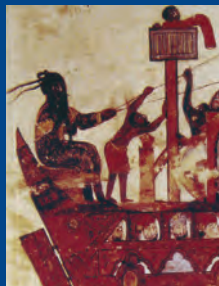


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Late Tang Ceramics and Asia's International Trade

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Sometimes, an event occurs which dramatically enlarges the boundaries of our knowledge and raises our understanding of the realities of the past. The discovery of the Belitung shipwreck in the Java Sea is one such event. The archaeological recovery of the wreck and its cargo has revealed the largest and most comprehensive assemblage of Chinese glazed ceramics found to date from late Tang dynasty, together with a group of rare gold and silver vessels, and silver ingots. This cargo represents the most important hoard of late Tang artefacts ever discovered at

a single site. As such, this find makes a unique contribution to our understanding and appreciation of late Tang material culture and its place in international trade.

The scope and significance of these artefacts are examined in detail in this volume. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an historical setting for the Belitung shipwreck and to examine through the medium of its ceramic cargo the geographical scope of China's international ceramic trade at the close of the first millennium.



Fig. 1 Traditional Arab dhow, of lashed and stitched hull construction with lateen-rigged sail. Manuscript painting depicting Arab merchants *en route* to India, dated 1237. Folio from al-Hariri's *Maqamat*, by a scribe from Wasit, Persian Gulf (Photograph courtesy of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris).

Three critical facts emerge from the archaeological investigation and research of this wreck and its cargo: the ethnicity of the ship, the origin of its cargo, and date. A study of the ship technology and identification of the 'ethnicity' of the vessel is provided elsewhere in this volume (pp. 6–21, 31–38), so I will give only a summary of the findings. It became clear early on in the underwater investigation of the shipwreck that the hull construction was not Chinese, lacking as it did multiple planking, the use of iron nails, or the presence of bulkheads. Rather, the lashed and stitched hull construction, which would have been rendered watertight by extensive caulking, points to a vessel belonging to the Arab-tradition of shipbuilding, that is, a dhow (fig. 1). A variety of timbers were employed in its construction, some of which are unique to the Indian subcontinent. This raises the possibility that the ship was built either in the Arabian peninsula using imported Indian timbers (as are known to have been traded), or (less likely), in India to Arab design. The precise origin of the vessel is less critical to our study than the fact that this is the first Arab dhow discovered in Southeast Asian waters.

The second and also unique aspect of this shipwreck is the cargo – the richest and largest consignment of early-ninth-century southern Chinese trade ceramics. These ceramics, some sixty thousand pieces, made up ninety-eight per

cent of the artefacts recovered from the wreck site, and of these the vast bulk are the iron-decorated stonewares from the Changsha kilns of Hunan province. Relatively small quantities of ceramics from other regions make up the balance: green-glazed Yue wares from Zhejiang together with coarse green stonewares from the kilns of Guangdong (some two thousand pieces), white-green earthenwares (some two hundred pieces) and white-glazed stonewares (some three hundred and fifty pieces), Xing ware from Hebei and a coarser ware possibly from Henan. The latter include three dishes decorated with underglaze cobalt blue, the first complete Tang 'blue-and-white' wares of this kind to be discovered (nos 107–109).

Maritime Asia was experiencing a revolution in the ninth century. The relations that China had enjoyed over the preceding centuries with the West were in flux. Use of the sea routes was actively encouraged as the overland Silk Route through Central Asia became prey to insecurity and disruption. The maritime routes, active already for perhaps a millennium, were now to be developed as both China's gateway to the markets of India, West Asia and the Mediterranean world and, increasingly, to ensure that China had an uninterrupted supply of the forest and marine products of Southeast Asia. China was becoming increasingly aware of the rich potential of these

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¹ *Suishu*, cited in Wheatley 1959, 20.

lands as sources of exotic commodities as a result of tribute missions from the region.

