

Sunken Treasures – Shipwrecks and the Maritime Silk Road

Eline van den Berg (Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics (NL))

Martijn Manders (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands & Leiden University)

ABSTRACT

In 2019 the exhibition *Sunken Treasures* was organised at the Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics. Featured are the ceramic cargoes of eight shipwrecks - from the 9th to 19th century - that show the long and rich history of the Maritime Silk Road. Asian ceramics, and in particular Chinese porcelain and stoneware, are often part of the remaining cargoes of these shipwrecks. This makes them a valuable source to gain knowledge on maritime trade in this region and in particular to trace the spread of Chinese ceramics. To highlight the vital role of underwater archaeology to preserve this history the museum cooperated for this exhibition with the Dutch Cultural Agency (RCE). The RCE has helped in setting up a constructive way to present this kind of material and the issues that come at play, including the controversy involved. By presenting this material in a larger context, the museum believes that is acceptable from an ethical point of view to use these commercially salvaged materials in the exhibition and that visitors are stimulated to critically reflect on what actually makes up the 'sunken treasures'.

Key words: Ceramics, Maritime Silk Road, Shipwrecks, Archaeology

INTRODUCTION

In September 2019 the exhibition '*Sunken Treasures – Secrets of the Maritime Silk Road*' opened at the Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics (fig. 1). On display are objects, mostly ceramics, found in eight shipwrecks from various periods involved in trade along the routes nowadays often referred to as the Maritime Silk Road¹; from an early 9th century Arab shipwreck all the way to an early 19th century Chinese junk. Since the 1970's many shipwrecks in Asia have been discovered. They have provided us with an incredible amount of information on how trade was conducted in different periods in history. Asian ceramics, and in particular Chinese porcelain and stoneware, are often part of the remaining cargoes of these shipwrecks. From as early as the 9th century they were a highly desired commodity throughout Asia, the Middle East and Africa. At a later stage they were also much in demand in Europe and America. While most of the organic cargo, such as pepper, textiles and tea, disintegrates over time, ceramics often survive remarkably well and also in great numbers. This makes them a valuable source to gain knowledge on maritime trade in this region and in particular to trace the spread of Chinese ceramics. As the National Museum of Ceramics of the Netherlands this provides the Princessehof the opportunity to make visitors aware of this many centuries old story of trade and show that a seemingly modest bowl can give a whole new perspective on written history.

In the initial stage of the preparations for the exhibition seven shipwrecks were selected from various periods and origin to give the visitor of the museum a general overview of the intensity of

¹ The idea of a trade route focused on silk connecting Han China and Rome was first proposed by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833–1905). To distinguish it from the trade routes on land, the maritime silk route was only named this way for the first time in 1967 by a Japanese scholar.

this trade throughout the centuries. These wrecks were: Tang² (c.830, Arab), Sinan (1323, Chinese), *San Diego* (1600, Spanish), *Witte Leeuw* (1613, Dutch), Hatcher junk (c. 1643, Asian/Chinese)³, *Geldermalsen* (1752, Dutch) and *Tek Sing* (1822, Chinese). All have in common that Chinese ceramics formed an important part of the remains of the shipwreck⁴, however also other commodities have been found such as spices, bronze coins, wood remains, and precious metals. Some of these materials are also included in the exhibition to provide a wider context. The wrecks altogether form a context of trade in Asia, from narratives of the more well-known period of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to the periods long before the Europeans arrived in this region. The exhibition was not set up in a chronological way, but divided into themes in line with this approach. Below will follow a short overview of these shipwrecks and the motivation for including them in the exhibition. While making this exhibition the museum was confronted with an important issue that unfortunately often is associated with underwater cultural heritage: almost all the wrecks were commercially salvaged in the past. Therefore, not only the information gained during the excavation was limited, by including these collections it could also cause discussion among scholars whether showing this material would be a suggestion of approval for these salvaging activities.⁵ This concern led to an adaptation of the exhibition in which commercial salvaging is acknowledged and critical notes are being made to reflect on this. This approach will be discussed later in this article.

SHIPWRECKS

The exhibition starts with two wrecks of dominant European powers in the 16th and 17th century: Spain and the Netherlands. The Spanish ship *San Diego* and the Dutch VOC ship *Witte Leeuw* were selected to show the early history of the European countries in Asia (fig. 2). More in particular, it illustrates the great difficulties the Dutch encountered when trying to set up trade networks. Out of frustration -and as resentment to the Spanish with whom they were at war - the Dutch turned to privateering. The Portuguese and Spanish ships were attacked in the hope of capturing their fully laden ships, which could then be sold with great profits at home. In addition to these stories both ships provided important information on what type of commodities were carried by European ships in this early period.

