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# The Navigational Route of the Belitung Wreck and Late Tang Ceramic Trade

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<sup>1</sup> Feng Chengjun 1976, 47–49; Yao Nan et al. 1993, 69–73.

<sup>2</sup> Kuwata Rokurō 1934, 210 ff.; Zhou Zhongjian 1986, 30–37.

The Belitung wreck was discovered south-east of Sumatra, less than two miles off the coast of Belitung Island. According to Tang and Song dynasty navigational routes, south-east Sumatra was the location of a powerful maritime state, known from Chinese sources as the Kingdom of Shilifoshi. This state controlled the Straits of Malacca to the north and the Selat Sunda Strait to the south, and as the guardian of the two main waterways linking East and West, held a key position in the Nanhai (South China Sea) trade from the seventh to the thirteenth century.

In 671, the famous monk Yijing travelled aboard an Arab ship from Guangzhou to Shilifoshi. From there, under the auspices of the King of Shilifoshi, he sailed on a royal vessel through the Straits of Malacca, past what is known from Chinese sources as Jietu (now the Kedah region in Malaysia) and the Kingdom of Luoren (now the Nicobar Island area) until he reached Tāmrlīpti in the Ganges River delta.<sup>1</sup> The Tang dynasty record, *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao*, written in the Zhenyuan period (785–805) by Jia Dan, also mentions the Kingdom of Shilifoshi as an important location that served as a reference point for the calculation of major navigational routes. It

further notes that the Kingdom of Heling (now Java) was a few days sail from Shilifoshi, while the Kingdom of Gegesengqi (now one of the Brouwers Islands) could be reached a few days after crossing the straits to the west. Writing in the Song dynasty, Zhou Qufei notes in his *Lingwai Daida* that:

The Kingdom of Sanfoqi (mid-ninth-century term for Shilifoshi) stands at the centre of all foreign waterways. From Dupo in the East, from Dashi and Guling in the West, all have to pass through its territory to reach China.<sup>2</sup>

The sources clearly indicate that Shilifoshi was a major way-station on the trade route linking China, India, the Arab world, and Southeast Asia, and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that the Belitung vessel did not accidentally drift into this area.

The objects salvaged from the Belitung wreck are striking in both variety and number, including such materials as gold, silver, iron, lead, bone, wood, stone, glass, a wide range of spices, and ceramics. Excluding spices and glass artefacts,

the largest portion of these remains are Chinese in origin. The most remarkable aspect of the find is the vast number of ceramics it contained: estimates suggest a total of some sixty thousand pieces. We may safely conclude from existing scholarly research that these wares chiefly date to the ninth century. While the production site of some of these ceramics remains unclear, by far the largest portion of the wreck's wares were manufactured at the Changsha kilns in Hunan province, the Yue kilns in Zhejiang province, the Xing kilns in Hebei province, and various kilns in Guangdong province.

A similar variety of wares has been found at excavation sites in way-stations such as the aforementioned Shilifoshi and Heling. Excavations at the site of the capital of Shilifoshi, located at Palembang in south-east Sumatra, have yielded Tang dynasty Yue wares, Changsha wares, green-glazed wares from Guangdong kilns, and North China white wares. On Java, green-glazed Yue wares have been found in Surabaya, while Jogjakarta has yielded Yue, Changsha, and green-glazed Guangdong wares, as well as white wares with green décor.<sup>3</sup> Shilifoshi was also an important production and distribution point for many of the commodities, such as spices and medicine, found aboard the Belitung wreck.<sup>4</sup> Although we are presently unable to prove with absolute certainty that the ship did indeed anchor and

conduct business in Shilifoshi before it sank, the great amount of Chinese goods on the vessel does demonstrate that it sank before reaching its final destination.

Whatever the case, Jia Dan's *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao* offers valuable clues for reconstructing the vessel's original route and ultimate destination. Previous reconstructions based on Jia Dan's text indicate that the trade route linking the Strait of Malacca to the Persian Gulf was approximately as follows (modern locations are given in parenthesis):

To the north of the Straits was the Kingdom of Luoyue (the southern tip of Malaysia), and to their south, Shilifoshi (south-east Sumatra); at four to five days' sailing distance from Shilifoshi, one reached the Kingdom of Heling (Java). Three days to the west of the Straits was the Kingdom of Gegesengqi (one of the Brouwers Islands at the southern end of the Strait of Malacca), and to its north, the Kingdom of Geluo (in the vicinity of present-day Kedah, Malaysia); to the west of Geluo was the Kingdom of Geguluo (the south-west portion of the Isthmus of Kra). Next, at four to five days sailing distance from Gegesengqi, came Shengdengzhou

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<sup>3</sup> Mikami Tsugio 1987, 335–337.