It is a paradox of Tang China that a country as mighty as this, with its capital city Chang'an perhaps the most prosperous and sophisticated city on earth, had not developed the maritime technology to exploit the benefits of international trade. Generally speaking, China seemed content to allow foreign mariners to visit her southern ports in search of trading opportunities, although there were times when China actively encouraged international maritime trade. Shortly after the reunification of China in the sixth century under the Sui (581–618), China began to encourage the exploration of the Southern Ocean (Nanhai) in search of the 'strange and the precious'.¹ However, throughout much of China's history official attitudes to commerce and trade remained ambivalent at best; the court was keen to receive the wondrous goods that distant lands could offer, but Confucian orthodoxy and the Chinese concept epitomized by its self-characterization as the 'Middle Kingdom', required that foreign trade with the court was explained in terms of tribute missions to the emperor. The volume of such missions became so great that periodically the court had to request foreign countries to show a little less enthusiasm, and visit less often – the reciprocal nature of these

contacts proving, on occasions, too great a strain on state resources. Southeast Asian countries were the chief offenders, with Java repeatedly being counselled to visit less frequently (cf. also pp. 152–153).

Attitudes within China to international trade also varied widely. The Confucian-driven court view was increasingly at odds with the commercial hunger of Chinese merchants (and often of provincial government officials), who sought to profit from this trade. The benefits of trade proved irresistible, and with some notable exceptions, the official attitude shifted from condoning to actively encouraging (and taxing) this trade. The charade of trade disguised as tribute gradually slipped away in the late Tang period and in the Southern Song and Yuan periods overseas trade was actively promoted. Formal recognition of this shift in government attitude came with the establishment of a series of new posts to control the movement of foreign shipping and goods in the southern ports. The Office of Superintendent of Shipping Trade (*shiboshi*) was established at Guangzhou by 714, and equivalent posts quickly followed at Quanzhou and elsewhere. Such moves were a reaction to economic reality and the desire of a centralist state to enforce its authority and capitalize on the revenue generated through such trade.

Over the course of the second half of first millennium, the southern port cities of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang grew in importance, fuelled by the Southern Ocean trade. The cities of Hangzhou, Ningbo, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou and Guangzhou all saw the growth of their expatriate merchant communities. These consisted of Malays (that is, peoples of western insular Southeast Asia), Chams (from central Vietnam), Indians and West Asians, each resident in different quarters (*fanfang*) assigned to them in the city. The most populous communities were the non-Muslim Persians (*Bosi*), including West Asian Jews and Nestorean Christians, and Muslim Persians and Arabs (*Dashi*). The latter community was extended the special privilege of appointing officials from within their community to administer Islamic justice, rather than be subject to Chinese law. Such a privilege demonstrates the economic importance attached to foreign trade by the Chinese government, and of the dominance of the Arab Muslims in the expatriate community.

The scale of these expatriate communities can be measured in a number of ways. Many left evidence of their presence in the form of religious monuments – early mosques and Moslem gravestones occur, most famously at Guangzhou and Quanzhou, as do Nestorian gravestones. At Quanzhou, the dispersed remains of Hindu

temples have been traced.² These archaeological remains point to large foreign communities well sustained over many centuries.

The Chinese port most frequently referred to in the Arabic literature is Khanfu (Guangzhou) in the middle and late Tang periods, with Zaitun (Quanzhou) challenging this pre-eminence early in the Song period. Instability and corruption in southern China caused periodic difficulties for the foreign merchants engaged in trade with China. The accounts of these troubles provide the only statistical evidence available for the size and cosmopolitan nature of these communities. In 758/9 the Arab and Persian community of Guangzhou sacked the city as an act of rebellion against the levels of local corruption under which they were obliged to trade, and escaped by sea to Tonkin, from where they continued to operate. In Hangzhou the sacking of the city by Chinese rebels in 760 resulted in the death of several thousand *Bosi* and *Dashi* merchants.³ When a recurrence of such violence occurred in Guangzhou in 878, thousands of Muslims, Jews, Christians and Parsees perished, according to the contemporary commentator, Abu Zaid of Siraf.⁴

The accounts of the Arab geographers who wrote in the ninth and tenth centuries are particularly informative because they give an unofficial view

² Chinese sources make it clear that both Hindu and Buddhist merchant communities existed in both Guangzhou and Quanzhou, though only the Hindu remains at Quanzhou can be traced archaeologically. See Guy 2001.

³ Wang Gungwu 1958, 80.

⁴ Lo Hsiang-lin 1967, 177.

