



Full length article

# Glass beads and glass production in early South India: Contextualizing Indo-Pacific bead manufacture



Shinu Anna Abraham

Department of Anthropology, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 13617, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Central to bead scholar Peter Francis's interpretations about the manufacture and distribution of Indian Ocean glass beads is the assertion that the Indo-Pacific bead – a small monochrome drawn glass bead commonly found at sites around the Indian Ocean – was originally produced in South India in the early centuries BCE/CE. He further contends that their manufacture continued for the next two millennia, and that in that time the artisans and/or their unique technology migrated from South India to other parts of Asia, including Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The dozen or so years since Francis's extensive research on the Indo-Pacific bead have produced new data from survey, excavations, and chemical analyses which provide a better context for understanding this particular artifact category. Moving beyond Francis's study of ethnoarcheological and excavated materials from Papanaidupet and Arikamedu, this paper will review the available data for glass in premodern South India, including recently discovered sites in southern Andhra Pradesh, and consider strategies for reconstructing the broader socio-economic settings in which early South Indian Indo-Pacific bead manufacture took place.

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## 1. Introduction

Much of what is known or written about glass in early South India (which include the modern Indian states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu) stems in no small part from the work of renowned bead scholar Peter Francis. Recognizing the importance of South India's glass and stone bead industries in early Indian Ocean commercial relations, Francis urged scholars to spend more time investigating South India, given its role as a "a dynamic participant in the world trade" (Francis, 2002: 197). Yet compared to other regions of the Old World, relatively little is known about glass in South Asia, and still less about glass in South India (Fig. 1). Systematic investigations into the subject are relatively recent, and can be found in reports that are scattered across various disciplines and research specialties. Ongoing field projects are also producing fresh evidence: the recently launched survey project Production Landscapes of Southern Andhra Pradesh (PLoSAP), for instance, has been mapping and cataloging pyrotechnological production remains for certain districts in the southern Andhra region, and new discoveries are being added to the archeological and ethnographic corpus. The review presented here of the available historical, ethnographic, archeological information for glass working in the southern part of the Indian peninsula will make it possible, not only to engage more effectively with glass researchers elsewhere, but also to develop better strategies for modeling the socioeconomic circumstances in

which early crafting communities operated within premodern South India.

### 1.1. The Indo-Pacific bead

More specifically, current research on South Indian glass has built upon the detailed investigations by Francis and other scholars on one small but widespread artifact, the Indo-Pacific glass bead (Fig. 2). Still manufactured today in one South Indian village, these are tiny drawn monochrome beads, made by the *lada* method, that is, by pulling thin tubes of glass from a heated mass of hollowed glass and then slicing the tubes into beads that are rarely more than 6 mm in diameter and length (Stern, 1987a, 1987b). The *lada* is a long hollow metal pipe which, in conjunction with a mobile inner rod known as the *chetak* (Kanungo, 2001), makes it possible to produce very narrow glass tubes that in turn are cut into large quantities of tiny beads (unlike wound beads, which are made individually). Both their diminutive size and mass-produced quantities are features that very likely contributed to the enduring popularity of the Indo-Pacific bead for over two millennia. Extensive ethnographic and ethnoarcheological investigations show that these beads are still widely used among members of indigenous communities (Kanungo, 2002). Indo-Pacific beads also form part of the Indian Ocean archeological corpus from the Early Historic period in South India (approximately 3rd century BCE to 3rd–4th century CE) right up to early colonial times, with their loci of production eventually including regions beyond South India (e.g., see Carter, 2015). Their presence has been documented not only in South Asia but throughout the Indian Ocean littoral (from the Red Sea to southern Africa to

E-mail address: [sabraham@stlawu.edu](mailto:sabraham@stlawu.edu).

