

# *Early Gold Ornaments of Southeast Asia: Production, Trade, and Consumption*



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## INTRODUCTION

THIS ARTICLE BRINGS TOGETHER PAST STUDIES AND NEW INFORMATION to emphasize the importance of gold ornaments as prestige goods and their connection to political and economic power in the early trading communities of Southeast Asia. Gold ornaments of early cultures from all over the world have received considerable attention, but despite the rich goldsmithing traditions of the early Buddhist kingdoms, gold production in Southeast Asia has largely been neglected.<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, only Malleret (1962) paid close attention to the subject, although Robert von Heine-Geldern (1974) mentioned that gold techniques were a characteristic of Dongson Culture. Recently, however, the subject has attracted greater attention due to an influx of new evidence (Barnes et al. 2015; Bennett 2009; Chen 2012; Le 2005, 2011; Miksic 2011; Pryce et al. 2006; Reinecke et al. 2009; Reinecke et al. 2014). For example, the early Iron Age site of Prohear in Cambodia and the early historical Oc Eo site in Viet Nam (first excavated in the 1940s) are among the richest gold-yielding sites in Southeast Asia. Discoveries of a variety of gold ornaments at these and other sites demonstrate that a widespread gold-working tradition already existed as early as the last part of the first millennium B.C.

Even where gold ornaments have been discussed in the archaeological literature, their role in Southeast Asia's early communities and their trade networks have not been deeply questioned or analyzed. The variety of gold ornaments discovered as part of adornment assemblages in high-status burial contexts has rarely been described in detail and only restricted interpretative frameworks exist to explain their use. This is a problem inherent to the archaeology of personal ornamentation. Lacking effective frameworks for incorporating ornaments into more complex descriptions of cultural context, such ornaments have often simply been assumed to be markers of rank, gender, or wealth (White 2005: 1).

Ornaments deserve a consideration that moves beyond the traditional prestige-good perspective to emphasize their potential to visually communicate changing

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perceptions of group and individual identities. They should be discussed as an essential component of dressing strategies, including all practices by which the body can be manipulated through new combinations of ornamentation displayed over clothing or on the body. Wearing ornaments allows individuals to “dress up” or “dress down” in order to reveal or conceal different selves and gain access to restricted social arenas (Fisher and Loren 2003:225). Thus, changes in ornament combinations and/or the usage of new techniques and materials can be linked to changing sociopolitical and economic circumstances.

This article argues that gold ornaments as prestige goods were an essential component of dressing strategies through which changing elite identities were expressed. “Dressing up” in ornaments that combined rare materials with new techniques visually communicated a high elite status at a local level and enhanced construction of a commercially and politically dominant elite identity on an interregional level. During the first centuries A.D., the use of gold ornaments became more controlled and restricted by this new elite ruling class as a strategy to legitimate and strengthen individuals’ power and interregional status.

Although the gold ornaments that have thus far been uncovered testify to an innovative local craft tradition partly inspired by foreign technologies and styles, their role in the interregional and long-distance exchange networks of early Southeast Asian communities has only rarely been considered. Studies of Iron Age exchange networks have focused mainly on prestige goods such as bronze drums and ornaments made from hard stone, glass, and semiprecious materials (Bellina 2014; Calo 2014; Hung et al. 2013; Imamura 2010; Theunissen et al. 2000). Gold ornaments not only show a similar distribution pattern with some of these prestige goods, in mortuary contexts they are also found in sets with glass and semi-precious stone ornaments. In addition to contributing to our understanding of Southeast Asia’s complex interregional prestige good network between port communities located along the maritime trade networks of the South China Sea and inland communities, this study of gold ornaments also supports the hypothesis that early communities across the Southeast Asian region shared cultural practices and a common symbolic system (Bellina 2003, 2014; Hung et al. 2013).

The production and consumption background of gold ornaments, as well as their archaeological finding context, reveal a complex web of multidirectional overland and overseas contact extending from southern China and Mainland Southeast Asia all the way to the Roman Empire. Although several valuable studies address early contact between Indian, Southeast Asian, and Mediterranean cultures (Bellina and Glover 2004; Borell et al. 2013; Gupta 2005), the role of gold ornaments has not been considered in great detail. A recently proposed paradigm emphasizes the extensiveness and plurality of the many “silk roads” that accommodated land as well as maritime traffic (Manning 2014:6). This article further contributes to understanding how intra-regional networks in Southeast Asia connected to these “silk roads.” It may shed some light on the characteristics and global impact of early connections between the South China Sea, Bay of Bengal, western Indian Ocean, and Hellenistic interaction spheres. In particular, this study reveals a period of close contact between Southeast Asia and the Greco-Buddhist cultures of northern India and the Afghan-Pakistan regions. Trade contacts between these regions have rarely been mentioned or discussed, so this article could serve as a starting point for future studies.

*Gold Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia*

This article deals with the earliest gold ornaments that have been discovered in archaeological sites of Mainland Southeast Asia dating to the Iron Age and the early historical period (Fig. 1). Southeast Asia's Iron Age corresponds roughly with the period 500 B.C.–A.D. 100/200. It is characterized by major transformations on a regional scale, such as intensified production, the development of new crafts, increased political centralization and social ranking, and an extension of trade activities (Higham 2002). The early historical period (100/200–1000 A.D.) is characterized by tendencies toward more complex societies, urbanization, and the adoption of Hindu-Buddhist concepts (O'Reilly 2006). Several archaeological cultures from Mainland Southeast Asia are important for discussing gold ornaments from these periods.

For Viet Nam, the Dongson, Sa Huynh, Cham, and Oc Eo cultures should be mentioned. Dongson sites are found in the Red, Ca, and Ma River valleys in North Viet Nam, and are dated to approximately 800 B.C.–A.D. 200 (Ha 1994). The material culture of Dongson sites mainly includes ceramics and bronzes such as drums,

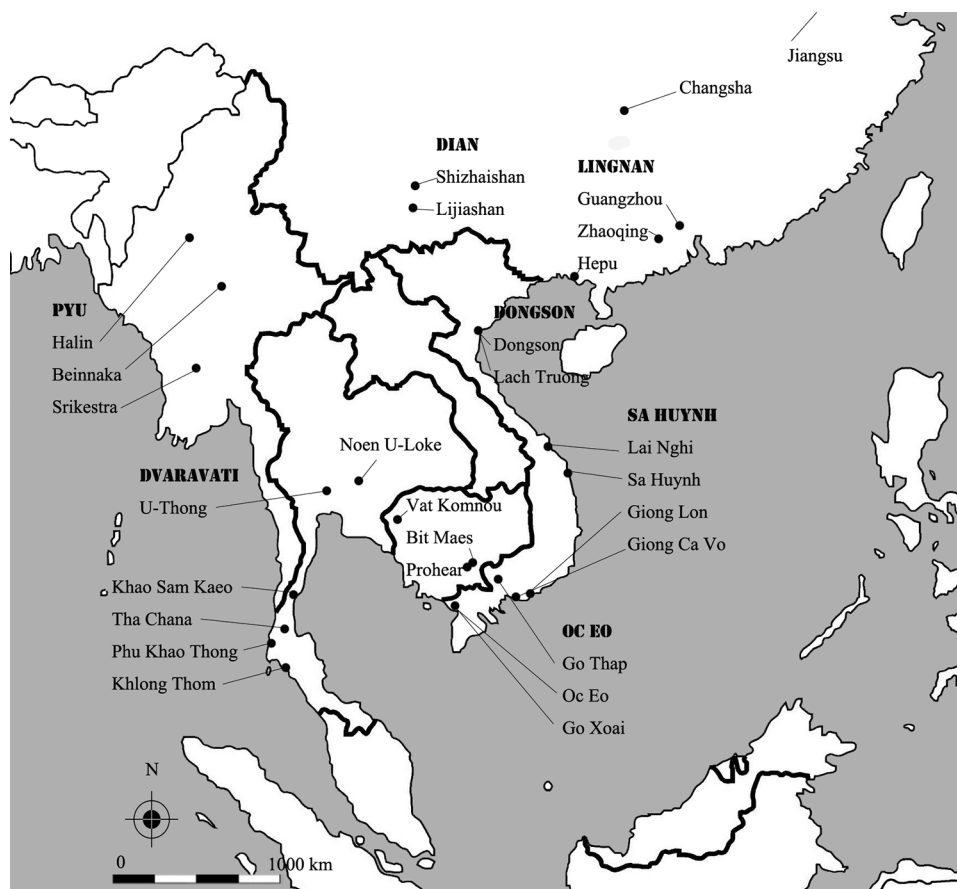


Fig. 1. Map of sites mentioned in text.