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of the Asian trading world. In this way they differ significantly from the only other literary source for the period, the Chinese official histories. The *Akhbar al-Sin wa'l-Hind* (*An Account of China and India*) was compiled by Sulayman al-Tajar, an Arab merchant, around 851 and absorbed into Abu Zaid's collection of Arabic travel accounts, published in 916 as *Silsilat at-tawarikh* (*The Chain of Histories*). These writers were variously based at Basra and Siraf, centres of the Arab–China trade. Their histories were largely compiled from accounts gathered from mariners and merchants of their experiences; some, such as the traveller Mas'udi, wrote from first-hand experience.

According to the *Akhbar al-sin Wa'l-Hind*, Siraf was the hub of the Persian Gulf's China trade, with goods from Iraq, Persia and the Arabian peninsula being gathered in this entrepôt for shipment. However, Siraf was devastated by an earthquake in 977 and never recovered. The evidence provided by Chinese ceramics at Siraf testifies to this terminal date. The authors of the *Akhbar al-sin Wa'l-Hind* also display a surprisingly informed, indeed sophisticated, knowledge of ninth-century Chinese export ceramics. It is clear from such sources that different types of Chinese glazed ceramics were admired. Yue and Longquan green wares (proto-celadons) of Zhejiang province were already enjoying an international reputation, as were the white Ding wares

of Hebei, and the iron-painted Changsha wares of Hunan. To this repertoire of ceramic types can be added the lower grade ceramics made in imitation of those innovative wares of Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Hunan, which were increasingly produced in the coastal kilns of Fujian and Guangdong, in easy reach of the ports. Distinctive types of storage jars produced in the vicinity of Guangzhou occur from the outset of this trade, establishing that port-city's pre-eminent role in China's early export trade in ceramics.

That Persian and in turn Arabic served as a *lingua franca* for the Asian maritime world perhaps most clearly demonstrates the pivotal role of West Asians in trade towards the close of the first millennium. It is not insignificant that loan words from both Persian and Arabic entered the Chinese maritime vocabulary in this period.

The stimulus to growing Chinese interest in the Southern Ocean can partly be explained by a desire to diversify and supplement the flow of luxury commodities that were entering the Tang capital of Chang'an from the overland Silk Route. Tropical Southeast Asia, India and the Arab and Persian worlds had other goods to offer: aromatic woods, pearls and kingfisher feathers are often cited in the Chinese sources of the period, most notably in the *Suishu* and *Tangshu*, the official dynastic histories. In exchange China offered its unique gift to the world, silk. By the fifth cen-

tury both Persia and India were providing large markets for Chinese silk, and trading many of the luxury goods China demanded in exchange. Throughout the Sui and Tang periods silk remained China's principal export, but nothing survives archaeologically outside Central Asia and Japan. Lacquer utensils were also popular but finds are exceedingly rare.⁵

Whilst there is secure evidence that individual Chinese travelled these southern routes, it is by no means clear that they did so in Chinese vessels. Indeed, the circumstantial and occasional textual references suggest otherwise. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims knew that merchant shipping was available to take between the southern Chinese ports and India via a number of staging posts, principally in Southeast Asia. The earliest such account is that of the pilgrim Faxian whose *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (399–414) provides the first description of a sea passage from India to China, with a change of vessel in *Java-dvipa*, presumably located either on the west coast of Malaya or more probably an early coastal entrepôt in Sumatra or western Java. The detail his description provides warrants quotation at length:

‘Having obtained the Sanskrit works [Buddhist sutras, transcribed during a two year sojourn in India] he took passage in a large merchantman, on board of which were more than 200 men ...

With a favorable wind they proceeded eastwards for three days, and then they encountered a great wind. The vessel sprang a leak and water came in ... The merchants were greatly alarmed, feeling their risk of instant death. Afraid that the vessel would fill they took their bulky goods and threw them into the water. Faxian also took his *kundika*, with some other articles, and cast them into the sea; but fearing that the merchants would cast overboard his [sacred] books and [religious] images, he could only think with all his heart of Guanyin [Avalokitesvara].

After proceeding ... more than ninety days, they arrived at a country called Java-dvipa, where various forms of error and Brahmanism are flourishing, while Buddhism is not worth speaking of. After staying there for five months [presumably to await the change of direction in the monsoon winds] Faxian again embarked in another large merchantman, which also had on board more than 200 men. They carried provisions for fifty days, sailing on 16th of April, 414 for Guangzhou.’

