

Dimensions of Interactions: Bay of Bengal in the Wider Asia-Pacific Region: Archaeological and Historical Records from the Earliest Period till 1500 CE

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role played by the Northern Bay of Bengal Region in the cultural transmission throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The investigation begins in the protohistoric period and subsequently discusses the early historic and the historical period. In this paper, the author raises issues of mortuary practices, which are similar between South Asia and South-East Asia. Artefacts discussed in this paper include glass and stone beads, portable enough to be carried across long distances and their final deposition as grave goods point to the inherent value attached to these portable artefacts. The third issue is the findspots of these artefacts, particularly beads from the shipwreck sites from the Philippines. It is remarkable how such sites can provide the much needed in-situ data on portable and its dated values. All this evidence compels us to look at a neglected region in the discussion, primarily the Northern Bay of Bengal region.

Keywords: *NBBR, Mortuary practices, Glass beads, Submerged sites*

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NBBR	Northern Bay of Bengal Region
KSK	Khao Sam Khaeo

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Figure 1: Map showing sites discussed in the text

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to understand the scales of interaction within the Asia-Pacific region by focusing on the Northern Bay of Bengal Region (NBBR) and its archaeological heritage to be part of interacting network in this vast region. The Bay of Bengal Region played a significant role in the Indian Ocean trade network from the prehistoric to modern periods and is well documented in the archaeological and historical records (Gupta 2005). The archaeological record of this interaction is indicated by common mortuary practices over a wide region of the Asia-Pacific region and also distribution of specific types of small portable objects like ceramics and glass beads known as Indo-Pacific glass beads (Francis 2002). The term itself is indicative of connectivity between Indian ocean and the Pacific region. Gleaning the available data, one is left with the idea that the geographical ambit of this distribution is largely limited in the southern part of the Bay of Bengal as the data from the NBBR is not easily available. In this paper, the author attempts to include data from the NBBR to understand the connection within the Asia-Pacific region. This is more important because majority of the sites from where these data can be properly gathered is either eroded coastal sites or facing threat due to coastal erosion.

2. PREHISTORIC PERIOD

This section deals with research findings from the prehistoric period in the wide Indo-Pacific region. The earliest data on interaction comes from the study of the distribution of jar burials across the

pacific and the Bay of Bengal region (Gupta 2005, 22-30). Jar burials are found in various Chalcolithic and Iron age contexts of South Asia. This included the well-known Deccan chalcolithic burials from western India (Dhavalikar et al. 1998). Jar burials are also known from South India, which was common cultural practice associated with the megalithic burial tradition during the Iron Age. In Northeast India, stone jar burials have been recently investigated, which is like sites in Laos and Vietnam (Thakuria et al. 2016, 44-51). Jar burials are known from the Yayoi period in Japan and from mainland South-East Asian sites, particularly from Thailand and Vietnam. In this context, the infant jar burials from the Samon valley in Myanmar show remarkable similarities to the jar burials of the India particularly the jar burials from Deccan chalcolithic phase. The jar burials have been described as large spherical vases with widened-out necks, staked together and lying flat in pairs, three or four touching each other by their openings. The jars were 25- 80 cm in height and 40 cm to 50 in maximum diameter (Coupey 2013, 84-91). Similar jar burials are found in the northern Thailand, although in an earlier context between 1800 and 600 BCE.

One of the major factors in the connectivity between the urban culture of South-East Asia, the 'Pyu' culture of Myanmar (second century BCE to ninth Century CE) and South Asia was Buddhist networks. As noted by Stargardt (2005, 407-34), the late Iron age burial tradition of the 'Pyu' civilization was characterized by burial stone jars and ceramic urns, similar to the burial urns of South India, particularly Andhra Pradesh and northern Tamil Nadu, which could have also influenced the Buddhist practices in both India and South-East Asia. Another region in East Asia where jar burials became very popular is Korea (Riotto 1995, 40-53). According to Riotto (Riotto 1995, 40-53) the burial tradition of the pre-Buddhist period in Korea may have been adopted by people who were accustomed with the tradition of jar burials elsewhere. Therefore, careful perusal of burial rites from South Asia to the far east could provide a nuanced position with relation to prehistoric connectivity in the prehistoric period involving sites in NBBR, particularly Myanmar.

