



# Tang Blue-and-White

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China's most famous ceramics are undoubtedly blue-and-white wares. Their origin has long been associated with Near Eastern traders eager to obtain vessels that combined the superior ceramic technology of China with their own local tastes. Fine cobalt was mined in Persia and was ideally suited for painting onto white porcelain that only Chinese potters knew how to produce. Applied under the glaze and fired at high temperatures, it yielded a striking, permanent bright blue on the pure white surface.

When the Mongols ruled over China in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and international trade was flourishing, styles in the arts and crafts changed from the low-key understatement of the Song dynasty (960–1279) to a more garish exuberance of color and design. Ceramic kilns sought ways to embellish their plain, subdued monochrome wares in line with new tastes, and those in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, in southeast China discovered the ravishing effect imported cobalt pigment had on their fine white porcelains. The new style met with overwhelming success abroad; blue-and-white porcelain was exported far and wide and changed the appearance of ceramics throughout Asia.

Yet China's production of blue-and-white had two beginnings, unrelated in time and place, and only one had lasting success. The developments in the Mongol period seem like a distant echo of similar happenings 500 years earlier. In the late Tang period (618–907) it was northern China that made high-fired white stonewares and porcelains, rather than the south. Near Eastern traders shipped them to western Asia, and potters in Iraq copied them with great ingenuity. By covering their low-fired earthenwares with opaque white tin glazes, they did not achieve the purity, evenness, and sparkle of the best Chinese originals—those of the Xing kilns of Hebei—but simulated well enough the color, texture, and sheen of the slightly rougher, creamy white Gongxian wares of Henan. The brilliance of the Hebei ceramics, which had evoked associations with silver, made any decoration, let alone in color, undesirable; the plainness of the Henan wares, on the other hand, like that of the Mesopotamian versions, made colored decoration a desideratum.

The potters at Basra applied cobalt onto their new white glazes most effectively in the forms of palmettes, garlands, palm trees, and some Arabic writing. Even though painted lines were generally somewhat thick and fuzzy, since the pigment tended to diffuse into the transparent glaze over which it was applied, the cobalt used in Mesopotamia yielded a clear and bright color. It soon became one of the favored pigments for decorating ceramics in the Near East.<sup>1</sup>

When cobalt blue decoration first appeared on Mesopotamian ceramics is still a matter of debate, since none of the examples from Iraq can be precisely dated. When the Belitung ship set sail, around the second quarter of the ninth century, the potters of the Baihe kilns in Gongyi

county (formerly Gongxian), Henan province, must already have seen, or at least heard of, these wares from Basra. The Gongxian potters had employed cobalt blue in monochrome and polychrome glazes, and they occasionally used it for rudimentary spotted designs on a white ground (but then mostly in combination with yellow) on their earthenware tomb furniture since at least the eighth century.<sup>2</sup> When they switched to making stonewares for use in daily life, they adopted a completely new style, making the new ware distinctly different from tomb furniture. The Gongxian potters' angular lozenge motifs and palmettes do not derive from the repertoire of Tang ornamentation but look like a direct take on the Mesopotamian quatrefoil panels filled with Arabic writing surrounded by leaf fronds. Related lozenge motifs also appear incised on some of the green-splashed wares that were equally made by the Gongxian kilns for the same export market.

The Chinese blue-and-white versions display a painting manner most peculiar for a Chinese brush: The lozenge motifs are drawn in a series of consecutive strokes rather than with a continuous line for each side. This could be due to the fact that the cobalt solution sank in so quickly that longer strokes were difficult to achieve, but it could also be a sign that the painters were copying a model they did not fully understand. It may have been the Arabic writing that caused the Chinese painters to hesitate in their strokes, or else, as suggested by Nigel Wood, they were unwittingly replicating the result of a difficulty encountered by the Mesopotamian painters, who painted on dry glaze rather than on the biscuit.<sup>3</sup>

In China, blue-and-white stoneware fragments (figs. 160–161) first came to light at the site of the Tang city of Yangzhou, China's flourishing international metropolis at the junction of the Grand Canal and the Yangzi River and, at the time, its most important port.<sup>4</sup> More recently, a small number of shards also has been found at the Baihe kiln site of Gongyi (fig. 163), part of the Gongxian kiln group.<sup>5</sup> They include the remains of bowls, dishes, ewers, boxes, and a pillow, generally with designs similar to or else simpler than those from the Belitung wreck. The first complete vessels discovered were the three dishes from this wreck, which also provide the most specific clues so far for dating.<sup>6</sup> Although recently many additional specimens of so-called Tang blue-and-white ware have been published in China, most stand in the well-known tradition of cobalt-decorated burial pottery and are therefore less relevant for the study of high-fired Tang blue-and-white.<sup>7</sup>

