Ancient Jade and Glass: Cultural Interactions throughout the South China Sea

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Abstract
Understanding the activities of cultural exchanges between 2000 BC and AD 100 throughout the South China Sea will lay the foundation for the study of the history of the maritime Silk Road. Recent research demonstrates that jade forked blades/ yazhang 牙璋 were produced around 2000 BC in northern China and were gradually distributed to the south, including the areas of Guangdong, Fujian, Hong Kong, and northern Vietnam. People living in the Philippines, East Malaysia, central and southern Vietnam, eastern Cambodia, and peninsular Thailand were importing nephrites from Taiwan from 500 BC to AD 500. These activities show that the South China Sea played an important role linking mainland China, Taiwan, and South East Asia in ancient times. Cultural interactions were not nevertheless, unidirectional: the southern Chinese were importing goods from distant regions as well. The greater Guangzhou area was one of the most significant areas receiving glass imports from the Roman empire. The tomb of the King of Nanyue, dating to approximately 122 BC, reveals many exotic items, including a silver cup from Persia and ivories possibly from Africa. These artifacts probably reached Guangzhou through the South China Sea. Using modern scientific methods to examine artifacts will enable us to discover more cultural exchanges that took place through the South China Sea.