

A covered box from Vietnam – 15th century



In the early 1990s an unusual type of pottery started appearing in antique shops and auctions around the world. It had detailed designs and images painted in cobalt blue on a white background, similar to Chinese porcelain. However, this pottery was made of a fine, smooth, almost white stoneware, similar to pottery made from clay from the Red River valley in the north of Vietnam. The designs were also often subtly different from Chinese blue and white pottery, reminiscent of the small number of Vietnamese blue and white ceramics known in museums and collections.

The attention of the Vietnamese authorities was drawn to this new supply of old pots when the police opened the bags of two Japanese dealers leaving Vietnam at Da Nang airport. Their bags were full of these pots and the dealers were arrested for the illegal export of antiquities. Tracing the route of these pots back from the dealers they found that they were coming from a fishing village called Hoi An, about 800 km south of Hanoi. The local fishermen had discovered a wreck on the sea bed about 20 km offshore, by finding pieces of pottery in their nets. Recognising the value of old pottery, the local fishermen had turned this into a full-time activity, dragging the seabed with nets attached to large rakes.

A study of these pots revealed that they had been made at a pottery village called Chu Dau near Hanoi which had been active between the 15th century and the 17th century. Excavations of kilns at Chu Dau had revealed sherds of similar pottery, but very few intact pieces from Chu Dau were known of before the discovery of the wreck at Hoi An.

The discovery of the wreck posed a problem for the Vietnamese authorities. It was deep (about 80 metres down) and an underwater archaeological excavation at this depth had never been undertaken and would be very expensive. However, if nothing was done there was no practical way of preventing the fishermen raking up more pottery and destroying what was recognised to be a discovery of historical significance for Vietnam. In 1996 a solution was proposed by a Malaysian businessman, who offered to fund an archaeological excavation provided he would be allowed to sell a proportion of the pottery which is recovered during the dig, with representative pieces of all types and many of the best pieces being retained for Vietnamese museums. This businessman was a

partner in a previous auction of Chinese pottery from a shipwreck (the 'Nanking Cargo') which had been very profitable. However, the Nanking Cargo was more of a treasure hunter's smash and grab, whereas this would be a slower, more difficult and more expensive excavation. The Hoi An excavation was given academic respectability by the involvement of the Vietnamese National History Museum and by supervision by an Oxford marine archaeologist, Mensun Bound. Bound, following a previous excavation, had been dubbed 'The Indiana Jones of the Deep' by the British press.

The tale of the excavation and the issues surrounding it has been told in an entertaining book by one of the team ('Dragon Sea' by Frank Pope). By the end they had raised almost 300,000 items of pottery, and they probably left even more than this on the seabed when they stopped. The small covered box (6 cm tall) in the picture at the head of this note has come from this excavation. On the underside there is a label identifying it as piece number 118020 from the 'Hoi An Hoard'. Each of the pieces excavated was given a unique number for the archaeological records and these numbers were also used in the auction of many of the pieces.



Vietnamese ceramics have a long history. The Vietnamese were using the potters wheel 4000 years ago, firing to over 1000°C by around 100 BC and making glazed stoneware by the third century AD. However, for most of their history they have been overshadowed by their neighbour China and for a thousand years (111 BC to 939 AD) Vietnam was actually a colony of China. Unsurprisingly, their pottery was strongly influenced by Chinese ceramics, but it often had a distinct character, with decorations often more freely drawn, which some experts criticised as inferior to the Chinese wares but others admired for their liveliness and innovation. As the Vietnamese had no porcelain stone, they had to make do with stoneware, but the Vietnamese stoneware clays were very good – smooth and white.

In the West not much was known about Vietnamese ceramics until 1931, when an exhibition of Vietnamese pottery was held in Paris. Even since that time, they have not been studied much. In part this is because the Vietnamese had no tradition of burying pottery with their dead and, before the discovery of the Hoi An wreck, there were only relatively few examples known. Those were often found in Indonesia or the Philippines, which were major destinations for Vietnamese exports, rather than Vietnam itself.