containers, bells, weapons, tools, and ornaments (Calo 2014; Higham 2002). Sa Huynh (500 B.C.–A.D. 100/200) sites are distributed in the area between Thua Thien-Hue and the Dong Nai Delta in central and South Viet Nam. They are characterized by a mortuary tradition involving burial jars and contain grave goods such as iron objects and ornaments made from glass, semi-precious, and precious stones (Hung et al. 2013; Lam 2011). The end of the Sa Huynh Culture coincided with the beginning of the Cham Culture around 100 A.D. This transition can be seen in radical changes in the material culture such as the introduction of new pottery-making techniques and the adoption of new types of ornaments (Lam 2011).

The Oc Eo Culture refers to early historical sites (dated c. 100–600 A.D.) found in the broad geographic area from current Ho Chi Minh City to the southern extent of Viet Nam (O'Reilly 2006:105). Finds include the remains of pile dwellings, stone and brick monuments, cremation graves, ceramics, ornaments, and gold plaques (Le 2005; O'Reilly 2006). An impressive number of gold ornaments—1311 pieces—has been found at the Oc Eo site in the Ba The District of An Giang Province (Luong 2015; Malleret 1962). Unfortunately little information is available about this collection.

Cambodia's Iron Age is not well understood, since most of the few known sites have been heavily looted. Prohear (500 B.C.–A.D. 100) is the most important gold-bearing site in Cambodia (Reinecke et al. 2009). Some of the most spectacular gold ornaments known in Southeast Asia are from this site (Fig. 2). Initial discovery of the Prohear site in 2007 unfortunately instigated a year of unauthorized looting, resulting in the disappearance of hundreds of gold and silver ornaments into the illegal antique trade. Luckily, one section of the site was preserved because it was located under the main village road. In 2008 and 2009, archaeologists successfully uncovered a total of 79 gold and 17 silver objects from this section (Fig. 2). These objects were unearthed from 32 graves belonging to the second and latest phase of the Prohear site (100/50 B.C.–A.D. 100) and were found together with fine ceramics, bronze or iron bracelets, precious stone beads, and imported bronzes like drums, bells, and bowls (Reinecke et al. 2009:41). Andreas Reinecke has called the gold ornaments of Prohear the first concrete evidence of the beginning of the goldsmiths' handicraft in Southeast Asia (Reinecke et al. 2009:160).

In Thailand, golden ornaments have mainly been found at coastal polities on the southern peninsula such as Khao Sam Kaeo, Tha Chana, Phu Khao Thong, and Khlong Thom. Khao Sam Kaeo was first occupied from the fourth to the third centuries B.C.; other sites were occupied from the last centuries B.C. until the early centuries A.D. (Borell et al. 2013). These port cities seem to have had a triple function as settlements, entrepôts, and production centers. Excavations have brought to light evidence of ramparts and other architectural remains, glass bead and hard-stone ornament production, and imported materials from China, India, and the Mediterranean (Bellina 2014; Borell et al. 2013). During the first millennium A.D., a Buddhist kingdom arose in central Thailand known as the Dvaravati Culture (sixth to eleventh centuries A.D.). It was characterized by large sites with extensive earthen ramparts and moats (such as U-Thong) and Buddhist monuments, sculptures, and votive tablets (Higham and Thosarat 2012). Buddhist practices were also adopted by the Pyu Culture of Myanmar, which has a chronological sequence from 200 B.C. until A.D. 900 and encompasses the region in and peripheral to the Samon Valley (Moore 2007). Pyu sites are known for being enclosed by brick walls; they typically contain urns, finger-

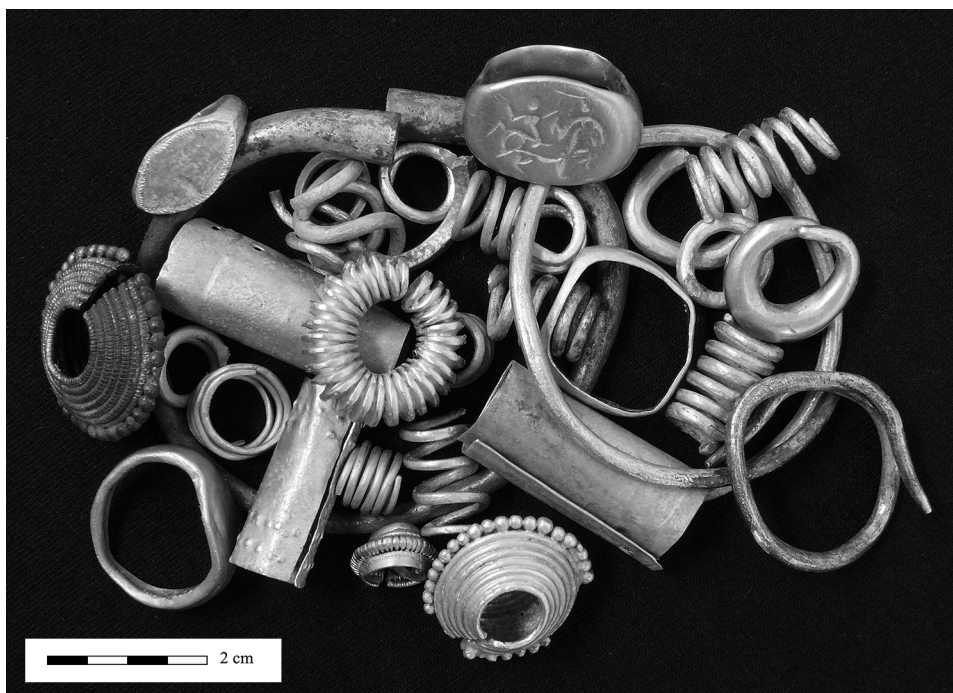


Fig. 2. Gold and silver jewelry discovered in various Prohear burials. Photograph from Reinecke et al. (2009: 14), reproduced with permission.

marked bricks, iron objects, stone sculptures, and ornaments made of gold, semi-precious stone, and glass (Moore 2007).

Finally, the Dian and Lingnan cultures of southern China should be taken into consideration, since they had close contact with some of the Southeast Asian cultures. The Dian Culture, c. 800/600–109 B.C. (after which it became integrated into the Han Empire), was located in Yunnan Province around Dian Lake. Dian Culture burial sites contain bronzes such as drums, other musical instruments, weapons, agricultural tools, and ornaments, along with objects made of silver, gold, lacquered wood, and ceramics (Allard 2006). The Lingnan Culture refers to the archaeological cultures of the Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan provinces of southern China. The majority of Iron Age sites in these regions are burial sites containing geometric impressed pottery, bronzes, and stone tools (Yang 2011). Starting from the Qin (221–206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) dynasties, a more diverse archaeological landscape starts to appear with the discovery of urban production sites. Around 203 B.C., Zhao Tuo, a Chinese general, founded the independent Nanyue Kingdom in Lingnan (203–111 B.C.); its capital was Panyu (present-day Guangzhou) (Guangzhou, Zhongguo, and Guangdong 1990). After the official integration of Lingnan into the Han territory in 111 B.C., a new type of burial tradition in the form of brick-chambered tombs covered by earthen mounds was introduced; these burials are found in association with Han-style grave goods such as mirrors, coins, and ritual ceramics (Allard 2006).

