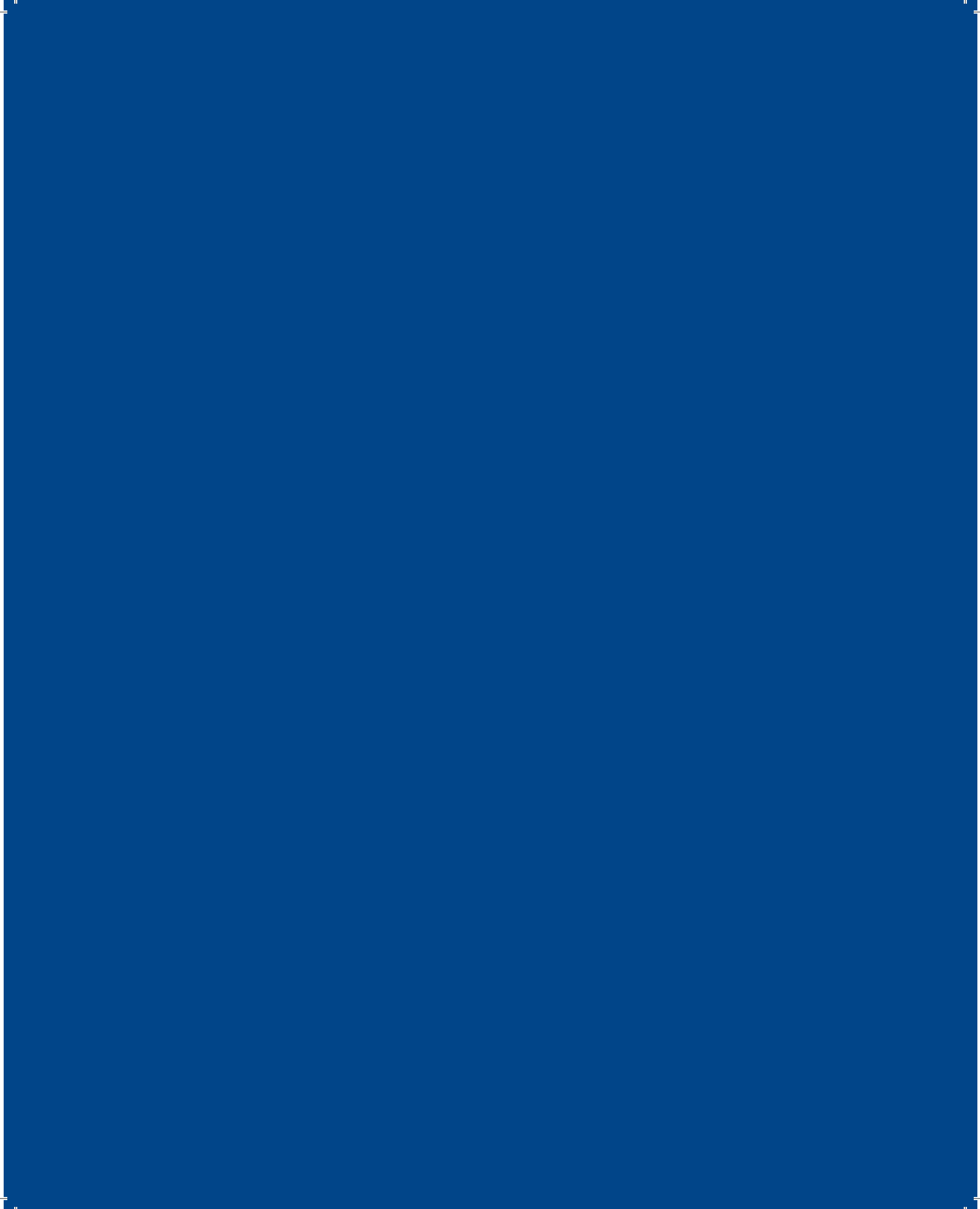






CATALOGUE



François Louis



Gold and Silver

François Louis

## Gold and Silver

Among the most precious and unexpected discoveries of the Belitung wreck are over thirty exquisitely manufactured gold and silver vessels. These include one octagonal gold cup and three oblong, gold, drinking bowls (nos 1, 5–7), three gold dishes (nos 2–4), and two dozen richly decorated silver vessels. In addition, the divers recovered eighteen silver ingots (cf. no. 11 a, b), over two kilograms of gold foil, a small gold coin (no. 10), a gold bracelet (no. 9), and several fragments of various gold and silver items. In quality as well as in size, this find figures among the most important discoveries of Tang gold and silver made to date. It is the first such discovery outside of China.

While the gold vessels have been entirely cleaned, the gold foil and most of the silver items, including sixteen of the ingots, are still covered by corrosion and calcification and await laborious conservation treatment (cf. pp. 108–112). Nevertheless, enough of the silver pieces have been partially cleaned, have been viewed with X-ray photography, or are sufficiently well preserved to allow a general assessment of all the precious metals at this time.

### I. Vessels

All of the seven gold vessels (nos 1–7), the gold leaf, the gold bracelet (no. 9), and nine small silver boxes (cf. nos 12–18) were discovered in 1998. Another fourteen silver vessels, the gold bracelet fragments (no. 8 a, b), and additional silver vessel fragments were salvaged in 1999 from a small area at the stern and slightly to port. Three large silver bowls with foot rings (cf. nos 19, 20) were found stacked on top of a fine white ceramic bowl of similar size and shape (no. 106). Next to these bowls, fragments of two large platters (cf. figs 1,7 and p. 108, figs 11a, b) with three feet were recovered – presumably the platters had originally also been stacked on top of each other. Better preserved were several of the altogether sixteen silver boxes found at the site. In 1998 a set of eight small four-lobed boxes (cf. no. 17) and a small oblong example (no. 13) were recovered, while in 1999 two large silver boxes came to light. One, measuring 21 cm in diameter, contained four well-preserved smaller boxes of various lobed shapes (nos 12, 14, 15, 18), while the other, measuring 16 cm in diameter and shaped like a six-

lobed blossom, contained one small oblong box.<sup>1</sup> The most impressive silver item, albeit fragmentary, is a slightly flattened bottle with lid and a movable handle (no. 21), 35 cm in height. The entire bottle is gilded and profusely decorated with superbly chased floral ornaments and two central medallions with a pair of mandarin ducks.

In the vicinity of the silver boxes the divers also discovered some of the most exquisite ceramics of the cargo – thin green-splashed cups (cf. nos 38–42) and elegant white cups (cf. nos 91, 92), part of which were stored in small jars from Guangdong (cf. no. 164) and part found out in the open. Also scattered around the stern area were two gilt-silver

and a bronze spoon (nos 317, 318 a, b). Below these precious objects was a layer of lead ballast.

The vessels form a stylistically coherent group, which suggests a narrow time frame for their manufacture. They were almost certainly made within the same two decades. The following stylistic analysis and comparisons to datable gold and silver suggest that the manufacturing period of the vessels falls between the years 810 and 850.

A number of design features are characteristic of these vessels. Among the most notable is a type of thickly stemmed, chased floral scroll with short, often palmette-like tentacles ending in thick round

<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, the latter, six-lobed box still had not been freed of its crust and calcification and thus had not yet been opened. An X-ray photograph, however, clearly showed the smaller box inside.



