FROM THE PAST (1854): A CHAPTER ON NECKLACES, OLD AND NEW

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Originally published in Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book *in 1854 (pp. 213-216), this article presents a brief history of necklaces among the classic Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, as well as the British, from the perspective of an educated English lady. It is an instructive early study of strung adornments based on antiquarian, historical, and literary sources.*

It is curious to trace the first appearance of necklaces amongst the Egyptians, in the same form as they exist at the present day upon the necks of the Patagonians, and the natives of the islands of the Pacific; for the ancient dwellers by the Nile wore necklaces of the seeds of leguminous plants, berries, and feathers (especially those of the *poule de Numidie*), precisely the same substances which are used in this ornament by the above people, except that the emu supplies the feathers, and that shells are occasionally mingled with the bright-colored berries. But shells were also used in necklaces by the Egyptians, as our readers may perceive in the table-cases of the Egyptian gallery in the British Museum.

Here, we may trace the next appearance of this trinket, when art began to be applied in its composition, and spherical beads of various substances were used; as well as its progression from a simple ornament to its superstitious use as an amulet.

In one of these cases some very interesting specimens of our subject may be seen, tracing, as plainly as more important things might do, the gradual advance of art; there is one of round blue beads capped with silver, another representing deities and symbols, and a third with pendants in the form of the lock of horns, fishes, and cowries, which are well deserving of attention.

The two latter were of course worn as amulets, and, being impressed with sacred images, were supposed to ward off danger and infection, to render the wearer courageous or agreeable, or invest him with the various qualities which their symbolism, or the substances of which they were composed, represented in the mythic language of the East.

Perhaps it might have been with such intentions that we find the necklace so favorite an adornment with the warriors of antiquity. The Medes, Persians, Indians, and Etruscans wore them in the valuable shape of strings of pearls, sometimes enriched with jewels; while the chiefs and great men amongst the northern nations were distinguished by necklaces and collars of gold, culled *torques*, so that, when conquered, the necklaces of both oriental and Celtic nations must have made an important part of the spoils. Hence, probably, the adoption of the *monile* by the Romans as a reward for military valor, and hence also the surname of *Torquatus* Manlius, who was so called from his having torn the golden *torque* from the neck of an enemy on the field of battle.

Necklaces were worn by both Greek and Roman women, but only within doors, and on occasions of domestic festivity, as at weddings and dances; they were especially used as bridal presents, and the learned in mythology will remember that it was upon the occasion of Hermione's marriage that Vulcan, to revenge her mother's infidelity, bestowed upon her the fatal necklace which worked such wondrous evils on her race. Here we perceive that the Eastern superstitions connected with this ornament had accompanied the fashion of wearing it into Greece: the rich and beautiful necklace of Hermione was a talisman – not to counteract evil, but to produce it; so that by-and-by we find this very necklace, which Ovid tells us was of gold, and to the description of which Nomus devotes fifty lines of his Dionysica, bribing Eriphyle, the wife of Amphiaraus, to betray her husband.

At Rome, as with the old Egyptians, the materials of the necklace soon altered from a simple row of berries or small spheres of glass, &c., to pearls and amber, and precious stones; the single chaplet, which primitively encircled the throat, gradually extended to a second, and even a third row: after which we find the original necklace adorned with drops or pendents, which, when worn, fell round the neck like rays from a centre.

For this description of *monile*, emeralds, and other gems of a greenish hue, were greatly prized; and amongst the treasures which time has restored to the museums and cabinets of the curious, from the buried toilets of Pompeii, a golden necklace is enumerated, which was enriched with twelve small emeralds.

Etruscan graves have also yielded up their treasures, and amongst a variety of other matters affording the most interesting illustrations of the domestic economies of the ancient Tuscan people, have preserved for us the fashion of these ornaments. Those purchased from the Prince of Canino, and deposited in the British Museum, are of gold; one represents a wreath of ivy leaves in pairs, the stems of the leaves joining; and the ornaments of the others consist of circles, lozenges, rosettes, hippocampi (sea horses), and a heart depends centrally from one of them.

Necklaces in the shape of serpents were worn by the Greeks and Romans, by whom this emblem was regarded as a charm against witchcraft and the "evil eye;" they were made to coil round the neck of the wearer, and it is remarkable that the necklace so fatal to Hermione and Eriphyle was of this form. Some years back an inscription, found in France, mentioned a *torque* dedicated to Æsculapius, having been made by twisting together two golden snakes, and offerings of trinkets in this shape were often made in honor of him by persons during illness, or their recovery from it.

Besides decorating the necks of brides and conquerors with these ornaments, the Romans carried their admiration of the necklace so far as to adorn the statues of their divinities with them; thus, a statue of Fortune, found at Herculaneum, had the representation of a necklace incrusted with silver, and a figure of Mercury, in the gallery of Greek and Roman antiquities in the museum (thought by some to be the most exquisite bronze in Europe), has a gold torquis round its neck; this honor, however, the deities shared in common with favorite domestic animals; and horses were frequently adorned with them.

So much more remains to be said of the use of them by the ancients, that we leave, reluctantly, these classic reminiscences, to trace the history of the necklace at home, where it appears to have an existence coeval with Stonehenge, and to have preserved its memoirs in the funeral barrows of the Britons and Anglo-Saxons. In these *tumuli*, necklaces of various kinds have been found, and beads of crystal, jet, amber, and colored glass, are quite common in them. In some, necklaces of bone and ivory have been discovered, and the Archaeological Society have engraved one in their Journal, which is formed of beads of bone and canel coal.

