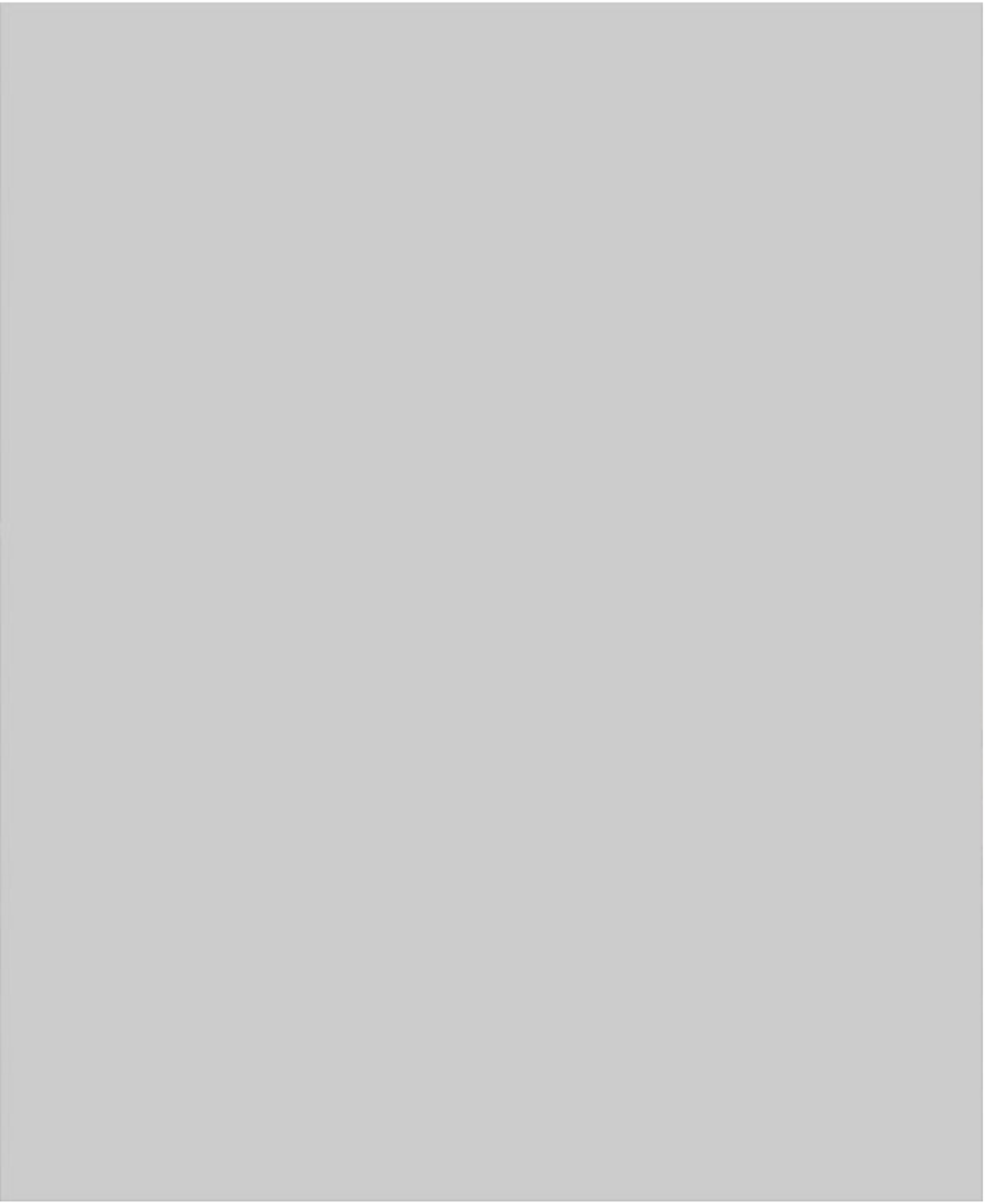

The Navigational Route

OF THE BELITUNG WRECK AND THE LATE TANG CERAMIC TRADE

Hsieh Ming-liang

The Belitung shipwreck was discovered southeast of Sumatra, about 3 kilometers off the coast of Belitung Island. According to Tang and Song dynasty navigational routes, southeast Sumatra was the location of a powerful maritime state, known from Chinese sources as the kingdom of Shilifoshi. This state controlled the Strait of Malacca to the north and the 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 through thirteenth century.

