



# Rare and Strange Goods

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN NINTH-CENTURY ASIA

John Guy

Maritime Asia was experiencing a revolution in the ninth century. The relations that China had enjoyed with West Asia over the preceding centuries were in flux. Use of sea routes was actively encouraged by successive Chinese administrations, as the overland Silk Route through Central Asia increasingly fell prey to insecurity and disruption. It was the Nanhai, the Southern Sea, used by maritime traders as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), that provided China with access to the Indian Ocean and lands west.<sup>1</sup> This maritime route was developed both as China's gateway to the markets of India, West Asia, and the Mediterranean world and, increasingly, to ensure that China had an uninterrupted supply of forest and marine products from Southeast Asia. Tribute missions had revealed the region's rich potential as a source of exotic commodities.

Buddhist pilgrims had traveled these routes centuries earlier. The Chinese monk Yijing had embarked on the sea journey from China to India in 671. He departed from Guangzhou aboard a Persian (*Bosī*) merchant ship, which took him to the kingdom of Srivijaya (Sanfozhi), the major entrepôt of western Indonesia. The location of Srivijaya has generated considerable debate and archaeological investigation, and the current consensus is that it was a loose federation of interests on both sides of the Malay Straits and probably west Java. It was most probably centered at Palembang in southeast Sumatra with command of the Malay Straits and, less effectively, the Sunda Straits. Srivijaya served as a great clearing house for the merchants who sailed the monsoons, and all vessels were obliged to stop there, stimulating the kingdom's prosperity. It is these waters in which the shipwreck was located, offshore from the small island of Belitung, east of Bangka, the major island between Singapore and Sumatra (see map on pp. 2–3).

The archaeological recovery of the Belitung shipwreck and its Tang cargo has allowed a radical reappraisal of the maritime Silk Route to China in the second quarter of the ninth century, when the vessel embarked on its ill-fated journey. The excavated cargo revealed the largest and most comprehensive assemblage of Chinese glazed ceramics from the late Tang dynasty found to date, together with a group of rare gold and silver vessels and silver ingots—one of the most important hoards of artifacts from that era ever discovered at a single site. As such, this find makes a unique contribution to our understanding and appreciation of late Tang material culture and its place in international trade. Furthermore, many of the questions regarding the nature of Asian maritime trade in the later first millennium now can be answered with a far greater degree of certainty than was possible before.

The timeframe for the sailing of the Belitung ship is critical. One Changsha bowl among the 55,000 examples recovered has its date of manufacture engraved on the base; the most likely reading is “the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the second year of Baoli era,” equivalent to 826 (fig. 12).<sup>2</sup> This is an important addition to the small corpus of dates for ninth-century

Chinese wares since it predates the only other dated Changsha ware known, a bowl inscribed “Third year of Kaicheng,” equivalent to 838.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it provides a benchmark for narrowing the date range of the Belitung ship and its cargo. It is reasonable to assume, as is done in the interpretation of other shipwreck material, that the cargo was newly produced when shipped or at least consigned for sale within a few seasons of its manufacture. There are compelling reasons, therefore, to accept this date as secure evidence that the cargo sailed south from China within a few years of 826 and, in reality, probably a season or two after that bowl was made. Discrepancies in style between cargo objects, which have been understood to belong to different timeframes, behoove us to review our assumptions about the chronology of those objects.<sup>4</sup>

Two other critical issues emerge from the archaeological investigation and research of this wreck and its cargo: the “ethnicity” of the ship and the origins of its cargo. A study of the vessel’s technology and identification of its ethnicity are provided elsewhere in this book.<sup>5</sup> The identification of the vessel as belonging to the Arab-tradition of shipbuilding—a dhow—lends credence to the geographical and navigational literature written in Arabic by observers of this trade who resided in the Gulf during the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the timbers employed in the hull construction have been identified as East African. African hardwoods have been supplied to the Arab world since antiquity, largely for use in shipbuilding, which points to the Arabian Peninsula as the vessel’s likely origin.<sup>7</sup> Where it was constructed is, however, less critical than the fact that this was the first Arab dhow discovered in Southeast Asian waters.

