

Stone Beads of South and South East Asia – Archaeology, Ethnography and Global Connections

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What is it that makes the ubiquitous bead such a fascinating and crucial component in understanding the character and changes of archaeological and ethnographic horizons across time? The superb photographs in this book would tempt one to suggest that it is their sheer beauty, and the marvelous shapes and finishes that a range of stones are given, that makes beads among the most attractive markers in the archaeology of South Asia. Beyond beauty, as Alok Kumar Kanungo's edited volume on this subject demonstrates so well, what makes them vital are the large number of ways in which all kinds of information can be recovered from them. These range from insights relating to trade and technology, and to the social and cultural histories encoded in their crafting and production.

A series of chapters here deal with the allusions to beads in various literary sources and to their presence in archaeological contexts. These range from overviews (such as the chapters authored by Kishore K. Basa, R.S. Bisht, V. Selvakumar) to case studies (Mehrgarh, Dholavira and other sites in Gujarat, the Deccan, South India and Ahichchhatra). Using stones to manufacture beads was the innovation of microlith users, as Rabindra Kumar Mohanty's overview points out, at places like Jwalapuram in Andhra Pradesh, around 35,000 BP where limestone and quartzite beads and those of bone were found. The ostrich eggshell finished and unfinished beads that figure in other contexts were perhaps as old as those from Jwalapuram. Among these, as Mohanty points out, the bead-bearing level at Khaparkheda in Madhya Pradesh has provided unique evidence for every stage of manufacturing, ranging from chipped eggshells to the tiny chert points which had glue/resin on them (for facilitating easy rotation when hafted to a shaft). Here too, bead making was undertaken.

In most other regions, bead making as a craft developed and consolidated in neolithic and chalcolithic contexts. The site of MR2 at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan has an entire lapis lazuli industry (Massimo Vidale, Maurizio Mariottini, Giancarlo Didoti and Muhammad Zahir) where there is early processing waste, debitage from the production process, drill bits and a range of beads including star-shaped and pouch-shaped ones. In the case of Datrana in Gujarat, this developed as part of the recycling of stone debitage generated in the course of manufacturing long blades. The circular beads made there used waste stone, what Kuldip K. Bhan categorizes as the platform rejuvenation pieces. The identification of raw material re-use in various archaeological contexts, in fact, has been identified in the case of metal and shell artefacts as well, and is a pointer to an important, though, understudied aspect of

ancient artisanal traditions. In historical times, the exploitation of all kinds of ordinary and semi-precious stones for manufacturing beads is excellently showcased in the gemstone industry that has been unearthed at Kodumanal in Tamil Nadu, as K. Rajan's contribution to this volume reminds us. Among the repertoire, it was beads of sapphire, beryl, agate, carnelian, amethyst, lapis lazuli, jasper, soapstone and quartz that were unearthed from the habitation mound. Interestingly, those in the graves of Kodumanal were beads of carnelian, specially etched ones, and agate. These are raw materials that were procured from the Gujarat and Maharashtra regions while lapis lazuli came to Kodumanal from Afghanistan. There is also a very interesting paper in this volume (Bunchar Pongpanich) on the ancient stone beads found in various parts of Southeast Asia, with a special focus on Thailand. Incidentally, beads bearing the *triratna* symbol have a distribution that stretches from Taxila to Thailand.

Several papers focus on the technology of bead production and their scientific analysis. V.N. Prabhakar's documentation of the Dholavira stone drills, primarily made from 'Ernestite' whose source is not yet ascertained, mentions 1603 specimens. These are of various types and reveal the optimum use of raw material. Actually many in the collection were modified and reworked from broken drill bits, once again revealing that even broken artefacts were reused by craftspeople. J.M. Kenoyer's study looks at the entire repertoire of techniques, from the time of raw material selection to the polishing of beads. Some of these techniques, as he points out, changed over time. By the end of the Harappan period, the use of the Ernestite drill disappeared. On the other hand, the colouring of agate to create a dark black or brown-banded agate, which began during the Harappan period, expanded in the Late Harappan and continued to be used in Early Historic India. As for the scientific analysis of stone beads, Laure Dussubieux and Mark Golitko look at lapis lazuli sources and beads from Kish, rather than from a South Asian site. Interestingly, the Kish beads were expected to have been manufactured from Afghanistan lapis lazuli. However, they did not match the raw material that was analyzed from there. Possibly, a more extensive sampling of source areas needs to be done, including those in Pakistan, in order to suggest a source for the Kish beads. Randall Law's contribution concerns how one bead from a Late Harappan hoard at Harappa has been identified and characterized through non-destructive analytical techniques. This, a tiny red bead, which was thought to be glass, has turned out to be a hardened hematitic kaolinite (a clay mineral).

There are several contributions that concern the ethnography of bead usage. An instance in point is the contribution on the symbolic value and trade of stone beads among the Nagas by Manabu Koiso, Hitoshi Endo and Ayumu Konasukawa. Necklaces of various types are worn by women and men. There are those which are used on an every day basis which are made of one or two lines of carnelian beads, the source of the carnelian being mainly from Khambhat. On the other hand, those reserved for special occasions were more elaborate and had ten strings or so. Carnelian bead use has a long antiquity in Nagaland. One bead is known to have been found at Chingliyimti in Tuensang district (c. 9th-10th centuries CE) while others were found from a 17th century burial at Jotsoma near Kohima. Khambhat forms the subject matter of Alok Kumar Kanungo's paper. Interestingly, Cambay itself does not have the stones for the craft that has made it famous, these come from elsewhere. Rajpipla, for instance, is an important provider of agate stone. The changes in technology are

recorded by Kanungo – such as those of the grinding and polishing methods, as also in the final polishing. At the same time, he also points out that there has been no change in the drilling of long beads, which continues to be done by hand using a method known as the bow drilling method with the use of diamond-tipped drill bits. The use of diamond for drilling beads can be traced back to Mauryan times (c. 3rd century BCE) while during Harappan times, a hard stone like Ernestite was used for drilling.

Given the title of the volume, one would have expected more contributions on Southeast Asia. Instead, the volume is primarily about the beads of South Asia. Still, there are good papers here and worth reading, for their individual content or as a collection of papers.

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