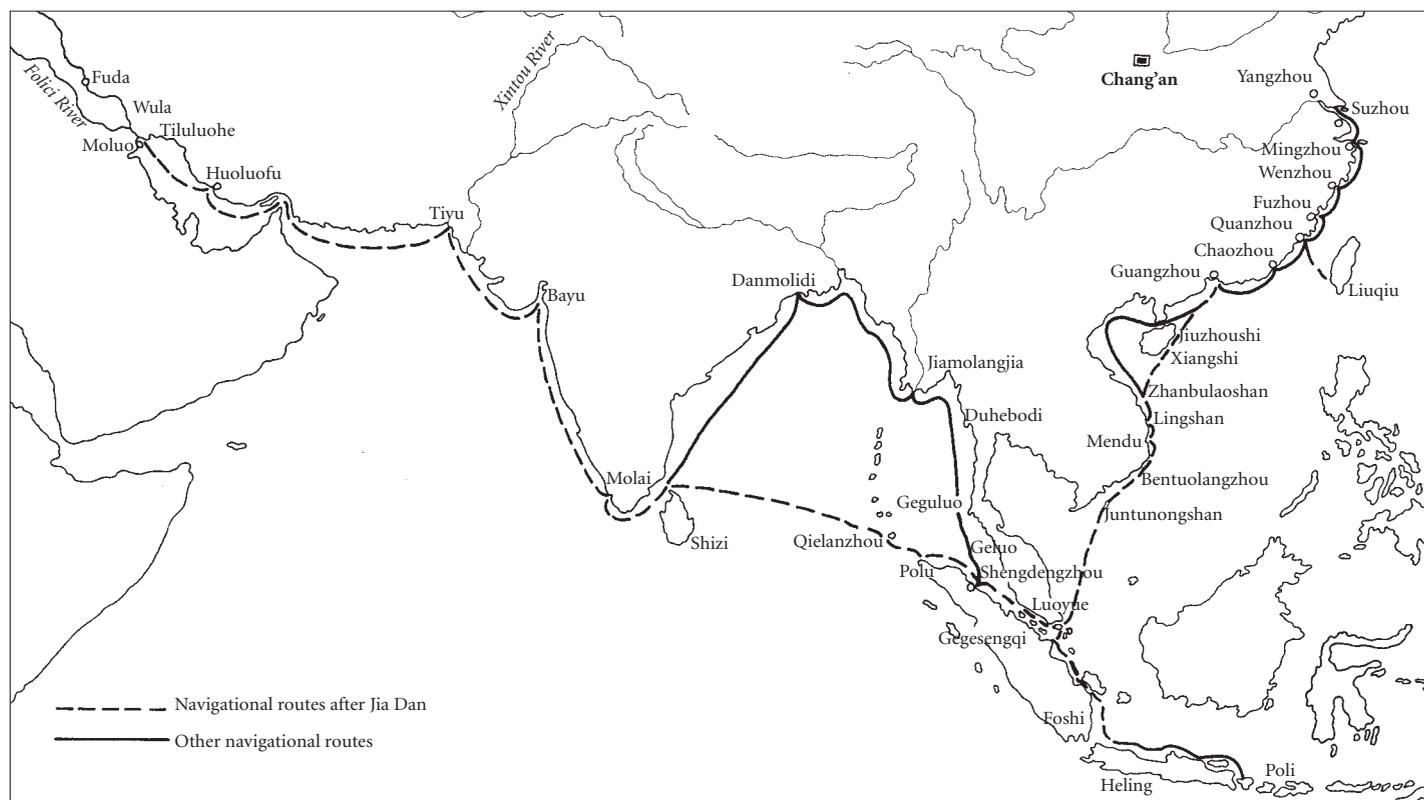
<sup>4</sup> Kuwata Rokurô 1934, 233–275.

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(in the vicinity of present-day Deli, north of Medan on the north-eastern coast of Sumatra). From there it was five days west to the Kingdom of Polu (Langabalous), another six days to Qielanzhou (the Nicobar Islands), and then four more days to the Kingdom of Shizi (Sri Lanka). One hundred miles across the sea from Shizi was southern

Tianzhu (southern India). Four days west of Shizi was the Kingdom of Molai (Quilon in southwestern India), from where the route turned, passing several small kingdoms before reaching the western regions of Poluomen (India). From Poluomen, it took two days of sailing northwest to reach the Kingdom of Bayu (Broach, north of Bombay),

Fig. 1 Map of trade routes between Tang dynasty China, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East (after Zhang Xun 1986).

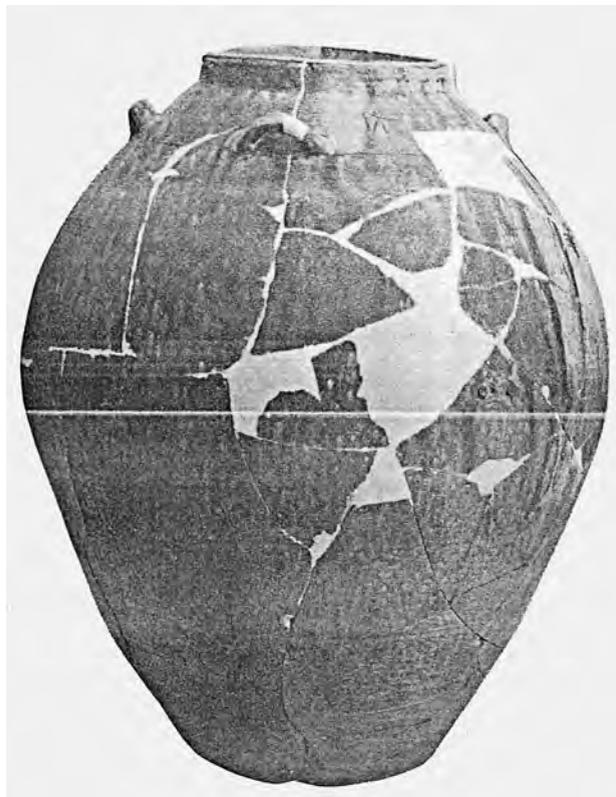


and then ten more days to the Kingdom of Tiyu (Daibul in Pakistan) at the mouth of the Xintou River (the Indus). From there it took twenty days of sailing through the Persian Gulf to reach the Kingdom of Tiluoluhe (vicinity of present-day Abbadan). One day further to the west was the Kingdom of Wula (Al-Ubollah, now Ubulla in Basra),

where the Fulila River (Fuhrat, now the Euphrates) flowed into the Gulf from Dashi (the Arab countries). Two days sail up the Euphrates brought one to the Kingdom of Moluo (now Basra), a major stronghold in Dashi. From there, one travelled overland to the northwest to finally reach Fuda (Baghdad), the capital of Dashi.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Zhang Xun 1986, 42–43; Chen Yan 1996, 84–85.



