

Shipwrecked

John N. Miksic



Review of Krahl, R. et al. (eds.) 2010. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore Tourism Board.

THE BOOK TELLS THE STORY of one of the greatest archaeological discoveries ever made in Southeast Asia: a ship that sank in the Gelasa Strait between Bangka and Belitung Island, Indonesia, the gateway to the Java Sea. The ship, sometimes called the Batu Hitam, probably sank sometime between 830 and 840. It is one of the oldest shipwrecks yet found in Southeast Asia, but this is not the reason that this discovery has made an enormous impact on our understanding of ancient history. The site's importance stems from two factors, one obvious, the other more subtle but no less revolutionary. The aspect of the discovery that needs no expertise to appreciate is the extraordinary richness of the ship's cargo, whether evaluated in monetary or aesthetic terms. The fact that has aroused the greatest interest among historians is that the ship was built somewhere in the northwestern Indian Ocean.

The shipwreck was found in 1998 and excavated over the next two years. Some artefacts from the site were exhibited in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum in 2005. In February 2011 an exhibition jointly curated by Singapore's National Heritage Board and the Smithsonian Institution opened at the ArtScience Museum, at which time this book was issued.

Controversy has arisen over this project due to the fact that the excavation was done by a private firm under license from the Indonesian government. A UNESCO convention calls upon signatory countries to forbid private financing of underwater heritage research, based on the assumption that such funding inevitably means that scholarly procedures will be neglected. Others point out the fact that without private funding, the shipwreck would have been looted and the vessel destroyed. The Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore sponsored a conference on maritime archaeology in June 2011, attended by representatives of private companies and Southeast Asian government archaeologists, to air these issues; the proceedings have been published.

The volume that is the subject of this review presents a wide range of scholarship on the ship, its cargo, and its historical context. *Shipwrecked* contains essays showing how much information has been gleaned from the site, which would not have been acquired had the site been salvaged by methods associated with treasure hunters, which are rightly condemned. The most stunning items in the ship from an artistic viewpoint are Chinese-made gold artefacts of imperial quality and style. These were no ordinary trade items. They must have been meant as diplomatic gifts for a king. The vast bulk of the cargo, however, was probably not meant for royalty; Chinese ceramics constituted almost 99% of 60,000 items recovered from the site, of which 55,000 are mass-produced bowls from kilns near Changsha. This statistic has made a major impact on our understanding of the past. It requires that the history of mass production be rewritten.

The Jewel of Muscat, exhibited at the Maritime Experiential Museum, Singapore. (Photo reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy Flickr.com)

Ceramics of this type are rarely found in China; they were made for export. They could have been meant for delivery to a king who intended to redistribute them as presents to favoured subjects. Changsha bowls have been found near several great ninth century religious monuments in Java, suggesting that they were often presented to religious communities. A few Southeast Asian artefacts were also aboard the ship, including an Indonesian gold coin, aromatic resin (probably from Southeast Asia), and a box made of wood from the jackfruit tree or a similar variety, from South or Southeast Asia.

The ship itself is a dhow, made in a fashion traditionally employed over a broad swath of coastal territory from Oman to western India. Artefacts found on the ship originating in Southeast Asia outnumber those from the Indian Ocean. The ship seems to have been relatively old; it had been refitted, with materials that can be found in the Singapore area. Chinese ships going to Arab lands in the twelfth century usually repaired their ships in Palembang;¹ these materials would certainly have been available there.

All the important facts that can be gathered from the remains of the ship are summarized by Michael Flecker, embellished with superb colour photographs. Tom Vosmer adds a chapter on the design and construction of a replica of the ship, complete with excellent technical drawings. This ship, the *Jewel of Muscat*, sailed to Singapore in 2010 and is now on display in the Maritime Experiential Museum on Sentosa Island, Singapore.

The dating of the ship's sinking is based on several considerations. Radiocarbon dates were obtained: 680-780; 670-890; 710-890. This wide range of possible dates is not particularly satisfactory. Coins on board cannot be dated any more precisely than to the period between 758 and 845. The Changsha wares on the other hand can be dated to 828, based on a painted inscription on one bowl. Regina Krahl argues that some greenwares on the ship date from the decade of the 840s, but this suggests that the Changsha bowls were 10 years old when they were exported. In any case, wherever Chinese wares are found in secure archaeological contexts of the past one thousand years, they are the most precise and reliable dating method available.