After further misadventures at sea, during which the ‘Brahmans’, that is, Indian Hindu merchants,

⁵ Chinese lacquer, possibly Later Han, has been noted at Begram, Afghanistan (Verbal communication, T. Mikami).

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⁶ Wang Gungwu 1958, 99; see also in this volume p. 81.

threatened to abandon Faxian on an island, the ship reached coastal Guangdong after a voyage of some two months. Faxian's detailed description provided a vivid picture of long distance Asian shipping in the fifth century. The ships were large, carrying two hundred crew and merchants with their goods for trade. At no point does he mention the possibility of Chinese ships for this passage. Even a late Tang dynasty source, the *Lingbiao Luyi* is still able to describe the ships of the foreign merchants as not using iron nails to secure their planks, but rather are stitched together with the fibre of coir-palms and their seams caulked.⁶ This description is, of course, of ship construction according to the Arab dhow tradition.

The situation does not seem to have changed by the late seventh century when another Chinese pilgrim Yijing undertook the same journey in 671, on his outward journey from China to India. He sailed from Guangdong aboard a West Asian (*Bosi*) merchant ship, which took him to Srivijaya (*Sanfoqi*), the major entrepôt of western Indonesia. The location of Srivijaya has generated considerable debate and archeological investigation, and the current consensus is that it was a loose federation of interests on both sides of the Malay Straits and probably west Java. It was most probably centred at Palembang in south-east Sumatra

with command of the Malay Straits and, less effectively, the Sunda Straits. These two passages provided the only practical access to the Indian Ocean from the South China Sea, and their control offered great economic potential, as Srivijaya discovered. It is in these waters that the Belitung shipwreck is located.

Late in the first millennium two significant changes occurred in Chinese understanding of the Nanhai trade, which were to alter its character and importance thereafter. The first was a growing awareness that many of the commodities marketed in China as being of Persian or Arab origin (especially the camphor, sandalwood, bezoin and other resins) were substitute aromatics procured in Southeast Asia, harvested largely in Sumatra and Borneo. The other factor was simply growing demand. Southern China was no longer marginal frontier territory, but was emerging as a significant economic region in its own right. As its prosperity grew, largely fuelled by servicing this international trade, so did local demand for the luxury goods of the Nanhai. During this period the reinvigoration of Mahayana Buddhism in China (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia) also generated a heightened demand for aromatics for use in temples and shrines.

A number of eighth-century sources affirm the dominance of ships from the western Indian Ocean in the China trade.⁷ The eighth-century Chinese poet Bao He, in his *Sending the Esteemed Master Li to Quanzhou*, provides the traditional view of China's oversea's trade and the role of foreigners:

The land by the sea lies beyond the
realm of civilization...
And in the markets are the people of
the sacred isles;
Grasping jade, they have come to our
land from afar,
Offering pearls, they come to offer
tribute.⁸

In the course of the ninth and tenth centuries, however, we see significant changes in the official attitude to trade and in the field of Chinese ship design. The technological developments, supported by a relaxing of government resistance to trade, resulted in the appearance of direct Chinese shipping in Southeast Asian waters. This change is clearly signalled in the *Muruj al-Dhahab*, written by Mas'udi (d. 956):

The ships from Basra, Siraf and Oman,
India the islands of Zaabaj and Sanf
came to the mouth of the river of

Khanfu [Guangdong] with their merchandise and their cargo [before 877/8]. Then [the trader] went to sea to the land of Killah [west coast Malay peninsular, possibly Kedah or Perak] which is approximately half way to China. Today this town is the terminus for Muslim ships from Siraf and Oman, where they meet the ships which come down from China, but it was not so once ... This trader then embarked at the city of Killah on a Chinese ship in order to go the port of Khanfu.⁹

But Mas'udi was describing the situation in the mid-tenth century, one hundred and twenty-five years later than the Belitung ship, and in the intervening period we witness China asserting itself as a significant maritime presence in the Southern Ocean for the first time.

Southeast Asia as a market

It is clear from the archaeological record that by the ninth century the Southern Lands had become more than a source of exotic goods, but also a significant market for Chinese exports. The Chinese records makes clear that plain silk cloths and silk brocades were the most popular

⁷ Hourani 1995, 62.

⁸ *Yudi jisheng*, cited in Clark 1991, 32–33.