**Fig. 2** Large green-glazed lugged Dusun-type jar. From the site of Banbhore, Pakistan (after Sasaki Tatsuo 1987, 240, pl. 8:38).

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6 Mikami Tsugio 1985, 9–10.

7 Yu Haoliang 1978, 77–78.

8 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 1965, 188–189.

9 Sasaki Tatsuo, for example, has developed this theory further in Sasaki Tatsuo 1987, 247.

10 Zeng Guangyi et al. 1963, 222, pl. 4:8. See Xue Jianhong 1990, 27, pl. 3.

11 For another argument in support of the Guangdong origin of this type of lugged jars, see Mikami Tsugio 1974–77, 20.

12 Sasaki Tatsuo 1987, 251–252.

Of the maritime stations recorded by Jia Dan, the harbour of Mantai in Shizi (Sri Lanka) has been the site of archeological excavations. The port has yielded not only Islamic wares, but also a large number of late Tang painted Changsha wares, green-glazed Yue wares, white Xing wares, white wares from the Gongxian kilns, white wares with green décor, and large green-glazed jars of so-called Dusun ware (named after the inhabitants of a region of Kalimantan, where such wares were discovered).<sup>6</sup> The variety of late Tang wares represented at the site is thus comparable to that of the aforementioned way-stations of Shilifoshi and Heling, as well as the ceramic cargo of the Belitung wreck. This indicates that these wares formed the bulk of Chinese ceramic exports to Southeast Asia in the early ninth century. The location of these finds, in turn, suggests that, in the early ninth century, the route recorded in the *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao* was one of the primary maritime trade routes connecting China to Southeast Asia and the Middle East (fig. 1).

The Kingdom of Tiyu mentioned by Jia Dan is generally believed to be located at present-day Debal in the Indus River delta,<sup>7</sup> which corresponds to the medieval city of Banbhore found

to the east of Karachi.<sup>8</sup> Late Tang ceramics from this site include painted Changsha bowls, brown-spotted Changsha *daibazhuhu* ewers with moulded floral appliques, green-glazed Yue bowls, white bowls from Northern kilns, and large green-glazed lugged Dusun-type jars (fig. 2). Although the large green-glazed jars in this latter category are sometimes identified as ninth to eleventh-century Yue-type wares,<sup>9</sup> the fact that they served as storage containers for most of the painted bowls found on the Belitung wreck (cf. no. 161 and figs 30, 31 on p. 23) indicates that they cannot date from later than the early ninth century. Furthermore, since some Guangdong kiln sites have yielded sherds of very similar lugged jars,<sup>10</sup> it seems more likely that these ceramic and merchandise containers were manufactured at Guangdong, rather than Yue, kilns.<sup>11</sup>

The ceramic finds at Banbhore are very similar in content to the wares discovered at Siraf, which, at that time, was both the most flourishing port in the Persian Gulf and a way-station located on the aforementioned trade route between Tiyu and Tiluoluhe.<sup>12</sup> Archeological excavations at Siraf have, in addition to large quantities

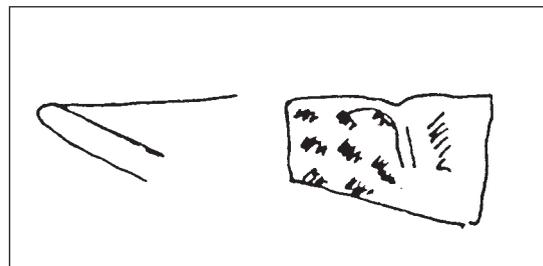


Fig. 3 Line drawing of white-glazed ceramic fragment with green décor. From the site of Siraf, Iran (after Tampoe 1989, 57–58).

of Islamic wares, yielded green-glazed Yue-type wares, Changsha *daibazhuhu* ewers and painted bowls, white North China wares, Guangdong-type green-glazed jars and *bo*-bowls, and low-fired lead-glazed cups with two-colour painted décor and moulded floral designs.<sup>13</sup> The Yue wares include bowls with four-petalled mouth-rims of the Xiangtang kiln-type from Dongyang, Zhejiang province,<sup>14</sup> while the Guangdong wares include green-glazed bowls with square spur-marks radiating from the centre of the base, a feature typical of the Gaoming, Sihui, and Anpugang areas.<sup>15</sup> Material recently published by Moria Tampoe indicates that Siraf also yielded white ware with green décor (fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> On the basis of the close affinity between the Islamic wares with floral designs and turquoise-blue glaze from Siraf, comparable wares from Banbhore and Mantai, and wares from the tomb of Liu Hua in Fuzhou, Fujian province (dated 930), Yajima Hikoichi has pointed out that these blue-glazed wares were probably produced in Siraf and distributed across Asia by local traders.<sup>17</sup> As this issue touches upon our discussion of the original destination of the Belitung wreck, it is necessary at this point to take into account important information concerning the vessel's construction provided by the specialists who participated in the salvaging operation.