The second and also unique aspect is the cargo—an unprecedented assemblage of precious metal objects, bullion, and glazed ceramics.<sup>8</sup> The ceramics made up 98 percent of the 60,000 artifacts recovered from the wreck site; of these, the vast bulk (around 57,500) are the iron-decorated stonewares from the Changsha kilns of Hunan, of which 55,000 are painted bowls. Relatively small quantities of ceramics from other regions make up the balance: green-glazed Yue tablewares from Zhejiang, large storage jars from Guangzhou, high-quality, white-glazed stonewares from Hebei and Henan, and white- and green-splashed stoneware recently confirmed as being from Gongxian.<sup>9</sup>

This complex cargo, sourced from widely dispersed areas across China, is a barometer of the level of the commercial development that gained momentum during the Tang dynasty (618–907), when industrial-scale production emerged for the first time. Mass production had occurred in the past, but usually for an imperial patron and often for funerary purposes, so it was not commercial in the sense of being shaped by market demand. The southern ports of Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang grew in importance, fuelled by the Southern Sea and Indian Ocean trade. Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou, and Guangzhou saw the growth of their expatriate merchant communities—Malays (from western insular Southeast Asia), Chams (from central Vietnam), Indians, and West Asians, each residing in different quarters (*fanfang*) assigned to them in the city. The most populous communities were the non-Muslim Persians (*Bosi*), including West Asian Jews and Nestorian Christians, and Muslim Persians and Arabs (*Dashi*).

The scale of these expatriate communities was extraordinary, as witnessed by two contemporary accounts—one Chinese, one Arabic—of massacres of foreigners during this




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**Fig. 11** Some storage jars found on the wreck were still full of star anise, an export from southern China. These spices must have been packed in Guangdong, the last port of call in China before the voyage to the Nanhai.

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ABOVE

**Fig. 12** Exterior of Changsha bowl with incised inscription: “the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the second year of Baoli era,” equivalent to 826. Cat. 188.

**Fig. 13** Fragments of Dusun-type storage jars produced in Guangdong. Excavated from the foundations of the Great Mosque at Siraf, built in the first quarter of the ninth century, the jars were incised at manufacture in pseudo-Arabic script.



period. The sacking of Yangzhou by Chinese rebels in 760 resulted in the death of several thousand *Bosi* and *Dashi* merchants,<sup>10</sup> and when a recurrence of this violence occurred in Guangzhou in 878, thousands of Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Parsis perished, according to the contemporary commentator Abu Zayd al-Sirafi.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, these communities persisted until the end of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), when they were finally purged and expelled. They left evidence of their presence in the form of mosques and Muslim gravestones, most famously at Guangzhou and Quanzhou. Nestorian gravestones and the dispersed remains of Hindu temples have been traced at Quanzhou. Chinese sources make it clear that both Hindu and Buddhist merchant communities existed in both Guangzhou and Quanzhou, though only the Hindu remains at Quanzhou can be traced archaeologically.<sup>12</sup> These archaeological remains point to large foreign communities well sustained by this international trade over many centuries.<sup>13</sup>

Guangzhou emerged to monopolize the trade in the “rare and strange” goods provided by the southern and western lands.<sup>14</sup> During the Tang dynasty, this great port city became a major economic force and a source not only of wondrous commodities but also of tax revenue for the government. In the eighth century, the post of superintendent of overseas trade (*shibo shi*) was established to regulate the trade and tap its revenue, but that control was somewhat tenuous and always fragile. According to Arabic literature, during this period “Khanfu” (i.e., Guangzhou) was the premier Chinese port for the western trade. *Akhbar al-Sin wa’l-Hind* (An Account of China and India) was compiled circa 851 by Sulayman al-Tajir (the Merchant), and absorbed into Abu Zayd al-Sirafi’s collection of Arabic travel accounts, published in 916 as *Silsilat al-Tawarikh* (The Chain of Histories). These writers were based at Basra (Iraq) and Siraf (Iran) respectively, centers of the Arab–China trade. Their histories were largely compiled from accounts of the experiences of mariners and merchants; some, like Sulayman and the historian, geographer, and traveler al-Mas’udi (died 956) wrote largely from firsthand experience.