⁹ Tibbetts 1979, 37.

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¹⁰ China was an exporter of lead in this period, so the ingots could be of Chinese origin, though their position in the ship's loading suggest otherwise.

¹¹ Guy 1986, 11.

export goods, and in all probability the Belitung ship was also carrying its share of these profitable items. This is made even more likely given the other luxury goods found – gold and silver vessels of a quality never before seen in a Southeast Asian shipwreck context, and a rarity from land sites (nos 1–7, 12–21). The presence of eighteen silver ingots (cf. no. 11 a, b) is also highly significant, representing the largest single find of Tang ingots and again strengthening the interpretation of this cargo as a high-value consignment. Yet it also contained lead ingots, loaded on top, which suggests they were taken on board at a later port of call, perhaps in the Malay peninsula.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the largest component of the cargo, in volume and number if not necessarily in value, is the glazed ceramics as cited above. The most pervasive of these wares are the distinctive underglaze-painted wares of Changsha (see below pp. 466ff.). The predominant form is the shallow bowl, which appears with a rich variety of painted designs, including flowers, foliages, clouds, landscapes, birds and some rare examples with a grotesque fish (*makara*) (see nos 171–217 and appendix I.1). The most remarkable perhaps are the series of bowls with painted calligraphy. Most are quotations from poetic passages (nos 218–221). Significantly, one Changsha bowl has engraved on the outer wall its date of manufacture: ‘the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the second year of Baoli era’, equivalent to 826

(no. 171). This is an important addition to the small corpus of dated Chinese wares from the ninth century, since it predates the only other dated Changsha ware, a bowl inscribed ‘third year of Kaicheng’, equivalent to 838. The latter was identified during the excavation of the Tongguan kilns, twenty miles north of Changsha.¹¹

More immediately, the dated bowl provides an invaluable benchmark date for narrowing the date range of the shipwreck and its cargo. It is reasonable to assume, as is done in the interpretation of other shipwreck material, that the cargo was newly manufactured when shipped. In the case of ceramics, there is no reason to assume that the goods were not consigned for sale within one or two seasons of their manufacture. The ceramics of Changsha were most probably consigned to Ningbo and on to Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province, which were major ports for Tang China.

International distribution

A distinctive class of wares seen in the earliest contexts, and associated with a variety of other trade wares, is the coarsely potted storage jars found in the cargo (nos 161–164). They are mostly glazed stonewares that have been linked to a number of kilns in the vicinity of Guangzhou. A number recovered from the Zhujiang River at

Guangzhou confirm that they were used for the shipping of goods (presumably preserved foods) loaded there.¹²

Random finds of Chinese trade goods, most notably glazed ceramics, have been noted from sites widely distributed across both mainland and insular Southeast Asia and at numerous sites further west. It is now clear that the archaeological trail can be traced from the Changsha kilns of Hunan, to the ports of Hangzhou and Ningbo. Excavations in the Tang quarters of Hangzhou and Ningbo have revealed quantities of all the major types of ceramics recovered from the Belitung shipwreck: Changsha, Yue, white wares.¹³ In the case of the Ningbo material, the bulk of the wares recovered appear unused, suggesting that these finds represent the wastage from the warehousing and packing of ceramic goods for export. No doubt Ningbo also supplied Hangzhou, for domestic use and for re-export to Japan. From these ports the ceramics were shipped directly to overseas markets, with Hangzhou focusing on the East Asia trade. Both ports supplied goods to feed into the Southern Ocean trade conducted out of the ports of Fujian and Guangdong.

To trace the trade route and distribution pattern of Changsha, Yue and Ding ware is to revisit the most extensive maritime trade route undertaken in the medieval world. The ceramics of Hunan,

Zhejiang and Jiangxi were transported by a variety of land, riverine and coastal shipping routes to the ports of southern China. Ships departed each season with the prevailing winds and made their way for Southeast Asia, presumably taking on provisions at landmark ports, such as Tonkin, Champa and Pulau Tioman, a fresh water island off the east coast of the Malay peninsula. Large quantities of Song export ceramics have been found on that island's beaches and hinterland, but none can be securely dated to the late Tang.¹⁴ This is surprising, given the evidence of the Belitung cargo, which establishes bulk trade in ninth-century Chinese ceramics passing through the Java Sea area. Prior to this discovery the assumption had been (based on the evidence of a number of land portage and entrepôt sites) that Chinese goods were unloaded on the east coast of the Isthmus of Kra, then transhipped to the west coast for onward journey to West Asian markets. Those lesser quantities destined for Southeast Asian consumption were assumed to have been distributed through a network of secondary trading.

