

Ceramic Excavation Sites in Southeast Asia

by John S. Guy

The study of trade ceramics in Southeast Asia has, over recent decades, advanced to a point where most countries in the region are now embarked on a systematic programme of controlled excavations of historic sites. They are engaged in a campaign to reconstruct their local and regional histories and to define more precisely the nature of their region's relations with cultural spheres both East and West. Trade ceramics provide one of the more tangible forms of historical evidence for these studies. Glazed ceramics, by their nature extremely durable, occur with such frequency and in such concentrations within the Southeast Asian region that an historical perspective can often be obtained of the nature, scale and duration of the economic relations of a locality through an analysis of the ceramics retrieved. This can be invaluable for such areas of study as cultural contact, the search for "lost kingdoms", the shifting nature of habitation sites and early urban centres, and the nature and pattern of maritime trade routes. It was the latter which provided Southeast Asia with some sense of regional identity and which in turn linked the region to the international trade routes serving China, South Asia, the Middle East and finally, Europe.

The gazetter of trade ceramics excavated from sites in Southeast Asia, recently published by the Research Centre for Southeast Asian Ceramics, Adelaide,¹ is presented as a first statement in what it is hoped will be an on-going dialogue and exchange between those interested in the reconstruction of the region's history and aspects of its material culture.

John S. Guy is Assistant Keeper, Indian Department of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Omissions have undoubtedly occurred in its compilation and continuing archaeological work will render it even less comprehensive. Whilst many more sites are known to me and others in this field of study it was felt preferable to only include those sites which, to date, have been the subject of some form of documentation or reliable reporting. In compiling a working file of such sites over the last five years all sites subjected to controlled excavation which came to my attention were listed, together with those which at least had been reliably reported even if this post-dated clandestine excavation by ceramic dealers or their agents. In many instances the illicit excavators removed only the most marketable examples leaving lesser pieces and most notably fragments which can contribute to some archaeological understanding of a site. The information gleaned from site associations, stratification and placement is however lost in these instances, greatly reducing the significance of such sites to the archaeology of the region.

The gazetter chronicles nearly 100 sites which, in the majority of cases, provide recorded assemblages of ceramics for particular phases of a site or region. The entries are summary distillations of the published reports cited in the bibliography. Users of this gazetter may treat it as a guide to examining the ceramic evidence for a specific locality or for looking at the regional distribution over a given period. It is hoped that through a series of periodization maps the shifting patterns of site distribution may be discernible and that useful regional comparisons may be suggested, both within and between periods.

Known groups of ceramics can be invaluable as a reference tool for dating new sites, often providing a useful starting point for defining the historical parameters of a site. Conversely, a datable archaeological context, such as a documented

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Japan.

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tomb, or a structure the construction (or destruction) of which is recorded, can throw light on hitherto undatable ceramics. Such was the case with the Sinan shipwreck sank off the coast of southern Korea soon after 1323 with a cargo containing an extraordinarily comprehensive selection of Yuan ceramics². Many of the ceramic types were known from excavations in Southeast Asia, most notably Luzon. The Sinan excavation was thus able to provide a secure 14th century context for the parallel samples found in the Luzon excavations and elsewhere. Similarly, the discovery of fragments of Chinese glazed stoneware jars beneath the paving stones of the Great Mosque at Sīrāf in the Persian Gulf, erected in circa 820³, provides a dated reference for identifying such jars when found in Southeast Asia, as has been the case in central Java, and in China itself.

This parallel study of contemporary ceramics from distant sites can reveal much about the process of production, distribution and consumption in traditional Asian trade. It is now possible, for example, to follow the 9th century Chinese wares of Changsha from kiln to consumer. Kiln site investigations have localized their production to the district of Tongguan in Hunan Province⁴. Excavations at Ningbo have revealed that the products of these kilns were exported through this city, one of the key ports for Tang China's international trade. An iron-decorated bowl of the Tongguan type has been discovered bearing the date "third year of Kaiching", equivalent to 838 AD, securing their production in the 9th century⁵. Bowls of this type have been identified along the length of the international sea route, from Java to the Persian Gulf.

