

CON DAO ISLAND WRECK - PRELIMINARY REPORT

The Con Dao Island Wreck was discovered by local fishermen in the vicinity of Con Dao Island, off of Vung Tau city, Birria Province, southern Vietnam. The exact location is a well guarded secret. The wrecksite was originally found in mid 2009, but only limited ceramic material was recovered until 2011 when blue and white porcelain emerged. Due to the location and difficult conditions diving and recovery is only possible one month out of the year. In addition to the ceramics described below, considerable quantities of Hong Wu (1368 to 1398) coins were also recovered. The wrecksite is dated to the early 15th century.

It would appear that the actual destination of the ship may have been Indonesia and/or the Philippines. Thai ceramics comprised the bulk of the recovered material and were quite popular trade items in those locations. For example, Thai celadon "coconut" jars are rather frequently encountered in the Philippines, and the Con Dao Island shipwreck had a large quantity of them. In contrast, other than Thai shipwreck items, Thai ceramics excavated material is extremely limited in Vietnam. A possible scenario for the ship could be that it started out in China with a cargo of ceramics and perhaps other trade goods, maybe stopping off along the way to do some trading and then arriving in Thailand. More trading in Thailand and taking on a load of Thai ceramics with plans to take the cargo to the Philippines or Indonesia for further trading, but making a stop in Con Dao to take on supplies and sinking there. Con Dao Island has a long history as a fresh water and supplies replenishing stop for ships traveling from the Southeast China coast and across the Gulf of Thailand to the northwestern islands of Indonesia and beyond. Of

course this scenario would need to be compared with likely sailing and trading routes, as well as monsoon patterns, etc.

A single dealer in Saigon purchased nearly all available material or approximately 2,000 items from the fishermen at a cost reported to range from US\$4,000 to \$6,000 and on up to \$ 20,000. The lower figures are probably the more accurate. This dealer has a near monopoly, with extremely few Con Dao items seen in any of the other shops. He is attempting to sell the ceramics at high prices given the quality and quantities of the material. As a sales technique he has produced price lists, tags and labels modeled after Sten Sjostrand's "Ming Wrecks" material.

Thai ceramics formed the bulk of the cargo and recoveries included 94 Sisatchanalai celadon coconut jars decorated in a wide variety of motifs (50 of the jars were subsequently sold to the dealer in the adjacent shop along with a variety of other items). "Coconut" shape jars were a popular export item from Thailand to Southeast Asia during the 15th century and early 16th century. They are characterized by a globular shape, mouth with rolled rim, two loop handles affixed at the neck, and relatively large size. Dimensions are: typical approximate average height is 14.5 cm. and diameter 15.5 cm.; however, size can range from height of 12.9 cm. to 16.4 cm., and diameter of 13.3 cm. to 18.5 cm. Most have a footrim, except for early examples which have a have flat base without footrim. The vast majority are celadon, a limited quantity in brown glaze, and a rare few examples of celadon with underglaze black décor. They were produced in the Koh Noi kilns of Sisatchanalai. These jars appear to be unique to Thailand with no closely comparable

counterparts among contemporaneous Chinese, Vietnamese, Khmer and Burma ceramics. The purpose for which they were used is not known with certainty, but speculation includes use as oil containers. This reference term is used not out of lack of sensitivity or respect, but in fact as a practical matter it is in common and wide use. In the Philippines, for example, this series of jars has long been referred to as “coconut jars.” The Con Dao wreck had an impressive quantity and variety of coconut jars, arguably the most extensive known.



Also recovered were a very limited number of underglaze black decorated celadons (2 medium size bowls and 2 plates); a wide variety of other Sisatchanalai celadons including a very large quantity of small plates 18 centimeters in diameter (with plain, piecrust and foliated rim), as well as larger plates, small globular jarlets with two loop handles, rather unusual larger jarlets with fluted sides and loop handles as in TH-545 below (total of approximately 50 observed), bowls - small and medium, and elegantly shaped small cups as described in TH-546 below (total of approximately 60 observed).

Small sized Sisatchanalai celadon plates are very seldom encountered in a shipwreck context or in kiln site recoveries or in old collections. For the only other small Sisatchanalai celadon plate in the Collection other than the Con Dao shipwreck plates see **Ceramics Catalogue Number TH-289**. Compare also the larger Sisatchanalai celadon plate from the Royal Nanhai shipwreck, illustrated in Brown and Sjostrand, *Maritime Archaeology and Shipwreck Ceramics in Malaysia*, Color Plate 59; and another from the Royal Nanhai shipwreck at TH-416. Recovered also were Singburi brown glazed jars - large size (total of 8 observed), medium and smaller. Fishermen are reported to have in excess of 100 additional large Singburi jars in their possession. Sukhothai wares include fish plates with a floral scroll in the cavetto, which are very similar to the recoveries from the Nanyang wreck in Malaysia, medium size very shallow dish with narrow base as described in **Catalogue Number TH-547** below (only one observed), and medium bowls approximately 16 centimeters in diameter with a floral motif or fish in the central medallion.



