

## **Small Things and Alternative Histories: Indo-Pacific Beads in Historical Reconstruction of Pre-modern Sri Lanka**

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With an uninterrupted recorded history from ca.6<sup>th</sup> century BC, supplemented by exceeding 4000 inscriptions, historical reconstruction in Sri Lanka is largely text driven. The alternative explanation is that of archaeology, which until recently, has been preoccupied with the grandeur of built heritage in the urban complexes of *Rajarata* and *Magama*. Thus, the pre-modern Sri Lankan history is primarily depicted through grand narratives and the spectacular ruins of elite centres.

Could small archaeological finds such as 'Indo-Pacific beads' (IPB) provide alternative explanations on historical developments that texts and ruins are unable to deliver? The objective of this study, therefore, is to look for alternative explanations about island's historical developments by analysing small beads termed 'IPB'.

IPBs discovered from Mantai and Kirinda seaports and Kantharodai urban/religious complex located in the north-western, south-eastern and northern coasts of Sri Lanka, respectively, were analysed. The emerging historical patterns were then compared with those of Anuradhapura and Tissamaharama, as well as with historical narratives in order to determine if our current understanding of pre-modern Sri Lankan society can be further enhanced.

.Considered as being first made at Arikamedu in South India ca. 250 BC, IBPs are distributed from South Africa in the west to Japan and Korea in the Far-east; the highest concentration being, however, in Sri Lanka and India. South East Asia was a major importer of these beads,

though they also produced them lately. While Arikamedu declined in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, production at Mantai persisted until ca.11th/13th centuries AD. It was among the four main IPB producers and a major IPB supplier to the word bead market.

Small and often unimpressive IPBs, traded across the Indian Ocean provides insights into the Island's economic history and early connections with the external world, something which is missing in the texts. Thus, small and seemingly mundane beads could in fact provide us with an alternate historical reading.

**Key words:** *Alternative Histories; Indo-Pacific Beads; Spectacular Ruins; Pre-modern Sri Lankan History; Text Driven History.*

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