



Metal Objects on the Belitung Shipwreck

François Louis

Among the most unexpected finds on the Belitung shipwreck was a group of more than thirty spectacular gold and silver artifacts from Tang China. These include luxurious tablewares for entertaining, notably, four cups and three dishes made of solid gold, a magnificent wine flask of gilt silver, four silver bowls, and two platters. The group also contains a golden bracelet and fourteen silver boxes of various sizes for cosmetics, incense, and medicines. Exquisitely manufactured and extremely rare, these objects figure among the most important discoveries of Tang gold and silver ever made. Even more intriguing is that this is the first such discovery made outside China.

The divers also retrieved more typical metal trade goods: twenty-nine Chinese bronze mirrors, one of the largest assemblies of Tang mirrors ever found; several hundred Chinese bronze coins; more than 2 kilograms of gold foil; and eighteen Chinese silver ingots, the largest amount of Tang silver bullion found to date. One metal object that is definitely not Chinese is a small gold coin, a so-called *piloncito*, of Southeast Asian origin. Given the preponderance of Chinese goods, we can safely assume that all these metal objects were taken aboard in Tang dynasty China just weeks before the ship sank north of the Gelasa Strait at Belitung Island in Indonesia. If the ship set sail from Guangzhou (Canton), the main port for the South Sea trade in Tang China, and if the winds were favorable, its final journey may have been as short as a month.¹ Like all ships heading south with the northeastern monsoon, the Belitung ship must have left China between late December and early March.² The dating of the ceramic cargo suggests that this may have been in winter 826–27 or one of the winters soon thereafter.³

Aside from cargo, the ship also carried equipment that could be expected on any merchant vessel, such as a bronze scale, measuring spoons, and sewing needles for patching sails and the like. The ship furthermore contained a vast amount of lead, at least part of which was needed as ballast. The divers recovered several dozen lead ingots but left some 2,000 more, an estimated 10 tons' worth, on the seabed. Michael Flecker has suggested that the lead may have served both as ballast and as a trade good, as much of it was found stacked above ceramic items.⁴ Little is currently known about the markets for lead in Southeast Asia in the ninth century, however⁵; the most likely buyers might well have been builders of new ships. Tang China was the most significant producer of lead in Asia at the time, but it is still unclear whether the ship's lead was Chinese. The large lead mine in Huameng, close to Guangzhou, would certainly have been well placed to cater both to the Guangzhou dockyards and to foreign traders.⁶

Most of the metal objects can be dated only approximately, based on their style. The gold and silver objects form a coherent stylistic group that is characteristic of the early ninth century. Thirteen boxes, the two fragmentary platters, and the octagonal gold cup are so similar in style and workmanship that we can even assume they originated from the same workshop. The only

items that are dated precisely are a bronze mirror and coins called “heavy treasure of the Qianyuan era” (*Qianyuan zhongbao*). Coincidentally, both were cast at the same time, in the first year of the Qianyuan era (758–59). The coins were cast frantically and in vast quantities to cope with the crippling inflation brought on by two years of devastating war.⁷ The mirror was cast on January 3, 759, to invoke a more auspicious future (fig. 26). It is not only the largest of the Belitung mirrors, measuring 21 centimeters in diameter, but also the most significant historically, for it is the only clearly identified example of a so-called Yangxin, or “Heart of the Yangzi,” mirror. The name of these celebrated mirrors refers to their unique casting process, which was performed on Yangzi riverboats in the city of Yangzhou, the greatest commercial center of Tang China outside the capital Chang’an (Xi’an). Like other fine bronze mirrors, Yangxin mirrors were commercially produced, and the best specimens were sent to the court as local tribute.

Tang mirrors were sturdy commodities that could be used for generations. Many, therefore, ended up on the secondhand market and were traded throughout China. They were also highly desirable products throughout Asia, and international traders exported them regularly from the Chinese frontier markets. Examples comparable to those found on the Belitung shipwreck have been discovered all along the Asian trade routes, from Japan to Iran.⁸

Gold and Silver

It is difficult to explain why gold and silver objects were on the ship, as no comparable finds exist from the ninth century. The gold foil and silver ingots may signal an early version of the precious-metal trade that would become more common in the tenth century and later. At that later time, silver in particular was used by the Chinese government to pay foreign traders in Guangzhou for goods from the south and west. The Chinese silver would then have been traded abroad for its bullion value.⁹ Precious metals are known to have been abundant within the foreign merchant communities in ninth-century China, to the extent that some foreign residents were asked to pay their taxes in silver.¹⁰ *Akhbar al-Sin wa’l-Hind*, an Arab text of 851 that describes life in Guangzhou, explicitly mentions that gold and silver were widely available.¹¹ Silver, indeed, was a major natural resource in southern China, particularly in Guangdong and Guangxi; more than half of the Tang silver was mined and refined there.¹² By the early ninth century, silver was commonly used in that region as a means of paying for large-value transactions.¹³ However, no inscriptions have yet been discovered on any of the Belitung ingots to help locate their place of manufacture.¹⁴

