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The Ca Mau Shipwreck, 1723-1735

By John Kleinen

Some time between 1723 and 1735, a Chinese junk sank off the coast of Vietnam’s farthest point in the South China Sea. Its cargo consisted of chinaware, porcelains, blue and white ware, porcelains decorated in brown, white-glazed porcelains over-glazed with enamels, and various stoneware, all originating from different kilns in southern China. The best-known pieces are the porcelains from Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province, where ceramics have been produced since the fourteenth century; other notable pieces include those from the Dehua kiln complex in Fujian, and from Guangzhou in Guangdong. The variety of the chinaware and the different kilns indicate that this vessel was part of the large Asiatic porcelain trade that developed in the early fifteenth century and in which the Portuguese and the Dutch played an important role. The exact provenance of the Ca Mau wreck is still not clear, but the author believes that the ship was on its way to Batavia or another port in order to deliver wares for the European market. Similar shipwrecks, such as the well-known Vung Tau (1690) and the one recently discovered off Binh Thuan, north of Saigon, belong to a regular trade route along the coast of Vietnam. Although the VOC was connected to the porcelain trade, private traders had already taken over the exports to the European and Dutch markets at this period. Apart from cataloguing a large amount of Chinese porcelain, the book includes a series of photographs of blue and white dishes, sometimes in sets of five, decorated with the well-known so-called ‘Scheveningen’ landscape (formerly known as the ‘Deshima’ décor), depicting a typical Dutch fishing village. In the background the sails of fishing boats are visible in between the roofs of houses, a church, and a fire beacon (executed in Chinese style). Chinese dishes with European motifs were made to order and are known as ‘Chine de commande’.

European motifs were, apparently, very popular. They appear not only on dishes, but also on cups, plates, and other kitchen- or tableware. A number of beer mugs, clearly made for a European market, also make up part of the large collection. This bilingual publication traces in detail the history of the recovery of the wreck and its cargo. The dating of the wreck is based on information gleaned from the hoard. Sources include Chinese porcelain inscriptions reading ‘Made in Yongsheng Great Qing’, and two coins bearing the inscriptions ‘Kangxi issued’, indicating that they were produced in the reign of the Qing emperor Kangxi (1662-1722), who united China during the seventeenth century. The author also makes clear that the ship was involved in trading Chinese porcelain and participated in the large inter-Asian trade between East and West. Vietnam was an important hub in the flourishing ‘single ocean’ trade (a term coined by the late historian O.W. Wolters), which stretched from the coasts of eastern Africa and western Asia to the immensely long coastal line of the Indian subcontinent and on to China. The Dutch linked up with the inter-Asian trade by trading Chinese and Vietnamese porcelain through the VOC-network or by ordering special objects through private traders. To get an insight into this trade, it proves useful to compare cargos of porcelain artefacts that were intended for different clients, as these cargos hold important keys to the history of inner-Asian trade in which Vietnam’s rulers of the southern domain, Dang Trong (the inner region), took part. Ultimately, the research on wrecks found off the coast of Vietnam contributes to unravelling Vietnam’s troubled internal history between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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