The *San Diego* sank in December 1600 off the coast of the island Fortune, Philippines, after a battle with the Dutch ship *Mauritius*.⁶ What is most striking about the objects found on the *San Diego* is

² The Tang shipwreck was previously referred to as the Belitung, referring to the island to near it was found. The collection is now part of the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore and is recently referred to by the museum as Tang.

³ The origin of this shipwreck is unclear. No research was conducted on the wooden remains or any of the context of the finds. It is therefore been named after Michael Hatcher, who discovered the shipwreck in 1983. Based on the Chinese porcelain found, that features a mix of export- and Chinese style ceramics, it was concluded its origin was likely Asian, possibly Chinese.

⁴ Tang circa 60.000, Sinan over 20.000, San Diego circa 2000, Witte Leeuw between 1500-2000, Hatcher junk circa 25.000, Geldermalsen over 140.000, Tek Sing circa 360.000.

⁵ For example the planned exhibition on the Belitung shipwreck in 2009 at the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery was cancelled due to huge opposition from American and European archaeologists and museum representatives. They expressed their concern that the salvaging of the shipwreck by a private company was not conducted in line with

international code of conduct for underwater archaeology. See:

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/centres/nalanda_sriwijaya_centre/documents/belitung_controversy.pdf

⁶ The *Mauritius* was a ship of the Compagnie van Verre (Long-distance company) the forerunner of the Dutch East-India Company (VOC) that was established in 1602.

the huge diversity of the material coming from many different areas: Asia, Europe and the New World. The *San Diego* was an armed state-trading ship (a Manilla galleon originally called the San Antonio) constructed in the Philippines and used for the trade between Manila and Mexico (L'Hour 1998, 240). Although it had been hastily converted into a warship and renamed *San Diego*, it still had a considerable quantity of trading commodities and utilitarian objects onboard. This, in combination with the extra amount of canons placed on the ship caused it to list in the water and made the use of the port holes impossible during the fight. The cargo found in the wreck, provides a good picture of the trans-Pacific and inter-asiatic trade in this period.

The *Witte Leeuw* sank during a fight with two Portuguese vessels at St. Helena, an island in the Atlantic Ocean. On the way back it moored at the Kerckbaai of St. Helena to load fresh supplies and do some necessary repairs. During their stay two Portuguese ships⁷ appeared and the Dutch decided to go into a battle. Even though they outnumbered the Portuguese and had bigger ships, they still lost. The *Witte Leeuw* possibly sank due to an explosion of the gunpowder cabin, completely destroying the stern. The wreck, found in 1976 by Robert Sténuit, was one of the first shipwrecks of a Dutch East India VOC ship bound home to be salvaged. This discovery therefore made it possible to compare the packing list in the historical archives with the actual cargo of a homebound ship. Next to a great amount of pepper and other spices still preserved encrusted in corrosion, the cargo consisted of blue-and-white *kraak* porcelain. Interestingly however nothing of this was mentioned in the inventory of the ship in the VOC records (National Archive, The Hague, 1.04.02, file I/E.1.i, 607). According to Ketel, the porcelain was possibly transferred in Bantam from another VOC ship part of the same fleet (Ketel 2011: 3). Much of the porcelain recovered was broken. Although not much of value for the commercial auction, the material provided great study material to set up a typology for early *kraak* ware. In the exhibition the broken material well illustrates the disastrous fate of the *Witte Leeuw*.

The Tek Sing was a three-masted Chinese junk from Fujian province that departed from Amoy (Xiamen, China) and was headed to Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia). It got caught up in a storm and was wrecked near the Belvidere shoals in the South China Sea. Its discovery in 1999 brought to light the largest amount of ceramics ever to be found in a shipwreck: over 360.000 pieces of mostly common Chinese porcelain catered to the Southeast Asian market. This shows how trade in the early 19th century was still taking place on a large scale in Asia. The porcelain was salvaged and auctioned in 2000 in Stuttgart, Germany. It is a great pity that the finds of the wreck were not documented in their context and that objects deemed not sufficiently interesting for auction were thrown back into the water (Tjoa-Bonatz 2016, 96–97). This meant that a great deal of valuable information was lost forever. In addition to the large amount of porcelain it is known from the few survivors that were rescued the next morning by a passing British ship, that on board were, besides a crew of 200 men, also at least 1600 passengers. The majority of them were (illegal) immigrants from Fujian province. The wreck illustrates the exodus of Chinese people from coastal regions during this period and the ever-growing export of Chinese porcelain partly fuelled by this settling of Chinese communities in Asia and beyond. What it also reminds us of, is that each wrecking represents a tragedy, often with loss of many lives. The display of the Tek Sing porcelain in the exhibition plays into both aspects (fig. 3); it on the one hand gives an impression of the large amount of cargo the ship was carrying

⁷ Noa Nossa Senhora da Nazareth and Noa Nossa Senhora do Monte do Carmo, also known as Conceicao

and on the other hand makes the pieces silent witnesses' of the people on board the *Tek Sing* who lost their lives when the ship hit a reef.