Fig. 1 Detail of platter fragment from the Belitung wreck (X-ray; photograph courtesy of Seabed Explorations).

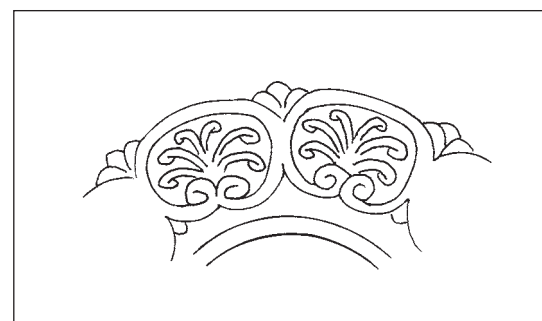


Fig. 2 Detail of octagonal gold cup no. 1 (Drawing: Z. Kotitsa).

# Gold and Silver

curls (cf. no. 15, drawing of bottom side). This ornament appears on the bottom of thirteen of the fourteen small boxes (cf. nos 12–17), on the fragmentary silver platters (fig. 1), as well as on the bottom of the octagonal gold cup no. 1 (fig. 2). The thirteen small boxes are all manufactured in the same manner and style with similarly imaginative lobed shapes, a slightly raised, gilded edge, a lid worked in gilded *repoussé*, a curved bottom that is chased with one or two gilded animals, the characteristic floral scrolls, and a loose ring-punched ground. These boxes, and probably also the platters and the gold cup, are likely to have originated in the same workshop.

Another characteristic design found in a number of variations on all the vessels is a type of lush flower with overlapping petals and heavy leaves, very often depicted in a perspectival, foreshortened manner. Based on stylistic variations of this decorative idiom, at least four different groups of vessels can be distinguished: the oblong gold bowls and the gold dishes (nos 2–6), the gilt silver bottle (no. 21, fig. 3) and the circular box no. 18, the three silver bowls (fig. 4, cf. nos 19, 20 and fig. 4), and the silver boxes (cf. nos 12–17, drawings of bottom sides). Such stylistic differences suggest at least four different makers – possibly three or four different workshops.



Fig. 3 Detail of silver bottle no. 21 (Photograph courtesy of Seabed Explorations).

The small four-lobed silver box no. 18 is considerably different from the other small boxes. Its bottom is flat and undecorated, its crisply chased lid entirely gilded and without relief. Instead of freely floating ornamental motifs we see birds in a landscape setting. But despite these idiosyncrasies the box fits within the general stylistic framework of this find. In craftsmanship it calls to mind the two oblong gold bowls (nos 5, 6), yet its linear style is more animated, its rendering of the natural imagery more spirited – a fact that becomes especially visible when comparing the flying ducks of the box with those of the gold bowls. The closest stylistic relative of this box is the large silver bottle no. 21 (fig.

3), which displays the same crisp, animate chasing, the same dense linear ring-punching, and an even more spirited expression on the birds' faces; it too is entirely gilded. This bottle in turn is decorated with floral ornament which itself can be compared to that on the oval gold drinking bowls (nos 5, 6).

Although it appears that at present we know of no other gold or silver vessels which were manufactured by the same workshops during the same years as the vessels from the Belitung wreck, archaeologists in China have uncovered numerous stylistically comparable pieces with relative dates. Probably the most closely related in style is a two-piece reliquary



Fig. 4 Detail of the silver bowl no. 20 (X-ray; photograph courtesy of Seabed Explorations).



# Gold and Silver

2 Zhenjiang shi bowuguan 1961.

excavated in 1960 from the foundations of the Iron Pagoda of the Ganlu Temple in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province.<sup>2</sup> That reliquary contained sacred crystals, remains of the Buddha, which had been transferred to the Ganlu Temple from the Chanzhong Monastery in Shangyuan near Nanjing. The relics were ceremoniously deposited at the Ganlu Temple under a newly erected stone pagoda early in 829 in order to provide the deceased emperor Muzong (r. 820–824) with good fortune in the afterlife. For this significant ceremonial occasion the eminent statesman Li Deyu (878–849) had a new precious gold and silver reliquary commissioned, presumably from artisans of the local Runzhou (then the

capital of Eastern Jiangnan province, modern-day Zhenjiang) or nearby Yangzhou, two of the main crafts centres of the Tang empire at the time. The reliquary consists of a tall rectangular silver box that imitates a burial chamber and of a small golden coffin (fig. 5) fitted within the silver box (fig. 6). The foliage and flower patterns on the silver box can be directly related to the flowers on the shipwreck's silver bowls (cf. nos 19, 20 and fig. 4), platters (figs 1, 7), and small silver boxes (cf. nos 12–18, drawings of bottom sides); the bodies of the *kalavinkas* on both reliquaries with their limp, underdeveloped, and clawless legs are closely related to the bird bodies on a silver platter (fig. 7) and on some of



Fig. 5 Gold coffin-shaped reliquary. Tang, 829. Excavated in 1960 under the Iron Pagoda of the Ganlu Temple in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu. Zhenjiang Museum (after Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 157).



Fig. 6 Silver reliquary casket. Tang, 829. Excavated in 1960 under the Iron Pagoda of the Ganlu Temple in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu. Zhenjiang Museum (after Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 161).

the silver boxes (cf. no. 16, drawing of top side); and some of the cloud scrolls occur almost identically on the reliquaries, the platters (fig. 7), and the circular silver box no. 18. Similarly, the punched row of beads along the edge of the lid of the gold coffin recurs in the same role as a framing device on the shipwreck's gold cup (no. 1) and the fragmentary silver platters (cf. fig. 7). The wave pattern along the base of the gold coffin can be found on the large silver bottle as well (fig. 3).



Fig. 7 Detail of silver platter from the Belitung wreck (X-ray; photograph courtesy of Seabed Explorations).

Other datable silver vessels that closely compare to some of those found on the shipwreck have been unearthed from the tomb of Lady Wu (763–824), the Grand Mistress of Qi.<sup>3</sup> In particular, we find here two oblong four-lobed wine bowls (fig. 8) of nearly identical shape and size as the four examples discovered on the shipwreck (cf. nos 5–7, 19).<sup>4</sup> The unusual shape of the two square gold saucers from the wreck (nos 3, 4), with their rounded and indented corners, is also present among Lady Wu's

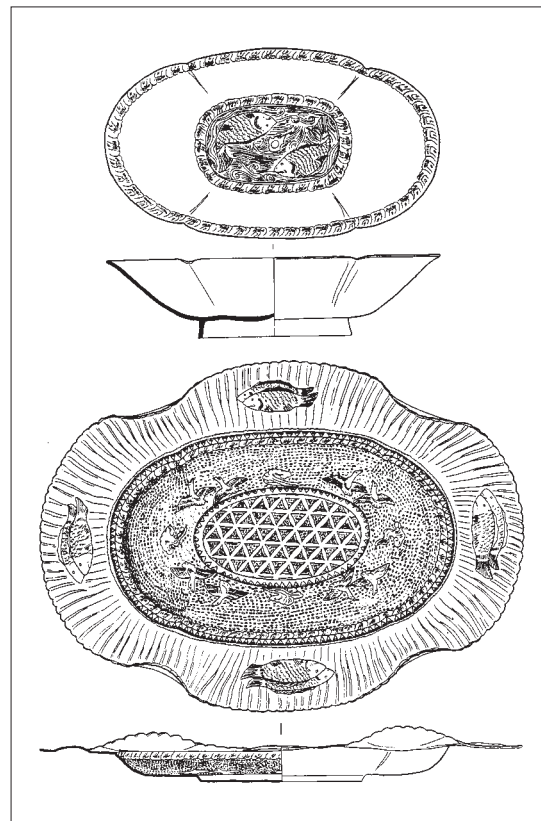


Fig. 8 Gilt silver drinking bowl and saucer. Tang, early 9th century. From the tomb of Lady Wu (d. 824) in Yichuan, Luoyang, Henan. L. bowl 14.0 cm. L. dish 20.2 cm. Luoyang Museum (after Luoyang dier 1995, 27).