A date from any point in the production-consumption process can thus bring light to bear on the other links in the trade chain. The parallel excavation programmes being conducted at the kiln sites in Sukhothai Province, central Thailand and in the Gulf of Thailand are assembling evidence on the production and distribution aspects of the Thai ceramic trade. To date the maritime excavations have done much to establish the contemporaneous production of kilns previously assumed to be sequential, and to extend the known production periods of particular ceramics types. In turn, kiln excavations have begun to identify hitherto unattributed wares retrieved from shipwreck sites. The exchange of information of this kind will progressively fill in many of the gaps in our understanding of ceramic production and trade in Southeast Asia.

The establishing of chronologies for classes of ceramics does not of itself establish absolute chronology, that is, secure dates. Ceramics dated by inscription are rare before the widespread use of the Chinese reign marks on better quality porcelains of the mid 15th century onwards. No dated Thai ceramics have yet been identified and the Vietnamese bottle with a dedicatory colophon dated 1450 is unique in 15th century Vietnamese ceramics⁶. The internal history of ceramic types and their stylistic development is however becoming clearer, most notably as a result of the identification of the kiln sites which can provide stratigraphies chronicling ceramic

evolution. The work being conducted in the People's Republic of China over recent decades has been particularly impressive in this regard, and more recent excavations in central Thailand and northern Vietnam are beginning to yield valuable information. Technical innovations and responses to market demand can now be more securely defined in terms of provenience and period. A few examples illustrate the Chinese case in the introduction of moulded and luted forms and decoration in Yuan ceramics, the contemporaneous experimentation with underglaze colourants and the emergence of cobalt blue as the most successful medium, the ready adoption of underglaze painted skills to new forms and decorative schemes demanded by Islamic taste and social customs. In Thailand the kilns of Sukhothai Province are revealing sequences of trade and pre-trade stonewares and identifying previously unattributed wares to localized kiln groups, such as the Thai Ceramics Archaeological Project has revealed at Phitsanulok⁷.

In assigning habitation dates to a site from trade ceramic evidence one must be aware of a number of pitfalls. Firstly, by dating provincial kiln products by reference to metropolitan styles one may be ignoring the propensity of provincial kilns to continue popular styles, particularly for the export market, long after they have ceased to be fashionable at the centre. The bias, long practised in oriental ceramic studies, of being disdainful of provincial products as unworthy of serious study has now been largely discarded, particularly in China itself where provincial southern kilns have been the subject of intensive research in recent years. With these investigations the provincial styles are being assessed in their own terms, establishing direct reference points of comparison for Chinese trade ceramics in Southeast Asia.

Secondly, the contemporaneity of a site and its contents must be assessed. This may be aided by an understanding of the often specifically localized social function of the ceramics. Glazed ceramics, being highly valued in Southeast Asian societies for their exotic character and sometimes presumed supernatural attributes, may be expected to have a lengthy life before being discarded through wastage or being committed to a grave site. This may be characterized as the heirloom problem⁸. In some Iban societies, for example, "martaban" jars were on occasions seen to be imbued with souls, given names and preserved amongst a family's most prized possessions. Conversely, many of the ceramics excavated from grave sites in Sulawesi and the Philippines appear in pristine condition, and can be assumed to have been purchased expressly for funerary purposes. Such ceramics could have gone from kiln to grave site with minimal delay.

Thirdly, ceramics are highly portable and isolated finds must be treated cautiously. Similarly the problem of sample reliability is acute in sites which have been disturbed. Illicit diggers remove those wares in good condition or which can be restored to a marketable state. The reliability of the remaining sample is uncertain and most probably has been skewed by selective looting. The number of undisturbed sites being excavated by the regional authorities in Southeast