Michael Flecker's analysis (pp. 31–38) suggests that the Belitung wreck was an Arab or Indian

ship made of Indian timber, the joints of which were constructed with perforations and lashings, rather than nails, a method very different from traditional Chinese shipbuilding techniques.<sup>18</sup> A late Tang source, the *Lingbiao Luyi* by Liu Xun, seems to describe exactly this type of vessel. It notes that, 'Merchant ships are built without nails, and are only bound with the leaves of the gomuti palm, then coated with resin of the olive tree, which, once dried, becomes very hard, and its quality when immersed in water is comparable to that of lacquer'.<sup>19</sup> The so-called 'sewn-plank' ship was constructed by perforating holes along the edges of planks, passing ropes made of coconut husks through these planks to bind them together, and then reinforcing the structure with resin or fish-oil. By the first century, ships of this type were already appearing in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean. Islamic records indicate that by the mid-ninth century this construction method was specific to the region of Siraf, and that during the ninth and tenth centuries Siraf and Sohar were the centres of 'sewn-plank' shipbuilding.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the important role that Siraf merchants played in Asian maritime trade, together with the physical characteristics of the Belitung wreck, suggests that the ship was not only constructed in Siraf, but may also have been commanded by a merchant from Siraf.

As mentioned in Song dynasty records, Siraf merchants conducting trade in Quanzhou char-

<sup>13</sup> Whitehouse 1971, pls VIII–IX; Whitehouse 1972, pls X–XI; Whitehouse 1973, 241–255. See also in this volume p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Mikami Tsugio 1974–77, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ho Chuimei 1992, 164; Guangdong sheng wenwu 1991, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Tampoe 1989, 57–58.

<sup>17</sup> Yajima Hikoichi 1987, 210–217; cf. in this volume p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Flecker 2001c.

<sup>19</sup> Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1916, 18; Dai Kaiyuan 1983, 86–89.

<sup>20</sup> Yajima Hikoichi 1977, 186–188.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>22</sup> Mu Genlai et al. 1983, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Yajima Hikoichi 1972, 124.

<sup>24</sup> Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1967, 112.

tered ‘sewn-plank’ vessels made in either Siraf or one of its overseas settlements.<sup>21</sup> As it was only by the mid-ninth century that Siraf became one of the major ports of trade with the East, the city is not mentioned by Jia Dan. By contrast, a mid-ninth-century record by the Arab merchant Sulayman notes that, ‘Goods were shipped from Bassorah, Uman, and other places to Siraf, where most of the Chinese ships loaded their cargo.’<sup>22</sup> It has been suggested that the term ‘Chinese ships’ might in fact refer to Arab ships sailing to Southeast Asia and China.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the case, the maritime route from Siraf to China recorded by Sulayman should figure side-by-side with Jia Dan’s *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao* as important reference material for our reconstruction of the route followed by the Belitung wreck.

The maritime route described by Sulayman led from Siraf to Musgat (the present-day capital of Oman), and on to Koulam (on the south-western tip of the Indian peninsula; Jia Dan’s Kingdom of Molai), the island of Langabalous (on the north-western coast of Sumatra; Jia Dan’s Kingdom of Polu), Kalah (Kedah on the eastern coast of the Malay peninsula), Tioman (on the eastern coast of the Malay peninsula), Pan-do-Uranga (Phan-rang in present-day Vietnam), Champa (in south-central Vietnam), Chams (Puol Cham), Bad al-Sīn (‘Gate to China’; now the submerged reefs of the Xisha Islands), and finally Guangzhou. The direct crossing from Musgat to Koulam on this route does differ from that

given in the *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao*, where the passage from Molai (Koulam) leads along intermediary coastal stations to the Persian Gulf. Otherwise, the two navigational routes are basically the same. For mercantile vessels carrying goods from China to the Persian Gulf, it must have made sense to make stopovers and do direct business at stations along the route, an activity which would seem to account for the presence of Chinese ceramics at Banbhore.

Another point of interest is raised by the *Lingwai Daida*, written by Zhou Qufei in the Song dynasty. The text records that, ‘Chinese merchants going to Dashi must change to smaller vessels from Koulam onward’, and that, when coming from Dashi, one first travels south on a small vessel, but then transfers to a larger vessel at Koulam before continuing east.<sup>24</sup> However, given the relatively small size of the Belitung wreck, at less than 20 m in length, it was probably not necessary to transfer to a smaller vessel before sailing on to the Persian Gulf.

Does the fact that both Jia Dan and Sulayman list Guangzhou as the terminal port necessarily mean that the Belitung wreck set sail from Guangzhou? As is well known, Guangzhou was the most important port for trade with the Nanhai region, a place where foreign merchants resided in specific foreign settlements, known as *fanfang*, and where a customs office, the *shiboshi*, was set up to supervise foreign trade. More im-

portantly, the Belitung wreck not only contained hundreds of pieces from Guangdong kilns (cf. nos 155–170), but also tens of thousands of painted Changsha wares (cf. nos 171–224) and some white Xing wares from northern China (cf. nos 86–95), all stored in large jars that appear to originate from Guangdong. Although these factors seem to point to Guangzhou as the port of departure, a more detailed inspection of the ship's cargo will show that the issue is not, in fact, quite so simple.