Professor Wang Gungwu in his *Introduction: Ships in the Nanhai*, argues against the theory that Chinese sources prove Persian ships sailed to China before the Tang Dynasty by showing that these reports deal with overland tributary exchanges, not sea trade. He holds out the possibility that Chinese ships of the Tang may still be found in Southeast Asia, although neither historical nor archaeological evidence for this eventuality exists.

Where was the ship bound? One theory is that it was returning to the western Indian Ocean, possibly to Oman.² The shipwreck's location, however, was not on the normal route to the Indian Ocean from the South China Sea. If the ship were heading for the Indian Ocean, she would have had to enter it via the Sunda Strait, and there is "no reliable evidence that the Sunda Straits were ever used in early times."³ This was

the period of the great Javanese kingdom of Mataram, which constructed such major monuments as Borobudur. It can be argued that the ship was heading for a Javanese port. This discovery underlines the fact that the northwest Indian Ocean, Indonesia, and China were closely linked by an ancient network of trade and communication by the ninth century.

John Guy, curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and an expert on ancient Chinese ceramics, summarizes in his chapter important points regarding the range of Chinese ceramic types found on the ship, which encompasses wares from Zhejiang, Guangzhou, Hebei, and Henan. He theorizes that the ship was probably on its way to the north Java coast to get Indonesian spices to take to Sri Lanka and the Arabian Sea. This would explain its location in the Gelasa Strait, while preserving the notion that its ultimate destination lay in West Asia. Jessica Hallett illustrates that the motifs painted in cobalt blue on three of the dishes are derived from the palm fronds found on bowls from Basra. This could be taken as evidence that the ceramics were designed to appeal to the Arabo-Persian market.

Regina Krahl adds important information on two inscribed Gongxian ceramics in the cargo. One bears the character *ying* [surplus], "believed to be an abbreviation of *da ying ku* or *bai bao da ying ku*, great surplus storehouse [of a hundred treasures]"; this was the treasury containing items used at the Tang court. An inscription on a dish reading *jinfeng* [respectfully offered as tribute], indicates that it was probably offered by the pottery-making enterprise to the court, which then gave it to a foreign embassy (p. 52). Both these texts reinforce the impression that some of the rarer ceramics on the ship were intimately connected with the very highest level of government in China.

One of the most interesting chapters in the volume is that by François Louis on "Metal objects on the Belitung shipwreck". He notes several salient points about the gold and silver items, including the fact that this is the first such assemblage found outside China. Several dozen lead ingots were recovered, but the vast majority numbering perhaps 2,000 and weighing 10 tonnes were left on the seabed. Many were stowed above the ceramics, which is another enigma. Louis's chapter demonstrates that despite the extraordinary quantity and quality of the gold and silver on board, it is not possible to conclude definitively that the ship was on an official mission. Officials in China engaged in illicit private trade with Southeast Asia, and "easily could have equipped the Belitung ship with extravagant gold and silver vessels in order to give the supercargo the means to ease trade in Southeast Asia" (p. 90). Frequent missions from Java arrived in China in the period between 813 and 839. On the subject of the dhow's destination, he comes down in favour of Java.

Chinese archaeologist Hsieh Ming-liang on the other hand concludes that the ship was headed for Siraf in the Persian Gulf. His chapter contains important information about excavations at the port of Hangzhou, including rare information about ceramic finds from habitation sites there. More than 30,000 sherds found at Wenhua Gong include examples of all types found on the Belitung wreck except for Guangdong wares; this combination has not yet been found at any other Chinese sites of the Tang period. This chapter is followed by excellent discussions of specific types of ceramics: white wares with green décor, Changsha ceramics, and green Yue-type wares. A final chapter contains scientific analysis of the rare green-splashed white ware, which hints strongly at Gongxian as their place of origin.

This volume is the standard reference for this extremely important archaeological site. There are still materials from the shipwreck that have not been studied. These include various types of organic remains. Some metal items are in fragmentary condition and await conservation and restoration. Many more years of work are necessary before the full archaeological story of this assemblage can be told. This volume can, however, stand as an excellent summary of the data in our current state of knowledge. The impact of this discovery will continue to reverberate as scholars from disciplines such as history begin to explore its meanings.

John Miksic is Head of the Archaeology Unit, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Notes

- 1 Wolters, O.W. 1983. 'A Few and Miscellaneous Pi-chi: Jottings on Early Indonesia', *Indonesia*, 36, p.55.
- 2 Guy, J. 2001-2002. 'Early Asian Ceramic Trade and the Belitung ('Tang') Cargo', *The Oriental Ceramic Society*, v. 66, p. 25.
- 3 Wolters, O.W. 1967. *Early Indonesian commerce: a study of the origins of Śrīvijaya*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 267, note 4.