The gold and silver vessels are particularly intriguing. Although we can only hypothesize as to why they were on the Belitung wreck, they give a good sense of the social status of the people involved at the top of this trading venture. In Tang China, gold vessels were markers of ultimate elite status, and there is no question that the precious vessels on board link the ship to the wealthiest members of the Tang ruling elite of around 830, if not to the imperial court itself. All the well-documented comparable archaeological finds in China suggest so.¹⁵ These privileged few had access to the highest levels of power and included officials and eunuchs at the court in Chang’an, governors and prefects of the wealthiest cities and provinces, members of the imperial family, and specialists who managed to gain the trust of the emperor, such as high Buddhist clergy, physicians, and a select group of grand merchants.

Social interaction within the top strata of the Tang elite was highly ritualized through formal receptions, banquets, and the exchange of gifts. Valuable goods were often acquired through ceremonial gift-giving rather than through a straightforward purchase. Gold and silver vessels played a central role in this formalized exchange during the second half of the Tang, when great quantities of them were explicitly made to be used as gifts.¹⁶ The pervasive imagery on the Belitung vessels, which speaks of tying knots, forging links and connections,

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Fig. 66 Lobed silver-gilt boxes with animals and birds in repoussé. Cats. 291–98.

OPPOSITE

Fig. 67 Four-lobed silver bowl with a rhinoceros, China, Tang dynasty, ca. 825–50.

Fig. 68 Square lobed gold dish with chased insects, flowers, and knotted ribbons. Cat. 302.







wishing long life, pairing friends and couples, and exchanging tributary offerings, such as exotic animals and entertainer slaves, amply demonstrates the social function of these precious items.

In the early ninth century, tens of thousands of such vessels were commissioned by the court from governors of the rich provinces, where an increasingly vibrant silversmithing trade was developing.¹⁷ The most productive craft centers were located in the Jiangnan region, in such cities as Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, and Shaoxing. It is probably no coincidence that the historical records place their most prolific production of gold and silver wares in the mid-820s—that is, the same time that the Belitung ship was in China loading its final cargo. Much of this production was driven by imperial demand. In 824, imperial requests were so exorbitant that some governors were unable to fulfill them fast enough. Li Deyu (787–850) at Zhenjiang complained in a letter to the court that imperial requests for nearly a ton of silver vessels in a single year were simply beyond the capacities of his province.¹⁸ Governors in neighboring commercial centers, notably Wang Bo (759–830) in Yangzhou, were given similar orders to produce silver wares that year and delivered them on a somewhat smaller scale.¹⁹ In August 826, the court is recorded in turn as having presented deserving subjects with some 4 metric tons of silver vessels and ingots and nearly 300 kilograms of gold vessels.²⁰

The Confucian scholars who wrote the history of the Tang dynasty describe the 820s, and in particular the reign of Emperor Jingzong (reigned 824–27), as a time of major government corruption and favoritism, with a politically inept, fun-seeking teenage emperor dominated by several thousand self-serving, factionalized eunuchs. Foreign traders, too, were part of that mix. In early autumn of 824, a grand Persian merchant named Li Susha presented Jingzong with enough rare, fragrant agarwood from Southeast Asia to build an entire pleasure pavilion (see p. 174).²¹ This expensive wood was otherwise used only in small quantities for incense and medicine.²² Li must have been massively wealthy and in control of a large trade operation to be able to make such a valuable gift. He also must have been well connected with the eunuchs, who arranged for what many at the time considered a decadent gift. The profligate Jingzong was murdered as a result of eunuch infighting in January 827. The new emperor, Jingzong's half-brother Wenzong (reigned 827–40), tried to tame the extravagance of the court and had many of the dishes and boxes melted into bullion. But by the 830s, he also seems to have lost his moral high ground, and the gifting of gold and silver resumed.²³

Did the Belitung gold and silver vessels originate as official requisitions from Jiangnan to the court? And if so, did they ever enter the imperial storehouse? Unfortunately, none of the vessels shows any inscriptions that would verify its presence in the imperial storehouse. But two of the fine green-splashed ceramics bear underglaze marks that indicate that they were destined for the emperor's storehouse in the capital.²⁴ As many of the green-splashed wares were discovered right next to the silver boxes at the wreck site, a direct imperial connection to at least some of the silver vessels is plausible, though it cannot be proven. The green-splashed wares and the precious metals also could have been used in eunuch-overseen court trading far from the palace, in the bustling market of Yangzhou.²⁵

There is even evidence of officials who conducted maritime trade directly, apparently unfazed by laws forbidding them to engage in private business.²⁶ The military commissioner Wang E, for instance, who had managed through various bribes to secure the lucrative position of prefect of Guangzhou from 795 to 801, is said to have sent “ten fully laden ships south daily” and to have monopolized the purchase of the rare goods from the incoming vessels.²⁷ Among his corrupt successors was Hu Zheng, prefect of Guangzhou and military commissioner of Lingnan between 826 and 828. Hu was similarly engaged in private trading, and it is said that he accumulated enough wealth in those three years to buy several blocks of real estate in the capital and to have a continuous stream of precious goods shipped there.²⁸ A Hu Zheng or a Li Susha 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.

