



The Binh Thuan Shipwreck

By Cynthia O. Valdes

Divers trying to unravel a fisherman's trawl net stumbled upon a far greater treasure than fish: the sea bed littered with thousands of ceramics!

Marine archaeologist Dr. Michael Flecker headed the archaeological team that excavated a wreck discovered at Binh Thuan off the southern coast of Vietnam. Nearly 20,000 pieces of early 17th century blue and white ceramics from Zhangzhou in the western border between Fujian and Guangdong provinces in South China were recovered during the salvage operations started in 2001. These ceramics are popularly called "Swatow" wares.

Zhangzhou (or Swatow) ceramics were made entirely for export with Southeast Asia and Japan as its main markets. They are not found in China itself but commonly encountered in sites along international trade routes. Some Zhangzhou ceramics were transhipped at a Southeast Asian ports onto Dutch vessels for eventual sale in Europe.

Zhangzhou ceramics are also found in the Middle East where large dishes were popularly used for communal feasting. Many pieces have also found their way to South Africa where Dutch colonies had been established. However, the greatest numbers of Zhangzhou ceramics were exported to Java, Sulawesi, the Philippines and Japan.

Having been found off the southern coast of Vietnam, the Binh Thuan wreck was likely to have been headed towards the Malay Peninsula (Singapore, the Riau Islands) or Java. From examination of the remains, marine historians believe the wreck to have been a Chinese junk (probably the *I Sin Ho*) that sank during the first decade of the 17th century. Archival research reveals that the ship was headed for Johore with its cargo to be transhipped through Indonesia.

Non-Ceramic Artifacts

Among non-ceramic artifacts on the Binh Thuan were cast iron pans which made up almost one third of the surviving cargo. China was the only country in the second millennium AD who could manufacture cast iron products in bulk. Most of these cast iron products were cooking vessels such as cauldrons and woks. It is a common commodity in Asian shipwrecks.

Other artifacts are yellow and red pigment, Chinese locks, a set of scales and an ink stone. It was recorded in VOC records that in 1694, the VOC purchased 19,050 pounds of red paint called galiga from the Chinese junk fleet in Batavia.

The locks found were unadorned and no different from Chinese locks produced up to the present time. The scales were similar to a set found on the Vung Tau shipwreck which went down around 1690 some eight decades later than the Binh Thuan.

The ink stone is plain, free of adornment and appears of be functional in nature, probably for shipboard use. It may possibly be a siltstone except that it does not manifest the purple hue associated with the famous Duan ink stones from Guangdong province, also found on the Vung Tau shipwreck. During the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907), ink stones were functional objects. They became aesthetic objects only in the later Ming (1368 – 1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties when they were produced in a variety of forms.

There were two silver artifacts: a wine pot (plain with no signs of decoration except for two loop handles on each side of the mouth) and an ewer (somewhat Middle Eastern in shape; this vessel is unadorned except for a long curved spout connected with an S – shaped element to the neck). Ceramic objects were often modeled on metallic originals but in this case the ceramic counterpart is crudely modeled in stoneware. Other metallic objects were three copper-alloy dishes with incised lotus decoration in an embossed background; three copper-alloy flat bottom bowls with slightly embossed floral decorations in their outer walls.

An unusual artifact is a flat rectangular object with indented corners made from mother of pearl. It is pierced with two holes on either side and could have been a garment ornament.

Among the artifacts is a conglomerate of what appear to be ovoid shaped glass beads. They are now iridescent black that could have been a result of long immersion in seawater.

Dating the Shipwreck

Shipwrecks become useful in dating ceramics. Voyages of European ships belonging to national companies such as the Dutch East India Company or VOC (Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie) were recorded in detail in a daily journal called the Dagregisters maintained at its Asian headquarters in Batavia. These records are now in national archives. However, adequate documentation is lacking in the case of Chinese and Southeast Asian vessels, especially when these ships were owned or controlled by private merchants. In the case of the Binh Thuan wreck, it is the ceramics that have come important to dating the shipwreck.

Based on Barbara Harrison's dating for Swatow (Zhangzhou) ceramics (1996), the blue and white and enameled *klapmutsen*-type (*klapmutsen* are woolen hats worn by the Dutch) bowls of the "versatile family" (Harrison's classification also adapted by Adhyatman)¹ may be dated to the end of the Ming Dynasty, after the Wan-li period (1620). Large dishes of the versatile family (also been found on the wreck of the *Witte Leeuw*. A likely dating for these ceramics would be the Wan Li period (1573-1619).

Zhangzhou (Swatow) Ceramics

According to Volker (1954) who minutely examined the records of the Dutch East India Company (1602-1682), "the usual junks arrived at Batavia with quantities of coarse porcelain". Volker likewise had something interesting to say about the "kiln grit" found on the bases of most of most of Zhangzhou porcelain. These sandy adhesions to the base appear unattractive to Europeans but not so to the Asians of that. Volker² cites an entry to the journals of a European who visited Acheen in 1598 who observed that the porcelain were not used for eating from a table but from the floor, "hee eateth upon the ground without table, napkins or other linen" (Volker 1954).

Notes:

1. Adhyatman following Harrison has classified blue and white dishes into three families: the conservative, the persistent and the versatile. The term "versatile" refers to the diversity (of decorations) of the ceramics. Most of these ceramics are "post Wan-li period or after 1620. It appears that most of ceramics from this period were made for foreigners who may have indicated their preferences. During the post Wan-li period, kilns depended largely on overseas trade from Southeast Asia, Japan or Europe.

2. Volker analyzed the ceramic trade from China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and Persia from the years 1602 to 1682 based on the journals of the VOC. Volker is also mentioned in Bennet Bronson's article for the Fujian Conference held in Singapore, 1998 entitled: "Quantifying the Role of Fujian Ceramics in China's Southeast Asian Trade".

References:

Talk delivered by Dr. Michael Flecker on the Binh Thuan wreck during a Regular Monthly Meeting of the Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines held at the residence of Lourdes Montinola.

The Binh Thuan Shipwreck (Melbourne, March 2004) Christie's Catalogue, March 2004.