

From Belitung to Jewel of Muscat

An inside view of the find that redefined regional trade

By Margaret White

What a treat to view the cargo of the *Belitung* shipwreck! So many Guangdong jars, arranged on steps within touching distance, and no glass partitions or rope barriers.... The waist-high jars originally stored wine and water for the ship's crew, while the smallest ones contained spices such as star anise. It is not often that one can get up close and personal to objects that have lain under the sea undisturbed for 1200 years.

The 9th century Tang Dynasty ship, the *Belitung* is the oldest wreck found in Southeast Asia and it pushes back the clock on trade between China/Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Divers in search of sea cucumbers encountered a mound of ceramics instead, which led to the discovery of the wreck in 1998, in the waters between Indonesia's Bangka and Belitung Islands. It is thought to have been the vessel of West Asian merchants, who were on their return journey from Guangzhou (after exchanging their aromatic spices for silk and ceramics) when they foundered.



Changsha bowls as found at wreck dive site

The *Belitung* was an Arabian *dhow*, a wooden sailing ship. Built without nails or dowels, its planks were instead sewn together with coir, a method similar to one still practised in some parts of Southeast Asia today. The cargo I saw was laid out to approximate the actual length and width of the *dhow* (18 m by 5 m).

After watching a background video on the wreck and its cargo, Alvin Chia, president of the Southeast Asian Ceramics Society (SEACS), explained to our group that the 53,000 recovered items were stored in a specially designed system. To facilitate viewing, the more unusual ceramics were displayed on open shelves but were protected by Perspex covers. As the SEACS members jostled closer, Alvin carefully lifted out piece after piece of ceramic for our enthusiastic inspection.

We admired the spontaneous, abstract, freehand designs painted on wares made at the Changsha (China) kilns. We marvelled at ear-handled ewers, bowls, jars and incense burners, all painted in colours that ranged from dull browns

to brilliant reds and adorned with lotuses, *makaras* (mythical composite sea creatures of Indian origin) and Arabic calligraphy. What was most surprising was that many of the pieces were intact and looked as if they were made yesterday, their glazes fresh, their decorations clear. This is because they were packed in Guangdong jars that were buried for centuries in the protective silt of the seabed.

A replica of the *dhow*, dubbed the *Jewel of Muscat*, was painstakingly constructed in Oman with materials and craftsmanship mirroring the original. It sailed to Singapore from Oman last year, following the ancient sea route using traditional navigation techniques and was presented as a gift to Singapore. Many SEACS members followed the *dhow's* voyage virtually (and were also able to listen to the sailors' commentary) via the Internet.

The *Jewel of Muscat* is scheduled to be on display in the first quarter of this year at the new Experiential Maritime Museum on Sentosa Island. Another new art science museum at Marina Bay Sands is now showcasing the Belitung cargo to whet visitors' imaginations and knowledge about the past and to highlight the importance of trade in the Southeast Asian region.

Further afield, the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution (Washington DC, USA) will exhibit more than 300 of the best pieces from the *Belitung*, including gold, silver and bronze mirrors, and rare blue-and-white plates. Co-curated with the National Heritage Board, the Smithsonian exhibition will have a world tour to such places as New York, London, France, Japan, China and the Middle East before it returns to Singapore in five years. Sounds just like the voyages of old!

For more information, log onto www.jewelofmuscat.tv

Margaret White, an avid FOM member, is currently focused on research and fine art. A recent exhibition of her paintings reflects her passion for Southeast Asia and her travels.



SEACS members examine finds from Belitung wreck; photo by Iswandy Ishak