Imported goods and ornaments made of glass, semi-precious stones, and gold have been unearthed from some of the rich cemeteries of this period, including the Hepu

Han tombs (Xiong 2014). Hepu was an important trade port during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) and is thought to have been one of the main departure points of the maritime Silk Road (Wu 2006; Xiong 2014). The Hepu Han tombs are among the best-preserved cemetery complexes in China, with over 1000 tombs excavated. The grave goods display an interesting mixture of locally produced and foreign-style objects such as precious stone ornaments, ceramics, and bronzes, in addition to gold ornaments (Xiong 2014).

### *Early Gold Ornament Production*

Gold is a very malleable and ductile metal, unfit for producing weapons, but quite suitable for manufacturing jewelry and ornaments. It is easy to work and can be hammered into a nearly weightless foil, pulled into wires as thin as strands of hair, or molded into an endless variety of shapes (Kassinger 2003:15). One of the earliest records describing goldsmithing is found in the “Arthashastra,” written around 300 B.C. by the famous Indian scholar Kautilya (Olivelle 2013). This treatise mostly dealt with politics and statecraft, but also described various kinds of work done by goldsmiths. Techniques for making and decorating gold jewelry were divided into the following categories: making solid pieces, making hollow pieces, setting gems, making granules, and wire drawing (Chandra 2002). This textual evidence combined with archaeological finds shows that a sophisticated and advanced metallurgic tradition emerged in South Asia. It reached an apex during the Kushan period (200 B.C.–A.D. 300). The Kushans became familiar with goldsmithing through their connections with the Scythians, so gold ornaments became more popular during their rule.

The richness and refinement of Kushan gold jewelry can be seen in the discoveries made at Taxila, the historical capital of the Gandhara Kingdom (Ghosh 1944–1945; Marshall 1951). The Gandhara region was located in present-day Pakistan. This strategic location linked the extensive trade networks of the Mediterranean, Central Asia, South Asia, and China. As discussed below, several of the early gold objects discovered in Southeast Asia display stylistic and technological features similar to those from the Gandhara area; it is therefore possible they reached Southeast Asia through these trade routes, part of the renowned “silk roads.”

The richest gold finds for the period 300 B.C.–A.D. 100 have been discovered at the Sa Huynh sites of Giong Lon and Lai Nghi, and at Prohear in southeast Cambodia. Altogether, 178 gold beads were found at Giong Lon, 104 gold beads at Lai Nghi, and 79 gold objects at Prohear (Reinecke et al. 2009). Most of these early artifacts are simple ornaments such as earrings, rings, and beads, and were probably the result of overseas exchange. However, recent analyses of gold objects from Prohear and Bit Maes have revealed that native gold was extracted from regional deposits and locally produced in at least two separate workshops (Reinecke 2015; Schlosser et al. 2012).

Most of the early gold ornaments in Mainland Southeast Asia are characterized by little variation and sophistication in shape and decoration. Gold beads are the most common type of ornamental object. They are found in central and southern Viet Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, South China, Indonesia, and Myanmar. Different shapes can be distinguished: round, square, conical, polyhedral, and central-knobbed. A special type of ribbed earring has been discovered at four different sites: Bit Maes and Prohear in Cambodia, and Giong Lon and Lai Nghi in southern Viet Nam (Fig. 3). Reinecke has observed similarities between this type of earring and gold earrings of the Bactrian Kingdom (Reinecke et al. 2014). (This interesting connection with the

Greco-Buddhist tradition is discussed below.) Other golden objects that have been found include: three masks, two foil plaques, and a small spiral wire at Giong Lon, a ring at Bit Maes, gold foil leaves at Vat Komnou, and mouth and eye covers from sites in Java and Bali (Reinecke et al. 2009; Reinecke and Nguyen 2009).

In southern China, gold objects (especially ornaments) have been uncovered from grave assemblages such as in the Nanyue royal tomb in Guangzhou and the Shizhai-shan and Lijiashan tombs in Yunnan (Guangzhou, Zhongguo, and Guandong 1990; Jiangchuanxian and Yuxishi 2007; Yunnansheng 2009). The tomb of the second Nanyue king, Zhao Mo (137–122 B.C.), is especially rich in gold content, with over 200 golden ornaments including gold buckles, gold foil leaves, and button-shaped appliqué. Since these ornaments have received little technical examination, information about the techniques used to produce them is limited. There is some evidence of gilding techniques as seen on gold-plated beads, repoussé seen on the Giong Lon masks, and gold foil techniques seen at Giong Lon, Khao Sam Kaeo, and Noen U-Loke. A study conducted by Sandra Schlosser and colleagues (2012) reveals that two gilding techniques were used at the Prohear and Bit Maes sites: depletion gilding (perhaps by means of an acid solution made from plants) and foil gilding.

The recent discovery and excavation of the Prohear site in Cambodia has provided us with new evidence about the development of the gold-working tradition in Southeast Asia. The 79 gold objects so far unearthed have revealed a greater variety in shape than at other gold-yielding sites. Some types of gold objects (e.g., beads) that are abundant in other late prehistoric sites are rare in Prohear. The main objects discovered include small spirals, slit rings, and small rings; earrings, gold foil tubes, beads, a bracelet, and broken pieces of gold and silver have been found in smaller quantities (Reinecke et al. 2009). We see a definite increase in more complex and detailed ornaments such as massive rings with animal decorations and the 13-tiered bicone-shaped ornaments decorated with granules (Reinecke et al. 2009:85) (Fig. 2). The ornaments show signs of soldering, hammering, repoussé, granulation, wire making, and the use of gold foil.

During the first centuries A.D., as a result of the opening of the western and maritime silk routes, there was an intensification of foreign exchanges with the arrival of many overseas commodities and techniques, which further influenced the consumption and appearance of gold ornaments in South and Southeast Asia. The Greco-Buddhist art style seems to have been a major source of inspiration. This style refers here mainly to the complex artistic traditions of the Afghan-Pakistan, Indian, and neighboring Central Asian regions from 200 B.C.–A.D. 300, which were heavily influenced by the Hellenistic world and the Scythian nomadic tribes. Gold granulation and filigree techniques originating from Greece appear to have been introduced to Southeast Asia and China via overland and overseas trade (Ceng 1990; Chen 2012; Li 2010). The earliest examples of artifacts produced with these techniques are five appliqué buttons found at the Nanyue tomb. The buttons are each lined with one or two rows of braided filigree and further decorated with a filigree flower motif and clusters of granules (Guangzhou, Zhongguo, and Guandong 1990). Similar appliqué are known from Sirkap and other parts of the Greco-Buddhist world (Marshall 1951; Pfrommer 1993:210–212, pls. 111 and 115). Other gold ornaments such as the ribbed earrings found at Sa Huynh sites, a bead decorated with braided filigree found at Khao Sam Kaeo, and a long tubular agate bead with gold leaf capsules at both ends from the Prohear site also reveal similarities with the Greco-Buddhist art styles (Pryce et al. 2006:309; Reinecke et al. 2014; Reinecke et al. 2009:89).

