

DHOW THE LOST

by Heidi McKenzie

I found myself returning again and again to witness a rare subset of assembled artifacts and spectacular Tang dynasty ceramics that was on view at the newest addition to Toronto, Canada's museumscape, the Aga Khan Museum (www.agakhanmuseum.org), in 2015. "The Lost Dhow: A Discovery from the Maritime Silk Route," guest-curated by John Vollmer, represented just over 300 out of an estimated 75,000 artifacts recovered from the 9th-century shipwreck of a dhow (a sailing ship with triangular sails used in the Indian ocean) discovered in the shallow waters of the western Java Sea in 1998. Part of what drew me in was the exhibit's arresting use of scale

and space. Diagonally marked out in vinyl tape on the floor, was a life-size, bird's eye schematic of the vessel's actual dimensions. The image-rich didactics were draped like sails on either side of the ship's axis. Its outline served to demarcate artifacts of the everyday on one side, and the precious luxury items on the other. Each part of the exhibit held its own landmark historical revelations.

Arguably the most important marine archaeological discovery of the 20th century, the ship's hold, which dates back to 835–850 CE, was laden with gold, silver, bronze, and ceramic objects, including over 57,500 astonishingly well-preserved Chinese Tang dynasty





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ceramic artifacts. The ship was found by happenstance when local sea cucumber fishermen happened upon a shipwreck near Belitung Island off the coast of Indonesia. To date, 60,000 of the recovered artifacts have been restored and are now under the aegis and part of the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. The Belitung dhow is the oldest Arab-constructed boat found that proves a direct link from the kilns in northern China all the way to modern-day Baghdad. This link provides hard evidence confirming a long-suspected Maritime Silk Route that predates Vasco de Gama's arrival by eight centuries.

Objects from a Golden Age

In the ninth century, both the Chinese and Abbasid Empires were amidst a "golden age of Muslim civilization."¹ China first began trading with the outside world over 2000 years ago during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Most trade moved overland along the Silk Road. Land travel was by camel. The daily off-loading of their cargo, while a method that worked well for silk, metals, and other non-breakables, was clumsy and inefficient for ceramics. Sources tell us that by the first century BCE, Indian and Persian merchants were trading across the Indian Ocean with the Chinese and Byzantine empires along what has become known as the Maritime Silk Route.² The route connected Tang China (618–960 CE), an empire that stretched from the South China Sea to the borders of Iran, and the Abbasid Empire (750–1258 CE), that included parts of Central



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1 Exhibition view of "The Lost Dhow: A Discovery from the Maritime Silk Route" at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada. 2 Exhibition view showing the different types of ware found in the ship's hold. 3 Dish, stoneware, cobalt pigment over white slip, glaze, attributed to the Gongxing kilns, Henan Province, China, 825–50. All images: Copyright Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, 2015. Photos: John Tsantes and Robert Harrell, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Asia, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt. Each empire not only desired and imported goods from the other, but also copied and reflected the other's design motifs back to its originator in their export wares. The exhibition's centerpiece, a dragon-headed ewer that stands over 40 inches high, is inscribed with West Asian lozenge and palmette patterns, design motifs foreign to China yet made by Chinese makers, somehow copied from imported prototypes to cater to a West Asian market. Vollmer counts the dragon ewer as an anomaly, citing that historians can only hypothesize it was some kind of special order, made in parts and copied from popular metalwork pieces of similar size and scope.³

Among the other luxury items recovered such as ornately hand-tooled brass mirrors, gold cups, and silver trinket boxes, was an astonishing stash of luxury ceramics. Fewer than 200 whitewares were uncovered; to the Chinese emperors these magnificent Yue wares were as precious as gold or silver, and only marginally less valuable than silk.⁴ The exhibition boasted a case of Yue wares and a case of green splashed copper wares, of which 300 were recovered. Many of the copper-glazed luxury ceramics on display were hand crimped with nasal spouts and miniature animal sprigs, imitating Arab metalwork. The Chinese seemed to reserve the use of single color glazes for wares destined for export, and favored the more widely recognized tri-color sancai for home use.⁵

