

Riddle of the jade jewels reveals vast trade arena

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Analysing the origins of jade used in ancient jewellery has revealed a trading arena that was active for more than 3,000 years and sprawled over 3,000km in Southeast Asia – possibly the largest such network discovered in the region to date.

An international research team led by archaeologists from The Australian National University used electron probe microanalysis to examine jade earrings excavated from sites all over Southeast Asia, and were able to pinpoint the origin of the precious stone to a source in Taiwan.

“People have noted the widespread use of jade in Southeast Asia since the early 20th century, so one of the big questions has been about where the stone was sourced and how it was distributed,” explained research leader Hsiao-Chun Hung, a PhD student in archaeology at ANU.

Archaeologists have long thought that the earrings were made from local jade by Austronesian peoples as they migrated and traded across Southeast Asia – but the researchers have now shown that much of the stone was sourced from Taiwan and then transported in raw form to places like the Philippines, Borneo, central Vietnam and southern Thailand – up to thousands of kilometres by sea from its source.

Team member Dr Yoshiyuki Iizuka from the Institute of Earth Sciences at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan used electron probe microanalysis to study the variable chemical composition of raw jade samples from all

over Southeast Asia, building up a geographic database of the precious stone. By applying the same technique to the 144 jade artefacts, they found that 116 specimens could be traced back to Eastern Taiwan.

“We know that ancient people elsewhere in the world traded over great distances,” team member Professor Peter Bellwood said. “But this is the first time that such a large trading network has been established in Southeast Asia.”

Ms Hung is studying the migration of Austronesian people throughout the region to Australia’s north between 5,000 and 3,000 years ago. The researchers say their work suggests that Austronesian people, who shared a common language and resembled contemporary Southeast Asians, had a vast, complex system of trade and transportation.

The work was supported by a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council, and also by the National Geographic Society, and is written up in the latest *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*.

Source: University of Surrey

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