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GIRIBAWA, SRI LANKA

An exceptional site of raw glass and glass bead production



Season 2022

Commission for Archaeology of Non-European Cultures

by Ariane de Saxcé



e-FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE DES DAI 2023 · Faszikel 1

Im Februar 2022 wurde eine neue Ausgrabung in Giribawa, im Nordwesten Sri Lankas, begonnen. Die Besiedlung geht auf das frühe Mittelalter und wahrscheinlich noch früher zurück. Zu den Überresten, die identifiziert werden konnten, gehören Perlenöfen, Glasabfälle, fertige Perlen und Rohglasfragmente, was auf eine Rohglasproduktion an diesem Ort hinweist. Die chemische Zusammensetzung der Perlen und des Rohglases ist ähnlich. Die weiteren Untersuchungen des Fundplatzes werden sich auf die kulturelle Abfolge, die Chronologie, die Lage eines Siedlungsgebietes und die technologischen Details dieses sehr spezifischen Typs von Halbrundöfen konzentrieren.

A new excavation has started in February 2022 on the site of Giribawa, in the north-west of Sri Lanka. Its occupation goes back to the early medieval period and probably earlier. The remains that could be identified include bead-making furnaces, glass waste, finished beads, and raw glass fragments, indicating raw glass production on the same site. The chemical composition of the beads and the raw glass are similar. Further investigations on the site will focus on the

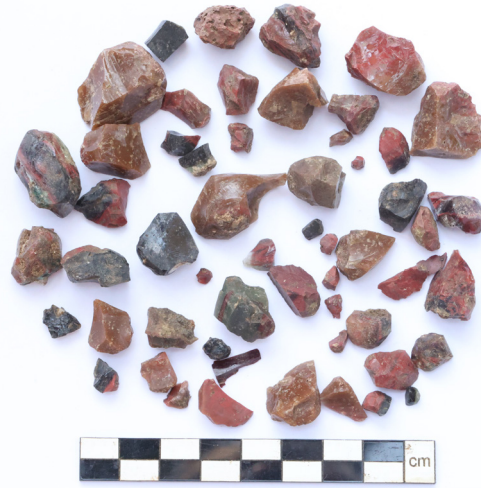
Cooperation partner: Department of Archaeology of Sri Lanka and University of Kelaniya.

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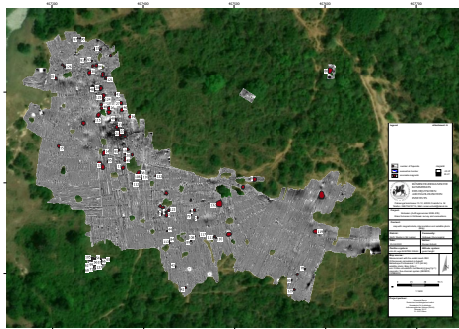
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cultural sequence, the chronology, the location of a settlement area and the technological details of this very specific type of semi-circular furnaces.

1 In February 2022, a campaign of survey and excavations took place in a site so-called Pabalugala, ›the rock of the beads‹, in the village of Giribawa, Kurunegala district (Sri Lanka ↗, Fig. 1). The site had been known for a few decades by the inhabitants, who used to collect glass beads and glass fragments from the surface. Some brick structures had also been observed, bringing the site to the attention of the Department of Archaeology of Sri Lanka, that delimited an area of 33,5 acres to be protected. In collaboration with the Department, researchers from the DAI KAAK, the University of Kelaniya and the French CNRS, have launched a long-term international project to study the site.

2 The first campaign included a survey and a small-scale excavation. The site is divided into three areas, two under a deep forest cover and one in a paddy field. The survey was undertaken by surface collection in the forest and geo-magnetic method on the whole surface of the open field.

3 The material collected on the surface included raw glass fragments, building material with glass attached, glass-layered blocks, beads, bead waste production (tubes, fragments...) and crucibles. The nature of these finds indicated the presence of primary as well as secondary glass production on the site (Figs. 2. 3). The geo-magnetic survey that took place in the paddy field showed more than 40 anomalies in the shape of semi-circular structures (Fig. 4). Comparison with an outcropping furnace was significant, suggesting that these anomalies correspond to furnace remains.