The Tang dynasty record *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao*, written in the Zhenyuan period (785–805) by Jia Dan, also mentions Shilifoshi (Srivijaya) 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; figs. 8, 97) 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 noted, "The Kingdom of Sanfoqi [Sanfozhi, a mid-ninth-century term for Shilifoshi] stands at the center 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."[1]

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 ship did not accidentally drift into this area.

Objects salvaged from the wreck also bear similarities to wares discovered at excavation sites in way stations such as Shilifoshi and Heling. Excavations at what was the capital of Shilifoshi, located at Palembang in southeast Sumatra, have yielded Tang dynasty Yue wares, Changsha wares, green-glazed wares from Guangdong kilns, and north China white wares. In 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.[2] Shilifoshi was also an important production and distribution point for many of the commodities, such as spices and medicine, found aboard the Belitung ship.[3]

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

> *To the north of the Straits was the Kingdom of Luoyue [the southern tip of Malaysia], and to their south, Shilifoshi [southeast 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 southwest portion of the Isthmus of Kra]. Next, at four to five days sailing distance from Gegesengqi, came Shengdengzhou [in the vicinity of present-day Deli, north of Medan on the northeastern coast of Sumatra]. From there it was five days west to the Kingdom of Polu [Langabalus], 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], and then ten more days to the Kingdom of Tiyu [Debal, 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 Abadan]. One day further to the west was the Kingdom of Wula [al-Ubulla, near Basra], where the Fulila River [Arabic: Furat, 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 traveled overland to the northwest to finally reach Fuda [Baghdad], the capital of Dashi.[4]

Of the maritime stations recorded by Jia Dan, the harbor of Mantai in Shizi (Sri Lanka) has been formally excavated. 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 the so-called Dusun type (named after a region of Borneo where such wares were discovered).[5] (See fig. 98.) 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 to 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 Near East (see map on pp. 2–3). The kingdom of Tiyu mentioned by Jia Dan is generally believed to be located at present-day Debal in the Indus River Delta,[6] which corresponds to the medieval city of Banbhore, found to the east of Karachi.[7] Late Tang ceramics from this site include painted Changsha bowls, brown-spotted Changsha *daibazhuhu* ewers with molded floral appliqué, green-glazed Yue bowls, white bowls from northern kilns, and large green-glazed lugged Dusun-type jars. Although items from this latter category are sometimes identified as ninth- to eleventh-century Yue-type wares,[8] the fact that they served as storage containers for some of the painted bowls found on the Belitung wreck (fig. 47) indicates that they cannot date from later than the early ninth century.

The ceramic finds at Banbhore are very similar in content to the wares discovered at Siraf, which, at that time, was the most flourishing port in the Gulf.[9] Archaeological excavations at Siraf have, in addition to large quantities 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-color painted décor and molded floral designs.[10] The Yue wares include bowls with four-petaled rims of the Xiangtang kiln-type from Dongyang, Zhejiang province,[11] while the Guangdong wares include green-glazed bowls with square spur marks radiating from the center of the base, a feature typical of the Gaoming, Sihui, and Anpugang areas.[12] Material recently published by Moira Tampoe indicates that Siraf also yielded white ware with green décor.[13]

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

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Fig. 97 Stupas at Borodubur, the Buddhist monument in central Java, established in the 9th century at the peak of the Sailendra dynasty.