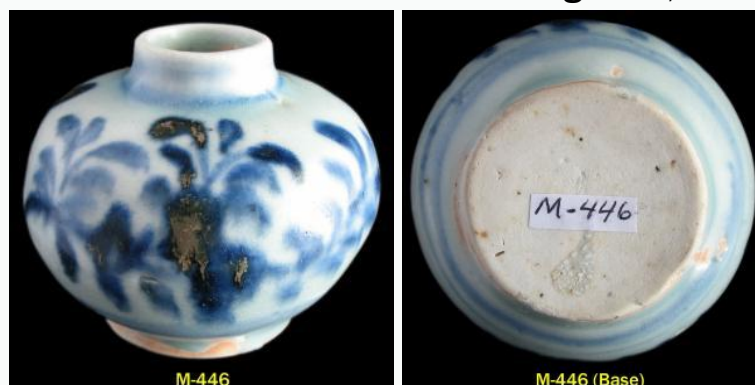
Chinese wares included blue and white porcelain and Longquan celadon. Blue and white porcelain consisted of small jarlets with floral motif (see **Catalogue Number M-446** below), medium bowls approximately 18 centimeters in diameter with floral motif, and plates with floral decor and with lion motif (approximately 20

centimeters and 30 centimeters in diameter). Small celadon dishes with fluted exterior sides as well as plain sides and with molded twin fish and floral motif, as well as with an incised floral motif were also recovered. Examples of these dishes are described below at M-447, M-448 and M-449. In addition to the Thai and Chinese ceramics, a very limited number of Burmese ceramics were also reportedly among the recoveries. These consisted of celadon plates covered with light green mottled glaze, the broad rim slanted very slightly upwards and rounded at the thickened edge; a pair of circles incised at the center of the plate and three more incised a bit further out; the rather sharply curving shallow cavetto plain. The diameter of the plates is approximately 25 centimeters.

Brief descriptions of the 25 ceramics referenced above (M-446 to M-449 and TH-545 to TH-563), along with a List of References are included below. A **Separate Photos Folder** contains photos of each item described under M-446 to M-449 and TH-545 to TH-563, including the base; it also includes photos of coconut jars and additional ceramics recovered from the Con Dao Island wreck.

Descriptions of Con Dao Island Wreck Wares in Ceramics Catalogue

M-446 – small blue and white jarlet, globular shape decorated with two fruit sprays and a profusion of leaves, underglaze blue is heavily applied; concave base without footrim is unglazed, D: 6.9 cm.



M-447 – small celadon dish with light green glaze, two small fish impressed at the center, wide flared mouthrim; underside molded with petal forms, vertical foot, base partially glazed, D: 13.0 cm.

M-448 – small celadon dish with light green glaze, a floral spray is molded at the center, wide mouthrim flared; underside molded with petal forms, vertical foot, base partially glazed, D: 12.9 cm.

M-449 – small celadon dish with light green glaze, a floral spray lightly incised in the center, angular sides with mouthrim very slightly flared; underside plain, vertical foot, base unglazed, D: 12.7 cm.



TH-545 – celadon jarlets (2 - pair) with vertical sides, two vertical loop handles and narrow cup-like mouth, molded and incised lotus leaves on the flattened shoulders; fluted sides, unglazed sharply convex narrow base, H: 10.1 cm. and 9.5 cm.

TH-546 – celadon cups (2 - pair) deep gouges carved down the gently curving sides, base is flat without footrim, D: 7.1 cm. & 6.6 cm.

TH-547 – Sukhothai dish decorated with a large fish extending over the entire bottom of the dish, four spur marks in center, sides are plain, mouthrim everted; high foot and narrow base, D: 19.3 cm.

TH-553 – Sukhothai bowls (2 - pair) decorated in iron-black on a cream slip under a straw colored glaze, in the center a fish facing to the left superimposed with five spur marks; just under the everted mouthrim a band of chevron elements interspersed with dots and enclosed within single line borders, D: 17.3 cm. & 17.0 cm.



TH-554 – celadon “coconut” jar, carved diagonal accents enclosed within incised line borders radiate down the shoulders, short neck is

flanked by two loop handles, carved vertical fluting on the lower body extends to the upright foot; H: 13.8 cm. & D: 14.5 cm.

TH-555 – Mon type extended ovoid shaped jar with very short spreading neck and flared mouthrim, two vertical loop handles extend from high on the shoulders to the upper portion of the neck; dark brown glaze now eroded in areas, H: 11.3 cm.



TH-556 – small celadon plates (4 - set) with a variety of rim treatments and various incised decorative motifs, including elaborate stylized peony spray; all have carved fluting radiating down the exterior sides, solidly constructed upright foot (nominally inward slanting on plate No. 4) outward sloping on the interior, and flat bases with compact light cream-beige colored body; D: 18.2 cm. to 16.7 cm.



