



The Production and Exchange of Glass and Stone Beads in Southeast Asia from 500 BCE to the early second millennium CE: An assessment of the work of Peter Francis in light of recent research



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ABSTRACT

Stone and glass beads are important artifacts in Southeast Asia as they are amongst the earliest objects from South Asia found in the region, and frequently seen as symbols of Indian influence and increasing socio-political complexity. Peter Francis Jr.'s writings regarding the production and exchange of beads in Southeast Asia have been influential to archaeologists who have viewed beads as prestige objects that were traded widely and produced at important urban centers in Southeast Asia. However, the field of beads studies in Southeast Asia has greatly expanded in the past 15 years and benefitted from new excavations and scientific techniques. In this article, I review Peter Francis' hypotheses regarding the production and exchange of beads in Southeast Asia from 500 BCE to the early second millennium CE. I then synthesize recent work by scholars that has transformed our understanding of the manufacture and trade of beads. I argue that this work has largely disproven Francis' model of bead production and interaction between South and Southeast Asia. Instead, there appear to have been multiple phases of bead production and exchange between the two regions, which reflect complex interaction networks between South and Southeast Asia and within Southeast Asia.

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1. Introduction

Peter Francis Jr.'s interest in beads in Southeast Asia spanned from the archaeological to the ethnographic (e.g. Francis, 1992). Much of his work on beads in Southeast Asia focused specifically on the manufacture and trade of Indo-Pacific beads, or the small, drawn, monochromatic, round or doughnut shaped beads that are ubiquitous across the ancient world (Francis, 1990). In his 2002 volume on *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade*, as well as in earlier works (e.g. Francis, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1996) Francis built a hypothesis regarding the development of Indo-Pacific bead production at the site of Arikamedu in southern India, and the export of finished beads, the bead manufacturing technology, and the movement of craftsmen to various locations in Southeast Asia. Francis (2002: 141) also argued that stone beads were produced at many of the same Indo-Pacific beadmaking sites. In this model, glass and stone beads were a marker for Indian influence in Southeast Asia.

Francis' model has been influential amongst archaeologists of Southeast Asia as are his assessments of sites that were supposedly producing stone and glass beads. However, in the years since *Asia's Maritime Bead Trade* was published, there has been an expansion in the study

of beads in Southeast Asia, and especially in the use of compositional analysis techniques and detailed studies of semiprecious stone beads (e.g. Bellina, 2014; Carter, 2015; Lankton and Dussubieux, 2013; Theunissen, 2003). While much of this new work has expanded on Francis' ideas, it has also disproven his assertion that Arikamedu was the cradle of Indo-Pacific bead production and that it was connected to many other beadmaking sites in Southeast Asia.

In this article, I use Francis' work as a springboard to bring together recent research on the exchange and manufacture of stone and glass beads in Southeast Asia. This article will focus primarily from 500 BCE–500 CE, a time frequently known as the Iron Age period in Southeast Asia, although I will briefly consider data on bead manufacture and exchange into the second millennium CE. I begin by summarizing Francis' hypothesis regarding the “Arikamedu League” and the manufacture of glass and stone beads in Southeast Asia. This will then be followed by a brief discussion on the evidence for stone and glass bead production in Southeast Asia, which is reviewed in more detail in Appendix 1. As bead manufacturing can take place in many steps over a large geographic area, I argue that scholars must evaluate evidence for bead production more critically. Bead manufacturing waste and by-products should be assessed carefully to identify which manufacturing stages were being undertaken within a site and to determine if manufacturing by-products may have been transported to the site with finished objects.

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In the third part of the paper, I present new research on stone and glass bead production, which I argue has largely invalidated Francis' Arikamedu model. Instead of a viewing Arikamedu as the source for Indo-Pacific bead manufacture in Southeast Asia, more recent work has identified three phases of glass bead production and exchange in Southeast Asia, with initial small-scale local production being followed by importation of high quantities of beads from South Asia. In contrast to Francis' model, early glass bead production sites were not necessarily in contact with one another, may have had a limited exchange of their finished products, and few seemed to have connections to the site of Arikamedu.

Francis' model for stone bead production in Southeast Asia is not as comprehensive as that for Indo-Pacific bead production. Nevertheless, the examination of stone beads in Southeast Asia has also shown evidence for technological traditions that changed over time (Bellina, 2014; Carter, 2015). Additionally, several scholars have used studies of stone and glass beads to shed light on socio-political and ideological developments taking place in Southeast Asia during this period (e.g. Bellina, 2014; Bellina, 2007; Carter, 2015; Gupta, 2003; Theunissen, 2003). Lastly, I conclude with a brief discussion of future avenues of research that are needed in order to better understand the production and consumption of beads in Southeast Asia.