Fig. 98 Large green-glazed lugged Dusun-type jar. From the site of Banbhore, Pakistan.

the tomb of Liu Hua in Fuzhou, Fujian province (dated 930; fig. 21), Yajima Hikoichi has pointed out that these blue-glazed wares were probably produced in Siraf and distributed across Asia by local traders.[14] As this issue touches upon discussion of the Belitung ship's original destination, it is necessary 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 suggests that the Belitung vessel most likely was an Arab ship made of African and Indian timber, the joinings of which were constructed with perforations and lashings rather than nails—a method very different from traditional Chinese shipbuilding techniques.[15] A late Tang source, the *Lingbiao Luyi* by Liu Xun, seems to describe exactly this type of vessel. It notes, "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."[16] 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 used in the region of Siraf, and that during the ninth and tenth centuries Siraf and Sohar were among the centers of sewn-plank shipbuilding.[17] 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 may have been constructed in Siraf, perhaps commanded by a merchant from that port.[18]

As mentioned in Song dynasty records, Siraf merchants conducting trade in Quanzhou chartered sewn-plank vessels made in either Siraf or one of its overseas settlements.[19] 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, "Goods were shipped from Bassorah, Uman, and other places to Siraf, where most of the Chinese ships loaded their cargo."[20] The term "Chinese ships" in this text has roused questions for many scholars; it has been suggested that it might, in fact, refer to Arab ships sailing to Southeast Asia and China.[21] 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 the reconstruction of the route followed by the Belitung ship.

The maritime route described by Sulayman led from Siraf to Muscat (the present-day capital of Oman) and on to Kollam (Quilon, on the southwestern tip of the Indian peninsula, Jia Dan's kingdom of Molai), the island of Langabalus (on the northwestern coast of Sumatra, Jia Dan's kingdom of Polu), Kalah (Kedah on the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula), Tīyouman (on the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula), Pan-do-Uranga (Phan-rang in present-day Vietnam), Tcampa (in south-central Vietnam), Tchams (Puol Cham), Bab al-Sin ("Gate to China," now the submerged reefs of the Xisha Islands), and finally Guangzhou. The direct crossing from Muscat to Quilon on this route does differ from that given in the *Guangzhou Tonghai Yidao*, where the passage leads along intermediary coastal stations to the Gulf. Otherwise, the two navigational routes are basically the same. For mercantile vessels carrying goods from China to the Gulf, it must have made sense to make stopovers and do direct business at stations along the route, an activity that would seem to account for the presence of Chinese ceramics at Banbhore.

Does the fact that both Jia Dan and Sulayman list Guangzhou as the terminal port necessarily mean that the Belitung ship set sail there? 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 *shibo shi*, was set up to supervise foreign trade. More important, the wreck contained not only hundreds of pieces from Guangdong kilns but also tens of thousands of painted Changsha wares and some white Xing wares from northern China, all stored in large jars that appear to have originated from Guangdong. Although these factors seem to point to Guangzhou as the port of departure, a more detailed inspection of the ship's cargo shows that the issue is not, in fact, quite so simple.

As mentioned, 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 and a few blue-glazed Islamic-inspired pieces. 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 discovered in such finds total no more than twenty pieces.[22] Moreover, there have been no 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 center 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 more than 30,000 shards from the 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.[23] With the sole exception of the Guangdong wares, this covers the entire variety of ceramics recovered from the Belitung wreck. In other words, the combination of ceramic finds from the Tang dynasty city of Yangzhou is noteworthy both because it is not seen in other Chinese finds of the Tang period and, even more important, because it corresponds quite closely to the wreck's ceramic cargo (figs. 24, 99).

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

Fig. 99 Green-glazed jar with lugs and spout from Yangzhou, Tang dynasty, very similar to a specimen from the Belitung cargo (see fig. 24).

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.[24] On the other hand, the bulk of the wreck's cargo consists of Changsha wares. Moreover, among them were toy lions, birds, and other figurines, which were found in China only among Changsha kiln remains and, again, in the Tang city of Yangzhou.

The biography of General Tian Shengong in the *Xin Tangshu* notes that many thousands of foreign merchants from Arabia and Persia died in the course of his invasion of Yangzhou, a figure that suggests how considerable Yangzhou's community of resident Islamic traders had become by the mid-eighth century.[25] These foreign merchants are reported to have set up stores known as "Persian shops," which traded in pearls and other goods.[26] 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.[27] Tellingly, the cargo of the Belitung wreck also included traces of gold leaf. It is therefore clear that the ship loaded the bulk of its merchandise and set sail from Yangzhou, situated at the crossroads of the Grand Canal and the Yangzi River, a converging point for goods from northern and southern China.