<sup>3</sup> Luoyang dier 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25–26; the vessels are mistakenly identified here as gold vessels. They are, however, made of gilded silver, cf. *Tô no jotei* 1998, 140–141.

# Gold and Silver

5 Xu Diankui 1994, 330–331.

6 During the early ninth century Lady Wu was one of the most important women within the wealthy and powerful Wang clan, who ruled the northeastern province of Chengde in a rather autonomous manner. Her husband Wang Shizhen (d. 809), and successively her two oldest sons Wang Chengzong (d. 820) and Wang Chengyuan (801–834), held the post of governor of Chengde, the area around modern-day Shijiazhuang in Hebei province. In 821 Chengyuan was given command over Yicheng and moved his household south to Huazhou, modern-day Hua county, 200 km northeast of Luoyang. This explains why Lady Wu, after her death on 18 March 824, was buried in Yichuan county south of Luoyang, Henan, far away from the traditional Chengde power base of the Wang family. On the historical background of the Wang family see *Jiu Tangshu*, j. 142; *Xin Tangshu*, 148: 211. Cf. Twitchett 1979, 503–507, 528–538, 613–614, 637.

7 Li Zhangqing and Hei Guang 1963, 60; Lu Zhaoyin 1982, 174–176; Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, nos 153, 154.

possessions in a silver stand with four legs (fig. 9) – as well as in a bronze mirror discovered in another Henan tomb dated from the year 829 (fig. 10).<sup>5</sup> Other objects from her tomb exhibit ornamental designs that all define a pictorial vocabulary very similar to that of the Belitung vessels: the knotted cord with four bows (fig. 11), cicadas with outspread wings, flower clusters and petal bands (fig. 12). There are, however, certain stylistic differences between the gold and silver items of these two finds, which may point to different places of origin. It is not yet clear where the silver wares discovered in Lady Wu's tomb were manufactured,<sup>6</sup> but they date

undoubtedly from her lifetime and reflect a style of the late eighth and early ninth century.

Several additional finds confirm a dating of the Belitung vessels to the first half of the ninth century. In 1962 a large silver platter (fig. 13) was discovered in Kengdi near Xi'an whose decoration of flower clusters resembles that on the gold plates (nos. 2–4) and oval gold bowls (nos 5–7) from the shipwreck. This platter bears an inscription stating that it was sent to the imperial court from Yuezhou (modern-day Shaoxing in Zhejiang) between June 799 and March 802.<sup>7</sup> Comparable in type to the many small,

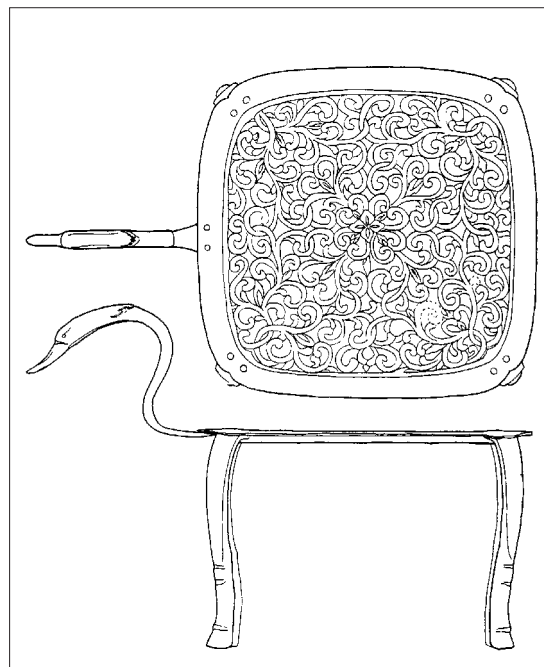


Fig. 9 Silver stand with openwork decoration. Tang, early 9th century. From the tomb of Lady Wu (d. 824) in Yichuan, Luoyang, Henan. Ht. 14.6 cm. Luoyang Museum (after Luoyang dier 1995, 31).



Fig. 10 Bronze mirror. Tang, early 9th century. From the tomb of Wei He (d. 829) in the Apricot Garden in Yanshi, Henan (after Xu Diankui 1994, 330).

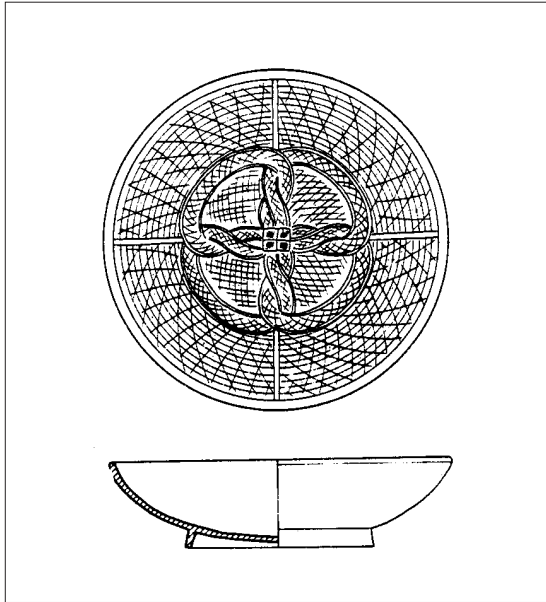


Fig. 11 Silver bowl. Tang, late 8th or early 9th century. From the tomb of Lady Wu (d. 824) in Yichuan, Luoyang, Henan. Luoyang Museum (after Luoyang dier 1995, 30).

