

Abstract

The prevailing view of the dynamics of social complexity in Iron Age mainland Southeast Asia is best represented by the work of Charles Higham. Underpinning Higham's model for the emergence of Iron Age chiefdoms is an elaboration of existing prestige goods exchange networks triggered by exposure to new highly valuable and exotic prestige goods from India. A critical review of Higham's model reveals weaknesses in the use of a regional scale neo-evolutionary theoretical framework, and inadequacies in the data used to assess wealth and status differentiation and the origin, exchange and social function of new exotics such as agate and carnelian beads.

A comprehensive study of agate and carnelian beads at both regional and site-based scales is argued to be a proxy sensitive to the dynamics of social complexity through evaluation of the bead's origin, exchange, value and social use. Alternative scenarios for bead exchange are investigated at the regional scale via a geochemical sourcing study and an analysis of the spatial and chronological distribution of the beads. At the local scale the detailed study of the beads and their burial contexts is used to evaluate alternative scenarios of organisational dynamics at the site of Noen U-Loke in Northeast Thailand.

The introduction of new exotics from external sources is suggested to trigger change in social complexity, but in ways and for reasons that vary between different areas in mainland Southeast Asia. The dynamics of social complexity following exposure to new exotics is shown to differ between inland and coastal areas. The factors that determine the trajectory of these organisational dynamics in any area are the character of social organisation prior to exposure to new exotics and the degree of control a society has over external exchange. As a result, while regional scale analysis is appropriate and required for understanding broader exchange patterns, understanding and articulating the dynamics of social complexity is argued to require detailed local modelling and investigation.