According to Sulayman al-Tajir, Siraf was the hub of the Gulf’s China trade, where goods from Iraq, Persia, and the Arabian Peninsula were gathered for shipment. However, the entrepôt was devastated by an earthquake in 977; the evidence provided by Chinese ceramics at Siraf testifies to this terminal date.<sup>15</sup> The authors of *Akhbar al-Sin wa’l-Hind* also display a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of export ceramics, identifying and admiring different classes and grades of Chinese glazed wares. Yue and Longquan green wares (proto-celadons) already enjoyed an international reputation, as did the white Ding wares of Hebei and the iron-painted Changsha wares. To these can be added the lower-grade ceramics produced in the coastal kilns of Fujian and Guangdong, in easy reach of the ports. Archaeological finds in



**Fig. 14** Changsha bowl from the Belitung cargo with sea-monster (*makara*) attacking a vessel, possibly the earliest recorded depiction of an ocean-going ship in Chinese history, diameter 15 cm. Private collection.

**OPPOSITE**

**Fig. 15** Green-splashed white ware dish with incised décor, China, 9th century. Excavated at Samarra. Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin.

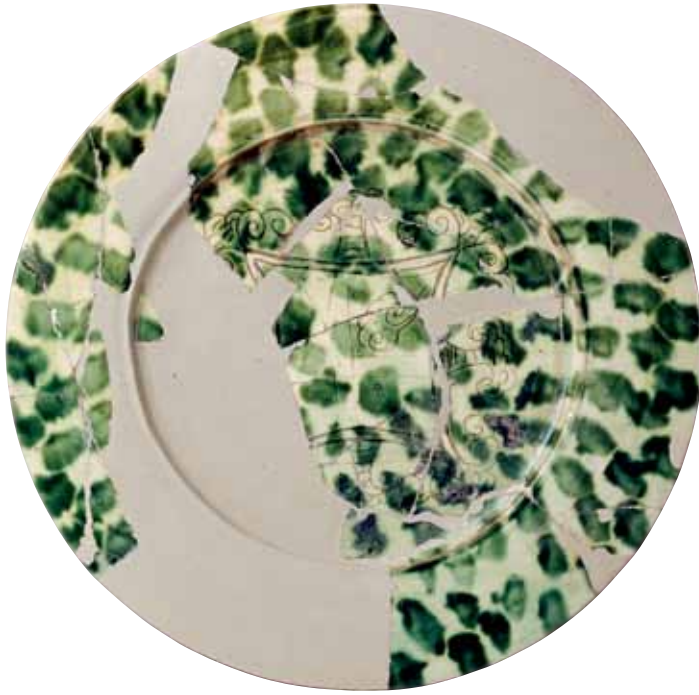
**Fig. 16** Green-splashed white ware bowl, China, 9th century. Excavated at Samarra. Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin.

Southeast and West Asia provide a barometer of both the distribution patterns of this trade and consumer preferences of the destination markets. Distinctive types of storage jars—high-shouldered vessels with a narrow, inverted rim and ring handles, produced at kilns upriver from Guangzhou—established that port city’s preeminent role in China’s early export trade in ceramics and are recorded in an early ninth-century archaeological context in Siraf, a few decades at most before the Belitung shipwreck.

Late in the first millennium, two significant changes affected the Chinese understanding of the Nanhai trade. The first was a growing awareness that many of the commodities marketed as Persian or Arab—especially camphor, sandalwood, benzoin, and other resins—were substitute aromatics procured in Southeast Asia, harvested largely in Sumatra and Borneo.<sup>16</sup> The other factor was a growing domestic demand. Southern China was no longer marginal frontier territory but was emerging as a significant economic region in its own right. As its prosperity grew, largely fuelled by its service of the international trade, so did local demand for the luxury goods of the Nanhai. During this period, the reinvigoration of Mahayana Buddhism in China (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia) also generated a heightened demand for aromatics, which were used in temples and shrines.

