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GLASS BEADS AND PRE-EUROPEAN TRADE IN THE SHASHE-LIMPOPO REGION

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ABSTRACT

During the Islamic period (8th to 15th centuries) glass beads are the most abundant evidence of international trade in southern Africa. Archaeologists, however, have underutilized them because they are small, monochrome and difficult to categorize. I show they can be divided into identifiable series that have temporal parameters. Once identified, the beads can help interpret site chronology as well as regional and international interaction.

Glass beads are also useful in reconstructing trade patterns in the Indian Ocean. Present perceptions concerning Islamic period trade to eastern and southern Africa are based largely on Islamic ceramics and Arab documents. Thus, it is generally believed that trade to southern Africa was an extension of the East Coast monsoon-driven trade that was conducted mainly by local mariners familiar with the difficult conditions in the Mozambique Channel. Comparison of glass bead assemblages from eastern and southern Africa, however, shows that it is unlikely the beads reaching the south were traded through ports to the north. Based on distribution patterns and recent chemical analyses, I propose they were arriving directly from South and/or Southeast Asia.