In the wills of the Anglo-Saxons, we find the neck-bracelet, as its name implied in their language, frequently mentioned: and amongst other articles of jewellery, we read of golden vermiculated necklaces. Boadicea wore a golden necklace, and subsequently the torquis, or collar of honor, commonly of gold, was made the *insignia* of dukes and earls, both by the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans. The Norman kings wore a collar or necklace of gold, adorned with jewels, and which depended on the breast, like the collar or [sic] knighthood, of which, no doubt, these antique ornaments were the prototypes; while such of our Saxon ancestors as could not procure the precious metals, rather than be without this favorite ornament, wore them of brass, and even iron.

Amber appears, from the very earliest period, a favorite material for the necklaces of women, probably on account of its perfume, which Autodycus, the roguish peddler, in the "Winter's Tale," alludes to in his rhyming list of wares –

"Necklace amber,
Perfume for a lady's chamber."

In Italy, we learn from an ancient chronicler that ladies wore them made of bent gold coins, and that whistles in the shape of a dragon, set with gold and pearls (probably to call servants), sometimes depended from them.

A picture of Joan of Navarre, wife of Henry IV, in whose reign necklaces were much worn by ladies, represents her wearing a collar of Esses.

A necklace on the ancient effigy of Lady Peyton at Isleham Church, Cambridgeshire, is formed of pear-shaped stones or pearls, attached to a string or narrow band of gold, while another, represented in the Harleian MS., looks like a wreath of small stars, and was, in all probability, of the same precious metal.

In the Middle Ages, we read that the necklaces of women were set with jewels and stones; and that some, called *serpents*, from the fashion of them, were also in vogue; and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the necklaces of English ladies were arranged in the same manner as the rayed ones of the Romans.

Queen Elizabeth is always represented wearing strings of pearls, or jewelled carcanets, and the royal example appears to have been very generally followed by the dames of her realm, whose taste for a profusion of such ornaments has been handed down to us by the dramatists and other writers of the period; though in her reign, as in her father's, sumptuary laws were made to prevent persons below a certain rank from appearing in them.

Barclay, in his "Ship of Fools," printed A.D. 1508, speaks of some who had their necks

"Charged with collars and chains,
In golden withes."

And in a curious work called "The Four Pees," of John Heywood, written 1560, he makes the Peddler vaunt, amongst other vanities of women, "of all manner of beads." The penalty for wearing anything of gold or gilt about the neck, in Henry VIII.'s time, unless the wearer was a gentleman, or could prove that he possessed, over all charges, 200*l*. yearly value, was the forfeiture of the same; a regulation well calculated to maintain the restriction in tact.

All this while certain superstitions existed with regard to the necklaces, as well as to all other trinkets of which gold and precious stones made part, occasioned, probably, by the antique use of gems as amulets, and from the pretended occult powers ascribed to them by the alchemists. Even Elizabeth, with all her keenness and masculine strength of mind, save where vanity and its natural craving, the love of admiration, were concerned, appears to have been just as impressible upon such subjects as a peasant girl; and we find the Lord Chancellor Hatton sending her a ring (in all probability an agate), to be worn on her breast, against infectious air. The physicians of those days did much to sustain the "charm" of our subject. Necklaces made of the root of the male peony were worn for the prevention of the falling sickness, while those made of amber were deemed good against infection; and to the doctrine of signatures, which connected the medical properties of substances with their forms and color, we may safely trace the common practice of ornamenting young children with necklaces of coral, as well as the invention of the silver-belled trifle, so called.

With the same purpose (that of assisting their teething), the anodyne necklace, which is made of beads of the white bryony, is sometimes hung around the necks of infants, sustaining, even in our own times, a lingering faith in the medical virtues of the amulet.

But that our space forbids, the necklace worn by nuns might lead us to a dissertation on the religious uses of this ornament; but we must briefly glance at its secular history in modern times, when its most powerful spells have been those of fashion.

Coming down to the seventeenth century, we find the necklace quite as much in vogue as in the reign of Elizabeth: in Massinger's "City Madam," after her husband's knighthood, we find her brother observing to the lady,

"Your borrowed hair,
Powdered and curled, was by your dresser's art
Formed like a coronet – hang'd with diamonds,
And richest orient pearls – your carkanet,
That did adorn your neck, of equal value;"

so that the love of gems and jewellery was by no means on the decline. In the picture of Charles and his queen, in "Heath's Chronicle," (1662), Catherine of Braganza wears two necklaces, one clasping the throat, and the other, to which a pendent is attached, falling low on the shoulders. Planché tells us that in Mary's reign, jewelled necklaces sparkled on the bosom, a fashion continued in that of her sister Anne of Denmark, who is usually drawn wearing one.

With the accession of George III., the maudlin sentimentality of the belles and macaronies of the period gave the name of *esclavage* to the necklace then in fashion, which consisted of several rows of gold chains, or beads, or jewels, arranged one under the other in successive festoons, so as to cover the entire neck.

This was again replaced by the carcanet, or band of jewels set in gold, and we ourselves remember the *négligé*, with its tasselled ends falling gracefully beneath the throat; since then the necklace has gradually grown into disuse, so that our friend's information, that short golden ones were again in fashion, sounded pleasantly as news of an old acquaintance.