2.1 Interactions through portable items

The above discussions underscore the need for a more sustained investigations into the portable artefacts recovered from terrestrial and underwater archaeological sites and this section is largely devoted to an interpretation of the available data. There are portable artefacts such as pottery and beads recovered from sites nearer to maritime spaces and also from shipwrecks. In this section the author attempts to summarize the importance of portable artefacts such as glass beads circulating in the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere in the examining interactions in the Asia-Pacific region from the earliest times to the medieval. These glass beads are extensively documented from port sites like Arikamedu on the Coromandel coast; eroded coastal sites of Bengal, early urban sites of South and South-east Asia; shipwrecks from Philippines and also from Japan in the Yayoi period graves (Gupta 2005, 22-30). What is the connection between the burials and the small portable artefacts like beads? Gupta would argue that the demand for the second category of artefacts is indicative of socio-cultural practices as these small artefacts could have circulated largely as prestige good because the immediate contexts are graves (Gupta 2005, 22-30). To imagine that an artefact like bead travelled over a wide space to be deposited in funerary contexts also highlights the importance attached to death rituals in wider Asia-Pacific world.

2.2 The circulation of glass and stone beads in the Asia-Pacific region: Chronological and cultural scope

This section is a summation of glass and stone beads circulating in the Bay of Bengal region from fourth century BCE. The beads were commodified and distributed in the South-East Asian middle range societies (Basa 1992, 91-104). Stone beads, including etched alkaline carnelian and agate beads were thought to have been produced in South Asia (Bellina and Glover 2001, 191-215) and made their way into different regions of South-East Asia and some of the techniques were adopted by the Iron Age communities in South-East Asia, where indigenous bead production techniques were locally adopted (Theunissen 2000, 84-105).

The increasing role of sites in South-East Asia, particularly in the Thai-Peninsular region (Khao Sam Khaeo) were catalyst in not only interactions between South Asia and South-East Asia but within the trans-Asiatic networks (Bellina et al. 2006, 257-293). The trans-Asiatic networks relayed technological know-hows. For instance, it has been argued that craftsmen at early sites like Khao Sam Khaeo in the Isthmus of Kra adopted technological traditions of South Asia (Bellina et al. 2006). At Khao Sam Khaeo glass production, particularly the drawn glass beads production technique was adopted. The ceramics also reported Indian style ceramics (Bouvet 2011, 47-82) and Chinese style (Han) ceramics (Bellina et al. 2006, 257-293). Therefore, the site of KSK, located on the east of the Isthmus of Kra connected Bay of Bengal to the East Asia.

Glass beads have great significance in pursuing research in the trans-Asiatic networks over long-time ranges. In East Asia Gupta (2005, 22-30) noted the presence of Indian drawn glass beads in Japan and Korea from late first Millennium BCE and continued in the late Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE) and Three Kingdoms period (220 to 280 CE). In more recent historical periods (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries) the research conducted by (Craig 2021) assumes importance as it draws on evidence from both terrestrial and underwater (shipwrecks) sites. Craig has listed out two important locales which could be investigated to document production, shipment, and distribution of portable objects like beads. These are sites of beach side communities who were likely the last to handle cargoes, coming in or going out into the sea and also the actual shipwreck sites. It is in this context that addressing underwater archaeological strategies becomes crucial.

After having examined the available evidence from the Bay of Bengal region, it becomes clear that it is difficult to obtain shipwreck sites from the Bay of Bengal region, particularly where large rivers like the Ganges debouches and turns underwater excavation strategies a problem and extremely difficult to pursue. Perusal of historical sources and archaeological data makes it clear that the NBBR region witnessed urbanization and participated in the wide trans-Asiatic exchange systems from the end of the first millennium BCE. A wide varieties of objects including glass, stone beads and ceramics were locally produced or acquired from other regions of South Asia and could have been shipped to other regions including the South-East Asian regions like Myanmar. The early urbanized sites of Myanmar like Beikthano reveals existence of red glass beads made from the ‘drawn’ techniques along with decorated (possibly lime) carnelian and stone beads (author’s own observations). These objects have been found at sites in the coastal zone of West Bengal in the western part of the NBBR. Some of the well-known sites are Tamluk and Chandraketugarh, but there are few sites, discussed below, which have yielded glass beads from the archaeological contexts, but are under threat from coastal erosions. In summary, although early shipwreck sites are not available for the Bay of Bengal region, artefacts originating from the region are to be found in shipwreck sites.

