

## A Chinese incense burner – 16th century or maybe later



The Chinese have been using incense for thousands of years. The earliest Chinese writing, scratched on oracle bones from the second millennium BC, refers to the use of incense, which is a mix of exotic materials which produce fragrances when burned. These were mainly plant products, such as orchid flowers, certain peppers, cinnamon, sandalwood and camphor, but animal products such as musk (from the musk deer) were also used. Over the centuries the range of ingredients expanded as trade with other countries brought new fragrant materials to China.

Initially, incense was probably a luxury good only used for religious purposes and rituals by the elite and religious bodies, burning incense on a bed of sand in large bronze incense burners, which were wide bowls on short legs. There was a period in the first millennium BC when the people worshipped the skies, and incense would be a particularly suitable offering for that purpose, as the fragrances created rise into the sky. From around that time smaller incense burners are also found, suggesting a new domestic use as well as a religious one, and towards the end of the first millennium AD it became popular with the middle classes as well. It was not only used in rituals and as a show of wealth (since the incense ingredients were rare and expensive), but also considered beneficial in the treatment of some illness.

In the Chinese bronze age bronze was the material which was highly prized by the elite and would naturally be used by them for their incense burners. Later, the more affordable glazed stoneware gained in prestige value and it was also used to make incense burners, such as the one (26 cm wide) in the picture above, with a pale green celadon glaze. The note I circulated last month discussed the pale green/blue glaze which in the West is usually called celadon. Its colour comes from small amounts of iron dissolved in the glaze and the Chinese have been using it to produce beautiful pots for thousands of years. My previous note looked at an early example of celadon, probably made in the 4th or 5th century AD, at a time when significant improvements in glaze quality were being

made. The incense burner in the photo above was probably made over a thousand years later, at a time when the peak of celadon quality and popularity was in the past.

Between the dates of these two pots, in the 13th and 14th century, celadon pots made at Longquan (pronounced Loongchuan) in China were highly prized and they were exported in large numbers all over the eastern world, from Persia to Japan. By that time the celadon glaze had been developed so that it looked like jade, with a stone-like opacity and a feeling of subtle depth. The opacity resulted from a suspension of tiny bubbles in the glaze, together with fine particles which had not fully dissolved during firing. The thickness of the glaze was built up by applying multiple layers, repeatedly firing the pot between each application, and creating a complex layered microscopic structure. Good examples of celadons from that time tend to be a bit expensive for me.

I bought this pot not long after my interest in old pots started and I knew less than I do now. The auctioneer said it was made in the Song dynasty (960 to 1279 AD), but even then I was sceptical that it was that old. All the celadon incense burners I had read about from the Song dynasty were much smaller (typically half the size of mine) and I knew that after the Song dynasty there was a general trend to larger pottery. Also, the glaze on this incense burner is not opaque – its transparency is demonstrated by the deepening of the colour in areas where the glaze is thicker, such as in grooves and corners. In the centuries following the 14th century, Chinese celadon glazes tended to get more glassy and transparent, due to slight changes in the glaze composition. Since buying this pot I have seen several similar incense burners in auctions, and those auctioneers universally said the pots were made in the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), or more specifically the 16th century.

However, I now think this bowl may be younger than that. It is one of the many wonders of chemistry that a small amount of iron in a glaze can produce a blue or green colour, while iron in the clay can result in a reddish brown colour in areas of the same pot where there is no glaze. The potters at Longquan achieved this by allowing air into the kiln as it was cooling, which oxidised the unglazed surface at the bottom of the pot but was unable to penetrate the glaze. The contrast between the green celadon and the reddish brown unglazed area was so admired that sometimes the Longquan potters mixed their normal clay with a clay containing more iron, to make the brown colour stronger. I am mentioning this here because although the unglazed areas on my pot have a brown coloration, it is streaky and patchy (see photo on the next page), indicating that on my pot it does not come from iron in the clay itself, but from a wash containing iron oxide which was applied to the surface. This suggests that the pot may have been made later than the 16<sup>th</sup> century, not at Longquan but probably at the famous pottery town of Jingdezhen. The clays at Jingdezhen contained less iron, so when they were trying to imitate the great celadons of past centuries they often applied an iron wash or slip to the unglazed surface to produce the desired colour. This was particularly common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

One sign that my pot is made for burning incense, and is not simply a bowl with feet, is that inside at the bottom there is a large area which is unglazed, and the edge of this area is irregular and rough, with no attempt to make it attractive (see photo on next page). This is because in use it would have contained a thick layer of sand, which the burning incense was placed on, and the bottom of the bowl wouldn't be visible. You can also see in the photo that there is cracking in the bottom of the bowl. I think this probably occurred during manufacture, relieving internal stresses, as this amount of damage due to an impact after firing would in my view have broken the pot completely. It may well be that this pot was a reject, due to the cracking, and was recovered from a waste heap in modern times. However, when the bowl contains a layer of sand the crack is not visible so it may have been considered suitable for use despite the crack.



The pot has moulded decoration on the three feet (see photo below), suggesting a face with rather wild hair and three small lumps at the bottom of each, which might be fangs. I suspect this reflects the fascination of the time with archaic things and the faces are intended to be taotie, an ancient symbol much used in the first millennium BC.



The side of the pot is decorated with incised wavy lines, apparently made with a three-pronged tool. Incised decoration is something that appeared on later Chinese pots with celadon glazes, when the glazes were more transparent, highlighting the grooves. I don't know if it was in the potters' minds, but to me the combination of the sea-green glaze and these overlapping wavy lines makes me think of the sea.



The underside of the pot has a rather odd shape (see photo below), with a thickening in two unglazed steps inside the feet. There are sandy patches in a large ring around the base and I believe this shows that the pot was supported on a ring when it was fired, with the top of the ring dusted with sand to reduce the risk of the ring sticking to any bits of glaze that may have accidentally spread onto this area. By supporting the pot on a ring inside the feet the potters were able to glaze the bottoms of the feet, as can be seen in the photo below. Maybe the base was made thicker so that the pot could be supported from the base without risking distortion during firing.





If my celadon incense burner is up to 500 years younger than the auctioneer said it was, you may wonder if I have any grounds for complaint with the auctioneer. Apart from the passage of time (I bought this pot in 2014) the dating is still only my opinion. Scientific proof of age would require expensive testing. I have noticed in recent years auctioneers increasingly using the term 'or later' in their descriptions of pots – e.g. 'Song dynasty or later', presumably to protect themselves against accusations of false descriptions. Of course this could undermine the confidence of buyers and result in a lower sale price, so it's not an expression to be over-used.

Incense is not used much nowadays, but the modern trend for scented candles is in some ways equivalent. We are not keen users of candles in the Akhurst household, but every now and then we receive them as gifts and there is the odd occasion when lighting them seems the right thing to do. An incense burner with sand inside seems ideal for this:



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