



# Gold and Silver Wares on the Belitung Shipwreck

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Late in the eighth century, during the Tang dynasty (618–907), an official named Liu Zhan started a rebellion in Yangzhou, a city on China's southeastern coast. It eventually was quelled by General Tian Shengong, whose troops wantonly looted the assets of merchants and civilians and brutally massacred thousands of Arab traders. Tian Shengong then went to the capital city of Chang'an (Xi'an), where he gave in tribute his stolen gold and silver treasures to the emperor.<sup>1</sup> His bloody acts did not result from a deeper strategic purpose or xenophobic intolerance but instead demonstrate the widespread lust for wealth that flourished in Yangzhou.

The late eighth-century period, the location in Yangzhou, the Arab traders, and the gold and silver wares have subtle connections to the mysterious sunken boat discovered in 1998 off the coast of Belitung, Indonesia. A large quantity of ceramic, gold, silver, and bronze objects, as well as other artifacts, was salvaged from the wreck. Of these amazing treasures, a number of the bronze mirrors and especially the gold and silver artifacts almost certainly were produced in Yangzhou during the Tang dynasty.

The decoration on the gold and silver objects discovered in the wreck was prevalent during the late eighth century, when the area around Yangzhou was known as the Zhexi and was the center for manufacturing, collecting, and distributing such wares. The discovery of the shipwreck demonstrates for the first time that gold and silver ware production in Yangzhou was dedicated not only to serving the imperial family but also to creating items to export overseas.

Three major late twentieth-century discoveries have proven Yangzhou's status as a gold and silver production center: 950 pieces of silver excavated at the Dingmao Bridge site, Dantu, Jiangsu province<sup>2</sup>; more than 100 pieces of silver unearthed at the Xiaxin Bridge site, Changxing County, Zhejiang province<sup>3</sup>; and 38 pieces of silver unearthed from the tomb of Lady Shuiqiu, Lin'an, Zhejiang province.<sup>4</sup> The pieces from Dingmao Bridge show a high frequency of the same kind of object—specifically, silver boxes, the majority of which appear unused. Some are only semifinished, which seems to indicate that these articles were made-to-order and stock items. Nearby, archaeologists have unearthed raw materials for making these objects. It is very likely that these remains belonged to an official workshop. The silver wares from Xiaxin Bridge are not as refined, but once again one type of object—in this case, forty-five silver hairpins—is repeated on a large scale. These are probably from a commercial workshop.<sup>5</sup>

Originally, the Imperial Workshop of Gold and Silver Ware, which was controlled by the central government, had been in Chang'an. After the mid-eighth century, mining in southern China accounted for 92 percent of the country's gold production and 94 percent of its silver production,<sup>6</sup> and the area became the new major supplier of these materials. Yangzhou quickly attracted a large number of craftsmen and became the major producer of gold and silver wares.

**Fig. 170** Detail of a silver platter decorated with a rhinoceros from the Belitung shipwreck; similar items have been found in a Tang dynasty tomb in China.

Yangzhou's newfound status was evidenced by tributes presented to the imperial court. For example, historical records document that the military governor of southern Nanhuai region, Wang Bo (759–830), paid tribute three times with more than 5,900 pieces of gold and silver utensils from Yangzhou.<sup>7</sup> When Li Deyu, the surveillance commissioner of the Zhexi, suddenly received an order from the emperor to manufacture gold and silver utensils, he was able to mobilize enough raw materials from the area to complete the task, which consumed 130 liangs of gold and 22,400 liangs of silver.<sup>8</sup> In Chang'an, archaeologists in 1966 unearthed a mid-ninth-century sunflower-shaped silver plate, a product of Yangzhou; it had been a tribute made by Jing Hui, who at the time served as the surveillance and salt-monopoly commissioner of the Zhexi.<sup>9</sup> An exquisite silver-gilt basin with a mandarin duck design found in the Famensi was a tribute product from the Zhexi to the imperial court, which later presented it as an offering to the temple.<sup>10</sup>

### Connections to Yangzhou

When the dozens of gold and silver objects recovered from the Belitung shipwreck are compared with other items excavated in China, it is not difficult to see that they were produced during the Tang dynasty and thus most likely in Yangzhou. A number of silver boxes from the sunken ship (figs. 174–177) feature foliated edges and an overall design of flowers or clouds decorated with interlocking vines, birds, and running animal motifs. Similar silver boxes featuring these decorations frequently have been found in Tang dynasty tombs (fig. 172).<sup>11</sup> A silver platter from the Belitung wreck is adorned with a rhinoceros (fig. 170); similar objects have been found at a tomb at Xingyuan in Yanshi, Luoyang.<sup>12</sup> The form and pattern of a gold drinking bowl found on the ship (fig. 179) exemplify Tang dynasty style (fig. 173).<sup>13</sup> A type of flat silver bottle with handles (fig. 181) discovered on the wreck is also found in the Leifeng Pagoda (fig. 182),<sup>14</sup> built during the Wu-Yue period (893–978) in Hangzhou. A similar object from the Liao dynasty (907–1125) is also known.