That Persian and subsequently Arabic served as a *lingua franca* for the Asian maritime world perhaps most clearly demonstrates the pivotal role of West Asians in this trade; significantly, loan words from both Persian and Arabic entered the Chinese maritime vocabulary in this period, such as the Chinese *shibo shi*, superintendent of maritime affairs, from the Persian term *shahbandar* for harbor master and customs officer. Interestingly, *bandar* is the title that King Mihrjan conferred on Sindbad (“the Sailor”) when he appointed him controller of foreign shipping at the harbor of his faraway kingdom.<sup>17</sup> The Baghdad-born al-Mas’udi refers to these tales, placing them close in time to the sailing of the Belitung ship. *Ling biao lu yi* (Strange Things Noted in the South), written during the late Tang, describes the ships of foreign merchants as being stitched together with the fiber of coir-palms and having their seams caulked rather than using iron nails to secure their planks (see p. 120).<sup>18</sup> This is ship construction according to the Arab dhow tradition and accurately describes the timbers recovered from the Belitung vessel.

The Belitung ceramics most probably were consigned to Yangzhou, Ningbo, and Hangzhou from their respective production centers and likely shipped down the coast to Guangzhou,



where they were consolidated into the cargo. Or the Arab vessel could have called at several ports to assemble its complex cargo. For safer passage, many of the bowls were packed into locally produced storage jars in Guangdong (fig. 47). In all probability, the Arab dhow commenced the first leg of its journey in Guangzhou, heading southward to the entrepôt of Srivijaya in Sumatra, where it likely underwent maintenance, including restitching and caulking.

It is clear from the archaeological record that by the ninth century the southern lands had become a significant market for Chinese exports. Chinese records make clear that plain silk cloths and silk brocades were the most popular export goods. Chinese silk long had been a regular export to India, as first noted in the *Han shu* and by the fifth-century Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, who cited silk's desirability in the court circles that were the settings for his drama-romances.<sup>19</sup> Southern India was served by a regular sea trade with China by this time.<sup>20</sup> Textile patterns clearly of Chinese design are part of relief decoration in ninth-century Buddhist shrines in Southeast Asia, and a contemporary Srivijayan inscription refers to “banners of Chinese silk” being deployed in a Buddhist monastery at Nakhon Si Thammarat, on the Thai peninsula.<sup>21</sup> Significant quantities of Chinese silk, of a variety of grades, were very probably a major component of the Belitung cargo, particularly given the other luxury goods found on board: rare gold and silver vessels, including the spectacular gold octagonal stem cup (see pp. 88–89)<sup>22</sup> and the exceptionally large gilt-silver pilgrim flask vessel.<sup>23</sup> The eighteen silver ingots strengthen the interpretation of this cargo as a high-value consignment as does the significant quantity of lead ingots. China was an exporter of lead in this period, so the ingots could be of Chinese origin, though their position in the ship's loading suggest otherwise. They also may have been taken on board in the Malay Peninsula, an important source of lead since antiquity.

Nonetheless, the largest component of the cargo, in volume and number if not necessarily in value, is the glazed ceramics. The most pervasive are the distinctive underglaze-painted wares from Changsha. One of the most spectacular depicts a monstrous *makara* attacking a sailing vessel (fig. 14), which bears comparison with ninth-century Chinese riverine and coastal vessels and the Arab dhow. As the painter responsible for decorating this bowl at Changsha was unlikely to have seen a dhow,<sup>24</sup> we must surmise that he intended to depict a Chinese boat rather than one of the many foreign vessels that frequented China's southern ports in this period.



### International Distribution

Random finds of Chinese glazed ceramics intended for export have been recorded from sites widely distributed across Southeast Asia and at numerous sites further west; the archaeological trail can be traced from the Changsha kilns to the ports of Hangzhou and Ningbo. Excavations in Yangzhou and Ningbo have unearthed the major types of ceramics recovered from the shipwreck: Changsha, Yue, white wares, green-splashed white wares, and blue-painted wares.<sup>25</sup> The bulk of the wares recovered from Ningbo appear unused, suggesting that they represent the wastage from the warehousing and packing of ceramic goods intended for export. From these ports, the ceramics were shipped directly to overseas markets, with Yangzhou focusing on the East Asia trade. Both ports supplied goods to feed into the southern ocean trade conducted out of Fujian and Guangdong.

