

Northern Thai Ceramics

by John Shaw

A report of recent finds at Kalong, Nan, Sansai, Payao and Chiengsaen

Little by little we are learning more about the kilns of Lanna, of which Chiang Mai was a capital of old, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the knowledge of how to make high fired, glazed stoneware was widely available in this Northern Kingdom. This widespread manufacture and use of glazed ceramics indicate a very high level of sophistication. It seems likely that the use was not confined to the 'laos' or princes and the members of their entourage but that the wares were also used by ordinary people for religious and everyday purposes.

Dating remains a problem. The only certain fact is that the Northern Thai ceramics do not, as was previously thought, come after those of Sukhothai but that they are contemporary. Historical and circumstantial evidence would indicate that the main output occurred during the 15th century, particularly during the reign of King Tilokarat, but that glazed ceramics were made throughout the period of the Mengrai dynasty and beyond, from the end of the 13th century² until, perhaps, as late as the 17th century A.D.

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The major kilns which produced most of the Northern Thai ceramics were found in the following places: Kalong, Nan, Sansai, Payao and Chiang Saen.

Kalong

Kalong was undoubtedly the most important centre of ceramics and every new accidental discovery of sherds by villagers seems to throw up a new style or type. Perhaps the most interesting recent finds have been:

1. A new group of kilns at Pa Sard in Payoom valley that mainly made thinly glazed green celadon dishes and bowls, sometimes, but not always, poorly glazed on the outside. Many pieces have simple lines incised in the base.

The interesting feature of these Group IV Kalong wares is that the rims were not glazed and that they were fired lip to lip and base to base. This method of firing was used also at Sawankhalok³, San Kamphaeng, Payao and Nan, and at all these kilns quite similar dishes were made. Very large pontils like those from the Wang Nua site were used to support the bottom piece of the stack at Pa Sard.

2. At Payoom, villagers found, at a depth of 3½ metres, what must have been a clay pit underneath a sandy streambed. It seems likely that the whole contents of one kiln firing was faulty and was thrown into this pit, undisturbed but in soft



Kalong Group I: underglaze black decorated vase.

mud and water; over 200 pieces were retrieved some in almost perfect condition. Over 95% of the sherds were Group I raincloud grey celadons, the remainder had underglaze black decoration. Many interesting new shapes were found.

3. In January 1984 three groups of kilns were reported near Baan Pa Mued, Tambon Pa Ngeu, Amphoe Vieng Pa Pao. This extends the kilns beyond San Maket nearly up to Vieng Pa Pao. Group I monochrome and underglaze black wares were produced, also distinctive Group V brown wares and olive celadon oil lamps similar to those from the Paan kilns. In the area of the kilns are three, villagers say five, *Vieng* surrounded with a deep dyke between two earthen ramparts similar to Vieng

Kalong. The largest, Vieng Mon, is said to be 20 acres in area. Beside Vieng Mon is a water reservoir. Nearby is Vieng Rong Nari said to be 12 acres in area, and higher up is the smaller Vieng



Kalong Group I: Oil lamps

Haw. No bricks have been found in these Vieng. It seems likely that they are contemporary with the kilns.

Nan

A new kiln site at Bor Suak in Nan Province has recently been reported by the Chiang Mai University Ceramics Research Centre and designated "The Nan Kiln Site"

This must have been a major centre of production as sherds litter a slope that rises gently from rice fields for a distance of over 500 metres. Most unfortunately, the whole area has been levelled by tractors hence no trace of kilns is found although saggars, glazed bricks and wasters prove their presence. It is to be hoped that the Fine Arts Department will investigate this site before all evidence has been destroyed. With advent of modern farming techniques, it can no longer be assumed

that buried history can safely be left for the future.

The body of a majority of pieces is black, sometimes red halfway through as if not fully 'cooked'. The exposed foot is usually fired red. The clay is rather rough with small white particles in it. The foot rim is low but neatly and squarely out. The pieces found are classified as follows:

Group I. Plates with a surprising milky white glaze, rather streaky with the black body showing through where it is thinnest and with a green tinge where it has thickly pooled. Often, the glaze is stippled with black pin pricks and usually there is no crazing. Some pieces seem to have been scarcely glazed on the outside wall and whatever glaze there is has turned into an uneven dark olive colour; on others, the outside is as well glazed as the inside. On some pieces, a slip was probably used and a splash is occasionally found in the middle of the base.

