

The Ca Mau Shipwreck, 1723-1735

Review >
Southeast Asia

When Vietnamese fishermen discovered a historical shipwreck about 90 nautical miles south of Cap Ca Mau in southern Vietnam in 1998, they hauled up more than 30,000 artefacts and 2.4 tons of metal objects in their nets. Subsequently, a Vietnamese diving and excavation company, working in close collaboration with the Ca Mau Provincial Museum and other responsible agencies, began to salvage the ship. In 1998 and 1999 more than 130,000 artefacts were recovered from this 450m² site. Now, four years later, Nguyen Dinh Chien, chief curator at Vietnam's Museum of Vietnamese History and a leading specialist on ceramics, has published the results of this find in a lavishly illustrated book under the title *Tàu Cổ Cà Mau (The Ca Mau shipwreck), 1723-1735*.

By John Kleinen

Sometime 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 Hujian, 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*'.¹

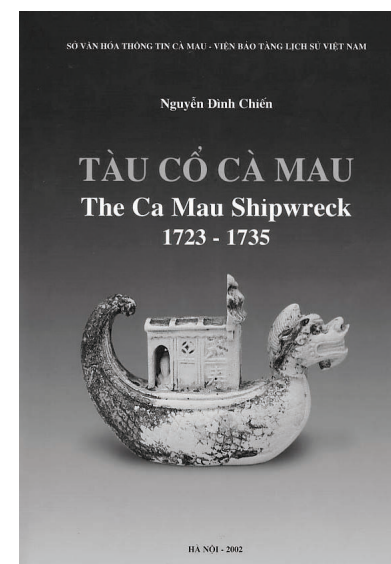
European motifs were, apparently, very popular. They appear not only on dishes, but also on cups, plates, and other kitchen- or tableware. A number of beer mugs, clearly made for a European market, also

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 ceramics 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 use-

ful 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 of the coast of Vietnam contributes to unravelling Vietnam's troubled internal history between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. ◀

- Dinh Chien, Nguyen, *Tàu Cổ Cà Mau, The Ca Mau Shipwreck*, Hanoi: Museum of Vietnamese History and Ca Mau Provincial Museum (2003), 258 pp. (96 pages of text, 386 photographs, and 21 pages of ceramics designs), Vietnamese and English, no ISBN



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- 1 For an excellent description of Dutch *Chine de commande*, see: Jörg, Christiaan J.A. 'Treasures of the Dutch Trade in Chinese Porcelain', *Oriental Art*, vol. XLVIII (no.5; 2002/03).