The origin of the cobalt used on Tang ceramics has been much discussed and is still not satisfactorily solved. Although a West Asian origin is the most likely explanation, this is still no more than a hypothesis. As one might expect, the blue pigment used on Gongxian stonewares is similar to that used on their earlier earthenwares. Tests from a blue-and-white stoneware pillow fragment discovered at Yangzhou have revealed a cobalt pigment with a low manganese content, markedly different from the high-manganese cobalt mined in China. Other studies, however, have shown the pillow fragment's cobalt to be distinctly different from that used on the Mesopotamian pottery prototypes it appears to be imitating.<sup>8</sup>

The three dishes recovered from the Belitung wreck (figs. 59, 65, 159) feature on the inside four lobes in the form of faint radiating ribs. In material and workmanship they are practically identical to some monochrome white stonewares recovered from the Baihe kiln site in Gongyi (fig. 162). Typical of Gongxian ware and unlike later blue-and-white porcelain, a white slip was used to cover a not completely pure, off-white body. The dishes are painted in blue with a quatrefoil motif based on a single or double lozenge surrounded by palmette-like fronds of leaves; four small sprigs dividing the rim area are only roughly aligned with the lobes. On one of the three dishes, where the immersion in seawater caused some glaze loss, the blue decoration has largely come off together with the glaze and has left only a faint ghost of the erstwhile design on the white ground.

Gongxian blue-and-white generally has been described as having been painted in cobalt blue under the glaze. Yet proper underglaze painting as practiced on Yuan and later Chinese blue-



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**Fig. 159** This dish and its two companions (figs. 59, 65) are among the earliest complete Chinese blue-and-white ceramics known. West Asia may have been the source of the cobalt used to paint the blue design, and the lozenge-surrounded-by-foliage motif, also seen on many green-splashed wares, comes from Iraq. Cat. 280.

ABOVE

**Fig. 160** Blue-and-white stoneware fragments (top and center) and stoneware pillow fragment (bottom) excavated from the Tang city site at Yangzhou, Jiangsu province.

**Fig. 161** Blue-and-white stoneware fragments probably excavated from the Tang city site at Yangzhou, Jiangsu province.



**Fig. 162** White stoneware dishes discovered at the Baihe kiln site in Gongyi, Henan province.



**Fig. 163** Blue-and-white stoneware fragments discovered at the Baihe kiln site in Gongyi, Henan province.

and-white porcelain tends to sink into the unfired body and remain there, even when the glaze is lost. A possible explanation tendered by Nigel Wood is that, on the Tang examples, the cobalt may itself have been applied in the form of a glaze—as was used for blue-decorated Gongxian earthenwares—rather than as an undiluted pigment, which would then have left less of an imprint on the body, even if it were applied under the transparent glaze.<sup>9</sup> This would also explain the rather thick application and imprecise designs. Still, the possibility that the cobalt solution on these dishes was not applied under the glaze at all but on top of it, as was done in Basra, cannot yet be completely ruled out either.

The Gongxian kilns' experiments with cobalt blue painting on white stoneware were apparently very short-lived. Blue-and-white ceramics did not accord with the prevailing Chinese taste. In the Tang dynasty, brightly colored ceramics were used for funerals, while plain white or somber olive-green vessels were chosen for use among the living, due to their perceived similarity to silver or jade. Regarded from this angle, any colored decoration would have spoiled the desired effect. The same attitude prevailed in the Yuan dynasty, when the first blue-and-white porcelains to arrive were dismissed as “vulgar” by Chinese connoisseurs. Tang blue-and-white was made primarily for export, and shards in China have been found almost exclusively at the kiln site and at the site of the Tang city of Yangzhou, from where this boat also might have departed.<sup>10</sup> Given the changing fortunes of the maritime trade to western Asia in the Tang, it is not surprising that its production was soon discontinued again.

The blue-and-white stonewares from Gongxian have been hailed as the earliest representatives of China's blue-and-white porcelain tradition. Technically they do indeed represent China's first high-fired ceramics painted in cobalt blue. In composition and technology, however, they are very different from the famous wares of Jingdezhen, where blue-and-white was reinvented once more 500 years later, under similar conditions. Tang dynasty blue-and-white wares were not celebrated as they were in the Yuan dynasty, when the blue-and-white style set in motion a worldwide trend and eventually found favor among Chinese arbiters of taste. Tang blue-painted stonewares represent a fascinating experiment, a trial run for the success story of China's blue-and-white, but not its first chapter.

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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.

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