We have already mentioned that, apart from Guangdong wares, the bulk of the Belitung wreck's ceramic cargo was composed of Changsha, Yue, and Xing wares, as well as white-glazed wares with green décor from northern China (nos 38–85), and two turquoise-glazed Islamic pieces (nos 292, 293). Even though burial sites and other remains in Guangdong province have yielded white Xing wares, green-glazed Yue wares, and painted Changsha wares, these discoveries are very rare, and the number of pieces excavated is low; even the relatively more numerous Changsha wares from such finds do not exceed 20 pieces in total.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, we have yet to see reports of white Gongxian wares or white wares with green décor from the region, let alone blue-and-white wares.

An important source of evidence is therefore the ceramic finds from Yangzhou, another important centre for foreign trade during the Tang dynasty.

Even if we disregard fragmentary finds from burial sites and only look at ceramic finds from residential remains, such as the Tang period architectural foundations of the Wenhua Gong site, we are left with a very diverse picture. The over thirty thousand sherds from Wenhua Gong site alone included Changsha, Yue, Xing, Gongxian, and blue-and-white wares, as well as white wares with green décor and Islamic wares,<sup>26</sup> thus, with the sole exception of the Guangdong wares, covering the entire variety of ceramics recovered from the Belitung wreck. A similar composition is encountered in the remains of the outer city of Yangzhou excavated at the Sanyuanlu site, which yielded Changsha wares, Yue wares, blue-and-white wares, and white wares with green décor,<sup>27</sup> as well as hundreds of Islamic ceramic fragments.<sup>28</sup>

According to currently published data, Islamic wares have been excavated from many sites, including ones in Ningbo (Zhejiang province), Fuzhou (Fujian province), Rong county (Guangxi province), and Guilin. These, however, are all small and isolated finds.<sup>29</sup> White wares with green décor, until now, have only been found at two sites in southern China: a Tang dynasty tomb in Chaohu (Anhui province),<sup>30</sup> and the Tang dynasty remains of Yangzhou. Tang blue-and-white ceramics, which are commonly found together with Islamic wares and white ware with green décor, have also only been found in Yangzhou. In other words, the ceramic

<sup>25</sup> Song Liangbi 1988, 41–42.

<sup>26</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan 1994, 416–419.

<sup>27</sup> Ma Fukun et al. 1985, 72–76.

<sup>28</sup> Zhou Changyuan 1988, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Ho Chuimei 1994, 43–44. For the items excavated in Ningbo, see Lin Shimin 1998, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Zhang Hongming 1988, 525.

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<sup>31</sup> Zhou Changyuan et al. 1994, 65–69.

<sup>32</sup> Nanjing bowuguan fajue 1977, 25, pl. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1967, 21.

finds from the Tang dynasty city of Yangzhou comprise a quite extraordinary combination of ware-types. This diverse combination is noteworthy both because it is not seen in other Chinese finds of the Tang period, and, even more importantly, because it corresponds quite closely to the ceramic cargo of the Belitung wreck.

In contrast to the very rare appearance of Changsha wares in finds throughout China as a whole, a small refuse heap at the Wenhelu site in the old city of Yangzhou yielded close to 500 complete Changsha ware vessels, among which covered boxes alone accounted for around 100 pieces. Since no other ware-types were found at the site, which is located in the vicinity of an old riverbed, the excavators suggested that they were the

remains of a warehouse inventory, from which they inferred the existence of specialized ceramic shops.<sup>31</sup> As already mentioned, the bulk of the wreck's cargo consists of Changsha wares, which number over fifty thousand in total and include a toy dog and bird (nos 288, 289). The only comparable ceramic toys excavated elsewhere were found among Changsha kiln remains and, again, in the Tang city of Yangzhou (fig. 4).<sup>32</sup>

The biography of Tian Shengong in the *Xin Tangshu* notes that many thousands of foreign merchants from Dashi and Persia died in the course of Shengong's invasion of Yangzhou, a figure that suggests how considerable Yangzhou's community of resident Islamic traders had already become by the mid-eighth century.<sup>33</sup>



Fig. 4 Ceramic lion, Changsha ware, from the remnants of Tang-era Yangzhou (after Zhou Changyuan et al. 1994, 65–69).

These foreign merchants are reported to have set up stores known as ‘Persian Shops’, which traded in pearls and other goods.<sup>34</sup> The mid- and late Tang strata of the Wenhua Gong site revealed what appear to be the architectural remnants of such shops, which contained not only high-quality white, green, blue-and-white, and Islamic wares, but also glass vases and pieces of gold.<sup>35</sup> Tellingly, the cargo of the Belitung wreck also included a small glass vase (no. 319) and traces of gold leaf. The present author therefore maintains that it was from Yangzhou, situated at the crossroads of the Grand Canal and the Yangzi River, a converging point for goods from northern and southern China, that the Belitung wreck loaded the bulk of its merchandise and set sail.

This leaves the question of how the Guangdong kiln products found their way into the vessel’s cargo. The Arab geographer, Ibn Khordâdhbeh (838–912), lists in his *Kitab al-masalik* a sequence of seaports leading to China: Lūgīn (Hanoi, Vietnam), Khanfu (now Guangzhou), Khanju (possibly Hangzhou), and Qantu (Jiangdu).<sup>36</sup> Kuwabara Jitsuzô identifies the last port, Jiangdu, as Yangzhou.<sup>37</sup> This list suggests that the Guangdong wares on the Belitung wreck might have been loaded during a stopover at Guangzhou, either on the way up or down the China coast. At the same time, the discovery at the Wenhelu site in Yangzhou of Guangdong-type green-glazed jars with four lugs and spout (fig. 5)<sup>38</sup>, identical to those from the Belitung wreck (cf. no. 164), indicates that these containers, which were used

<sup>34</sup> Xie Zhaozhi, chap. 12: ‘During the Tang dynasty there were foreign Persian shops in Yangzhou, the *Taiping Guangji* mentions this repeatedly’. Quoted from Kuwabara Jitsuzô 1967, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Jiang Zhongyi 1992, 178; Wang Qinjin 1994, 420.