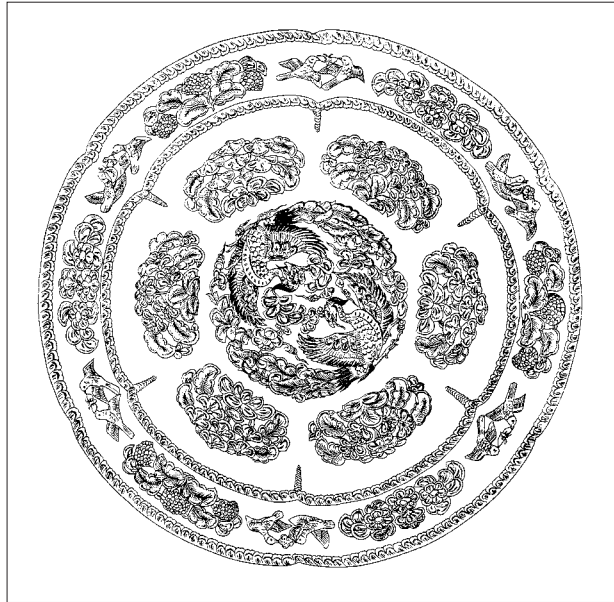


Fig. 13 Silver platter. Tang, c. 800, but before 802. Excavated in Kengdi, Xi'an, Shaanxi. Diam. 55 cm. Shaanxi Provincial Museum (after Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 154).

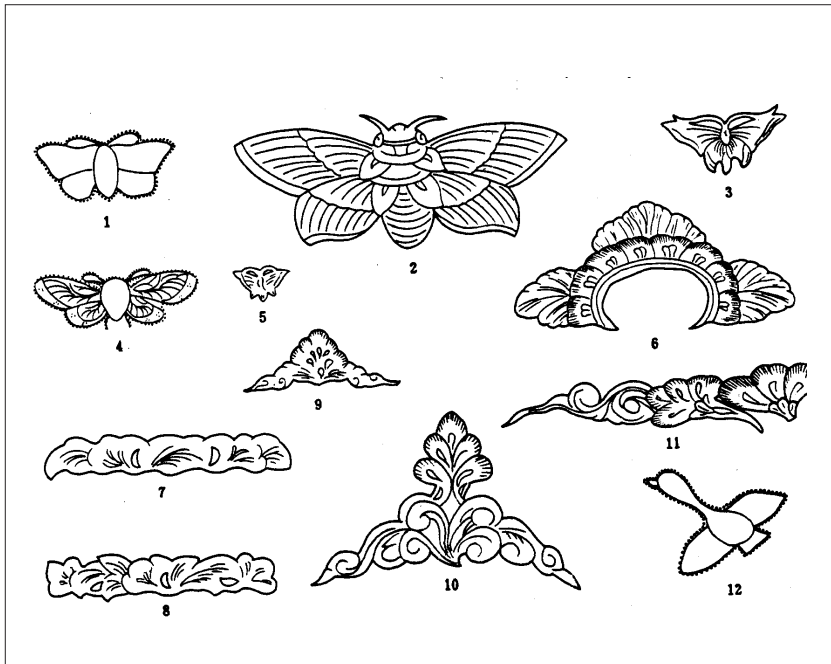


Fig. 12 Gold and silver ornaments. Tang, early 9th century. From the tomb of Lady Wu (d. 824) in Yichuan, Luoyang, Henan. Luoyang Museum (after Luoyang dier 1995, 32).

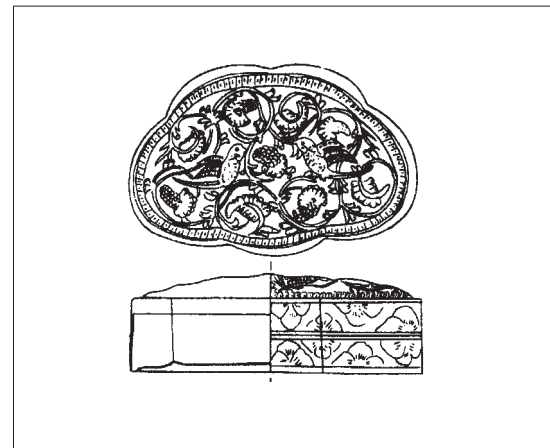


Fig. 14 Silver box. Tang, c. 840. From a gold and silver hoard in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi. Lantian Cultural Relics Administration (after Lantian xian 1982, 48).

# Gold and Silver

<sup>8</sup> Lantian xian 1982, 48; Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, nos 190, 191. For a colour illustration see Shi Shuqing 1994, 117, no. 091. For a concise summary of other related multi-lobed boxes see Qi Dongfang 1999, 90ff., where these boxes are assigned ninth-century dates.

<sup>9</sup> Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan 1996; Qi Dongfang 1999, 30.

multi-lobed boxes from the shipwreck are two silver boxes (fig. 14) which came to light in 1980 in a silver hoard at Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi province.<sup>8</sup> That find also included bowls and dishes with designs of knotted sashes (fig. 15), floral medallions (fig. 16), birds, and wave ornaments (fig. 17) comparable especially to those of the gold dishes (nos 2–4) from Belitung. Among the Lantian finds was a silver box whose inscription states that it was

completed in 866 and used in the imperial palace. Stylistically, this box differs slightly from some of the other objects of that find, which may have been made one or two decades earlier. A dating of much of the Lantian material to the middle of the ninth century is suggested by a multi-lobed silver box decorated with a tied sash motif, which recently came to light in the tomb of Li Yu, who died in 841 and was buried in Yanshi, Henan (fig. 18).<sup>9</sup>

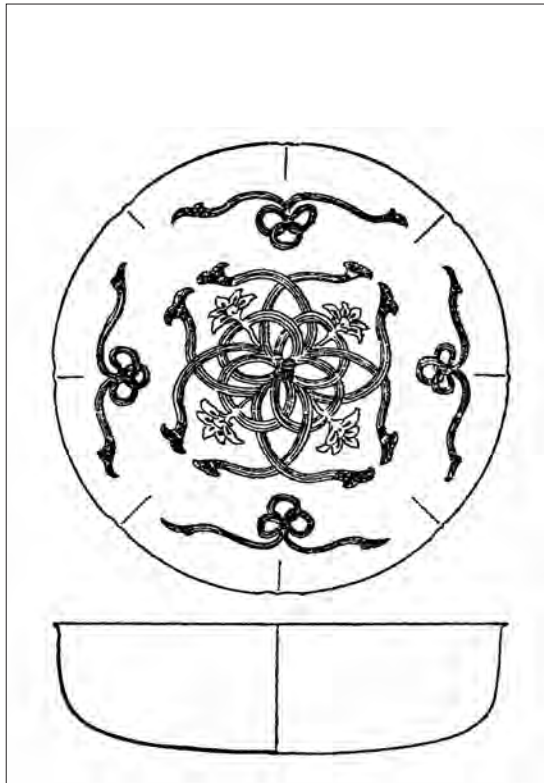


Fig. 15 Silver bowl. Tang, c. 840. From a gold and silver hoard in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi. Lantian Cultural Relics Administration (after Lantian xian 1982, 48).