The Belitung cargo contained the largest finding of green-splashed white wares yet recorded, some 200 pieces. Apart from the shards excavated at the Tang export ports, examples are rarely recorded in China. The largest discovery, now securely if not exclusively linked to the Gongxian kilns of Henan, was made during excavations in Samarra, Iraq,<sup>26</sup> the capital established by the Abbasids in 836. A fragmentary bowl from the Samarra excavations (fig. 16) bears close comparison with examples from the cargo, and the decorative technique can be compared to the magnificent ewer with the *makara* pouring spout and leaping leopard strap handle (see pp. 159–63), which in turn has its origins in West Asian metal prototypes. The *makara* spout signals the complex hybridity of this eclectic form: an Iranian vessel-type filtered through Chinese aesthetics and translated into the ceramic medium, with an Indian-derived device, the *makara*-spout, wedded to this design. A large dish from Samarra (fig. 15) is green splashed in the same manner as many of the cargo examples and has the same feature in the center: the lozenge with vegetal palmette projections, a design of Iraqi origin introduced to China in the early ninth century (fig. 17).<sup>27</sup> In the context of the Belitung cargo, this design is a signature motif, appearing most frequently in the green-splashed wares and three blue-and-white bowls. A ninth-century Iraqi dish that combines both these decorative devices—green-splashed and painted blue—

**Fig. 17** Dish with cobalt blue in-glaze painted lozenge-and-palmette design, Basra, Iraq, 9th century. Collection unknown.

**Fig. 18** Dish with cobalt blue and copper green in-glaze painting, Basra, Iraq, 9th century. Victoria and Albert Museum.

underscores the complex reciprocal relationship between Iraqi and Chinese ceramics during this period (fig. 18).

Archaeological finds in many Chinese coastal port cities, Islamic glazed ceramics and the occasional Abbasid coins, principally gold dinars (see fig. 19), underscore both the reciprocal nature of ninth-century Asian trade and the central role of Gulf merchants in that exchange.<sup>28</sup> Islamic-period turquoise-glazed earthenware ceramics are represented in the Belitung cargo by several double-handled jars. Two complete examples have survived. One (fig. 20) is in the Philippines, which had a long history of trade with Fujian.<sup>29</sup> The other was unearthed at Yangzhou, a major port frequented by Arab merchants.<sup>30</sup>

Pottery originating in the Gulf region has been noted consistently at sites reporting late Tang trade ceramics. As exotic imports, these Islamic-period wares appear to have assumed a high status in China, especially among the coastal elite. Their social standing is confirmed by two tenth-century references to these wares forming part of royal estates. Twenty such jars, referred to as “Tajik” (Arab) jars, were part of tribute sent in 961 by the Cham king of central Vietnam, Jaya Indravarman I, to the newly established Song emperor Tai Zu. Shards have been recovered both from Simhapura, the citadel of the Chams, and on Cu Lao Cham, the island that served as a replenishment station for vessels on the China run. Evidently the Cham rulers of central Vietnam engaged in a brisk trade with the West Asian merchants who passed their shores, no doubt trading their forest products, aromatics, exotic birds, and ivory for Persian ceramics. Islam appears to have been introduced there in this period.<sup>31</sup> Given that the earliest Islamic tombstone in Southeast Asia is in central Vietnam, perhaps this region was the first to experience conversion. This tombstone could be the legacy of a visiting merchant, but undoubtedly Islam arrived early in Vietnam courtesy of merchants from the Gulf.

Further evidence of the status of these Arab imports in China is provided by their inclusion among grave goods. The tomb of Liu Hua, wife of the ruler of the Min kingdom of Fujian, who died in 930, revealed three large amphora-type Persian jars, again, most probably produced in Basra and clear evidence of the international trading system (fig. 21).<sup>32</sup> Shards of these jars have appeared from coastal China to the western coast of India. The 2009 discovery of the shards of a large Islamic-period storage jar from Iraq (again, probably Basra ware) at the site of the Saidaïji temple in Nara, dated 768 or slightly later, confirms that this distribution system also reached Japan.<sup>33</sup>

To trace the distribution pattern of Changsha, Yue, and Ding ware is to revisit the most extensive maritime trade route in the medieval world. Ceramics from Hunan, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang were transported by a variety of land, riverine, and coastal shipping routes to the ports of southern China. Ships departed each season for Southeast Asia, presumably taking on provisions at landmark ports, such as Van Don (Tonkin), Cu Lao Cham (Champa), and Pulau Tioman (Malay Peninsula). The evidence of the Tang cargo establishes that the bulk trade in ninth-century Chinese ceramics passed through the Java Sea area.