<sup>36</sup> Song Xian 1991, 71–72.

<sup>37</sup> Kuwabara Jitsuzô 1966, 76.

<sup>38</sup> Yangzhou bowuguan 1996, pl. 48.



Fig. 5 Green-glazed jar with lugs and spout from Yangzhou, Tang dynasty (after Yangzhou bowuguan 1996, pl. 48).

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39 Tampoe 1989, 307, nos 1321, 1322.

40 Ho Chuimei 1991, 62, 78, pl. 15 above right.

41 Yajima Hikoichi 1987, 203–204.

42 Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1916, 14.

43 Mu Genlai et al. 1983, 7.

44 Sarre 1996, 224–233. For the small number of Changsha wares excavated at this site, see Sasaki Tatsuo 1995, 115.

45 Pirazzoli-t'serstevens 1992, 100–116.

to store pieces such as white-glazed cups, might even have been available in Yangzhou. This type of four-lugged, spouted jar has also been found at sites such as Siraf in Iran (fig. 6),<sup>39</sup> and Laem Pho in southern Thailand. According to Ho Chuimei, vessels of this type were manufactured at greenware-producing kilns in Guangdong coastal areas, such as the north-west regions of the Pearl River delta and the Leizhou peninsula.<sup>40</sup>

As argued above, even if the Belitung wreck sank before completing its final transaction, the combined evidence of its location, ninth-century textual sources, archeological finds of comparable wares, and likely origin from the port of Yangzhou, strongly suggests that the ship was headed for the port of Siraf in the Persian Gulf. Further indirect evidence in support of this hypothesis can be garnered from archeological discoveries at sites such as Samarra in Iraq.

As is generally known, the merchants of Siraf dominated the markets of an area that extended from Siraf westward to Baghdad, the economic and cultural centre of the Islamic world of the time, and northward to Nishapur in the Khurasan region.<sup>41</sup> Due to alluvial silting in the mouth of the Tigris River, seafaring vessels were forced to discharge their cargo upon reaching the port of Siraf. Trade goods were then reloaded onto smaller vessels for transportation to Basra, Baghdad, and other destinations.<sup>42</sup> The transshipment of goods at Siraf is also recorded in Sulayman's ninth-century text.<sup>43</sup> The ruins of Samarra, capital of the ninth-century Abbasid Empire (836–892), located north of Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris, have yielded Yue, Xing, Gongxian, and Changsha wares, as well as white wares with green décor.<sup>44</sup> The remains of the city of Sohar on the Oman coast have also yielded Tang dynasty Yue, Xing, Changsha, and Guangdong wares.<sup>45</sup> The similarity between the Chinese wares found

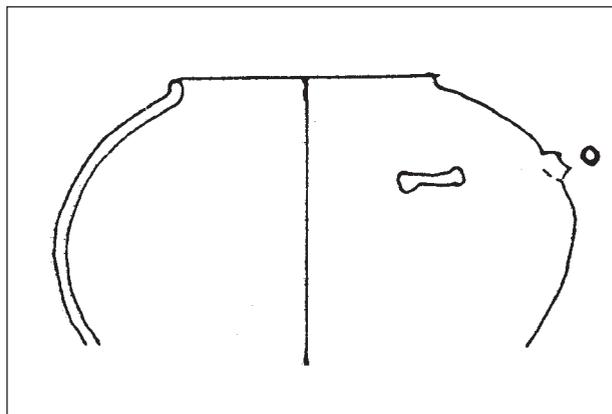


Fig. 6 Green glazed jar with lugs and spout from the site of Siraf, Iran (after Tampoe 1989, 307, nos 1321, 1322).

at these sites and those known from Siraf, together with the hydrology and topography of the Persian Gulf region in the ninth and tenth centuries, implies that the wares discovered at Samarra and Sohar were transshipped from Siraf.

Furthermore, the close affinity of Tang dynasty wares from Siraf with those from other sites, as well as with the ceramics from the Belitung wreck, indicates that this transportation method – namely the shipment of goods from the Orient to Siraf, followed by transshipment on smaller vessels – was common practice in the trans-Asian maritime trade of the ninth century. While we lack sufficient data to establish detailed chronologies for Tang dynasty ceramics excavated from Siraf and other sites, the many similarities

between these wares and those of the Belitung wreck indicate that, already by the early ninth century, the port of Siraf was frequently visited by merchant vessels bearing Oriental goods.

Oriental goods, including ceramics, were also transported overland to inland settlements, with the best known ceramic finds being those of Nishapur, the capital of the Tahirid (820–872) and Saffarid (867–903) Empires. This site has yielded green-glazed Yue wares, painted Changsha wares, white Xing wares, white Gongxian wares, and white wares with green décor.<sup>46</sup> One fragment of the last category, a shallow white *bo*-bowl with a moulded dragon appliqué on its central inner field (fig. 7), is identical to a specimen unearthed from the Sanyuanlu site in Yangzhou

46 Wilkinson 1974, 258, fig. 1:17.



Fig. 7 White-glazed bowl fragment with green décor, bearing moulded dragon appliqué, from the site of Nishapur, Iran. 9th century (after Wilkinson 1974, 258, fig. 1:17).