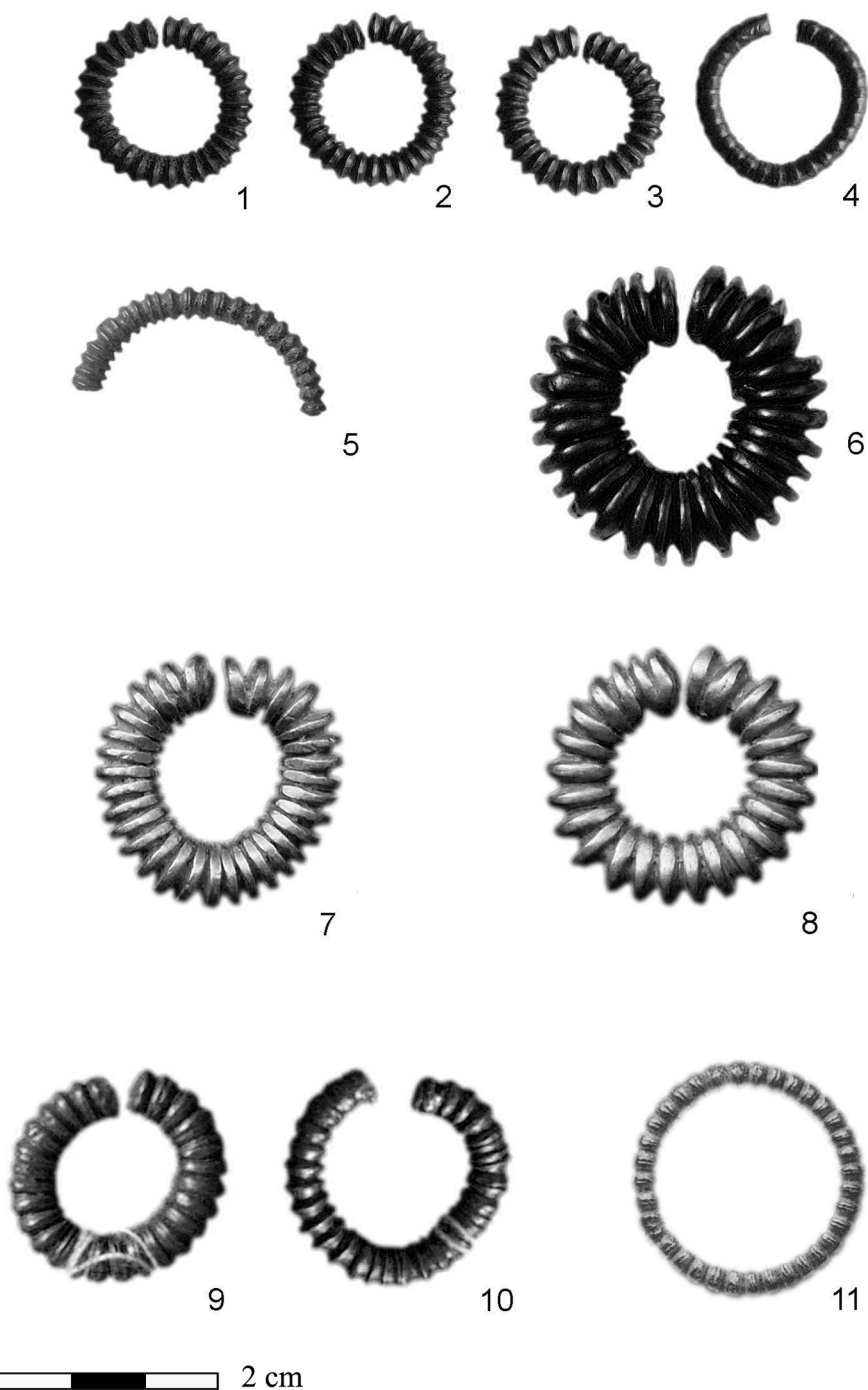


Fig. 3. Ribbed earrings (1–10) and ornament (11). (1–4) Burial 7, Lai Nghi; (5) Unit E, Prohear; (6) Burial 46, Prohear; (7–8) recovered from looters of Bit Meas; (9–10) Burial 05GLH1M1, Giong Lon; (11) Oc Eo. Photographs 1–10: Reinecke et al. (2009:21) and Reinecke et al. (2015:59); 11: Malleret (1962).



Polyhedral beads discovered at several important trade and bead production sites are of great interest as they show similarities to gold beads from the Gandharan and Bactrian kingdoms (Ceng 1990; Li 2010; Lin 2006; Marshall 1951:24.5, pl. 192, 25.6, pl. 193; Pryce et al. 2006). Many of these beads are decorated with granules (especially four granules placed in a triangular pyramid structure) or filigree made from plain and twisted gold wire, two popular techniques for decorating beads in Bactria, India, and Ghandara (Li 2010). Polyhedral gold beads have been found at the Oc Eo site in southern Viet Nam, the Phu Khao Thong, Tha Chana, and Khao Sam Kaeo sites in Thailand, the Srikestra and Beinnaka sites of the Pyu Culture in Myanmar, and in southern China (Chen 2012; Manguin et al. 2011; Pryce et al. 2006; Tan 2015). Two beads found at the Late Lach Truong site in Thanh Hoa Province, North Viet Nam, are possibly also polyhedral beads (Reinecke 2015:151). In southern China, polyhedral beads are mostly found in Hepu Han tombs located near the Tonkin Gulf in Guangxi Province (Chen 2012; Peng 2006). Other finds in China come from the Longshenggang tomb in Guangzhou, the Wulipai tomb in Changsha, and the Hanjiangganquan tomb in Jiangsu (Chen 2012:133). The total number of polyhedral gold beads from each site is unclear and only the beads from the Hepu Han sites have been described in detail.

A total of 33 beads have been discovered in Hepu tombs: Jiuzhiling no. 6a (7), Fengmenling no. 10 (2) and no. 5 (2), and Beichajiangyan no. 1 (8) and no. 4 (14) (Guangxi and Hepu 2005:136) (Figs. 4 and 5). The polyhedral beads found at these sites are typically constructed as follows: they are hollow, with a diameter between 0.5 and 1.7 mm, and are made out of 12 small gold wire circles soldered together in a polyhedral shape. The corners of each polyhedral bead are further decorated with small granules that appear in several arrangements ranging from one granule (most common) to four granules arranged in a pyramid shape. Beads decorated with four granules have been found in Hunan, Jiangxi, the Longshenggang tomb in Guangzhou, and the Jiuzhiling tomb in Hepu.

Producing polyhedral beads was a very complex process and required craftspeople who possessed specialist knowledge of soldering and granulation techniques. The main granulation process involved making small granules and affixing them to the surface of a golden base piece. Granules were affixed using a combination of an adhesive and a solder that had a lower melting point than gold; these fused together after heating. A variety of methods could be used to accomplish this. Chinese scholars have suggested that fish glue or an adhesive made from the Bletilla orchid were used (Chen 2012; Li 2010; Qi 1998). Sir John Hubert Marshall (1951:618) suggests that an alloy of gold and copper was used to solder the granules on similar beads discovered in Taxila; this technique was originally practiced by Etruscan jewelers.