The distribution of Chinese ceramics across Southeast Asia mirrors trade routes, the sites of historical entrepôts, and religious or urban centers. In all probability, the dhow was sailing for a port on Java’s north coast to unload a consignment of trade goods and take on eastern Indonesian spices (fig. 11), before proceeding to Sri Lanka and the Arabian Sea. Late Tang ceramics are widely dispersed throughout Southeast Asia. Finds of Changsha wares and green-glazed storage jars recur at sites in Java, principally those associated with the Sailendra kingdom. Yue-type storage jars were recovered during restoration work on eighth-century temples on the Dieng plateau. Excavations in the vicinity of ninth-century temple sites such as Prambanan, near Jogjakarta, have yielded quantities of painted Changsha bowls and covered boxes such as those in the wreck’s cargo.<sup>34</sup> Green-glazed storage jars also have been recorded from this region, including at the Candi Sojiwan.<sup>35</sup>

Tang ceramics also have been discovered at port-settlement sites in Malaysia, confirming the importance of the port known to the Arab geographers and navigators as “Kalah.” The



Bujang valley in Kedah, sometimes equated with Kalah, has yielded small quantities of Tang ceramics, associated with the temple sites.<sup>36</sup> The temple and riverine site of Laem Po–Chaiya, near Surat Thani, demonstrates the pattern. Chaiya probably represented the westerly limits of Srivijaya’s influence. It was also an important trading center: surface surveys of the beach and river estuary have revealed large quantities of ninth-century underglaze-painted Changsha wares and storage jars associated with kilns around Guangzhou.<sup>37</sup> No sites comparable in their ceramic concentrations to Laem Po have been located in Malaysia, which may indicate that Kalah was located further north in the Isthmus region. Takuapa, on the west coast, is a strong candidate for this identification.

The Cambodian capital at Angkor was an important market for Song- and Yuan-period Chinese ceramics, as first described at Zhou Daquan in 1296–97.<sup>38</sup> Excavations conducted in 2008–2010 in the vicinity of Prei Monti temple, part of the Rolous group and the presumed palace complex of King Indravarman I (reigned 877– circa 886), have revealed ninth-century Chinese wares identical to those represented in the Belitung cargo, along with turquoise-glazed Islamic wares from Basra.<sup>39</sup> These include northern white wares (among them high-fired types presumed to be Hebei Xing ware), green-splashed white wares, Changsha wares, and green-glazed storage jars of the Guangdong type. These finds directly parallel those recovered from the surface finds at Laem Po, and may be presumed to be part of a shared trading system.

The archaeological record strongly suggests that the volume traffic in late Tang ceramics was westward. Examples of the ceramic types represented by the Tang cargo are recorded next in Sri Lanka, a major trading partner in early east–west trade. Sri Lanka was a prosperous Buddhist kingdom, strategically located to service Indian Ocean shipping. It also had immense reserves of precious and semiprecious stones, spices, and, most famously of all, pearls of matchless size and quality much in demand in China. Excavations at Mantai, near Jaffna, have confirmed the location of Sri Lanka’s principal port in this period.<sup>40</sup> Chinese ceramics, including Changsha wares with both painted and applied decoration, have been revealed during excavations in central Sri Lanka.<sup>41</sup>