The motif of bees (or butterflies) on the square and round gold plates from the Belitung wreck (fig. 178) also can be seen on the Dingmao Bridge silver wares, which include a silver box with a butterfly shape and decoration. Lifelike butterfly patterns emerged in the south during the late Tang dynasty, but the main theme on this piece is formed by broad leaves, which constitute a 卍 character in the center. The 卍 is an auspicious symbol in Buddhist art and is featured on a small number of Tang dynasty bronze mirrors. However, the Belitung wreck marks the first archaeological excavation to uncover gold and silver relics featuring this design. The design on the square gold dishes is unique. Its combined motif of broad leaves and a 卍 symbol is uncommon in traditional Tang design, which may suggest that it was specially made for export overseas.

Each side of the octagonal gold cup found on the ship is adorned with a dancing *hu* (fig. 68), a term that refers to the non-Chinese ethnic group of the northwestern region. These figures hold various musical instruments in their hands. A number of similar cups has been found, mainly in northern China. Dating to before the mid-eighth century, they were created by Tang artisans in the style of Sogdian silver ware from Central Asia (fig. 180).<sup>15</sup> The cup found on the ship fits in easily with this group, down to the thumb rest on the handle, which is decorated with a detailed portrait of a *hu*.

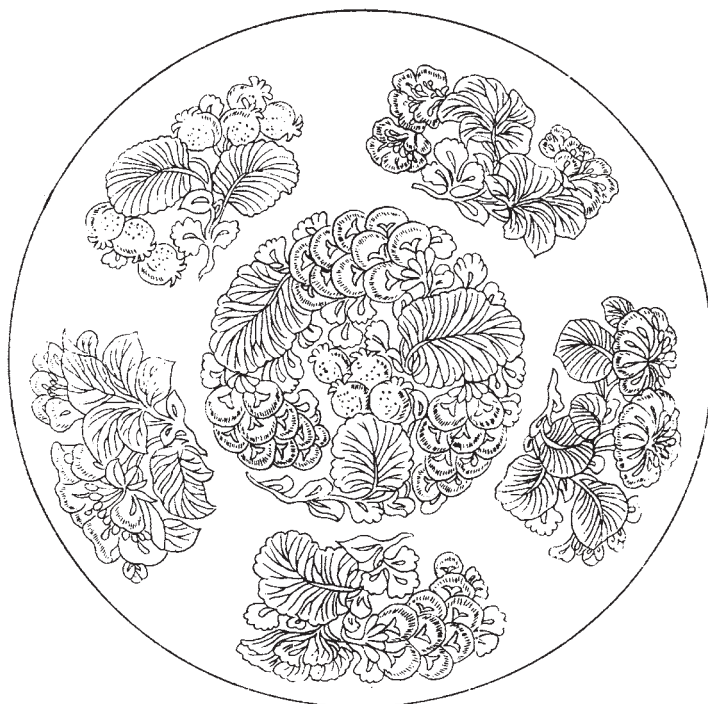
However, this type of cup has not been found to date past the mid-700s. Its discovery on the Belitung shipwreck is therefore a bit surprising. Why would such an item—which evokes the Tian Shengong massacre and the robbed Arab merchants—have reappeared in Yangzhou toward the end of the Tang dynasty? It may be that the Belitung gold cup was not made by local Chinese artisans but manufactured and sold by Arabs in Yangzhou or was made to order by the owner of a foreign vessel who also may have provided customized designs.



**Fig. 171** Drawing of silver bowl excavated in Xi'an, Shaanxi province.

**Fig. 172** Silver box in the collection of Shaanxi Museum, Xi'an, Shaanxi province.

**Fig. 173** Gold drinking bowl unearthed at Taiyi Road in Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



**FROM TOP**

**Fig. 174** Lobed fan-shaped box with a chased pair of ducks. Cat. 296.



**Fig. 175** Lobed triangular box with a chased pair of ducks. Cat. 294.



**Fig. 176** Four-lobed oval box with a chased lion. Cat. 292.

**Fig. 177** Lobed triangular box with a chased pair of ducks. Cat. 295.



These silver boxes could have been used as containers for cosmetics, incense, and medicines. The leaf shape is particularly rare.



**Fig. 178** Lobed dish with chased insects, flowers, and knotted ribbons. Cat. 303.

**Fig. 179** Lobed oval bowl with two ducks in repoussé among chased flowers. Cat. 300.

The lobed oval seems to have been a characteristic shape for drinking bowls during the Tang dynasty, when celadon wares of the same form were made (see cats. 249-250).



## Yangzhou's Rise as a Shipping Center

China has a long history of international maritime trade. Roman glasswares and Persian silver boxes have been unearthed from Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) tombs in Guangzhou and Jiangsu.<sup>16</sup> Although there was no indication that Han dynasty ships sailed to faraway western regions, there also was no reliable evidence that China was visited by foreign ships—until now. The foreign goods transported through the Southeast Asian cultural centers on the Belitung ship prove the early existence of indirect maritime trade between China and other areas.