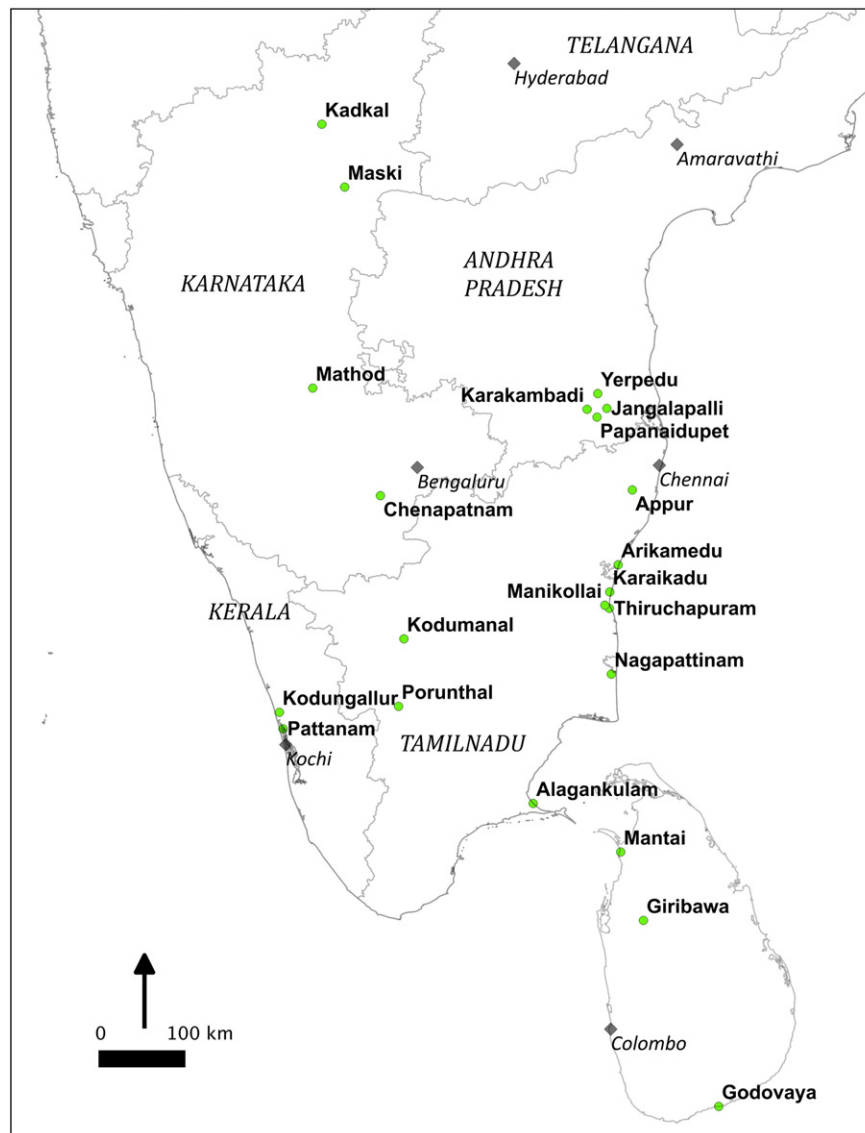


Fig. 1. Map of South Indian and Sri Lanka showing relevant sites.

Southeast Asia and Japan); they have also recently been identified in European assemblages (Pion and Gratuze, 2013, see also Gratuze and Pion, 2015). The Indo-Pacific bead has thus drawn the ongoing attention of scholars investigating early Indian Ocean exchange networks.

The Indo-Pacific bead has likewise generated interest among scholars working on the history of South Indian technology, in large part because Peter Francis argued convincingly that the origins of Indo-Pacific bead manufacture can be traced back to South Indian glass working communities in the first centuries BCE. He and others (Francis, 2002; Kanungo, 2001; Stern, 1987a, 1987b) studied the only known contemporary producers of Indo-Pacific beads, in the South Indian village of Papanaidupet. Francis documented the glass waste debitage that resulted from various stages of production from Papanaidupet (Francis, 2002: 22) and compared the debris to glass wasters from the site of Arikamedu, an Early Historic port site on the southeastern Indian coast. Not only did Arikamedu have Indo-Pacific beads in layers dating to the first centuries BCE/CE, but the glass wasters from those layers (and the nearby port site Karaikadu [1st c. BCE/CE]) were virtually identical to those from modern Papanaidupet village (Francis, 2002: 27). Francis thus concluded that the earliest producers of Indo-Pacific glass beads lived and worked in South India as

early as 2nd century BCE (although not necessarily at Papanaidupet, whose bead making history is still unclear (Francis, 2004: 475)). From there, according to Francis's reconstruction, the *lada* technology spread to western and northern India, to Sri Lanka, and to Southeast Asia (Francis, 2002: 31), perhaps via the migration of low-status bead makers under the supervision of 'governing authorities' such as trading guilds (Francis, 2002: 38). Indo-Pacific bead manufacture continued into the medieval and premodern periods, as evidenced by substantial exports to southern Africa (Wood, 2011a, 2011b; Francis, 2002: 40). To Francis, the continued (albeit diminished) presence of the industry at modern Papanaidupet made a strong case for a long and unbroken South Indian artisan tradition stretching back at least two millennia.

### 1.2. Glass in South India

Our records of the wide distribution of Indo-Pacific and other small drawn monochrome beads are growing steadily (e.g., Abraham and Christie, 2010), as is data related to the spread of Indo-Pacific bead technology (e.g., Lankton et al., 2008). But curiously little is known about the alleged origins and development of the technology within South India itself, leaving Francis's assertion about the South Indian origins of Indo-Pacific bead technology in a contextual vacuum (except,

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