The westerly trade served the Abbasid-period (750–870) markets of the Gulf, and it is in Persian ports and cities that late Tang ceramics have been found in their greatest quantities. Basra, Siraf, and Sohar (Oman) were the main ports; Baghdad, Shiraz (Iran), and Samarra, the major markets. The Great Mosque excavation at Siraf provides the most detailed record, and the percentages of wares there offer an interesting measure for the composition of the Tang cargo. The excavation is distinguished for its concentration of Changsha painted wares and green-glazed jars, recovered beneath the floor of the Great Mosque, built in the first quarter of the ninth century.<sup>42</sup> The mosque foundation yielded significant quantities of green-glazed Guangdong storage jars (65 percent), Changsha wares from Hunan (25 percent), and white wares (5 percent).<sup>43</sup> Two jar fragments have Arabic names incised beneath the glaze (fig. 13). These inscriptions, made on instruction at the time of manufacture, suggest that Arab-speaking merchants placed the order for these Chinese jars, perhaps that the names served as a record of ownership. They confirm that these jars were expressly produced for the Arab trade. Jars of this type with “pseudo-Arabic” inscriptions also have been found in Palembang (Sumatra), and central Java.<sup>44</sup> The earliest dateable example is from a century earlier, from the tomb of the poet Zhang Jiuling who died in 740 in Shaoguan, Guangdong, a district capital connected to Guangzhou by the Zhu River.<sup>45</sup>

The distinctive coarsely potted glazed storage jars are associated with a variety of trade-route wares and are well represented in the Belitung cargo. They were assumed to have been for the shipment of preserved goods (fig. 23), but the discovery of bowls packed inside jars indicates there were other uses as well. These stoneware jars are linked to a number of kilns in the vicinity of Guangzhou, and further examples have been recovered from the nearby Zhu River, confirming that they were used to ship goods loaded there.<sup>46</sup>



**Fig. 19** Abbasid Caliph al-Mukafi gold dinar, mint of Hamadan, with Koranic passages in Kufic script, dated AH 291, equivalent to 903–904. Excavated near Tra Kieu, Quang Nam province, central Vietnam. Similarly dated coins have been found in the coastal ports of southern China as well as the Tang capital of Chang’an (Xi’an). Cathedral Collection, Danang, Vietnam.

**Fig. 20** Double-handled earthenware storage jar with turquoise glaze, Iran or Iraq, 9th–10th century. Recovered Taal, Batangas Province, Luzon, Philippines; formerly Santos Collection, Manila.



**Fig. 21** Amphora-type earthenware storage jar with turquoise glaze, Basra, Iraq. Discovered in 1965 in the royal tomb of Liu Hua, queen of the kingdom of Min, Fuzhou, Fujian, dated 930. Fujian Provincial Museum, Fuzhou.



White-glazed bowls with a rolled rim and recess-carved (*bi*-disc) foot were so pervasive in West Asian sites, they were dubbed “Samarra ware” in earlier literature. The name was inspired by the quantities recovered at Samarra. In addition, the greatest concentrations of the type of green-splashed ware found in the Tang cargo have been excavated from the Abbasid capital, as discussed above (see figs. 15, 16). In all probability, these wares arrived there as part of the same maritime trade that the Belitung ship represented. Other urban sites in West Asia—Shiraz, Kish, Gurgan, and Nishapur in Iran, and Fustat in Lower Egypt—received Chinese ceramics, principally from Siraf, which served as the major redistribution center for the Iran hinterland until its demise in 977. Other sites bordered the Arabian Sea, such as Banbhore in Pakistan.<sup>47</sup> There is evidence that Chinese ceramics were carried to East Africa along with the spread of Islam, as far south as Kilwa in Tanzania and Zanzibar.

The sheer volume of the ceramics cargo, and the presence of a small number of high-value precious metal objects, suggests that the ship was on its way to West Asia, where it would have generated considerable wealth for its owners. The Gulf to China route was a long and hazardous one: an Indian sailed from Sri Lanka to Palembang in 717 on a convoy of thirty-five *Bosi* ships, most of which were lost at sea.<sup>48</sup> But for those who returned safely, the rewards were great. One of the few Arabic merchants involved in the Indian Ocean–China trade for whom we have contemporary records is Abu’l Qasim Ramisht.<sup>49</sup> He is remembered for gifting, at great personal expense, Chinese textiles to serve as a cover for the Ka’ba at Mecca, the holiest of Muslim shrines. This wealth flowed from the ships that successfully completed the longest sea journey of its day, from the Gulf to China, and back. The Belitung ship was part of that great enterprise.

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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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