While scholars agree that the techniques used to fabricate such complex beads had a foreign origin, there is some debate about whether or not polyhedral beads were local products or overseas commodities. Most Chinese scholars agree that polyhedral beads were foreign products traded overseas from the west (Ceng 1990; Lin 2006; Peng 2006). Lin Meicun argues that these types of beads were a Roman product that testify to the active participation of the Roman world in eastern trade (Lin 2006:152). However, Lin's argument is based solely on the evidence of polyhedral beads found at the Oc Eo site along with Roman artifacts such as coins, seals, and glass. On the other hand, Louis Malleret (1962) argued that polyhedral beads were locally produced in emulation of Roman samples. Evidence of local gold production has been found

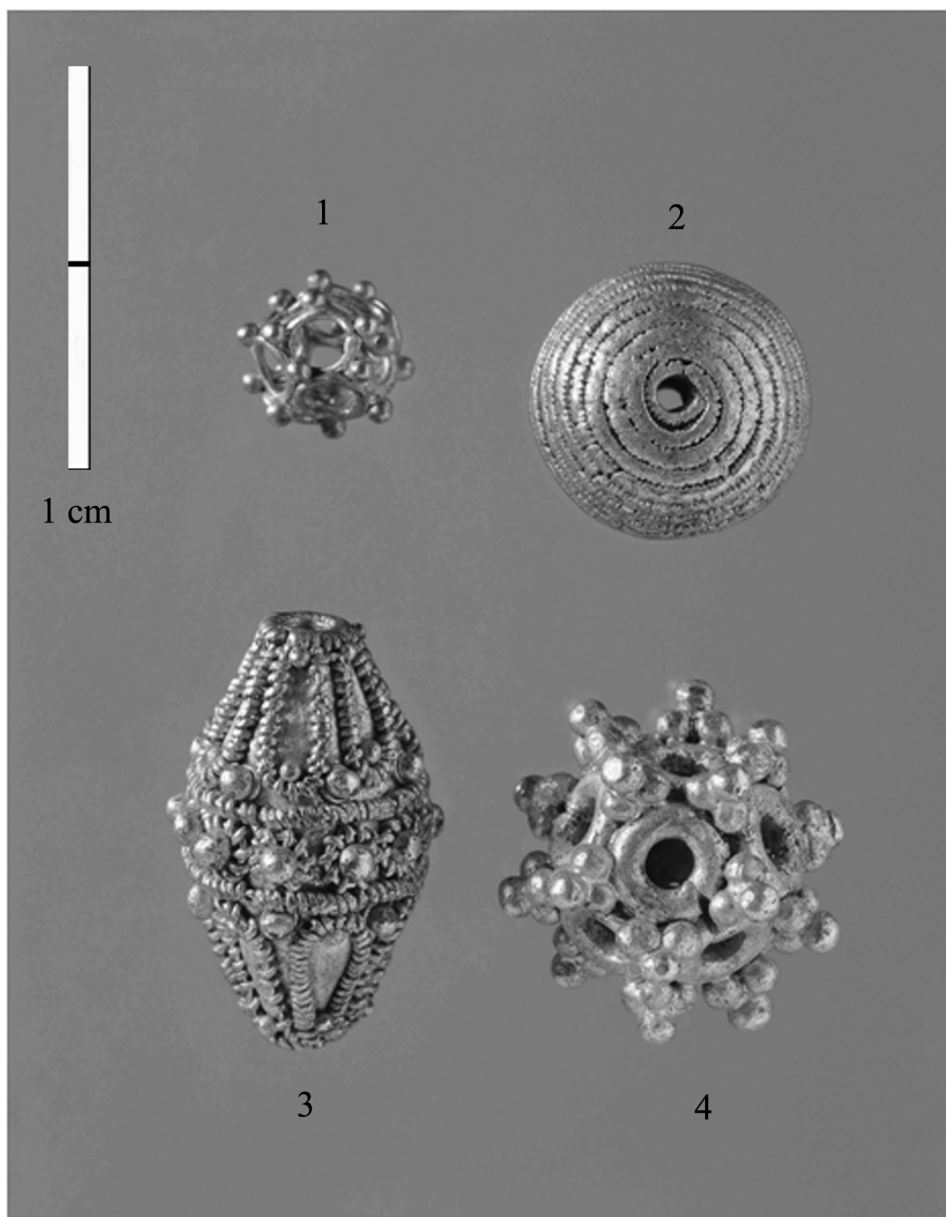


Fig. 4. Four beads unearthed from early Eastern Han (25–220 A.D.) Jiuzhiling Tomb no. 6, Hepu: (1) polyhedral bead decorated with single granules; (2) flattened circular bead with string pattern; (3) elliptical bead; (4) polyhedral bead decorated with four-granule pyramids. Photograph courtesy of Hepu Museum.

at the Oc Eo site in the form of a jewelry workshop including specialist crafts tools and fragments of gold (Higham 2004). Emphasizing the greater variety and number of beads found in Hepu compared to other spots in China, Chen (2012) poses the possibility that Hepu was a production center for gold polyhedral beads, but notes that



Fig. 5. Necklace with polyhedral gold beads from the Western Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 25) Beichajiangyan Tomb no. 1 in Hepu. Diameter all beads 0.8–1 cm. Photograph from Guangxi and Hepu (2005: pl. 44).

the overall size of the beads and granules suggests that bead production techniques at Hepu were less advanced compared to those in the west. Since no evidence of workshops or goldsmithing tools have yet been found in this region, more research has to be done on this issue.

All beads found in Hepu came from high status tombs and all were found in association with other ornaments. Some were strung together with beads made of semi-precious stones such as rock crystal, carnelian, and agate. Besides polyhedral and other shapes of beads (i.e., elliptical, spherical, round, and pear-shaped), gold ornaments such as rings, bracelets, buckles, and earplugs (placed inside the ear canal of the deceased) have also been found in Hepu. Another remarkable discovery was of two small gold pieces decorated with granules and gold wire from the handle of an iron sword in Hepu Liaowei tomb no. 14 (Xiong and Li 2011:175) (Fig. 6). Similar granulated pieces have been found at Huancheng Goncheng Zhuanchang tomb no. 1, also located in Hepu (Peng 2006).

The introduction and spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, and art styles accompanying these religions, began in the early historical period. Buddhist motifs and ornaments became more popular and were copied by local craftspeople. Strong evidence of this is seen through the discovery of goldsmiths' tools at several Oc Eo sites and in the form of gold plaques, originally from South Asia, which were distributed and then produced at several places in Southeast Asia (Fig. 7). The earliest examples have been found in brick structures at the Go Thap site in southern Viet Nam; these are believed to date earlier than 500 A.D. (Le 2005:153). Their iconography mostly seems related

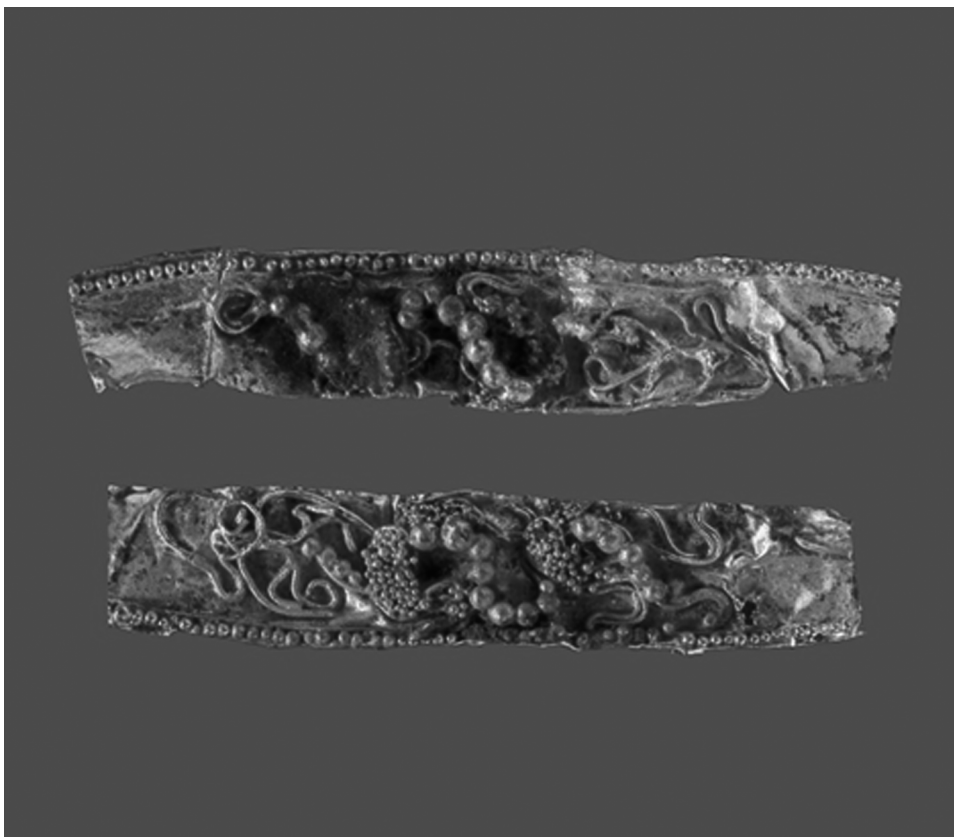


Fig. 6. Granulated gold pieces from the handle of an iron sword, from Eastern Han (25–220 A.D.) Liaowei Tomb no. 14, Hepu. Length 2.1 cm, width 0.4 cm. Photograph from Xiong and Li (2011: pl. 19).

to Hinduism, including the wheel, bull, conch, linga, lotus, and *kendi* symbols, variously representative of Vishnu worship and the goddess of fertility (Le 2005:149).<sup>2</sup> At the Go Xoai site, one plaque with a Buddhist inscription and plaques decorated with Buddhist motifs such as the lotus, tortoise, and elephant have also been found (Le 2005:149). This site represents the most advanced smithing tradition of this period, including a variety of techniques such as forging, cutting, embossing, stamping, and incising.