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47 Ma Fukun et al. 1985, 73, pls 3:4; Yangzhou bowuguan 1996, pl. 36.

48 Zhou Changyuan 1985, 152, pl. 1 (left); Yangzhou bowuguan 1996, pl. 42.

49 Whitehouse 1971, pl. Xc: site D (kiln remains); Whitehouse 1974, pl. XIIa: site B (mosque remains).

50 Ho Chuimei 1994, 37.

51 Yajima Hikoichi 1972, 129; Yajima Hikoichi 1987, 217. In the latter article, Yajima cites historical records on the presentation of local ceramics from Siraf as tribute to the Caliph of Baghdad.

(see fig. 5 on p. 233),<sup>47</sup> and very similar to a specimen from the Belitung wreck (no. 60).

Concurrent with the large-scale export of Chinese ceramics, some Islamic wares with turquoise glaze were introduced to China. The greatest concentration of these wares is found in Yangzhou. The formal similarities between two well preserved glazed Islamic jars with double lugs from the wreck and other excavated jars are noteworthy. The first jar has a straight mouth and long, wide neck (no. 292, see drawing), and is comparable to an Islamic piece with similar glaze colour excavated from the south of Yangzhou city (fig. 8).<sup>48</sup> The second has a lipped mouth and

long, slender neck (no. 293), and is comparable to a piece from Siraf (fig. 9).<sup>49</sup> Previous laboratory tests on Islamic wares excavated from Siraf have suggested that these pieces were produced either in Siraf or in Basra, Iraq.<sup>50</sup> Whichever is the case, it is highly probable that this type of glazed Islamic ware was traded and distributed to other regions by merchants from Siraf.<sup>51</sup> This gives the Islamic wares from the Belitung wreck special significance, insofar as they represent a clue that may help to unravel the trade network linking the port cities of Siraf and Yangzhou.

As noted above, the preceding comparison of ceramics leads the present author to conclude that

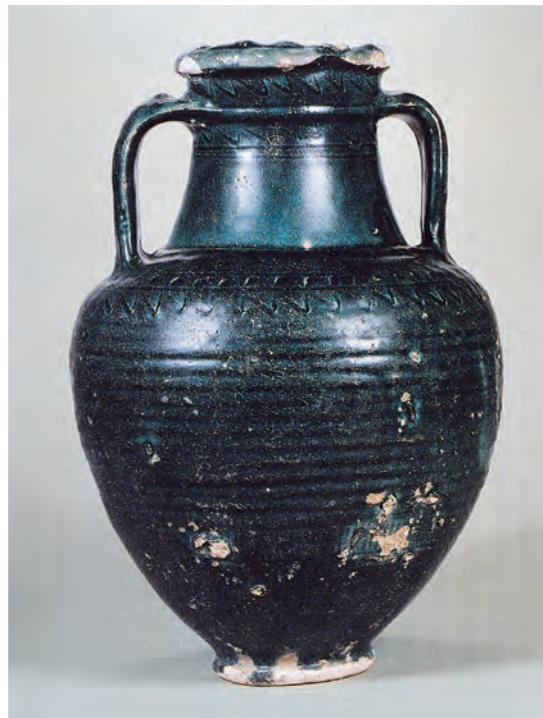


Fig. 8 Islamic turquoise-glazed jar from Yangzhou (after Yangzhou bowuguan 1996, pl. 42).

Yangzhou was the port of origin for the Belitung wreck and the majority of its cargo. If this inference is correct, it lends credence to the hypothesis that there was a customs office supervising international trade in Yangzhou during the Tang dynasty. Scholarly opinion varies as to the existence of such an office, since there are no textual records concerning the passage of foreign merchant vessels, and no clear mention is made of such an office in surviving texts, including even the *Chiyu Deyin*, dated 834, which otherwise gives a detailed description of such trade:

‘Foreign ships from the Nanhai region come out of desire to learn ... and of

foreign visitors to Lingnan, Fujian, and Yangzhou, the office of Military and Surveillance Commissioner is fittingly charged to conduct inquiry, but apart from trade on vessels, the closing of markets, and tribute, circulation and transaction of goods are conducted freely, and are not burdened with heavy taxes.’<sup>52</sup>

The evidence presented by the Belitung wreck, together with the matching archeological data from Yangzhou, may help to fill this lacuna in the textual record.

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<sup>52</sup> Zhu Jiang 1988, 81–84; Yan Ren 1989, 57–59.



Fig. 9 Islamic glazed earthenware jar, from the site of Siraf, Iran (after Whitehouse 1971, pl. Xc: site D).

# The Navigational Route of the Belitung Wreck and Late Tang Ceramic Trade

53 Kuwabara Jitsuzō 1966, 128.

54 Mikami Tsugio 1987, 338.

55 Based on the passage in Jia Dan's record that, 'Three days westwards through the *xia*', one reaches the Kingdom of Gege-sengqi, Adachi Kiroku has argued that the *xia* 'strait', in this case, refers to the Selat Sunda Strait, and that, therefore, the main sea route linking China and India in the ninth century passed along the southern coast of Sumatra. See Adachi Kiroku 1938, 1–32, 48–93. This sea route is worth further attention, even if Adachi's analysis of toponyms has suffered critical review. See Yamamoto Tatsurō 1938, 75–91.