The Belitung dhow contained what may be the earliest intact pieces of cobalt blue-on-white ceramics. The cargo is dated to the mid eighth century, which means all its ceramics predate the Chinese invention of porcelain that happened around the millennium. These made-in-China, blue-and-white stoneware dishes were decorated with blue cobalt underglaze imported from Persia. Once again, the hand-painted palmette designs were clearly intended for a West Asian market. Curiously these early blue-and-white ceramics fell out of fashion and the iconic blue-and-white patterns disappeared



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for another two hundred years until China developed the technology to produce porcelain. Five centuries later, during the Yuan (1279–1368 CE) and Ming (1368–1644 CE) dynasties, Chinese potters painting with blue cobalt on snow-white porcelain catalyzed the East-West craze for blue-and-white ceramics from Iran or Turkey as well as Dutch Delft and Portuguese faience.⁶

In total, the inventory of the estimated 25-metric tons of recovered goods counts 1600 ewers, 800 ink pots, 1400 stoneware storage jars, and 55,000 Changsha bowls. The curator chose to exhibit some of the large coil-built storage jars as found, complete with coral and barnacles. Most of these storage jars were packed with the impressive number of Changsha rice or teabowls using what archeologists



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4 Ewer, stoneware, slipped, incised, copper green, glaze, attributed to the Gongxing kiln, Henan Province, China, 825–50 CE. 5 Flask, stoneware, incised, iron, attributed to the Yue kilns, Zhejiang Province, China, 825–50 CE. 6 Cups and stands, glazed, stoneware, attributed to the Xing kilns, Hebei Province, China, 825–50 CE. 7 Large packing jar from Guangdong Province, China, stoneware, glaze, 825–50. Used to transport Changsha rice or teabowls.

believe to have been bean sprouts as makeshift organic bubble-wrap. These jars represent the earliest known documentation of container shipping, and the bowls the earliest known mass-produced goods. Although most of the artifacts underwent extensive desalination processes in their restoration, the rice and teabowls emerged from the depths virtually unscathed. They range from 6 to 10 inches in diameter and were decorated by hand using copper- and lead-based underglazes over a buff-white slip topped with a coat of clear glaze. The designs are strikingly whimsical, and *The Lost Dhow* exhibition presented separate dedicated display cases for bowls with birds,

clouds, flowers, sea monsters, and fish, as well as abstract imagery, respectively. These last bowls comprised fewer than five percent of the total and were occasionally ornamented with Chinese poetry or other narratives. These were considered eccentric bowls, meaning that were likely completed by the artists after they had reached their daily quotas.⁷ Each and every Changsha bowl is visually squared-off by four sections of the rim that were dipped in an iron glaze. This design motif was typical of the Chinese notion of a square circle, the circle being symbolic of heaven and the square representing the earth.⁸

Shards of these Changsha bowls have been found scattered far and wide, from Indonesia to East and West Africa, India, Iran, and South East Asia's mainland and islands but never before found as whole objects. Vollmer confirmed that researchers know that they were wood-fired in industrial-scaled dragon kilns that stretched 30–60 meters or longer along mountain slopes. Furthermore, we know they emanated from five different kilns in Hunan Province. We know that the bowls were destined for a broad market and that they must have been affordable and popular. We can surmise that they were likely “made to order.” More importantly, the bowls authenticate the earliest known example of mass production of ceramics, shattering the evidence-based expert notion that ceramics mass production has started in Europe in the 17th century, rewriting history by 800 years. As far as their use, simply put, they were “Tang Tupperware.”⁹

The good news is that the exhibition is well documented in both short-form and long-form exhibition catalogs and the works can and will continue to be accessible for research by students and scholars alike. This was a landmark exhibition that has indelibly shaped the way in which the production and trade of ceramic goods during the Maritime Silk Route had previously been interpreted. *The Lost Dhow* has shifted the paradigm on a global level.

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1, 2, 6, 9 Simon Worrall, *The Lost Dhow: A Discovery From the Maritime Silk Route*, Aga Khan Museum, pp. 23, 27, 42, and 39, respectively.
3–5, 7, 8 John Vollmer, curator's talk at the Aga Khan Museum, February 12th, 2015.