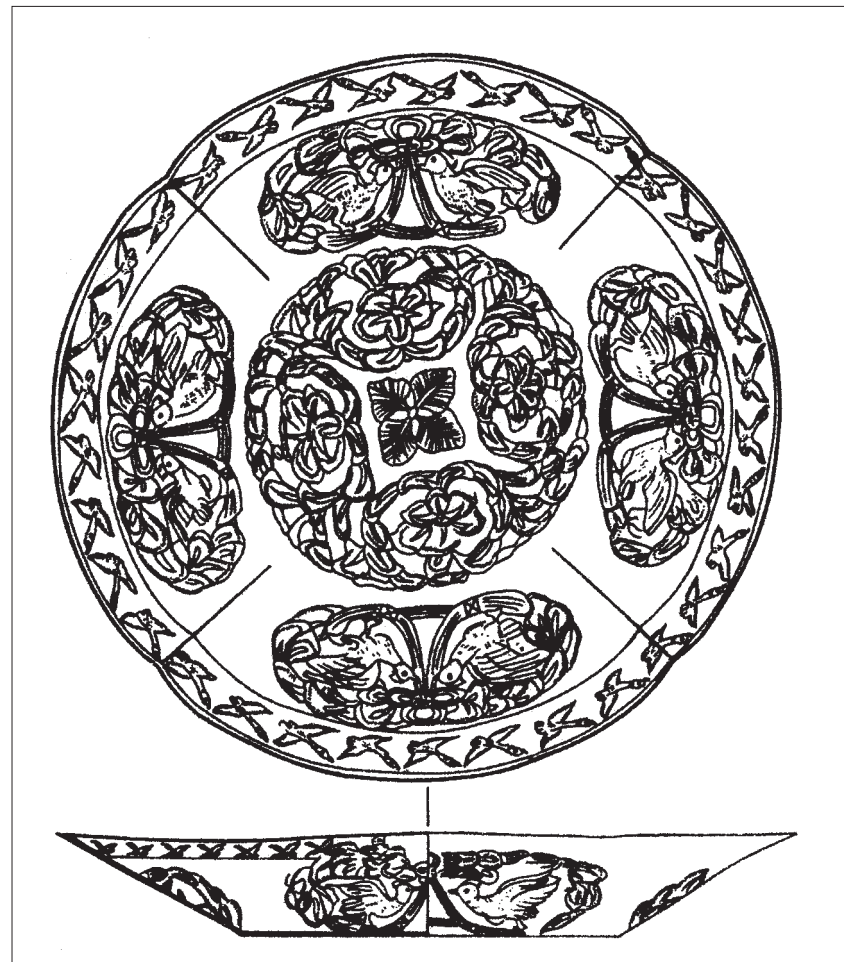


Fig. 16 Silver dish. Tang, c. 840. From a gold and silver hoard in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi. Lantian Cultural Relics Administration (after Lantian xian 1982, 47).

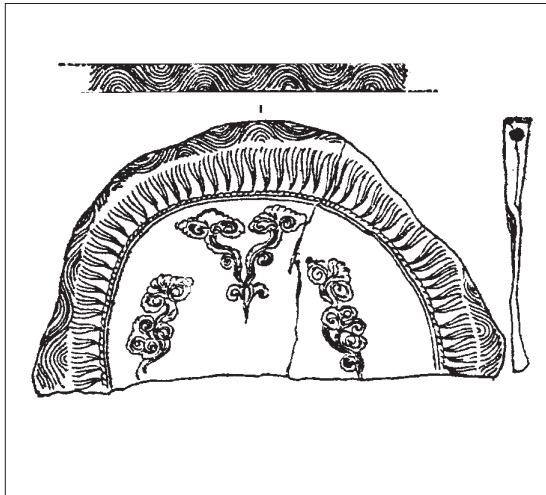


Fig. 17 Fragment of a silver dish. Tang, c. 840. From a gold and silver hoard in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi. Lantian Cultural Relics Administration (after Lantian xian 1982, 49).

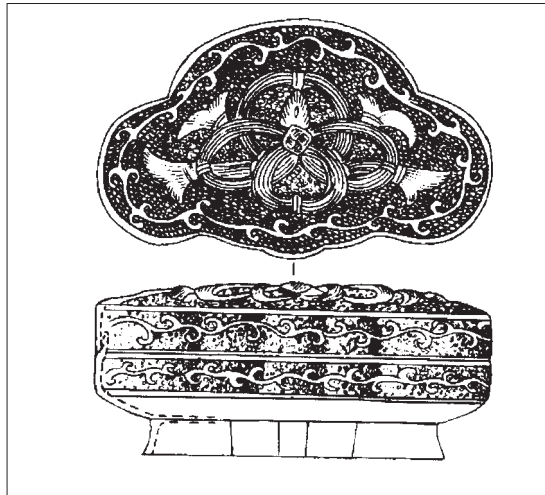


Fig. 18 Silver box. Tang, first half 9th century. From the tomb of Li Yu (d. 841) in Yanshi, Henan (after Qi Dongfang 1999, 30).

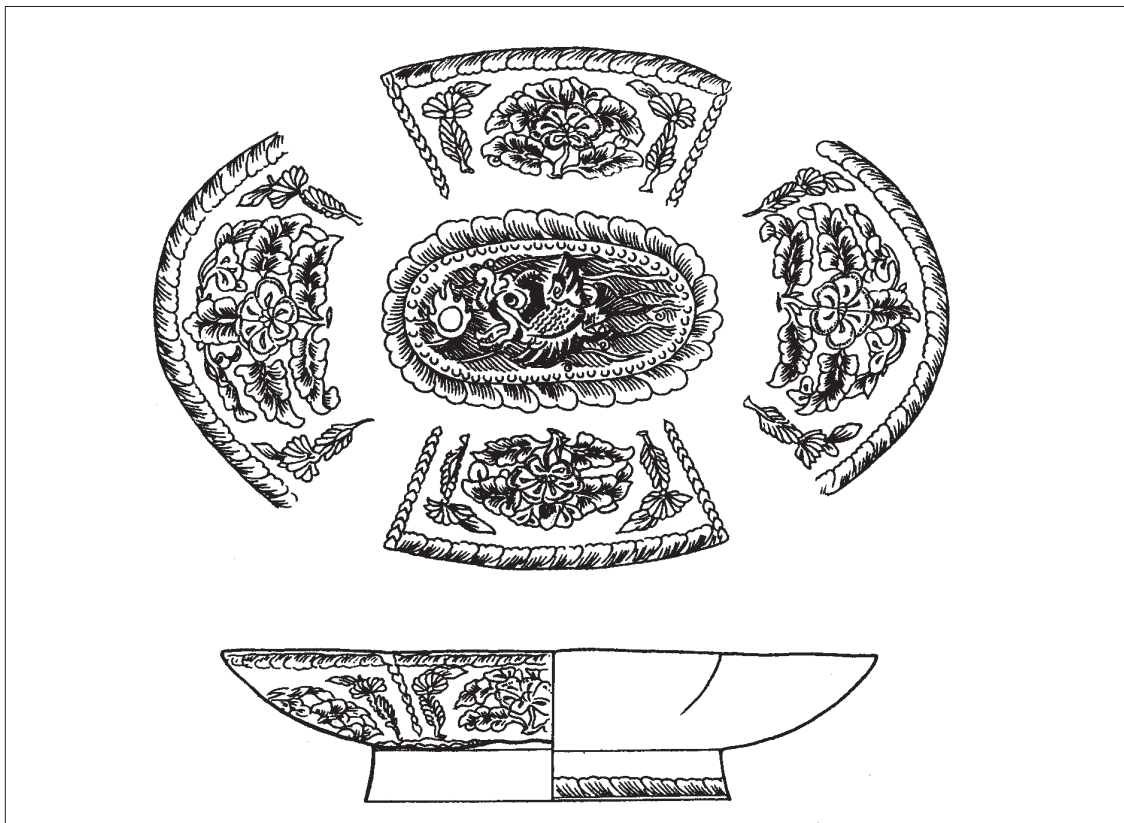


Fig. 19 Gold drinking bowl. Tang, c. 830. Excavated at Taiyi Road in Xi'an, Shaanxi. Shaanxi Provincial Museum (after Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 246).

