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Beads from Tissamaharama, Sri Lanka: Long Distance Contacts

Over 10,000 beads were retrieved from the excavations in Tissamaharama, the ancient Mahagama which was the capital of the kingdom of Ruhuna in southern Sri Lanka. They were conducted since, 1992 by KAVA (Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie, Bonn) in collaboration with the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka, within the ancient citadel at three localities: The workmen's quarter Akurugoda (Tissa 1) on the southern slope of the hill, the Courts Garden (Tissa 2), and Sarvodaya (Tissa 3) in the western sector (Weisshaar/Schenk/Wijeyapala 2001, 5ff.). The large sample of beads established Tissamaharama as an important site for bead research in South Asia. A comprehensive typology was formulated for a wide range of forms, colours and materials, within a secure chronological framework (Hannibal-Deraniyagala 2001, 203ff.). Besides, an opportunity was provided for investigating long distance contacts between Sri Lanka and further afield.

Sri Lanka occupied a central place in the Indian Ocean for the trade and exchange of goods from South, West and Southeast Asia. Ships from the west used the summer monsoon to come to Sri Lanka, and sailed back with the winter monsoon. Maritime trade contacts were also regularly maintained between mainland India, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Among the highly prized goods originating in Sri Lanka were pearls, ivory, steel and, notably, precious (e. g. rubies and blue sapphires) and semi-precious (e. g. garnets and amethysts) stones.

A project was launched by the Mineralogical Institute of Würzburg to discover the source of garnet beads which were found in the graves of the Samad Culture of Oman[1]. Garnet (fig. 1, 9. 11–12) is not a local stone, so it must have been imported. Samples of garnet from excavations in Sri Lanka (Tissamaharama, Godavaya, Anuradhapura) and a few from India were analysed. The results indicated a trace element match between the samples from Oman and the ones from Sri Lanka, suggesting that they originated in Sri Lanka. However, the latter has a geology that is very similar to that of India, and it is possible that India was also a source. Further investigations on the great range of garnet occurrences in India is necessary before one could conclude on the precise origin of the garnet beads in Oman's Samad Culture – whether Sri Lanka, India or both.

It is pertinent to note that there was a demand for garnets from Sri Lanka/India in Europe during the Merovingian period. They were used to adorn weapons and jewellery. Apparently the import of garnets from South Asia stopped in the 7th century AD, and there was a shift to other sources (Quast/Schüssler 2000, 86; Lennartz 2001, 269).

Another semi-precious stone, carnelian (fig. 1, 1–2. 4), is often found in archaeological sites in Sri Lanka, from the protohistoric Iron Age (900–500 BC) onwards. Carnelian does not occur naturally in Sri Lanka and was imported from India. Gujerat would have been the main source, where there are still workshops using the old techniques (Kenoyer/Vidale/Bhan 1991, 50). Recent discoveries of other sources in India suggest that these would have been exploited as well in antiquity.

R. Theunissen of the University of New England, Armidale, Australia has conducted intensive investigations on ancient carnelian samples from India, Thailand and Sri Lanka (Anuradhapura). He affirms that the ones from Sri Lanka are different in their composition to those from India, whereas they are said to match the Thai samples closely (Theunissen/Grave/Bailey 2000, 98). What is particularly interesting is his claim that the samples from the BC levels in Anuradhapura showed close similarities to those from Ban Don Ta Phet, while the ones from the AD levels matched those from Noen-U-Loke and Lopburi (Theunissen/Grave/Bailey 2000, 100). These preliminary conclusions, concerning the change in the sources of carnelian brought into Anuradhapura, need to be further researched as to their applicability to other sites in Sri Lanka.

[1] Schüssler/Rösch/Hock 2001, 240ff.; Rösch/Hock/Schüssler/Yule/Hannibal 1997.

Fig. 1. Beads from Tissamaharama: 1–2, 4 carnelian; 3 rock crystal; 5–8 amethyst; 9, 11–12 garnet; 10 shell; 13–25 glass. Beads not to scale. Photo H. Wittersheim.

With regard to glass beads (fig. 1, 13–25), the Sri Lankan material displays numerous resemblances to Indian beads. India was always, and still is, a production zone for huge amounts of glass beads. For a long time there has been a lack of evidence of a glass bead industry in Sri Lanka, and

the literature has tended to assign all of the Sri Lankan glass beads to an Indian origin; for instance collar beads (these distinctive beads have a collar on both sides around the perforation) which have been referred to as typical Indian shapes (Sankalia/Diskshit 1952, 144). However, recent excavations in Sri Lanka have brought to light evidence of glass bead manufacture (lumps of glass, waste material), although on a small scale, in Anuradhapura, Mantai and Tissamaharama. Roof-tiles were glazed with molten glass in the 2nd century AD at Anuradhapura. Moreover, large lumps of artificial glass (notably in corn-flower blue, burgundy red and pale green and emerald green colours) have been found in the gem mines of the Sabaragamuva and Uva Provinces of Sri Lanka in deposits of considerable antiquity; and a glass manufacturing site with furnaces has been located at Pabalugala near Rajangane in the northwest. These discoveries necessitate a rethinking of the hypothesis that all of the ancient Sri Lankan glass industry, inclusive of beads, had perforce to be imported from India, with workmen moving down from India into centres such as Mantai and later into Southeast Asia. This simplistic linear model is no longer tenable. Beads appear to have been an item of fashion in ancient South Asia. Polycentric origins to various important bead categories are a more plausible hypothesis. Whatever the birthplace of types, such as collar beads, might have been, it is quite possible that they were manufactured in Sri Lanka as well soon thereafter. Note that glass beads have been found in very early contexts in the protohistoric Iron Age of Anuradhapura, prior to 500 BC.

One bead type appears to support the hypothesis of Sri Lanka standing on its own as a centre for bead origins. Beads called "stupa beads" by Peter Francis, because they resemble a Buddhist stupa with its surrounding wall and two entrance gates (Francis 1991a, 98) have not up till now been found in India (fig. 1, 13–25). They were made mostly of glass, in blue, red, green and yellow colours. In Tissamaharama they were found in horizons dated to the 4th/5th centuries AD (Hannibal-Deraniyagala 2001, 221). In Anuradhapura during the excavations of the Jethavana Stupa they were found in a securely dated context of the 4th century AD. Similar beads are quite common in ancient sites of Southeast Asia, mainly Thailand and Malaysia (Francis 1991b, 111). According to the literature, they are dated later than the ones from Sri Lanka (Francis 1991b, 99). Could it be that this tradition of "stupa beads" was exported from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia, and why is it absent in India? This intriguing question deserves a focused research programme, as do many other aspects of ancient bead industry in South Asia – in the context of its occurrences in the wider cultural sphere of West and Southeast Asia.

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