Sui Yangdi (569–618), also known as the emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty (581–618), is considered by scholars to have been a brutal, fatuous monarch. He did, however, make two major contributions during his reign: a tour to the west along the Silk Road and the construction of the Grand Canal of China. Yangdi traveled west to Zhangye, convened envoys from twenty-seven western kingdoms, and then invited envoys from more than thirty countries to gather and trade in Luoyang, day and night, a veritable world expo.<sup>17</sup> Yangdi also ordered the construction of an inland canal connecting the Hai River, Yellow River, Huai River, Yangzi River, and Qiantang River—the five major river systems that later became China's north–south traffic artery.

By the eighth century, a few major events had occurred in Asian history: Arabs had shattered the Sasanian Empire, the Tang had fought and lost the Battle of Talas against the Arabs in Central Asia, and there was an outbreak of civil strife, known as the An Shi Rebellion. These three major events resulted in shifts in power and significant changes to Asia's political structure. The original methods of communication broke down, and once-prosperous land-based trading routes gradually declined.

From the late eighth to the ninth century, Yangzhou's officials developed transportation on the rivers and canals, linking the city with outside waterways and greatly facilitating commerce.<sup>18</sup> Yangzhou rapidly rose as an international city, trading with the world. Due to its rich resources and convenient transportation, it became a production base and commercial center. Goods arrived first at Yangzhou and then were dispersed in all directions. In a book written during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), Yangzhou was named the most affluent city of the Tang dynasty, followed by Chengdu.<sup>19</sup> A contemporary poet described the night market in Yangzhou: "A thousand lanterns light up the clouds, tall chambers, red sleeves attract crowds of customers."<sup>20</sup>

Yangzhou was a major location for minting official currency; ancient coins have been found buried there in the tens of thousands.<sup>21</sup> Shipbuilding industries also thrived. According to historical records, in the mid-eighth century, strong winds created tides that overturned thousands of ships in the city's harbor.<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the century, the government set up ten shipyards in Yangzhou specifically to make transit boats for carrying grain to the capital, with "each ship costing millions of coins."<sup>23</sup> Archaeological excavations in Yangzhou have also uncovered ancient Tang waterways, piers, wooden bridges, and other relics<sup>24</sup>—including a canoe and a Tang-era boat, about 24 meters long, with five large and several smaller cabins.<sup>25</sup>

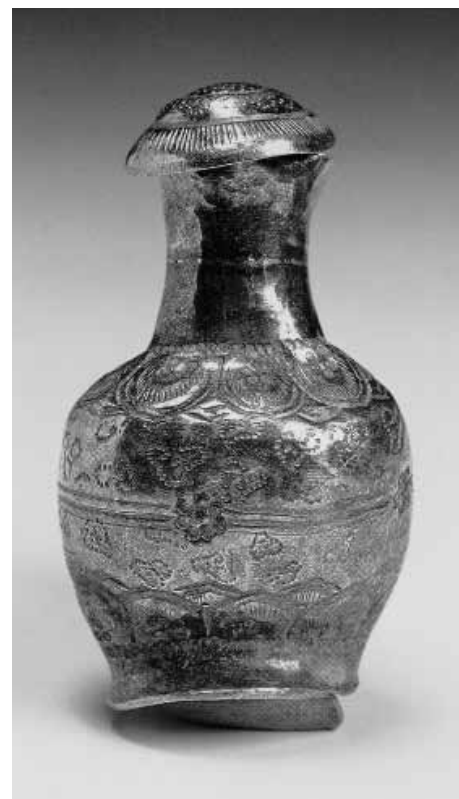
There also is evidence that foreign businessmen, including Arab merchants, settled in Yangzhou. Both fragments and complete pieces of Islamic pottery have been discovered at sites in the city. An Islamic pottery bottle carried on the Belitung wreck—probably for the daily use of crew members—resembles these finds. Excavations of Tang dynasty architectural ruins in Yangzhou unearthed many fragments of Islamic glass, which likely was not used in residential buildings but in the stores of foreign merchants.<sup>26</sup>



**Fig. 180** Gold cup unearthed at Hejia Village, in Xi'an, Shaanxi province.

**Fig. 181** Silver bottle with handle from the Belitung shipwreck.

**Fig. 182** Gold bottle unearthed from Leifeng Pagoda.



China has conducted large-scale excavations of the Changsha kiln in Hunan province, but more attractive examples of these Changsha wares were unearthed in Yangzhou. The Belitung shipwreck carried a large number of Changsha ceramics, which is not surprising if they were loaded in Yangzhou.

Of the tens of thousands of pieces on board, the dozens of fine gold and silver relics are obviously the most valuable. They also illustrate Yangzhou's important role on the Maritime Silk Road in the ninth century. From the silver boxes common to the Tang dynasty to the gold plates featuring the meaningful character 卍, these items help to illustrate Yangzhou's vibrant past in foreign trade.



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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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