The Sinan and Tang are the oldest shipwrecks within the exhibition and are important examples to highlight the vast trade between Asia, the Middle East and Africa long before the arrival of the Europeans (fig 4). In museums in the Netherlands the emphasis when focussing on trade in Asia is generally on the VOC period. Although in a Dutch centred view this might be logic, in a larger context it is only a part of the story and it covers only a small period of time. The Sinan shipwreck is of particular interest since it marked the start of underwater archaeology in Asia. The remains of the shipwreck and its cargo were carefully excavated over a long-term period from 1976 to 1984. Besides eight million coins, 23,502 other artefacts were registered, circa 1017 pieces of rosewood (genus *Dalbergia*) and 450 parts of the hull. An interesting group of items were the 360 wooden tags that were recovered during the excavation which contained Chinese characters with information on the different cargoes in the ship. From this it has been concluded that the ship was loaded from April to June 1323 and left from Ningbo port in China to Hakata in Japan (Mokpo 2016: 63-65). The more than 20.0000 pieces of ceramics consisted mostly of celadon stoneware and Qingbai porcelain destined for Japanese temples and wealthy aristocratic families. The discovery of the Sinan shipwreck thus led to an archaeological excavation that shed light on the maritime trade and cultural exchange in East Asia during the fourteenth century, connecting several countries.

The Tang is the oldest shipwreck of which material is shown in the exhibition. It sank around 830 AD close to the Indonesian island Belitung and was recovered during two seasons in 1998 and 1999. Some remains of the wooden hull have been examined and shown that the wood came from Africa and India. In addition the planks had been sewn together with rope made from sea hibiscus (*Talipariti tiliaceum*) and wadding sealed with lime used around the joints. This has led researchers to conclude that it was likely an Arab *dhow* (Burger et. al. 2010, 383-386). The shipwreck provided the first major archaeological evidence of the early complex maritime trade network between West and East of the Indian Ocean. A newly (2014) discovered shipwreck, the Phanom Surin, in Thailand, confirms the idea of *dhow*s being extensively used in this early period.⁸ Over 60.000 pieces of Chinese ceramics were found during the salvage of the Belitung wreck, many of them largely intact. The discovery of the Tang is of major importance; it confirms that Chinese ceramics were already during the 9th century traded in large numbers to Southeast and West Asia and catered to diverse markets.⁹

⁸ <https://www.currentscience.ac.in/Volumes/117/10/1647.pdf> (accessed 22-01-20)

⁹ For example on the Changsha bowls decorations of Makara (monster fish) have been applied, which was a popular myth originating in Southeast Asia. On several dishes from the Gongxian kilns a lozenge motif has been applied. This design was developed in the 8th century in the Abbasid empire and it is likely to assume this motif was catered specifically for this market.

UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY

The shipwrecks discussed above have been discovered in the latter part of the 20th century and, except for the *Sinan*, were almost all commercially salvaged. The controversy related to this topic stresses the need to inform visitors of the museum about these issues and to make them aware of the importance of underwater archaeology for the preservation of underwater heritage for future generations. It was felt that to present some of this controversial material in the museum advice was needed to handle this topic in an appropriate manner. For this reason the Prinsessehof set up a collaboration with the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), in specific its international maritime programme. Together with the RCE and the external designer team the museum discussed during several project meetings how best to include underwater archaeology in the exhibition. At first a plan was developed in which every story of a shipwreck was divided into three layers: 1) in which period and how did the ship sink, 2) when/how was it found and salvaged/excavated, 3) what can we learn from the material that was found? This approach however did not underscore enough the importance of underwater archaeology. It was our desire to create a clear marker within the exhibition on this topic, that would on the one hand make it clearly stand out, and on the other hand would make it seemingly fit in with the overall storyline. During the preparations of the exhibition the RCE was still carrying out an excavation of the VOC shipwreck of the *Rooswijk*, which sank in 1740 in front of the coast of the United Kingdom. The ship was loaded with silver and destined for Asia. During the excavation season in August 2018 high quality footage was shot of the entire *Rooswijk* project. This material was included to show visitors how an excavation is carried out. For the exhibition so far only returning trade ships had been selected, therefore the inclusion of the *Rooswijk* project would also make an interesting story from the historical perspective: that of a ship transporting money, contraband and building materials to facilitate trade in Asia. It was therefore decided to create a separate room, central within the exhibition, that would focus on underwater archaeology (fig. 5). In the same room the *Geldermalsen* (1752) and Hatcher junk (c. 1643) porcelain was included. While the other shipwrecks highlighted in the exhibition focus on the historical narrative, these two shipwrecks have become ‘famous’ for the auction of their porcelain cargoes during the 1980’s in Amsterdam and London and this is also the emphasis of the display. The Prinsessehof, like many other museums at the time, bought a selection during auction and in many houses of Dutch collectors of Chinese porcelain these pieces are still present. What these collectors are generally unaware of is the great loss of information that was caused by the salvage of these shipwrecks. In addition, the selling of artefacts from cultural sites like shipwrecks often puts pressure on the quality of research due to conflictions in budget, time and profits. Ultimately it was the auction of the *Geldermalsen* that pushed underwater archaeology on to the political and scientific agendas in the Netherlands. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) formed a committee to investigate the condition of underwater archaeological research and management. Two major symposiums set to work on these issues (Manders 2017, 5). The result of these discussions was that the government established an Underwater Archaeology Department to tackle the management of the underwater cultural heritage in the Netherlands. For this reason the combination of the *Rooswijk* together with the *Geldermalsen* and Hatcher junk narrative created the ideal setting within the exhibition to focus on the important work conducted by