The riverine site of Laem Pho at Chaiya, near Nakhon Si Thammarat, peninsular Thailand, demonstrates the pattern. Chaiya was an important trading centre and probably represented the westerly limits of Srivijaya's influence. In earlier times this area appears to have come under Funan's hegemony, so the region

¹² These examples are displayed in the Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou. See also *Ceramic Finds* 1985.

¹³ Jiang Hua 1984. See also Ruan Pinger 1994, 8.

¹⁴ Southeast Asian Ceramic Society 1985.

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¹⁵ Surveyed by the author, jointly with the Thai Department of Fine Arts, in 1986; Guy 1987, 14–15.

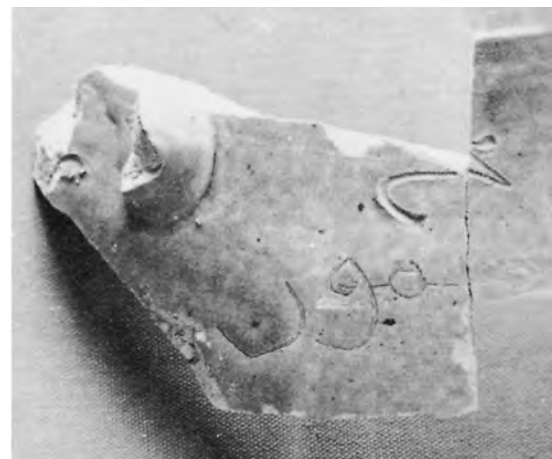
¹⁶ For a review of Indian merchant-guild activity in Southeast Asia see Guy 2001.

had a long history of participation in international trade. Surface surveys of the beach and river estuary reveal large quantities of ninth-century underglaze-painted Changsha wares, together with the storage jars associated with kilns around Guangzhou.¹⁵ A selection of these finds are exhibited in the National Museum at Nakhom Si Thammarat. Investigations on the other side of the peninsula, at Takuapa, have revealed a similar pattern: Chinese ceramics have been found, together with Islamic glass, traces of processed gold (residue of smelting or gold-working activity), Hindu sculpture and a Tamil inscription recording the activity of a south Indian merchant guild.¹⁶ These land routes across peninsular Southeast Asia have been used since the very beginnings of maritime East–West

trade. They appear to have been revived at times when piracy made the sea passage through the Malay Straits too hazardous. The ninth-century ceramic evidence from Laem Pho-Chaiya area, contemporary with the Belitung shipwreck, indicates that both routes were active at this time.

The archaeological record suggests that the volume traffic in late Tang ceramics was westward. Examples of the ceramic types represented by the Belitung cargo are recorded next in Sri Lanka, a major trading partner in early East–West trade. Sri Lanka was a prosperous Buddhist kingdom, strategically located to service Indian Ocean shipping. It also had immense reserves of precious and semi-precious stones, spices and, most famously of all, pearls of matchless size and

Fig. 2a, b Storage jar fragments. Chinese green-glazed stoneware. Provincial imitation of Yue ware, associated with kilns in the vicinity of Guangzhou, Guangdong province. Excavated from the foundations of the Great Mosque, Siraf, built in the first quarter of the ninth century. Note incised (below glaze) Arabic inscription on shoulder of Figure 2b (right) (Photograph courtesy of David Whitehouse).



quality. Excavations at Mantai, near Jaffna, have confirmed the location of Sri Lanka's principal port in this period.¹⁷ Chinese ceramics, including Changsha wares with both painted and applied decoration, have been revealed during excavations in the vicinity of Abhayagiri monastery and stupa at Anuradhapura, central Sri Lanka.¹⁸ Other examples have been excavated at Mantai, the port through which the capital was supplied.