Rich finds of Buddhist-inspired gold ornaments have been discovered at some Pyu sites (e.g., Halin, Srikestra, and Beinnaka) in Myanmar. Several variations of polyhedral beads have been found, as well as signet rings and dice beads with Buddhist motifs such as the *bhaddapitha* (auspicious throne) and *srivatsa* (endless knot) (Moore 2007; Tan 2015) (Fig. 8).

These types of gold ornaments and their production techniques seem to have formed the foundation for later goldsmithing traditions in Southeast Asia. Archaeological and historical research has revealed that the early Buddhist kingdoms of the Khmer, Cham, and Pyu held gold in high regard, and that they produced sophisticated gold ornaments that were part of religious ceremonies and elite life (Bunker



Fig. 7. Gold plaques of the Oc Eo Culture: (1) gold plaques with linga motif, Go Thap site (Le 2005 : 150, fig. 5); (2) gold plaques with Vishnu image, from temple deposit, Go Thap (Le Thi Lien 2011 : 416, fig. 20.11); (3) gold plaque with several symbols including a lotus, from temple deposit, Go Thap (photograph courtesy of Le Thi Lien).

and Latchford 2008; Hardy et al. 2009; Tan 2015). From the earliest simple gold ornaments found at the Sa Huynh sites in Viet Nam, to the intricate jewelry designs of the early Buddhist kingdoms, we can see a clear evolution in the technologies and patterns used. The transition point of this technical evolution can be traced back to the intensification of trade contacts and the first arrival of the Hindu-Buddhist and Greco-Buddhist cultures in Southeast Asia, which not only influenced and altered the



Fig. 8. Gold ornaments of the Pyu Culture from private collections. Scale unknown. (1) granulated ornament, Myauk Mee Gone; (2) ring with mythical creature motif, Toe Naya Sriksetra. Photographs from Tan (2015: cover page).

form and appearance of gold ornaments, but also the social context for consumption of gold.

#### *Consumption of Early Gold Ornaments*

Consumption of gold ornaments should thus be studied as part of the select category of exotic prestige goods. First, however, the meaning of prestige goods must be explained. The use of terms such as “prestige goods” and “prestige goods network”

can be problematic because they are vague and limited, and not useful without an interpretative framework. Thomas E. Emmerson (1997:33) defines prestige goods network as the expression of social, political, and religious relationships through the medium of material goods. These relationships, which required a shared symbolic and stylistic system, can be recognized on a regional and local scale through the use of non-local and exotic goods in inter-elite exchange. The gold relics and Indian-inspired carnelian beads of a similar style in wealthy elite graves distributed across Southeast Asia testify to this.

Gupta (2005:24) adds another element to this in arguing that prestige goods as objects link aesthetics with status and thus have a social function. The use of the concept “aesthetics” is interesting, since many prestige goods were objects of body adornment, a topic often neglected in archaeology. Martin Wobst (1977) has shown that adornment, because of its visibility, is a suitable medium for conveying stylistic messages. Diana DiPaolo Loren (2003:236) argues that ornaments were part of dress strategies and that new combinations of objects were displayed visually over clothing or on the body to constitute new identities. Wobst further explains that stylistic messaging “allows individuals to summarize and broadcast the uniqueness of their rank or status within a matrix of ranks or statuses, or to express their social and economic group affiliation towards outsiders” (1977:328).

Gold ornaments fit this description well as they were a means of expressing elite identities and the status and power connected to such identities inside the local community and among different social groups. This can be seen in the part they played in mortuary rituals. The occurrence of gold objects along with other prestige goods such as iron weapons and non-local beads in burials suggests they were used by social elites in mortuary rituals. Despite the looting of archaeological sites reported in Southeast Asia, some gold ornaments have been excavated and uncovered *in situ*. Most early gold artifacts are found in burial contexts, arranged together with other ornaments made of glass and semi-precious stones. For example, gold beads and earrings have been found in association with glass and carnelian beads at the sites of Bit Maes, Lai Nghi, Giong Ca Vo, Giong Lon, and Hepu. Gold ornaments strung together with other beads have been found near human remains, which suggests they were a form of body adornment. In the sites discussed earlier, beads were the preferred ornaments; they are found in different combinations of color, shape, and material. They are often found together with other ornaments forming adornment assemblages. For example in Hepu, at tomb no. 26 of the Fengmenling site, over 1500 beads were found, among which were several necklaces made of gold, agate, crystal, jade, carnelian, and glass beads (Guangxi and Hepu 2005). If worn together, these strung beads must have had a stunning effect. They would have advertised information about the status of their owner quite clearly.<sup>3</sup>

Their widespread distribution, stylistic and symbolic characteristics, and occurrence with other prestige goods furthermore suggest that gold ornaments assisted regional elites in forging alliances through exchange. Gold ornaments can therefore be described as a set of prestige goods, selected according to a shared symbolic and stylistic system, which filled a sociopolitical role by reflecting local and interregional identities of the ruling elite.

The first gold ornaments were imported goods, so looking at how they were exchanged should enable us to better understand their consumption background. Internal trade networks in Southeast Asia already played a major role in prehistoric

inter-elite exchange. Archaeological research has revealed the adoption of a set of exotic valuables that demonstrate specific technological and stylistic similarities during this period (Bellina 2014; Hung and Bellwood 2010). Elite groups in prehistoric times seem to have used these exchange relations to express a shared identity, accumulate wealth, and forge social alliances (Bellina 2014; Emmerson 1997). Evidence of this is the distribution of local prestige goods such as Dongson drums and Sa Huynh ornaments across Southeast Asia (Hung and Bellwood 2010; Imamura 2010).

Starting from 500 B.C. we see the arrival of a group of non-local prestige goods such as Indo-Pacific beads, rouletted ware, etched stone beads, carnelian, and pendants (Gupta 2005). According to Charles Higham (2002:224–227), there was a transition from autonomous to centralized societies at this time, which was further characterized by marked intensification in the fields of production, agriculture, and ceremony. The increase in social complexity led to new power structures and elites who selected new exotic prestige goods. The first appearance of gold ornaments coincides with this period, so it seems possible that gold ornaments were included in this inter-elite prestige goods network.