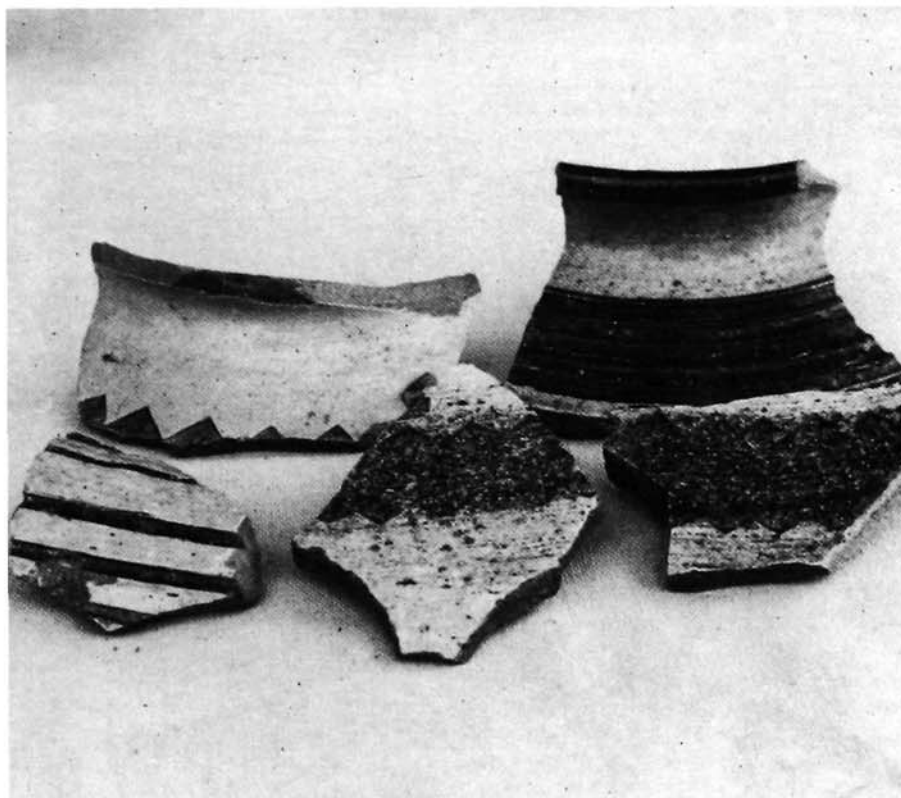
A large majority of these plates

have unglazed rims as they were fired lip to lip and base to base. One nearly perfect pair, stuck together, is in the Museum of Wat Chang Kham, Nan.

Group II: These sherds are much nearer to a true green celadon although some are finely crazed and others have a peculiar banded effect of different shades of olive green, yellow green and milky green, all rather dirty looking. This group seems mostly to have been made up of jars, some large but a majority less than 20 cm. high.

Group III: These are brown glazed wares often a golden brown, but sometimes almost black and occasionally streaky where the glaze has flowed unevenly down. These sherds seem to come from medium to large jars.

Group IV: Two large sherds from the same piece have dual glaze; the body, dark brown with bands of milky celadon on which little brown glazed 'seeds' have been stuck like a necklace.



Sherds from the Payao Kiln Site.

Group V: An unglazed roof tile has been found. Also in a well at the kiln site covered with a large stone, a great number of 'pra pim' Buddha figures were found together, so it is reported, with moulds. However, sherds have not yet been seen in the area of the kiln site.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of these kilns is the large number of sherds from saggars. These are roughly and sturdily made with holes in the sides. The average diameter seems to be about 20 cm. and the height 10 cm. Saggars are unknown in other Thai kiln sites (with rare exceptions at Kalong and San Kamphaeng).

Five nearly perfect jars were found a number of years ago buried under a chedi near Nan. They contained bones and all had had a hole punched through the base. Three are Group II, a streaky celadon; and two brown, Group III.

Nan sherds have also been found at a site 30 kilometres beyond Na Noi in association with Sawankhalok celadons, Ming celadons, and Kalong underglaze black.