# Gold and Silver

<sup>10</sup> Li Yufang 1982, 53, 43; Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, nos 259–261; Shi Shuqing 1994, 104; Michaelson 1999, 100.

<sup>11</sup> He Lin et al. 1983, 14–15; Shi Shuqing 1994, 109; Michaelson 1999, 99.

<sup>12</sup> Dantu xian 1982, 15–27.

<sup>13</sup> Qi Dongfang 1999, 52f., 62, 91–92, 118, 125. Han Wei (1989) categorizes the find as style IV (820–907). The eighth- to mid-ninth-century date for the Dingmaoqiao silver originally proposed by Lu Jiugao and Liu Jianguo (1982, 32) had already been adjusted to a ninth-century date in 1985, cf. Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, 3.

<sup>14</sup> See also below p. 156.

Because of its stylistic consistency the treasure from the Belitung shipwreck provides exciting new material to refine the dating of a considerable group of related artefacts. The most notable among these are the oblong golden wine bowl discovered in 1983 at Taiyi Road in Xi'an (fig. 19) and the famous golden ewer found in 1969 in Xianyang (fig. 20).<sup>10</sup> In relation to the Belitung find, the gold bowl may now be dated to the time around 830, while the ewer appears to date from around the middle of the ninth century.<sup>11</sup> Art historians will also need to re-examine the dating of many of the decorated vessels from the large Dingmaoqiao hoard, excavated in 1982 near Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province.<sup>12</sup> While there are slight stylistic differences, the Dingmaoqiao finds compare closely to the vessels of the shipwreck

in their ornamental vocabulary of multi-lobed shapes, cicada designs, floral scrolls, bird pairs, etc. Most recently, Qi Dongfang has argued for a manufacturing date in the second half of the ninth century;<sup>13</sup> now, in the light of the vessels from the Belitung wreck, refining that date closer toward the middle rather than the end of the ninth century will need to be considered for most of that important find. Finally, the stylistic similarities between the figures on the octagonal gold cup no. 1 (fig. 21) and the stucco figures from the Xiuding Pagoda in Anyang (fig. 22) must be regarded as significant new clues for a more secure dating of those famous reliefs to the first half of the ninth century and more specifically to the decades around 820.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 20 Gold ewer. Tang, c. 850. Excavated in Xianyang, Shaanxi. Xianyang Museum (after Michaelson 1999, 100).



Fig. 21 Detail of dancer and musicians of the octagonal gold cup no. 1 (Drawing Z. Kotitsa).



Fig. 22 Detail of stucco relief decoration of the Xiuding Temple pagoda, Anyang, Henan. Tang, c. 820 (after Henan sheng 1983, 35).



# Gold and Silver

## II. Silver ingots

Eighteen silver ingots were recovered in 1998, constituting one of the largest and earliest such finds to date. Two of the ingots have been freed of their calcification and cleaned (no. 11 a, b). Both are cast in the form of a slender stick with concave sides, flat ends, and slightly raised rims. Their surface is occasionally wrinkled and partly rough and corroded. No inscriptions are visible. Ingot A weighs 2,016 g, ingot B, although roughly the same size, only weighs 1,920 g. Shape and weight of these two ingots suggest that they were cast according to the conventions of Tang China, where rectangular silver ingots circulated from the middle of the eighth century as 10-, 40-, or 50-*liang* sticks. The weight of previously excavated ingots of a 50-*liang* denomination ranges between 1,950 and 2,115 g.<sup>15</sup> Ingot A therefore fits neatly into the average group of Tang 50-*liang* silver ingots, while ingot B falls somewhat short in weight, possibly because some of its material was lost through corrosion.

During the Tang period, silver was primarily a valuable commodity and by no means a true currency. This became the case only in the Southern Song period (1127–1279). The Tang government neither issued silver ingots nor prescribed the ingots' shapes; standard weights only seem to have become established in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>16</sup> The earliest silver ingots with concave sides

have been discovered in Tang sites dating from the middle of the eighth and from the ninth century. Such a piece 10 *liang* in weight was discovered in the mid-eighth-century hoard of Hejia, along with over sixty small rectangular ingots and twenty-two circular silver cakes of random weight.<sup>17</sup> Much more closely related in shape to the ingots from the shipwreck, however, are two and a half silver ingots discovered in 1980 in a silver hoard in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi province.<sup>18</sup> That hoard, which, as illustrated above (p. 144, figs 14–17), also included a number of silver vessels comparable to the gold and silver of the Belitung shipwreck, was hidden during the second half of the ninth century. The Yangjiagou ingots are somewhat shorter and weigh 1,825 g and 1,800 g respectively, thus not conforming to any standard decimal weight unit of the Tang.

## III. Trade goods or diplomatic gifts?

The discovery of fine Tang gold and silver in Southeast Asia is a most extraordinary event. To date, no comparable material has been found either in Southeast Asia, India, or the Near East. In fact, only a handful of silver items survive which are thought to have left China during the Tang era. Among these is a large silver platter with four legs, which entered

<sup>15</sup> Qian Yu 1993, 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–28; Louis 1999, 37–47.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Shaanxi sheng bowuguan 1972, 33; Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, 190–191, appendix nos 5–11.

<sup>18</sup> Lantian xian 1982, 46.

the imperial household of Japan in the middle of the eighth century and was donated to the Tōdai Temple by Empress Kōmyō (701–760) in 756.<sup>19</sup> Another example may be a small silver box discovered in 1978 in the treasure of the Qianxun Pagoda in Dali, Yunnan, which belonged to the independent Nanzhao kingdom during the Tang dynasty.<sup>20</sup> The box shows many features of late-Tang metalwork and, if it is indeed a Chinese product, must have reached Yunnan between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Now, the gold and silver treasure from the shipwreck in Indonesia presents us not only with a completely unprecedented archaeological context but also with significant new evidence for the international use of Tang precious metals.

At the moment, too little is known about the details of international shipping procedures in the early ninth-century Nanhai trade to allow for definite conclusions about the purpose and destination of the Chinese gold and silver on board a large merchant vessel like the one discovered in Belitung. Several scenarios are conceivable and will be discussed below: the gold and silver objects may have been trade goods intended for sale like the ceramics; they may have served for the private use of one or several passengers; or they may have been intended as diplomatic gifts.