underwater archaeologist worldwide. It shows why archaeology is extremely beneficial in the reconstruction and storytelling of the past.

The display of the shipwreck material in the entire exhibition is supported by audio and infographics. The latter contains basic information of the subsequent shipwrecks: measurements of the ship, date and location of sinking, tonnage and time of discovery. In the audio, accessible via an one-hand earphone in each room, further details about the history of the shipwreck are provided; what do we know about the time it sank, some particulars of the type of ship or life on board, and how it was discovered and accordingly salvaged or excavated. The audio of the *Rooswijk* tells a more detailed story about the process of doing archaeology and why this is of key importance for the understanding of the material and its context.

CONCLUSION

The maritime silk road has received considerable attention in recent years and has especially become a hot topic in relation to China's launch of the 'One Belt and One Road' initiative. However, although a constructed term that has only been in use from the 1950's, the trade itself is many centuries old. Through eight shipwrecks that have been discovered underwater, the Prinsessehof in Leeuwarden (the Netherlands), has created an exhibition in which it tells the story of this millennia old trade network from the perspective of their cargoes, in particular Asian ceramics. The oldest shipwreck in the exhibition is from the 9th century, while the latest wreck dates a thousand years later to the early 19th century. It shows an intensive inter-asiatic trade between the west and east side of the Indian ocean, both before and during the period European countries took their part. The presentation of these collections confronted the makers also with another issue: that of commercial salvaging. Most of the collections have been brought up in the seventies, eighties and nineties of the previous century through commercial salvaging operations. This has led to a loss of context information for most of the sites. The museum was therefore convinced of the importance to also address the issue of salvaging versus archaeology. By combining the information and display of the recent excavation of the *Rooswijk* and the auction of the two major salvaging operations of the *Geldermalsen* and the Hatcher wreck in one room the exhibition is able to immediately put all the shown collections in an overall perspective and fuel the discussion of these issues for those visiting the exhibition. By doing so, we believe that is acceptable from an ethical point of view to use these commercially salvaged materials in the exhibition and that we have stimulated visitor to critically reflect on what actually makes up the 'sunken treasures'.

Bibliography

Pauline Burger, Armelle Charrié-Duhaut, Jacques Connan, Pierre Albrecht and Michael Flecker, The 9th-Century-AD Belitung Wreck, Indonesia: analysis of a resin lump, in *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* (2010) 39.2: 383–386

Jean-Paul Desroches, Gabriel Casal, Franck Goddio (eds.), *Die Schätze der San Diego*, Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz) 1997

Karin Gaillard & Eline van den Berg (eds.), *Sunken Treasures, Secrets of the Maritime Silk Road*, Leewarden/Zwolle, 2019

Christine Ketel 2011: Identification of export porcelains from early 17th Century VOC shipwrecks and the linkage to their cultural identification

Michel L'Hour, 'A l'aube de la construction navale espagnole en Asie: le *San Diego* (1600)', *Archaeonautica* 14 (1998), Construction navale maritime et fluviale. Approches archéologique, historique et ethnologique, 237-241

Underwater Archaeology in Korea, 40th Anniversary of the Excavation of the Shinan Shipwreck, National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage, Mokpo 2016

Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz, 'Struggles over historic shipwrecks in Indonesia', in: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin & Lyndel V. Prott (eds.), *Cultural Property and Contested Ownership*, Basingstoke 2016, 85-107

Manders, M.R., *Preserving a layered history of the Western Wadden Sea: managing an underwater cultural heritage resource*, Leiden, 2017

National Archive, The Hague, Archive of the Dutch East India Compagnie (VOC), 1602-1795, 1.04.02, file I/E.1.i, 607: Invoices of shiploads, bills of income and expenses; bills, drawn up at various VOC branches in India, Invoices of the shipments of the ships Wapen van Amsterdam, Vlissingen and Witte Leeuw, going from Bantam to the Republic of 1612 Dec. 5