The history of production of certain categories of glass beads such as the ‘drawn’ glass beads, could also be reconstructed from these studies. Craig’s (2021) research on the fifteenth century CE shipwreck Pandanan, located in the Palawan region of Philippines, cargo consisted of drawn and wound glass beads. The red opaque drawn glass beads classified as ‘Indo-Pacific’ beads and mineral Soda-Alumina glass were possibly sourced from South Asia (Craig 2021). She emphasizes shipwrecks from Philippines are important to understand the shift in the bead trade in the entire Asia-Pacific region, while I add this research also aids historians in evaluating the relative importance of the different maritime spaces like Bay of Bengal region and its role in transferring technologies and objects towards the east. Further, I suggest the strategy to locate more sites along the eastern coast of India, to sample glass and also stone beads. Arikamedu is the only site at the centre of current discussion but more sites from the NBBR should be included.

2.4 The ports in the NBBR region: Western segment of Ganga-Brahmaputra delta (West Bengal).

2.4.1 Chandraketugarh

The site is located on a defunct arm of the palaeo-channel of the Ganges. The site is about two sq km in extent and the most flourishing period of the site was between the third century BCE to the fourth century CE. The major artefactual component of the site consists of large number of terracotta plaques, ceramics, stone and glass beads. The site may correspond to one of the ports mentioned in the *Periplus* as *Gange*. Although, a large number of beads have been found from the site the only publication is that of (Chakraborty 1998, 32-54). Chakraborty has documented blue glass beads, green glass beads and Indo-Pacific beads in red, orange and yellow opaque have been documented.

2.4.2 Tamluk

The site is identified with the port of *Tamralipti*. Excavations and explorations at the site (IAR, 1954-55; 1973-74) produced a large number of ceramics, terracotta plaques and figurines and glass beads. Several glass beads including green glass, blue glass, black oblate and ‘Indo-Pacific’ beads have been documented from the site although from surface context. The chronology of the beads is between third century BCE to even ninth-twelfth centuries CE based on comparison of beads with sites in South India and also with sites in South-East Asia, such as Takua Pa (Gangopadhyay 2010, 171-181). The beads demonstrate wide geographical zone from North-West India, Northern India, Southern India and South-East Asia. The temporal zone is between third centuries BCE to twelfth centuries CE.

2.4.3. Harinarayanpur and Deulpota

The other sites from coastal West Bengal are these two very interesting sites which has produced several coloured and opaque glass beads (Chakraborty 1998, 32-54), including the ‘Indo-Pacific’ types. These sites will be dealt with in our discussion on underwater archaeological heritage.



Figure 1: Map showing sites discussed in the text (Courtesy: Snehadip Saha)

2.5 Glass beads and trade: coastal West Bengal

Several sites in coastal zone West Bengal have evidence of glass beads from the early historic to the medieval period. However, these sites have not been studied in detail. It is unclear as to whether communities at these sites produced glass beads or acted as transportation nodes from Indian glass beads production centre or southern glass production centres. Also, one can raise the issue and debate if all the drawn red glass beads collected from the surface context from the sites mentioned above should be chronologically placed in the early historic period. The connection with South-East Asia is indicated by the blue 'eye' bead of glass, similar to the one from Takua Pa, referred above, although such beads have a long chronology in India going back to the third century BCE. The data of these small portable items belonging to the early medieval and medieval period is unsubstantial for any cogent argument.

3. DISCUSSION

The following points emerge out of the above discussion:

- a. The Bay of Bengal region connecting South and South-East Asia from the prehistoric times till the medieval period. The connectivity stretched towards east Asia and the Far east for which archaeological evidence of Jar burials can be put forward.
- b. The more tangible evidence of ceramics within the Bay of Bengal region and beads in the wider Asia-Pacific region appears at disparate localities within the region stretching from the Coromandel coast to Korea and Japan.
- c. Our data on Indo-Pacific glass beads from coastal West Bengal in NBBR, shows that littoral sites are presently being eroded and the archaeological layers lie below the high tidal mark therefore, it is important to survey the inter-tidal zone. Other coastal regions along in the NBBR, such as Myanmar, should also be surveyed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge APCONF 2023 and the chairperson of the session for accepting this paper and for providing senior travel award to enable travelling to Korea. Some of the data used in the article was observed while the author travelled the Myanmar in 2019. The UGC-UPE-II (India Looking East) is acknowledged and also the University of Calcutta for facilitating the funding.

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