Despite a number of surface surveys in coastal southern India, no pre-Song Chinese ceramics have been identified to date: thirteenth- and fourteenth-century wares have been the most prevalent.¹⁹ Given the traffic flowing west to the markets served by the Persian Gulf ports, this seems surprising. Nonetheless, it is to the ports and cities of the Abbasid period (750–870) that we must turn for the largest concentrations of late Tang ceramics linked to the Indian Ocean sea trade. Basra (Iraq), Siraf (Iran) and Sohar (Oman) were the main ports, Baghdad (Iraq), Shiraz (Iran) and Samarra (Iraq) the major markets.

The most detailed excavation record is that provided by the Great Mosque excavation at Siraf, and the percentages of wares provide an interesting 'measure' for the composition of the Belitung cargo. The Siraf excavation is distinguished for its concentration of Changsha painted wares and green glazed jars recovered

beneath the floor of the Great Mosque, built in the first quarter of the ninth century. The Siraf mosque foundation excavation yielded significant quantities of green-glazed Chinese storage jars (sixty-five per cent), Changsha wares (twenty-five per cent), and white wares (five per cent).²⁰ Two fragments of these Chinese jars have Arabic names incised beneath the glaze, suggesting that Arabic-speaking merchants placed the order for these jars, and perhaps that the names served as a record of ownership. They also confirm that these jars were expressly produced for the Arab trade (fig. 2a, b). Jars of this type with 'pseudo-Arabic' inscriptions on the shoulder have also been found in Palembang (Sumatra), and Central Java, confirming the place of the western Indonesian ports in this trade.²¹

Islamic turquoise-glazed earthenware was also recorded at the Siraf excavation. These are of special interest in that they are found, in small quantities, scattered along the same West-East trade route, and clearly formed a part of the Islamic reciprocal trade. Twenty 'Tajik' [Arab] vases formed part of the tribute sent in 961 by the Cham king Jaya Indravarman I to the new Song emperor.²² The acceptability of Islamic pottery in China is confirmed by the discovery of three green-glazed Persian earthenware jars of this type in the tomb of Liu Hua, on the outskirts of Fuzhou, Fujian province.²³ The tomb, dated 930, belonged to the wife of Wang Yanjun, the ruler of

17 Carswell 1992.

18 Published Guy 1986, fig. 6.

19 Subbarayalu 1996, 113; see also Carswell 1978.

20 Tampoe 1989; see also Rougeulle 1996, and in this volume pp. 80–81.

21 Adhyatman 1983, pls. 10, 13.

22 *Songshu*, cited in Schafer 1967, 75.

23 Feng Xianming 1986, 47. Larger quantities have been found at Yangzhou, but in Song dynasty contexts; cf. in this volume p. 88.

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²⁴ Khan 1969; see also in this volume p. 80.

the Min kingdom (909–945), whose wealth was built on the profits of international trade. Clearly these Islamic imports were the products of this trade, and highly valued.

So pervasive have the white-glazed bowls with a rolled rim and recess-carved foot been in West Asian sites that they were dubbed 'Samarra ware' in earlier literature, inspired by the quantities recovered at the city of Samarra, founded on Sassanian foundations as the Abbasid capital in 836 and abandoned as a royal centre by the mid-

tenth century. Other contemporary urban sites in West Asia received Chinese ceramics, principally from Siraf which continued to serve as the major redistribution centre for the Iran hinterland until it demise in 977. These included Shiraz, Kish, Gurgan, and Nishapur in Iran, and Fustat in lower Egypt which was served by the Jeddah–Siraf trade. Other sites border the Arabian Sea, such as Banbhore in Pakistan.²⁴ Evidence exists for Chinese ceramics to have been carried to East Africa along with the spread of Islam, as far south as Zanzibar.

Fig. 3 Fragments of Changsha bowls. Underglaze-painted stoneware, Hunan province. Excavated in the vicinity of the Hindu temple complex of Lara Jonggrang (Prambanan), in 1936. The temples were built in the second quarter of the ninth century, and dedicated in 856. The ceramics may be presumed to date from the site's use in the second half of the century (Photograph courtesy of the National Museum, Jakarta).