TH-559 – small celadon plates (4 - set) with a variety of rim treatments and various incised decorative motifs, including an unrecorded variant of the onion skin motif; all have carved fluting radiating down the exterior sides, solidly constructed upright foot (slightly inward slanting on plate No. 4) outward sloping on the interior, and flat bases with compact light cream to beige colored body; D: 19.2 cm. to 16.4 cm.

TH-560 – large celadon bowl with underglaze black floral décor; unglazed base with medium textured light grayish beige body and a blackened circular firing scar; D: 20.6 cm.



TH-563 – celadon “coconut” jars (3) with carved and incised accents, short neck flanked by two loop handles, and cup-like narrow mouth with thickened rolled rim; traces of marine encrustation on the exterior, H: 14.4 to 12.9, D: 14.4 to 13.3.



Detailed descriptions of each individual Con Dao Island Wreck ceramic are also included in the **Ceramics Catalogue** organized by the corresponding ceramic category (Thai or Ming). Details include the Catalogue Number, description, size, dating, provenance (origin, place and date of acquisition, cost), and any references to comparable examples.

References - Partial Listing

Field Notes: Saigon - November 2012, August 2013, and January 2014.

Ha Van Dinh, M. B. A., of Saigon - November 2012, August 2013 and January 2014. Personal discussions in Saigon.

Nguyen Van Hoa of Saigon - November 2012. Personal discussions in Saigon.

Sten Sjostrand - August 2012. Personal discussions in Endau, Malaysia.

Brown, Roxanna and Sten Sjostrand, 2002. *Maritime Archaeology and Shipwreck Ceramics in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Museums and Antiquities.

Brown, Roxanna, 2009. *The Ming Gap and Shipwreck Ceramics in Southeast Asia: Towards a Chronology of Thai Trade Ware*. Bangkok: River Books.

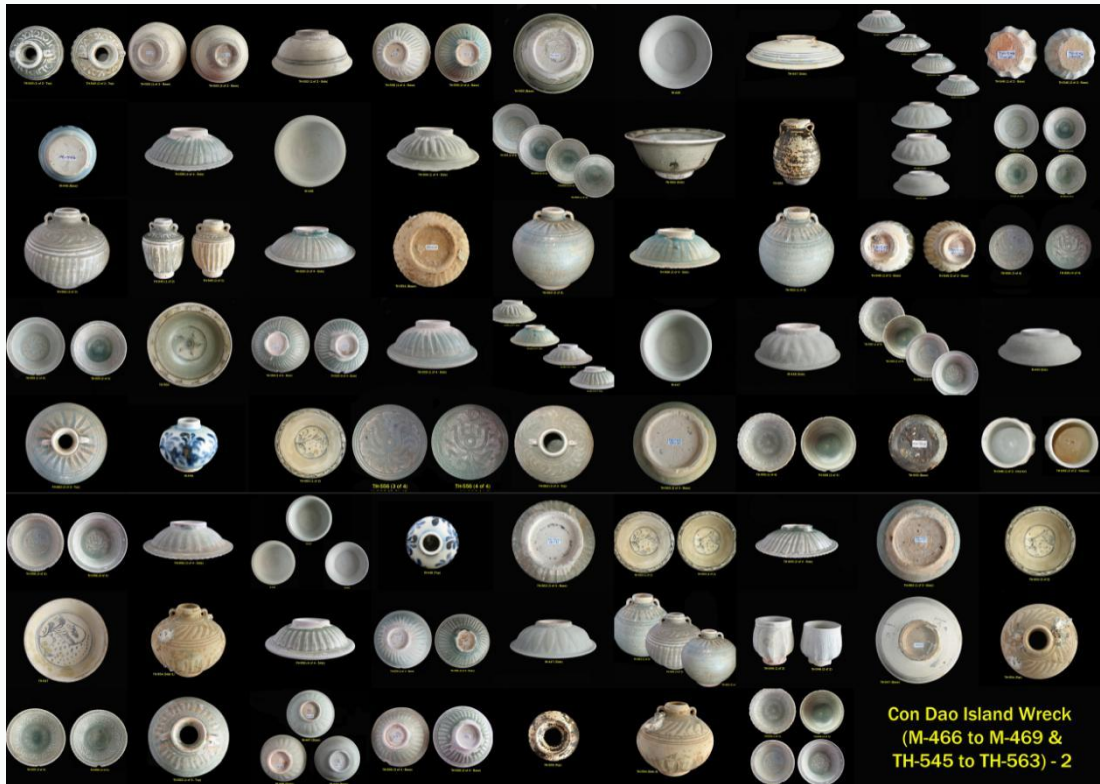
Richards, Dick 1977. *Thai Ceramics*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia.

Ridho, Abu, 1982. *The World's Great Collections Oriental Ceramics Vol.3 Museum Pusat, Jakarta*. Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International Ltd.

Tan, Rita, et al., 1991. *Chinese and Southeast Asian Greenware found in the Philippines*. Manila: Oriental Ceramic Society of the Philippines.

Photos - Con Dao Island Wreck Ceramics





**For additional photos see separate Folder:
Con Dao Island Wreck - Photos.**