Blue and white pottery, where a design is painted using a cobalt blue pigment over a white body and then subsequently coated in a colourless transparent glaze, is inevitably associated with China. The Chinese pottery town of Jingdezhen started making blue and white porcelain early in the 14th century and eventually was producing vast quantities which were shipped all over the world. In the

early 14th century the Vietnamese were experimenting with white stoneware painted with designs using a brown iron-based pigment and it seems that as soon as they saw the Chinese blue and white they switched to using cobalt, producing their own blue and white pottery by the late 14th century. Because of concerns about cultural contamination, by the end of the 14th century the Ming dynasty in China had banned their traders from doing business overseas and in the middle of the 15th century the kilns at Jingdezhen were actually shut down for thirty years. This provided a great opportunity for potters in Vietnam and Thailand to fill the gap in the export market by supplying pottery to nearby countries in South east Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines. It is very likely that the ship wrecked off the coast at Hoi An was heading to one of these destinations. We don't know precisely when it sank, but it is considered likely that it was around 1480 or 1490. Interestingly, the residues of fruits recovered from the wreck indicate that it must have sailed in monsoon season and that, combined with the huge cargo of heavy pottery, probably explains why it foundered.

The major increase in production that this newly increased export market required of Vietnamese potters inevitably had an adverse effect on quality. Some superb pieces of pottery were still produced, but also large quantities were made where the painted decoration was simpler and quickly done. Different varieties of painted flowers and plants were no longer identifiable and generic marks representing leaves and stems, such as can be seen on my box, became common. Geometric designs were also popular, often alternating with plant-like designs as on my box.

The lid of the box is a simple cap that fits over a step in the rim of the lower half. Chipping of the rim confirms how white the stoneware clay is (see photo below). You may be able to detect in the picture at the top of this note that the lid is slightly larger in diameter than the base of the box. In fact, the lids and bases of the boxes were stored in separate locations in the ship and were clearly not intended to have a unique match. The excavation team had to do their best to match up lids and boxes in preparation for the auction. It is not very clear in the photo, but the lid of my box is significantly more shiny than the base, and the cobalt decoration darker. As they were stored in separate parts of the ship it is likely that the base ended up in a more exposed position under the water so that more of the glaze eroded away over the years. You can also see in the photo that many of the blue lines in the design have lighter-coloured bands or blobs in the middle. These are areas where there has been increased erosion by the sea water, resulting in a rough and pitted surface. I'm not sure why this should happen over the blue decoration – maybe some of the cobalt dissolved in the overlying glaze, changing its resistance to erosion.



Stepped rim of lower part of box



Generic plant design and localised erosion

The excavation of old wrecks has become a controversial subject in the archaeological community. Developments in diving technology in the second half of the 20th century opened up these wrecks to hordes of treasure hunters, usually only interested in finding valuable cargo and happy to destroy and lose for ever any historical information which a properly managed excavation might find. This got worse when the huge profits made by the Nanking Cargo sale in 1986 became generally known.

Archaeologists pressed for a UNESCO convention banning the sale of any finds from underwater wrecks, but this did not get enough countries to sign up for it to become law. Before he took on the Hoi An job, Mensun Bound agonized about this, but he argued that the wreck was in the process of being destroyed by the local fishermen and the only way to fund a controlled excavation was to allow the sale of some of the finds.

Unfortunately for the investors in the excavation, the proceeds of the sale were very disappointing. It seemed that the cargo of Vietnamese pottery did not capture the imagination of collectors and sale prices were low, with many pots unsold on the day. Sadly for Mensun Bound and the others on the archaeological team, this meant that funds to publish the results of the archaeological work were no longer available. I believe that since the excavation there has been little scholarly reporting of the results. In 2001 Bound published a book summarising the results of their excavation, but this is out of print and unavailable on the used book market.

When the archaeological team left the site of the wreck the local fishermen returned and continue to rake it for more finds. All the publicity also prompted a frenzy of digging by local residents at the Chu Dau pottery town where these pots were made, in the hope of finding valuable items, but all they found were remnants of old kilns, pottery sherds and kiln furniture (e.g. supports). It is almost impossible to stop treasure hunters searching for valuable antiquities and when sites are identified some sort of quick rescue archaeology is probably the least bad option. I can't help feeling that the Hoi An excavation was an honorable effort despite the problems they encountered.

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