Late Tang ceramics are widely reported in Southeast Asia. This is undoubtedly a direct result of the sustained level of archaeological activity that has gone on in the region in recent decades. The distribution predictably mirrors trade routes, the sites of historical entrepôts, and religious or urban centres. Finds of Changsha wares and green-glazed storage jars recur at sites in Java, principally those associated with the Sailendra kingdom. Excavations in the vicinity of Central Javanese temple sites have consistently yielded examples. Yue-type storage jars

have been recovered during temple restoration work on the Dieng plateau, which may date to the eighth century. Excavations in the vicinity of Prambanan temple, near Jogjakarta, has yielded quantities of painted Changsha ware, including bowls and covered boxes such as are represented in the wreck cargo (fig. 3). Green-glazed storage jars have also been recorded from this region, including Candi Sojiwan.²⁵

Tang ceramics have been reported from Malaysia, confirming the importance of the port

²⁵ Adhyatman 1983, pl. 36.



Fig. 4 Excavation and restoration of a Hindu temple platform, Chandi Bukit Batu Pahat, Merbok, Bujang valley, Kedah, Malaysia. This riverine site, with access to the estuary of the Merbok River, was one of the early centres for intermediate trading on the West Asia–China route (Photograph courtesy of the Museums Department, Malaysia).

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²⁶ Exhibited at the site museum, Lembah Bujang, Kedah. See also Shuhaimi and Yatim 1990, 72.

known to the Arab geographers and navigators as 'Kalah'. The Bujang valley in Kedah, which has sometimes been equated with Kalah, has yielded small quantities of Tang ceramics, associated with the temple sites (fig. 4).²⁶ No sites comparable in their ceramic concentrations to Laem Pho in peninsular Thailand have been located in Malaysia, which may point to the 'Kalah' having been located further north in the Isthmus region. Takuapa, on the west coast, may be a candidate for this identification.

Conclusion

The Belitung ship sank in the west Java Sea, close to the Sunda Straits and well within the zone of Srivijaya's control. There is no firm evidence to resolve questions surrounding its ports of call, though some clues are provided by traces of other cargo goods and finds of items for personal use by crew or on-board merchants. The vessel may have been sailing to west Java to collect spices before using the Sunda Straits to access the eastern Indian Ocean. No Southeast Asian spices have been recovered, though traces of aromatic resins were found (no. 322), such as could be acquired in Sumatra. These could however also be the legacy of an outward cargo already delivered to China.

The recovery of a few personal artefacts (which were not part of the cargo) gives some clues as to where the ship may have stopped on its journey. Most of these personal items are Chinese, which can be interpreted as suggesting some Chinese presence on board – witness the recovery of an inkstone (no. 309), and a Chinese sword handle fitting (no. 325). Other Chinese items could have been purchased for personal use at the Chinese port-of-call by the crew and accompanying merchants. Given that the ship's company was probably a mix of Arab, Indian and Malay seaman and merchants, with some Chinese traders, perhaps accompanying the high-value goods, it is curious that two Persian Gulf turquoise-glazed earthenware jars (nos 292, 293) are the only material evidence of Arab presence on the dhow.

The recovery of a few items of Southeast Asian provenance however, does provide a clue to the most likely immediate port of call before the vessel sank. A grinding stone and roller of distinctly Southeast Asian type (no. 302) suggests the taking on of Malay crew at some point in the journey. A scale bar (no. 301) and weights (no. 300 a–c) are the accoutrements of a merchant, as is a single Javanese gold coin (of the 'piloncito'-type, no. 10). This latter find could indicate the presence of a Malay merchant who joined the ship at a port in Sumatra, most likely Palembang (where

this style of coinage was in circulation), or a high-value coin received by an on-board merchant in exchange for goods sold in Sumatra.

The sheer volume of the ceramic cargo, and the presence of a small number of high-value precious metal objects, suggests that the ship had been on its way to West Asia, where it would have generated considerable wealth for its owners. The Persian Gulf–China route was a long and hazardous one: an Indian sailed from Sri Lanka to Palembang in 717 on a convoy of thirty-five Persian (*Bosi*) ships, most of which were lost at sea.²⁷ But for those who returned safely, the rewards were great. One of the few Arabic merchants involved in the Indian Ocean–China trade for whom we have contemporary records is Abu'l Qasim Ramisht.²⁸ He is remembered for gifting, at great personal expense, Chinese textiles to serve as a cover for the Ka'ba at Mecca, the holiest of Muslim shrines. This wealth flowed from the ships that successfully completed the longest sea journey of its day, from the Persian Gulf to China, and back. The Belitung ship was part of that great enterprise.

²⁷ Hourani 1995, 62.

²⁸ Guy 1998, 48.