Commercial interests in gold and silver were well developed in many countries which traded with

Tang China. Several states in India, as well as Java, used gold coins at the time, while both gold and silver coins circulated in Sumatra and the Arab world.<sup>21</sup> Precious metals were also abundant among the foreign communities in China, to the extent that some of the foreign merchants residing in Tang China were asked to pay their taxes in silver.<sup>22</sup> The *Akhbar al-Sin w'al-Hind*, an Arab text of 851 traditionally but unconvincingly attributed to a certain merchant Sulayman, describes life in Guangzhou and explicitly mentions that gold and silver were abundant commodities there.<sup>23</sup> Chinese sources similarly explain that not only the foreigners but also the Chinese would traditionally trade these materials in the Guangdong region, which was renowned for its rich deposits of gold and silver.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the mines in southern China (in the Lingnan and Jiangnan circuits) provided the Tang empire with about 80 per cent of its precious metals.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, there is little precise information about the role of precious metals in international maritime trade with China in the early ninth century. Officially, the export of gold and silver is likely to have been interdicted at that time, as earlier imperial edicts may have remained in place. Already in 713 'the barter of gold and iron with foreigners' had been forbidden, and in 780 the use of 'silver, copper, iron, and male and female slaves' had been prohibited in barter with foreigners as well.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it is because of such official regulations that the textual record does not appear to

<sup>19</sup> Hayashi Ryōichi 1975, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Lutz 1991, 226.

<sup>21</sup> Katō Shigeshi 1944, II:127; for precious metals coinage used in Southeast Asia cf. Wicks 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Twitchett 1970, 142.

<sup>23</sup> Sauvaget 1948, 16. For Sauvaget's discussion of the authorship of the text see *ibid.*, xix–xxi.

<sup>24</sup> Schafer 1967, 153.

<sup>25</sup> Louis 1999, 38–42.

<sup>26</sup> Wicks 1992, 24. For a broader perspective on the sumptuary edicts of 713 and 714 see Wang Zhenping 1991, 27–28.

# Gold and Silver

<sup>27</sup> Up to the seventh century and during the Song period, on the other hand, Chinese precious metals formed an important part in China's maritime trade, cf. Wicks 1992, 21ff.; Schottenhammer 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Kató Shigeshi 1944, II:127.

<sup>29</sup> Wang Gungwu 1958, 69–115; Wang Zhenping 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Wang Gungwu 1958, 72–87; Wang Zhenping 1991, 12–19, 29–35; Schafer 1967, 77–78.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the inscribed vessels from the Famensi pagoda, which in many cases were either made in the imperial workshops or were gifts to the emperor from officials, and which in turn were donated by the emperor to the Buddha, cf. Han Wei 1995.

<sup>32</sup> The scratch testing method for establishing the purity of precious metals is recorded for the Song period, and we may presume it was also used in the ninth century, cf.

mention any export of precious metals for the early ninth century.<sup>27</sup> Texts do record, on the other hand, Persian and Arab merchants routinely acquiring precious materials, including gold and silver, on their way to China in order to exchange these goods for Tang silks, copper coin, and ceramics.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while it is likely that a certain amount of gold and silver was exported from China and found a market in Sumatra, Java, India, or Persia, such export was also likely to have been legally restricted.

As foreign merchant ships undoubtedly had their cargo inspected by officials of the Tang foreign trade administration before they were allowed to set sail, the export of precious metals must have been sanctioned in some form by the local authorities. As Wang Gungwu, Wang Zhenping, and others have described in detail, a foreign merchant had to conduct his trading in close collaboration with the Tang government, which had the right of first purchase and of taxation of an imported cargo.<sup>29</sup> A number of records also portray officials in charge of international trading ports as abusing their governmental authority to amass immense wealth through private trade with foreign merchants, despite the fact that members of the Tang administration were officially forbidden to engage in commerce.<sup>30</sup> The presence of gold and silver on the shipwreck of Belitung may thus well be interpreted as the result of some form of private trading between a foreign merchant and the prefect of Yangzhou or Guangzhou, or one of the Maritime Trade Commissioners sent by the palace to such a

port in order to purchase exotic rarities directly for the court.

The data recovered from the shipwreck unfortunately does not provide sufficient clues about the owner, or owners, of the gold and silver. The Chinese weight inscriptions at the bottom of the gold dishes (nos 2–4) indicate a concern with the value of the gold, but do not necessarily refer to a commercial use. They were almost certainly chased at the time of manufacture by the goldsmith himself and reflect standard Tang practice. Such inscriptions were common even on objects made in the imperial workshops for the Tang court.<sup>31</sup> At court, an object's material value was directly linked to distinctions of status within the social hierarchy. It was crucial for the emperor to bestow the appropriate number and type of gifts on his courtiers and guests, and it was similarly of major concern for the subordinates to make clear the value of their gifts to the court. Weight inscriptions on precious metal objects can thus be understood within the Tang system of social politics just as much as within a framework of private commerce.

The intentional scratch marks and the engraved characters on the back of two of the gold dishes (nos 2–4), on the other hand, suggest that these two objects at least had been tested for the quality of the metal and had been handled by someone who did not write Chinese.<sup>32</sup> The people who left the scratches and marks may have viewed the dishes from a more economic point of view. The few scat-

tered written marks, which resemble ancient Southeast Asian scripts, have not yet been deciphered.

In China's archaeological record gold and silver vessels comparable to those found on the shipwreck are usually associated with wealthy members of the Tang ruling elite, if not with the court itself. Lady Wu (763–824), for instance, the Grand Mistress of Qi, whose tomb contained the most impressive gold and silver equipment discovered in a Tang burial so far, was the matriarch of one of the richest and most powerful families of the country (see above pp. 141–142, figs 8, 9). Yet, compared to the treasure on the shipwreck, the gold and silver funerary gifts recovered from her tomb were far less impressive and expensive, lacking large silver items and gold vessels altogether.<sup>33</sup> The most magnificent gold and silver hoard known to date, found in 1970 in Hejia village in the southern part of Xi'an and datable mainly to the first half of the eighth century, contained a similar, albeit larger assembly of gold and silver treasures, including nearly 200 vessels and 451 gold and silver coins used at the court for gaming.<sup>34</sup> Here again, the owner's connection to the court is obvious. Other gold and silver objects quoted earlier similarly circulated in the highest strata of Tang society. Even silver ingots can be closely linked to the Tang government or the court, having frequently entered the official storehouses as tax payments or personal tribute. Given the high status of gold and silver in Tang China as markers of social prestige, we should conclude that the treasures of the shipwreck reflect the wealth and status of one

or several persons who must have had access to the highest echelons of the Tang administration. The many gold vessels in particular point at supreme elite privilege.

If we assume that the bulk of the gold and silver treasures belonged to one person, who, judging by the marks on the back of the gold dishes, was possibly not Chinese, we may explore the intriguing hypothesis that someone of considerable social importance had been on the ship. The great value of the vessels suggests a dignitary who must have interacted with no lesser authorities than Tang prefectural governors or with the court directly. Social interaction within those most influential strata of the Tang elite was highly ritualized through formal receptions, banquets, and – most importantly for our discussion – through the exchange of gifts. Many an exchange of valuable goods took the form of ceremonial gift giving, rather than a straightforward sale and purchase. Gold and silver vessels appear to have played a central role in this formalized exchange during the later half of the Tang period, when great quantities of them were explicitly made to be used as gifts.<sup>35</sup> The pervasive iconography of their decoration, which speaks of tying knots, of making links and connections, of wishing long life, or of pairing friends and couples, amply demonstrates the social function of these precious items as gifts.