PREVIOUS PAGES

Fig. 69 Gold lobed oval bowl. Cat. 301.

Fig. 70 Gold lobed oval bowl with two ducks in repoussé among chased flowers (detail on right). Cat. 300.

I am unaware of ninth-century records that refer to gold and silver vessels in maritime trade. But Chinese texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mention that such objects were used in Southeast Asian trade, not only as merchandise but also as tableware and as gifts during trading transactions.²⁹ For instance, in one kingdom known as Boni, somewhere on the coast of Borneo, Zhao Rugua (circa 1165–after 1225) records the following trading procedures:

Three days after a foreign ship has arrived at these shores, the king and his family, along with the high court attendants, go on board to enquire about the hardships of the journey. The crew cover the gang plank with silk brocade and welcome them respectfully. They treat them to all kinds of wine, and distribute among them according to rank, presents of gold and silver vessels, mats with cloth borders, and parasols. When the ship's crew has moored and gone on shore, it is customary, before they touch upon questions of barter, for the traders to give the king daily presents of Chinese food and beverages.³⁰

It is thus possible that the elegant gold and silver items on the Belitung ship were needed to establish trade negotiations on foreign shores. The ship's high-value cargo would have been subject to taxation and trade regulations by local rulers no matter where the ship decided to dock, just as its incoming cargo had been subject to the oversight of Tang government officials in China.³¹ Trade at an Indonesian port would have been a given for the ship, simply because the monsoon winds necessitated a prolonged stay before an eastward or northward journey would have been possible. The ship may have been headed for a port in Sumatra or, judging by the location of the wreck, more likely a port in Java, a flourishing cultural center during the early ninth century where the Borobudur, the Buddhist temple monument (see pp. 14–15, 136), had just been completed.

An alternative hypothesis to explain the presence of the gold and silver on the Belitung ship involves a slightly different type of trading, one driven not by interest groups residing in China but by foreign visitors. Known as tribute trade, this kind of commodities exchange was couched in the protocol of diplomatic exchange. With many embassies sent to the Tang court, the line between international commerce and politics was entirely blurred. Frequently the main purpose of foreign delegations was to conduct trade with the Tang, and often their leaders were merchants themselves.³² The Belitung gold and silver vessels might in that case be regarded as reciprocation gifts from the Jingzong or Wenzong court to a foreign mission. The surviving records of foreign embassies to the Tang, although obviously incomplete, list a single embassy that arrived via the southern maritime trade routes around 830. It came from Shepo, a place most scholars believe refers to Java,³³ and reached the capital on February 24, 831.³⁴ Its ambassador, Li Nanhulu, returned with another trade mission in March 839.³⁵ Indeed, Shepo was the single most frequent tribute trader at the Tang court in the early ninth century. Between 813 and 839, Shepo sent no fewer than six embassies to Chang'an.³⁶ In 813, it presented Emperor Xianzong (reigned 805–20) with four dark-skinned slave children, five colored parrots and other exotic birds, as well as all kinds of incense.³⁷ Subsequent missions offered two highly prized dark-skinned slave girls, tortoise shells, and a live rhinoceros.

Whether the Belitung ship carried an embassy or simply a supercargo, the gold and silver wares onboard show clearly that it traded in close collaboration with top elites in Tang China.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Twelve centuries ago, a merchant ship—an Arab dhow—foundered on a reef just off the coast of Belitung, a small island in the Java Sea. The cargo was a remarkable assemblage of lead ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, and more than 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers, and other ceramics. The ship remained buried at sea for more than a millennium, its contents protected from erosion by their packing and the conditions of the silty sea floor. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* explores the story of both the sailors and the ship's precious cargo through more than 400 gorgeous photographs and essays by international experts in Arab ship-building methods, pan-Asian maritime trade, ceramics, precious metalwork, and more.

Edited by

Regina Krahl, John Guy, J. Keith Wilson, and Julian Raby

With contributions from

Alison Effeny | Michael Flecker | John Guy | Jessica Hallett | Hsieh Ming-liang | Regina Krahl
Li Baoping with Chen Yuh-shiow and Nigel Wood | Liu Yang | François Louis | Qi Dongfang
Tom Vosmer | Wang Gungwu | J. Keith Wilson

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