The Nan Chronicle, which unfortunately cannot be relied on, tells us that the founder of Nan later became King of Pukha leaving his wife to rule at Pua (the capital was later moved from Pua to Nan). Hearing that the country was only ruled by a Queen, Jao Ngarm Muang of Payao occupied Nan. Hence, the Queen's son was brought up at the court of Payao. He later rebelled and ruled Nan from 1320-1350 A.D.

In 1366, the present Nan became a capital. In 1397 the King of Prae attacked and killed the King, but the latter's brother escaped and went to stay with Phraya Chaliang. The following year, he returned with an army and drove out the King of Prae.

In 1432 the Chronicle records

that King Intakaen escaped from prison and fled to Baan Tao Hai (the village of jar kilns) hence he went on to Muang Ram.

In 1448, Nan became a province of Chiang Mai and from then onwards until the Burmese conquest, it was ruled by Governors who moved frequently to other posts at Fang, Payao, Chiang Saen, Lampang, Terng and Chiang Mai.

The Burmese conquest did not seem to have affected Nan seriously until the very end of the 16th century, since we read of the Governor restoring Wat Chae Haeng and of the Burmese king of Chiang Mai ordering further restoration to be carried out in 1578 when he passed through Nan on his way to Luang Prabang.

The wares made at Nan bear a remarkable resemblance to those of Payao and almost certainly must have been made by the same school of potters. It has been thought that the Payao kilns were of an early date, possibly 13th century. This fits in very well with the Nan Chronicle account. It is also tempting to equate the kilns in Baan Bor Suak with the Baan Tao Hai to which King Intakaen fled in 1432. Two kiln sites one at Lampang and one at San Sai were discovered because the name of the village today is Baan Mor. Earthenware pots are not made in kilns and villages where such pots are made are usually called Baan Mor.

Payao

Further surveys at Payao have shown that the extent of the kiln area is much larger than was previously thought. There were kilns under the main road just beyond Toke Kwak and sherds litter the verges. The kiln site originally reported has now been found to extend for a further two kilometres up to the Mae Nam Kwiang.

Large disc pontils with a hole in the middle and no feet have been found. A new group of wares has been found near the main road. These are brown glazed with a raised pattern in white slip. The most common design is bands with



Unglazed Pots from Chiengsaen



Jar neck from the Sansai Kiln Site

saw-toothed edges although one piece has a simple animal design.

Sansai

In August 1983, Khun Kraisi Nimmanahaeminda found a new kiln site in Sansai at Huay Ma Leo. Like in the previously reported Sansai site at Wat Tao Hai, the main production was brown wares of poor quality. Enough celadon sherds were found to prove that these were also made in this site, however,

their quality is not good and the glaze is similar to some San Kamphaeng pieces; some of the plates, too, have unglazed rims. The most interesting pieces are large jars with high collars and everted rims and dark brown glaze. The necks are left unglazed and on some pieces, the glaze removed in the bands around the shoulders.

Chiang Saen

Many distinctive sherds are

found along the bank of the River Mekhong at Chiang Saen and a few nearly perfect pieces are in the Museum of Pa Ngao. These are high-fired unglazed wares with a grey body. Small vases and kendis are known. No kiln site has been found but as these wares are only known in the Chiang Saen area, it seems likely that they were produced locally.

Conclusion

As more information is brought to light by the Chiang Mai University Ceramic Research Centre, it becomes clear that glazed ceramics of high quality were in common use throughout Lanna from the 14th-17th century indicating a very high level of craftsmanship and a high standard of living.

- 1 This report is an updating for 'Northern Thai Ceramics' by J.C. Shaw, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1981.
- 2 A pilot excavation carried out by Chiang Mai University and the Fine Arts Department in April 1984 at Vieng Ta Garn, an old Haripunchai city, revealed glazed ceramic sherds at the lowest levels indicating that they may have predated the establishment of Chiang Mai by King Mengrai in 1296 A.D.
- 3 Excavations undertaken at the Sawankhalok Goh Moi site by the Fine Arts Department and the Australian-Thai Dating Project during the last 4 seasons indicate that 'Mon' wares of this type predate the better known Sawankhalok wares.