This leaves the question of how the Guangdong kiln products found their way into the vessel's cargo. The Arab geographer Ibn Khurdadhbih (838–912) lists in his *Kitab al-masalik* a sequence of seaports leading to China: Lugin (Hanoi), Khanfu (now Guangzhou), Khanju (possibly Hangzhou), and Qantu (Jiangdu).[28] Kuwabara Jitsuzo identifies the last port, Jiangdu, as Yangzhou.[29] This list suggests that the Guangdong wares found on the 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, identical to those from the Belitung ship,[30] indicates that these containers, which were used to store white-glazed cups and other pieces, might even have been available in Yangzhou. This type of four-lugged, spouted jar also has been found at sites such as Siraf in Iran[31] and Laem Po in southern Thailand. According to Ho Chuimei, vessels of this type were manufactured at green-ware-producing kilns in Guangdong coastal areas, such as the northwest regions of the Pearl River Delta and the Leizhou Peninsula.[32]

As argued above, even if the Belitung ship sank before completing its final transaction, the combined evidence of its location, ninth-century textual sources, archaeological finds of comparable wares, and its likely origin from the port of Yangzhou strongly suggests that the ship was headed for the port of Siraf in the Gulf. Further indirect evidence in support of this hypothesis can be garnered from archaeological discoveries at such sites 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 center of the Islamic world of the time, and northward to Nishapur in the Khurasan region.[33] 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.[34] The transshipment of goods at Siraf is also recorded in Sulayman's ninth-century text.[35] The ruins of Samarra, capital of the ninth-century Abbasid Empire (836–92), 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.[36] The remains of the city of Sohar on the Oman coast have also yielded Tang dynasty Yue, Xing, Changsha, and Guangdong wares.[37] The similarity between the Chinese wares found at these sites and those known from Siraf, together with the hydrology and topography of the 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 ship, indicates that this transportation method—namely, the shipment of goods from China to Siraf, followed by transshipment on smaller vessels—was common practice in the trans-Asian maritime trade of the ninth century. While there is not sufficient data to establish detailed chronologies for Tang dynasty ceramics excavated from Siraf and other sites, the many similarities between these wares and those found in the wreck indicate that by the early ninth century, the port of Siraf was frequently visited by merchant vessels bearing Asian goods.

Asian goods, including ceramics, were also transported overland to inland settlements, with the best-known ceramic finds being those at Nishapur, the capital of the Tahirid (820–72) 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.[38] One fragment of the last category, a shallow white *bo* bowl with a molded dragon appliqué on its central inner field, is identical to a specimen unearthed from the Sanyuanlu site in Yangzhou[39] and very similar to a specimen from the Belitung wreck (fig. 116).

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. If Yangzhou was indeed the port of origin for the Belitung ship, 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."[40] The evidence presented by the wreck, together with the matching archaeological data from Yangzhou, may help to fill this lacuna in the textual record.

The *Tang Huiyao* records a prohibition issued in 779 that states, "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."[41] The socio-economic phenomenon reflected by this proclamation, together with the aforementioned discovery in Yangzhou of a large number of Changsha wares from the remains of a theoretical ceramics shop, illustrates how the presence of many specialized shops in Yangzhou must have provided a convenient means for the masters of the Belitung ship to purchase its cargo.

While it is possible to reconstruct the ship's approximate route, it must be considered that the location of the find close to Belitung Island, together with the discovery of Tang period green-glazed wares at Bengkulu in southwest Sumatra,[42] also suggest a southern route through the Sunda Strait.[43] This possibility awaits closer investigation. In fact, there were various maritime routes along which Tang dynasty goods were exported to the Gulf, and it seems that, in particular, Tang period ceramics such as those unearthed from Ko Kho Khao and Laem Po in southern Thailand might well have traveled the coastal route north from Geluo (Kedah, Malaysia) to Geguluo (the southwestern portion of the Isthmus of Kra).[44] It is significant that the ceramic finds from archaeological sites in Thailand, such as Laem Po, are very similar in content to those from the wreck and from sites along the 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 compose the basic set of ninth-century Chinese ceramic commodities exported to Southeast Asia and the Near East.

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