56 Ho Chuimei 1991, 53–80. The large amount of Chinese wares and small amount of Islamic wares found at Laem Pho, together with the many Islamic wares and few Chinese wares found at Ko Kho Khao, has led Ho Chuimei to suggest that trade vessels stopped at Laem Pho, and that goods were transported overland to be reshipped at Ko Kho Kao; for similar views, see Aoyagi Yōji 1999, 55. The present author meanwhile has reservations regarding the plausibility of such a roundabout mode of transportation.

The *Tang Huiyao* records a prohibition issued in 779 which states that, 'All nobility and officials in the country are forbidden to contend for profit with the people, and those who previously set up residence and shops in Yangzhou to conduct business should be dismissed from office'.<sup>53</sup> The socio-economic phenomenon reflected by this proclamation, together with the aforementioned discovery in Yangzhou of a large number of Changsha wares from the theoretical remains of a ceramics shop, illustrates how the presence of many specialized shops in Yangzhou must have provided a convenient means for the masters of the Belitung wreck to purchase its cargo.

While it is possible to reconstruct the approximate route of the Belitung wreck, we have to

keep in mind that the location of the find close to Belitung Island, together with the alleged discovery of Tang period green-glazed wares at Bengkulu in south-west Sumatra,<sup>54</sup> suggest a southern route through the Selat Sunda.<sup>55</sup> This possibility awaits closer investigation. In fact, there were various maritime routes along which Tang dynasty goods were exported to the Persian Gulf, and it seems that, in particular, Tang period ceramics such as those unearthed from Ko Kho Khao and Laem Pho in southern Thailand<sup>56</sup> might well have travelled the coastal route north from Geluo (Kedah, Malaysia) to Geguluo (the south-western portion of the Isthmus of Kra). It is significant that the ceramic finds from archaeological sites in Thailand such as Laem Pho are very similar in content to those from the



Belitung wreck and from sites along the Persian Gulf, including not only glazed Islamic wares, but also painted Changsha wares, green-glazed Yue wares, green-glazed Guangdong wares, white Xing wares, white Gongxian wares, and white wares with green décor.

Once again, these discoveries confirm that these types comprise the basic set of ninth-century Chinese ceramic commodities exported to Southeast Asia and the Middle East. By contrast, although Japanese sites have yielded Changsha wares, Yue wares, white Xing wares, and glazed Islamic wares, Tang period Guangdong-type wares have not been found in the region. On the other hand, site M at Kashiwara, Fukuoka, has yielded late Tang polychrome lead-glazed

wares and white ware with green décor similar to those from Samarra (fig. 10),<sup>57</sup> while the famous Kōrokan site has also yielded white wares with green décor.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the content of a poem from the *Waizuki taishu chaka*, recorded in the Heian period anthology *Keikokushū*, suggests that these finds of white wares probably included white Gongxian bowls.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, Tang dynasty ceramic finds from Japan indicate that Yangzhou was undoubtedly one of the main centres at which Japanese merchants purchased Chinese merchandise. Guangzhou, by contrast, seems to have played a relatively insignificant role.

57 Yamazaki Sumio 1983, 4, pl. 2.

58 Fukuoka-shi kyōiku iinkai 1994, cover pl. 1-(2).

59 Hsieh Mingliang 1996, 111.

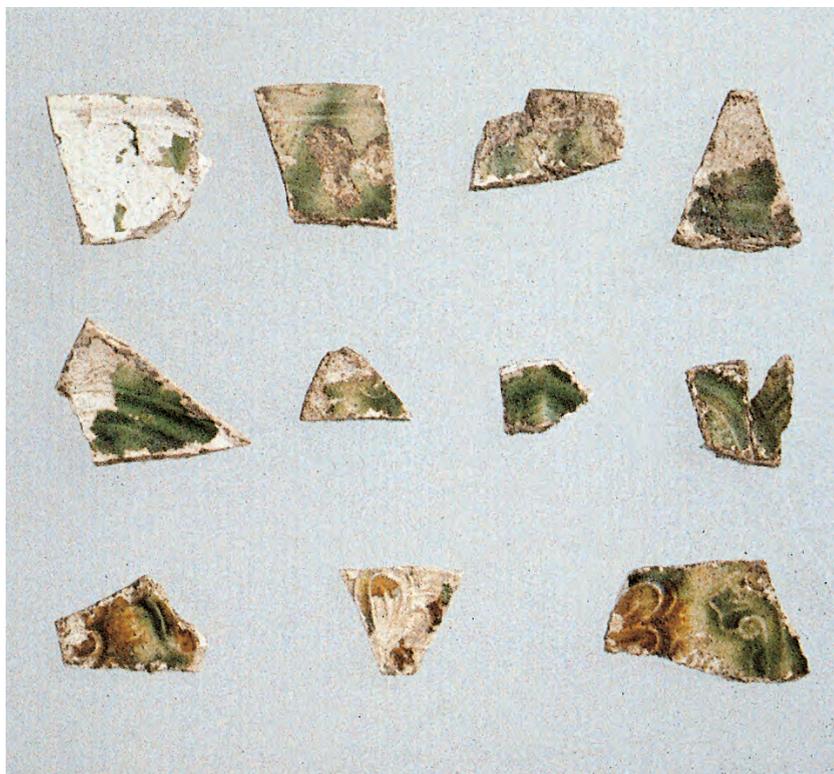


Fig. 10 (left and opposite)  
Fragments of polychrome lead-glazed wares and white wares with green décor, from site M at Kashiwara, Fukuoka. Tang, 9th century (after Yamazaki Sumio 1983, 4, pl. 2).