

The position of engraved gems of India in the Indian Ocean networks

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ABSTRACT

The proposed paper aims at looking into the evidence of engraved gems in the Indian sub-continent belonging to the early centuries of the Common-era, when commercial ties with the Roman Empire were active. A long indigenous tradition of mining and processing gemstones prior to these cross-cultural connections is well established and also acknowledged in the western classical accounts on India. Whereas, this ancient industry, primarily engaged in the manufacture of beads, interaction with the Hellenistic world followed by connections with the Roman Empire, prompted new artefact forms and attributes to be gradually incorporated into the native repertoire as witnessed in the archaeological record.

In the studies on Indo-Mediterranean commerce, however, engraved gemstones have received little attention. This is perhaps due to the small scale of tangible evidence as well as their local material and stylistic composition. Previous studies have tended to explain similarities in type and style among artefacts found in the Mediterranean region and South Asia, including engraved gems, in terms of waves of acculturation i.e. Roman influence upon India and likewise the *Indianisation* of Southeast Asia. These simplistic models of cultural change have been rightly contested as insufficient and often biased accounts of cross-cultural interaction, encouraging instead a review of recipient cultures as producers of new meanings of the same objects and therefore active agents in shaping culture. In understanding the nature of Indo-Mediterranean contact, a shift is also warranted from a primarily economic approach to incorporating the role of non-economic factors.

The present paper, therefore, seeks to explore the variability in type and spatial distribution of the available evidence of engraved gems in the Indian subcontinent with reference to other markers of interaction with the Roman Empire to understand the cultural background which facilitated and sustained ancient Indo-Mediterranean interaction.

Keywords: Indo-Roman trade; engraved gemstones; Indianisation; Maritime trade; Cultural Change