Gold ornaments were imported by means of long distance networks (i.e., the so-called silk roads) that connected several interaction spheres such as the South China Sea, Bay of Bengal, Indian Ocean, Southwest Asia, and Mediterranean regions (Bellina 2014; Borell et al. 2013; Gupta 2005). The first arrival of gold objects and techniques in Southeast Asia coincided with a period of intense foreign contact and socioeconomic change in Southwest Asia and India. During the fourth and third centuries B.C., Alexander the Great led his great Asian campaigns that later resulted in the spread of Hellenistic culture and the consequent foundation of the Greco-Buddhist kingdoms (Pfrommer 1993; Tarn 2010). Thus, it is no surprise that Greco-Buddhist and South Asian art styles had the greatest influence on the production and final execution of early gold ornaments. Around the same time, pastoral groups originating from the Altai Mountains became more prominent in the region; their influence eventually extended all the way to China (Beckwith 2009; Stark et al. 2012). These contacts further flourished with the opening of the terrestrial and maritime silk routes during the Han dynasty (Beckwith 2009; Kuzmina and Mair 2007; Wu 2006; Zou 2006).

Findings of imported goods originating from Persia, Gandhara, and Bactria in mainland China and at port sites in South China and Southeast Asia suggest that both overland and overseas routes were in use. Early finds of multiple eye beads originating from Southwest Asia have been made in Guangzhou and Zhaoqing tombs dated to the Warring States period (403–221 B.C.) (Lin 2006). At the Hepu Han tombs, several objects in a Southwest Asian style have been uncovered, including beads, a bronze cymbal, a Persian turquoise pot from the Parthian Empire, and silver boxes from Bactria or Persia (Xiong 2014). A Persian copper lamp and Indo-Greek coins have been found at Oc Eo (Luong 2015). In addition distinctive bronze vessels with a central cone found at the Dongson sites and certain sites in central and western Thailand, show similarities with vessels found at Taxila and the Greco-Buddhist region (Bellina and Glover 2004:75–77). These findings further support strong cultural and commercial connections between Southeast Asia and the Greco-Buddhist region and the argument that gold ornaments and possibly Greco-Roman artifacts reached Southeast Asia and South China via overland and overseas routes.<sup>4</sup>



More gold objects reached Southeast Asia during the early historical period, traded over the same routes as other commodities. To determine the value of gold ornaments and their position in the commodity trade network we first need to consider the contexts of their discovery. Many gold ornaments from the early historical period have been found at sites that participated in long-distance trade and produced their own set of local prestige goods such as glass beads. Examples of this are Oc Eo in Viet Nam; U-Thong, Phu Khao Thong, Khao Sam Kaeo, and Khlong Thom in Thailand; and possibly Hepu in China. While some gold objects have been excavated from wealthy burials along with other prestige goods, others have been surface finds, so their context is unclear. The shapes of and techniques used to produce early historical objects seem more complex and show greater variation than objects from the Iron Age. This is very obvious in the evolution of bead shapes from round and biconical to polyhedral.

Gold imitation goods, such as gold-colored glass beads, also appeared during the early historical period. These beads were originally products of Hellenistic Egypt or the Roman Empire; they were traded via maritime and land routes to sites in India, Thailand, Viet Nam, and China (Francis 2002:92). Their growing popularity, together with new forms of gold jewelry and evidence of local gold production at Oc Eo, suggest that the demand for and popularity of gold objects was increasing during this period. Since gold ornaments were still used by the ruling elite, the demand for them and consequent value would have been very high. The display of foreign shapes and complex techniques such as granulation and filigree would have set them apart further from other trade commodities. Gold ornaments appear to have had a higher value than ordinary commodities because they fulfilled a sociopolitical role and directly communicated the identity and status of the elite people who wore them.

Archaeological evidence has revealed that a tendency toward centralization, characterized by urban development, intensification of trade and navigation, economic surplus production, and warfare, increased in the first centuries A.D. (Higham 2002). This created new opportunities for control and power and transformed the early ruling elites into new elite classes. These new leaders needed a novel system of symbolic authority to legitimize their power, so they selected a new group of prestige goods and abandoned previous ones. This change of material preference is visible in the archaeological record in Southeast Asia.

The transformation from the Sa Huynh (500 B.C.–A.D. 100/200) to the Early Cham Culture (100–500 A.D.) in central Viet Nam is attested by radical changes in ornament assemblages. Typical ornaments of the Sa Huynh Culture such as the Lingling O and double animal-headed earrings disappeared completely.<sup>5</sup> Agate, carnelian, and nephrite beads became rare. At the same time, Indo-Pacific glass beads became abundant along with increased use of gold and silver ornaments (Lam 2011:9–10). Similar trends can be observed in other coastal regions of Southeast Asia, where large quantities of Indo-Pacific beads have been found; gold and silver ornaments became more popular, and other prestige items such as Dongson drums gradually diminished (Bellina 2003; Bellina et al. 2010; Gupta 2005; Imamura 2010).

Another method elite leaders could use to uphold their power was to control the distribution of prestige goods by separating them from other trade commodities. Appadurai (1988:24) calls an object that is restricted in movement and not priced similarly to other things an “enclave commodity.” It seems the elite class used three methods to “enclave” the distribution of these status goods within the bigger

commodity trade system: first, by developing a stricter and more organized system of controlling the existing trade networks; second, through local production; and third, through importing made-to-order Indian products.

Enclave control can be seen in sites (called port cities) that apparently had both trade and production functions (Bellina 2014). For example, Phu Khao Thong, which is located near the Andaman coast in Thailand, was both a bead-making site and a trading community. Participation in the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere can be seen from the many overseas objects found there, such as Roman mosaic glass, rouletted ware, carnelian tiger beads, and granulated gold beads (Bellina and Glover 2004; Manguin et al. 2011). Whoever controlled these port cities could control access to and distribution of certain trade goods.

Enclave commodities were also developed locally. Signs of local gold production have been found at Oc Eo and at the later sites of Go Thap and Go Xoai (Higham 2004; Le 2005, 2011). Evidence of local manufacturing of other prestige goods such as glass beads is also abundant in the emergence of coastal bead-making sites. These sites have been dated from the early first millennium A.D. Finally, Bérénice Bellina (2003) has shown that Indian made-to-order production was already in use from the end of the first millennium B.C. and developed further over time. Local Southeast Asian elites specified the form, materials, and decorations of desirable objects to Indian craftsmen. Such active participation of Southeast Asian elites in overseas trade with India strengthens the argument that “Indianization” was not a passive process. Trade between India and Southeast Asia was not unidirectional. Southeast Asian ruling elites not only selected Indian trade commodities and prestige goods, but also adopted Indian sociopolitical and religious ideas.

This brings me to the final part of this article, a discussion of the degree to which Southeast Asian elites adapted Indian concepts into their gold ornaments and other jewelry. In ancient Indian literature there are many references to personal adornment, describing jewelry working techniques for different types of ornaments, classified according to the parts of the body that they adorned (Ayyar 1987). Although gold ornaments have been discovered, most of our information about such adornments comes from ancient sculptures, terracottas, and paintings of Hindu and Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas. The elaborate ornaments depicted in these artworks have helped to distinguish amongst the various forms of jewelry described in ancient texts that were originally worn by Indian royalty.

These ornaments not only had an “aesthetic” purpose, but also sociopolitical and religious functions, as noted above. Gold was associated with immortality and used as a metaphor for the sun. In the origin myth of Hinduism, the source of physical and spiritual human life originated in and evolved from a golden womb or egg (Untracht 2008:278). Gold was therefore an important material in India: it emphasized the artistic value of jewelry, represented supernatural powers and religious ideas, and was worn as a status symbol by elite classes. Many of the original Indian meanings for gold were adopted in Southeast Asia, although its association with immortality seems to be less present.

The jewelry tradition of India was more elaborate and varied than that of Southeast Asia. Especially during the Sunga period (185–73 B.C.), men and women preferred rich, heavy ornaments and their idea of beauty was to put on as many ornaments as possible (Ayyar 1987:173). Southeast Asians seem to have initially adopted only cer-

tain forms of Indian jewelry, such as beads and other small ornamental pieces (possibly used as amulets). These adoptions represent the first material signs of Indian culture reaching Southeast Asia. More Indian elements were adopted as trade and exchange intensified; for the first time we see use of Indian religious and sociopolitical concepts by the elite classes (Coedes 1967; Higham 2004).