4 Among the visible remains, two furnaces had been partially exposed and damaged by looters. They were chosen for this first season exploration, in order to get a first understanding of the specific technology used in this site. They showed a semi-circular shape with an opening, understood as the entrance of the burning chamber, in which the fuel could be inserted. The sole of the burning chamber was partially preserved in both cases, as well as a portion of the surrounding wall in bricks, covered with a thick clay plaster.

1 Location of the site of Giribawa. (Map: Osmund Boppearachchi)

2 Raw glass fragment. (Photo: Ariane de Saxcé, Joëlle Rolland)

3 Bead waste production. (Photo: Ariane de Saxcé, Joëlle Rolland)

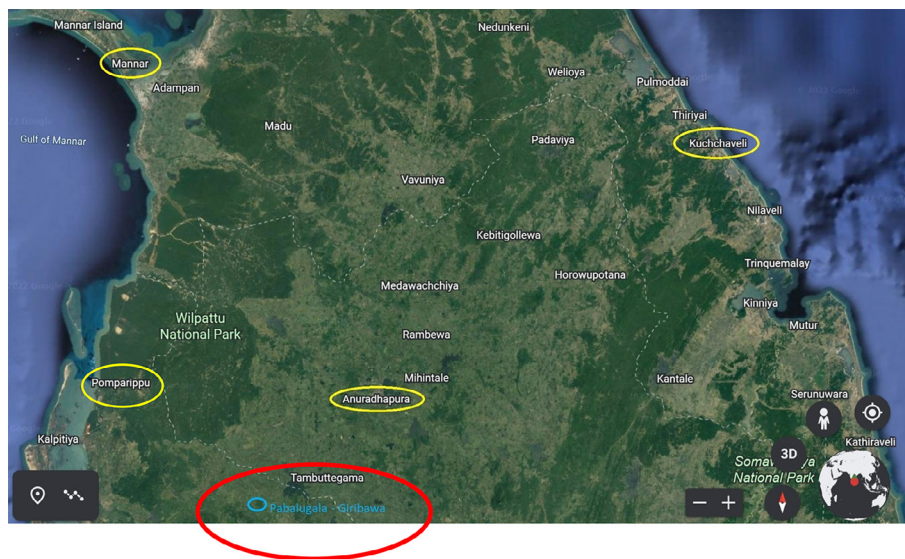
4 Results of the geomagnetic survey. (Map: Roman Scholz)



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Their diameter is close to 3 m. The material included glass fragments (waste of bead production), a few beads and notably, a drop of glass, allowing the identification of the structure as a bead-making furnace. Their semi-circular shape is quite exceptional so far in the history of glass, most bead producing furnaces being circular (Fig. 5).

5 Furnaces for raw glass production have not been located yet, despite a big amount of material indicating their presence somewhere on the site, such as big blocks with chunks of glass (mainly brown or red, Fig. 6).

6 The coincidence of primary and secondary glass production on the same site shows Giribawa as one of the most important locations for the understanding of glass technology in South Asia during early historic to medieval times. No absolute dating could be obtained this year but the ceramic typology suggests that the site was active in early medieval times, between the 7th and the 11th centuries. Strong similarities between the chemical composition of the glass from Giribawa and the glass beads from the medieval monastic site of Kuchchaveli on the East coast, support this dating. Further investigations will take place to obtain a complete cultural sequence and know more about the lower levels of occupation on the site.

7 The site of Giribawa could have been a supplier of glass to Kuchchaveli and other sites in the island, particularly the capital [Anuradhapura](#) and the ports of the West coast, such as Pomparippu or Mantai (Fig. 7). Further chemical analyses and comparisons will take place to understand the relation of the site with other locations in Sri Lanka and in South India. The place of this glass manufacture in the trade networks in and around Sri Lanka needs to be determined more precisely in the future but Giribawa definitely stands out as a unique discovery, both for the history of glass technology as well as for the understanding of cultural and trade exchanges in South Asia.

5 Furnace 3 at the end of the excavation. (Orthophoto: Roman Scholz)

6 Ofenblock mit Rohglas. (Foto: Ariane de Saxcé)

7 Location of Giribawa in relation to other important sites in Sri Lanka. (Map: Ariane de Saxcé)



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