2. Francis and the Indo-Pacific beadmakers

In Francis' study of the connections between South and Southeast Asia, it was the unassuming Indo-Pacific bead that was a key link between these regions. In his early work, Francis (1990) initially noticed connections between four sites, which had evidence for various waste products that were related to Indo-Pacific bead production. These four sites were Arikamedu in southern India, Mantai in Sri Lanka, Oc Eo in southern Vietnam, and Khlong Thom in peninsular Thailand (Figs. 1 and 2). As Indo-Pacific glass bead production was a technologically advanced skill and protected knowledge, Francis did not believe that this technology had been transmitted to local craftsmen. Instead, he argued that Tamil beadmakers had traveled to each of these locations (Francis, 1990:18) and were connected to one another in a network he dubbed the Arikamedu League (Francis, 1990: 16). As is discussed below, there is little archaeological evidence to support this hypothesis (see also Kelly, 2016, for further challenges to the ethnic identity of the stone beadmakers).

A few years later, Francis (1996) had a more detailed proposal for the nature of Indo-Pacific bead production in South and Southeast Asia. In this model, summarized in Table 1, Indo-Pacific bead makers traveled from site to site as power at one urban center declined and

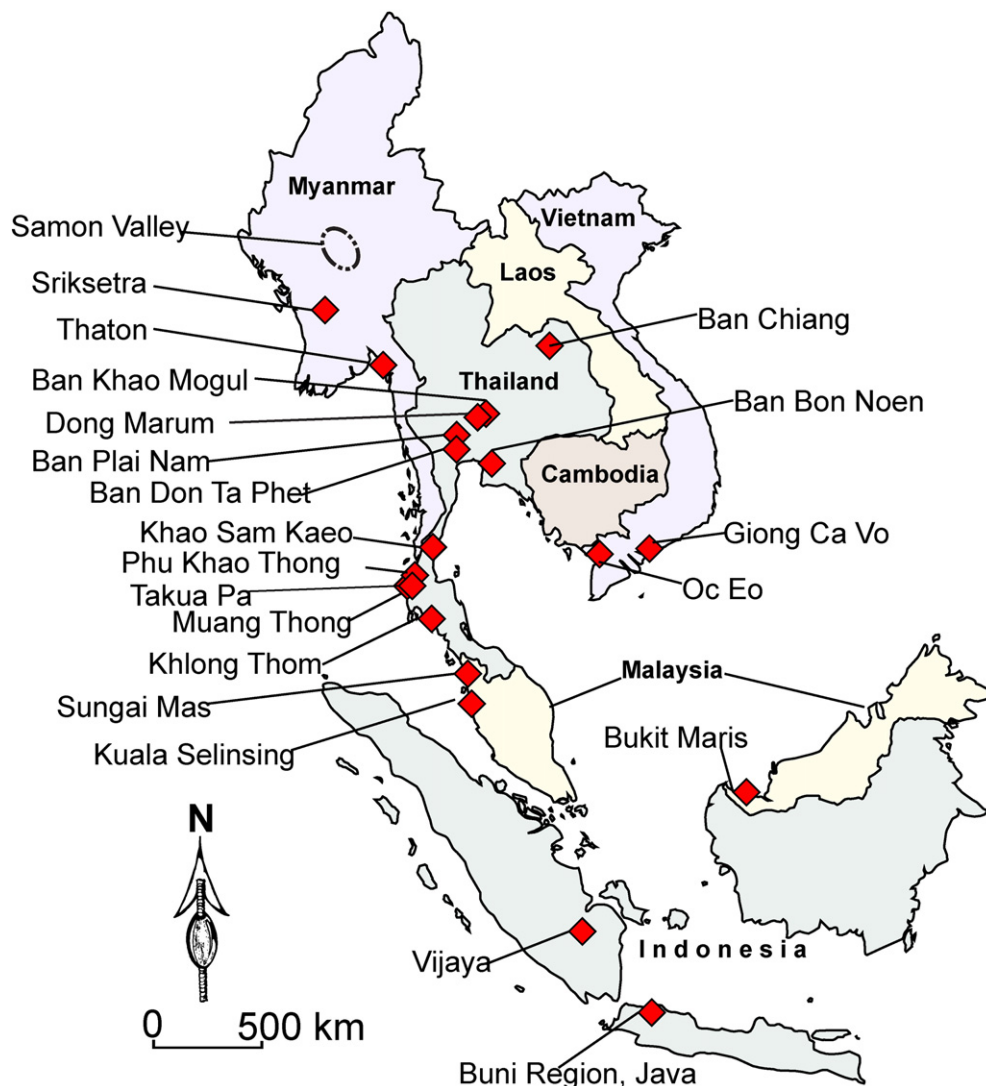


Fig. 1. Map of bead production sites in Southeast Asia mentioned in the text and Appendix 1.

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