The use of gold ornaments appears to have evolved from prestige objects, representing a Southeast Asian elite culture, to enclaved commodities with religious connotations used by new elite classes to legitimate and strengthen individual power. The exchange, use, and adoption of Indian religio-political concepts set the stage for the first Buddhist kingdoms in Southeast Asia and for the development of their rich art traditions. Gupta (2005:27) writes that “the material panoply of status initially manifested in beads and cowries gradually came to be projected through sculptural art, coinage and architecture.” Indian influences were thus not limited to jewelry, but affected other art forms such as architecture.

From A.D. 500 onward, the use of gold seems to have extended to tribute missions. Chinese chronicles record that Funan (early polity located in the Mekong Delta), between 226 and 649 A.D., sent tribute missions to China that included gifts of gold (Gunn 2011:26–27). In 445, Linyi (early polity preceding Champa) also offered large quantities of precious metals, including 10,000 *jin* of gold to China (Wicks 1992:210).<sup>6</sup> Gold remained important in forging diplomatic and commercial contacts and displaying power and status. Gold ornaments continued to be used and locally produced, as can be seen in the rich gold-working traditions of the Cham, Khmer, and Pyu (Bunker and Latchford 2008; Hardy et al. 2009; Tan 2015). Religious use also continued, as is attested by finding Buddhist sculptures, gold plaques with Hindu-Buddhist designs, and plaques with inscriptions all over Southeast Asia (Le 2005, 2011).

#### CONCLUSION

The first gold ornaments in Southeast Asia were overseas prestige goods that showed simple techniques and little variation. Carried from South and West Asia via overland and overseas routes, they reached Southeast Asia around 400/300 B.C. They continued to be exchanged over an interregional coastal-inland prestige goods network. The arrival of gold ornaments coincided with the appearance of new status symbols and dressing strategies that embodied major shifts in social identities. New elites arose who used adornment assemblages specifically designed to visually proclaim their high social status and express a new identity deeply rooted in the maritime trading culture. These new leaders selected a novel group of prestige goods and separated them from other trade commodities using three methods: a well-organized and supervised trade system, local production, and made-to-order Indian products. The gold ornaments that were part of this new group of enclaved commodities were more complex in technique and style than the earlier types. These processes were not only closely linked to evolving trade patterns throughout the South China Sea interaction sphere, but also to the opening and extension of multiple silk roads across the whole Eurasian continent. They testify to a complex system of multidirectional connections and cultural exchange between Southeast Asia, India, and Southwest Asia.

During the first centuries A.D., gold ornaments began to display more Buddhist motifs and foreign techniques. These seem to have been initially inspired by Greco-

Buddhist art, but later seem to be more influenced by Indian sociopolitical and religious ideas. These changes in gold ornaments provide an interesting example of how certain foreign techniques and motifs were selectively adopted and modified to fit regional styles during the Indianization process in Southeast Asia. From this time on, the usage of gold was extended and included in religious practices. Gold was used in new material categories, such as plaques with Hindu and Buddhist symbols found in temple deposits. This may reveal a tendency to connect power that was originally invested in individuals to religious rituals, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this article. It may be a topic for future research.

This article has looked at early gold ornaments in Mainland Southeast Asia from three points of view: production, exchange, and consumption. As Chris Gosden (1989:356) states, these concepts are closely related: “Changes in production represent a basic, slow-moving social pulse, which can be used to measure the faster rates of social change in the areas of exchange and consumption.” Changes in the production of personal ornaments are even more distinct, since they are shaped and designed according to the changing fashions and preferences of the society they are used in. The importance of glass, nephrite, carnelian, and agate personal ornaments as prestige goods in Iron Age networks of Southeast Asia has been noted previously (Bellina 2014; Francis 2002; Hung et al. 2013; Theunissen et al. 2000); this article has shown that gold also belongs to the category of prestige good. Adornment assemblages made up of gold, glass, and semi-precious stones were used to constitute and broadcast new identities in different social arenas as part of dressing strategies (Loren 2003). Combining ornaments of different rare materials such as gold, carnelian, rock crystal, amber, and agate could have effectively communicated the identity of individuals in their daily lives as well as in the afterlife. This practice, found in high-status mortuary contexts throughout Iron Age and early historical Southeast Asia, not only testifies to a complicated system of body manipulation linked to identity construction used by social elites, but also reflects interregional tendencies related to socioeconomic and political developments. Findings of similar gold ornaments in coastal polities in Thailand, Viet Nam, and southern China, and inland sites in Myanmar, Thailand, and South China also support earlier studies about shared cultural practices and the existence of a widely shared symbolic system at the interregional scale (Bellina 2003, 2014; Hung et al. 2013).

Finally, the theoretical framework suggested in this article demonstrates the importance of integrating different material categories and opens the way for future studies about the use of high elite personal ornamentation in Southeast Asia. This article is only a starting point in the study of early gold ornaments, however; more detailed descriptions and technical examinations of gold ornaments are needed, along with a multidisciplinary dialogue among international scholars. Gold ornaments and other objects of adornment deserve closer attention because they can highlight information that was previously overlooked and reveal new knowledge about early Southeast Asian societies and the cultural regions with which they traded.

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## NOTES

1. There are several reasons for this neglect. One of the main problems is illegal gold digging and the practice of melting down gold objects for reuse. The archaeological situation in the countries where these objects are found is another major factor. In some Southeast Asian countries, gold objects unearthed by archaeologists rarely receive any technical examination and are surprisingly seldom described in excavation reports.
2. *Kendi* are a type of pottery with a rounded body, straight neck, and spout. They were originally used for pouring sacred water during Hindu rituals. They are found distributed across East and Southeast Asia.
3. Although few skeletal remains have survived the humid and acidic climate of Southeast Asia, some chance discoveries have revealed that there was no strong gender differentiation in the use of these objects. At Noen U-Loke, for example, one male and one female burial both contained gold ornaments (Glover and Bellwood 2004:62). The gold ornaments of Prohear were buried together with men, women, and even children (Reinecke et al. 2009:53). Wearing gold ornaments thus seems to have been neither gender nor age specific.
4. It remains uncertain whether Southwest Asian goods reached Southeast Asia through long-distance sea-lanes starting from the Arabian Sea or were transported overland to India first, then traded across the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere.
5. The Lingling O ornament is a type of jade ear pendant mostly found in Iron Age sites of the Sa Huynh Culture, but also at sites in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. They come in different shapes, but the most characteristic ones have a three-pointed circumferential projection.
6. *Jin 斤* is a traditional Chinese unit for weight equal to 0.5 kg.

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## ABSTRACT

In the last decade a variety of gold ornaments have come to light through excavations and the illegal looting of Iron Age and early historical sites in Southeast Asia. Although these gold objects are personal ornaments testifying to an innovative local craft tradition that was partly inspired by foreign technologies and styles, their role in the inter-regional and long-distance exchange network of the early Southeast Asian communities has been rarely considered. This study of early gold ornaments brings together important gold discoveries on sites in Viet Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and southern China, and discusses similarities in production, consumption, and exchange. It further attempts to offer some new insights into sociopolitical and economic changes on a regional scale, and hopes to contribute to a *longue-durée* examination of trading connections across Asia. It is proposed that the first arrival of gold ornaments was closely related to the blossoming of trade activities on the terrestrial and maritime silk routes, and the political, religious, and artistic ideas that reached Southeast Asia from far-away regions such as the Greco-Buddhist and Hindu-Buddhist regions. Furthermore it is argued that gold ornaments were prestige goods and an essential part of dressing strategies through which changing elite identities were expressed. **KEYWORDS:** gold ornaments, prestige goods, overseas trade, goldsmithing, Southeast Asia.