Were these precious vessels presented to the wealthy merchant who owned the cargo by government

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<sup>33</sup> Her tomb had, however, been looted in the weeks before the authorities received reports about its discovery, so that what the archaeologists and the police could recover may only reflect a portion of the original grave goods; Luoyang dier 1995, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Shaanxi sheng bowuguan 1972, 37f; Michaelson 1999, 127–128; Hansen 2003; Qi Dongfang 2003.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the use of gold and silver as gifts to the Tang court see Louis 1999, 117–126.

# Gold and Silver

<sup>36</sup> On the purposes of embassies from the Nanhai see Wang Gungwu 1958, 116f.

<sup>37</sup> As Edward Schafer pointed out in his graphic description of the tributary audiences at the Tang court, the 'average ambassador was an ordinary politician, or a close relative of a king, or a distinguished priest, or perhaps a rich merchant'. Schafer 1963, 25–29.

<sup>38</sup> *Jiu Tangshu*, 17a: 512; *Zizhi Tongjian*, 243: 7839. The presentation is recorded for 27 September 824 (according to some chronologies 26 September 824).

<sup>39</sup> Wheatly 1959, 69ff.

<sup>40</sup> The dates are translated into the Western calendar. *Jiu Tangshu*, 17b: 577; *Cefu yuangui*, 972: 11419; Wang Gungwu 1958, 121. *Cefu yuangui* lists the earlier Shepo embassy for March 831.

<sup>41</sup> *Cefu yuangui*, 972: 11419.

officials as a socially accepted form of 'doing business'? Or were they possibly gifts from the court in response to a diplomatic mission from a foreign country? After all, foreign envoys to China not only received personal gifts upon their arrival at the court depending on their rank, but they were also entrusted with suitable presents for those they represented.<sup>36</sup> Embassies by necessity of protocol transported precious and often rare goods, and they obviously followed the same routes and used the same methods of transport as did the merchants. In fact, with many missions to the Tang court the lines between international commerce and politics were entirely blurred. Frequently the main purpose of foreign delegations was to improve mutual trade between their country and the Tang; and sometimes their leaders were even foreign merchants themselves.<sup>37</sup> Merchants who acted as diplomats were conceivably in a perfect position to use their access to the court to further their own business. Such may possibly have been the case with the wealthy Persian trader Li Susha, who was able to personally present emperor Muzong (r. 820–824) with enough rare, fragrant gharuwood from Southeast Asia to build an entire pleasure pavilion from it and to be recorded for this extravagant present in the official history of the dynasty.<sup>38</sup> The expensive gharuwood was otherwise mainly used for incense and medicine.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the historical record does not specify the circumstances which allowed Li Susha to get access to the court, and we may only

speculate whether Li occasionally took on the role of an official delegate.

If the gold and silver on the shipwreck of Belitung, along with some of the fine ceramics, were indeed diplomatic gifts, the question of course arises as to whom they might have been intended for. If the owner of the ship was an influential merchant such as Li Susha, such luxurious items may possibly have been bestowed on him personally. But, perhaps more likely such treasures were intended to go to the ruler of the 'tributary' state, rather than to the ambassador himself. The historical records list a great number of foreign delegations at the Tang court, but not many arrived from the southern seas around the time our ship most likely was wrecked. Because a piece of Changsha ware of the find is dated by inscription to the year 826 (no. 171), we know that the ship must have sunk in that year or later. Stylistically, the gold, silver, and ceramic vessels suggest a manufacturing date hardly later than 850. Thus, the ship most likely sank between 826 and 850. During this period, only two embassies arriving from along the southern sea routes are recorded. Both came from Shepo, one presenting tribute on 24 February 831, the other on 14 March 839.<sup>40</sup> Both missions were led by an ambassador named Li Nanhulu.<sup>41</sup>

Shepo is generally understood to refer to a country with its capital of the same name in either Sumatra

or Java.<sup>42</sup> Possibly Shepo was identical with the kingdom of the Sailendra dynasty, who was most powerful between the eighth and the first half of the ninth century. The Sailendra, famous as Buddhist patrons of the Borobudur temple near their main power base in Java, apparently had close ties to Srivijaya in Sumatra, which traditionally controlled the sea trade of the Nanhai. Although the precise political relations between the Srivijaya trading ports and the Sailendra kingdom in the early ninth century are still unclear, a number of scholars have suggested that the Sailendra may at that time have enjoyed some form of political alliance with Srivijaya, or even have exerted political control over their neighbour.<sup>43</sup> The intensified diplomatic relations between Shepo and Tang and the cessation of embassies from Srivijaya between the middle of the eighth and the middle of the ninth century certainly indicate a shift within the political equilibrium of the region.<sup>44</sup> Between 813 and 839, Shepo appeared at the Tang court especially frequently, busying itself with no less than six embassies.<sup>45</sup> In 813 it presented emperor Xianzong (r. 805–820) with the remarkable gift of four African slaves, five-coloured parrots, and other exotic rarities.<sup>46</sup> Subsequent missions offered additional slaves, tortoise shell, and a live rhinoceros.

If the gold and silver treasures on the Tang wreck of Belitung were indeed intended as diplomatic gifts for Shepo, the large boat must, as was customary

for many of the ships that went on farther west, have planned to make a stop at one of the main ports in Sumatra or Java.<sup>47</sup> At that time the embassy would have disembarked to take the precious gifts from the Tang court to the Sailendra king.<sup>48</sup> If such a hypothesis proved to be correct, we would be presented with a set of gold and silver vessels made at one time for the Tang court. Judging from the differences in quality – for example between the gold dishes (nos 2–4) and the octagonal gold cup (no. 1) – such a hypothesis may not hold up entirely and may require further clarification. Once all the silver items are cleaned and inspected for inscriptions, a more thorough analysis of the possible role and provenance of the ship's precious metal cargo can be conducted.

<sup>42</sup> It appears that around 820 the name Shepo came to replace the earlier name Heling, cf. Luo Zhufeng 1997, 7168; Wang Gungwu 1958, 75, 86, 99. For a description of its geography and customs see *Tang huiyao*, 100: 1782; *Xin Tangshu*, 222: 6302f.

<sup>43</sup> Van Naerssen 1947; Suleiman 1977, esp. 22; Mahdi 1995, esp. 172ff.; for additional literature cf. Wicks 1992, 228.

<sup>44</sup> Wang Gungwu 1958, 93–94, 121.

<sup>45</sup> *Tang huiyao*, 100: 1782.

<sup>46</sup> *Xin Tangshu*, 222: 6302; Schafer 1963, 46–47, 291 n. 54.

<sup>47</sup> On the possible routes, see Wang Gungwu 1958, 96–99 and in this volume pp. 76–91.

<sup>48</sup> There are a few items that were discovered on the wreck which suggest that the ship or some of the persons on board may have had previous contact with Java or Sumatra: small chunks of aromatic resin may be associated with aromatics from Sumatra, see no. 322; or the golden piloncito (no. 10), which is a type of coin that current scholarship links most closely to Java. See also in this volume pp. 658–659.