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## **From the Deep Sea: A study of 9th-century fusion artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck in the Indian Ocean**

Drijver, Julia Louise

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# From the Deep Sea

A study of 9th-century fusion artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck in the Indian Ocean

By Drijver, J.L.

Cover image: Ewers and ceramic fragments from the Belitung Shipwreck,  
Photographed by M. Flecker

# From the Deep Sea

A study of 9th-century fusion artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck in the Indian Ocean

Author: Julia Louise Drijver

Course: Bachelor Thesis - 1083VBTHEY\_2223\_HS

Supervisor: Dr. M.E.J.J. van Aerde

Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology

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## Acknowledgments

To my parents and Saartje, thank you

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# 1. Introduction

The Belitung Shipwreck, occasionally named the Tang shipwreck or Batu Hitam shipwreck, was discovered by local fishermen off the coast of Belitung in 1998. The ship possibly sailed between the Arab peninsula and China during the 9th century CE, predominantly carrying ceramics in its cargo (*The Belitung Shipwreck | Silk Roads Programme*, n.d.).

This thesis will focus on studying the artefacts recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck, aiming to examine the fusion of culture in trade objects during the expansion of the Indian Ocean trade. This research provides insights into the expanding trade relationships that emerged within the Indian Ocean region and the integration of diverse cultures within this comprehensive network. The significance of these findings cannot be overstated, as they challenge the prevailing Western-centric perspective that Western societies exclusively dominated global trade during this period.

The term "fusion artefacts" will be employed to describe objects that embody the fusion of cultural elements. These elements can cover a range of different aspects, for this study, we will mainly look at the locations of production centres, the materials utilised, and the decorative elements. By adopting this terminology, it becomes possible to more accurately capture the essence of these objects, reflecting the intersection and blending of cultural influences.

Within the context of the Indian Ocean trade network, a fusion artefact is defined as a cultural artefact that presents the amalgamation of diverse cultural traditions, artistic styles, and materials originating from the various regions surrounding the Indian Ocean. These objects serve as tangible evidence of the cultural exchange and interaction that occurred within the maritime network of the Indian Ocean, offering insights into the dynamic and interconnected nature of trade during that era.

This research delves into fusion artefacts to uncover the intricate relationships between cultures, the spread of ideas, and the mutual influences that influenced trade and cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean region. By gaining a deeper understanding

of these fusion objects, we can gain a greater appreciation for the complex historical trade networks and the diverse cultural encounters that played a role in their creation.

## 1.1 Research Questions

This thesis aims to contribute to the continuation of research on Indian Ocean trade. It will contribute to the research by analysing the artefacts predominantly produced for the trade. The primary research question will consequently be as follows:

- *Can artefacts from the Belitung shipwreck give insight into how trade expansions led to fusion objects?*

In order to answer the primary research question, several secondary questions should be constituted. These questions will concentrate on several elements of the overall research topic. The sub-questions will be as follows:

- *Are there significant cultural elements observed on the artefacts salvaged from the Belitung Shipwreck?*
- *Which cultural elements are observed, and where do they originate from?*
- *Is there a relation between the possible trade route of the Belitung ship and the cultural elements observed?*

## 1.2 Methodology

The methodology utilised for this thesis will be a literary review as well as an analysis of the photographs of recovered artefacts. These photographs will be used to assemble a dataset to analyse the cultural elements, such as the artefact's colour, decorations, shape and origin, and to determine what cultures can be distinguished and if there is a fusion of elements present. The primary research question will be answered using this dataset, which will also be used to illustrate the implications of fusion objects.

## 1.3 Limitations

The shipwreck was commercially salvaged by a salvaging team without archaeological experience. The team encountered a significant number of artefacts, approximately

60,000, which proved challenging to adequately store and document. Unfortunately, no official records were ever made available regarding the salvage site or the artefacts that were retrieved (Pearson, 2023, p. 65). Resulting in a lack of recorded information on the artefacts or the site of the Belitung Shipwreck. Furthermore, because the salvaging was not done in accordance with the UNESCO guidelines, most museums rejected displaying the artefacts (Pearson, 2023, p. 64). Further decreasing the amount of research done on the artefacts.

Researching for this thesis has proven to be quite challenging due to the scarcity of publications and the fact that the objects being studied are on permanent display in Singapore, which makes it impossible to conduct a direct examination. To create a dataset, I will have to rely on limited photographs. Due to the scarcity of publications, the research is particularly significant as it sheds light on the underwater heritage and the eastern side of the Indian Ocean trade network. These areas have been increasingly studied in recent times and are expected to remain significant and valuable in the future.

## 1.4 Thesis Outline

The following is an overview of the thesis. The second chapter will place the shipwreck in the broader historical context of Indian Ocean maritime trade. I will briefly discuss the history of the Indian Ocean trade in the classical and medieval periods. In addition, I will go over the influential empires that were part of the Indian Ocean trade network and their connection to the network.

The third chapter will discuss the history of the Belitung Shipwreck. I will discuss the shipwreck's discovery, salvaging and ownership here. I shall also investigate the possible origin and age of the shipwreck by analysing the ship itself. Finally, I will go over the possible route and destination of the ship.

The fourth chapter will be a case study on a selection of shipwreck artefacts. I will compile a database of photographs of the selected artefacts. I will describe the artefacts, identify the unique cultural elements, and determine the cultures to which

these elements belong. Additionally, I will investigate the connection between the cultures and the route the Belitung Shipwreck took.

Following this, the fifth chapter will be the discussion. I will explain and evaluate the implication of the term “fusion object” while providing a more in-depth definition of the term. Finally, I would like to propose ideas for future research.

The final chapter of this thesis will be the conclusion. It will be an evaluation of the information mentioned in previous chapters. It will also address the primary and secondary questions that were introduced before. Lastly, go over the significance of the conclusion of the research question.

## 2. Background Indian Ocean Trade

Before delving into the Belitung shipwreck, it is important to establish the historical context surrounding trade on the Indian Ocean. I will be concentrating on the Classical and the Medieval periods. Additionally, in this chapter, we will be examining empires and port cities that had a significant influence on the Indian Ocean Trade network during the 9th century CE.

The Maritime Silk Road is a term often used to describe the trade that occurred in the Indian Ocean. The name was derived from its land-based equivalent, the Silk Road. However, these two trade routes were fundamentally different, and it is unlikely that silk played the same role in the maritime route as it did on the Silk Road (Chong, 2017, p. 8). The problem with the Maritime Silk Road or, more specifically, the Silk Road is that the term only points to the trade in silk and takes away from the various other commodities traded on the Indian Ocean (Billé et al., 2022, pp. 11-12). Therefore, to accurately address this topic, I will use the term "Indian Ocean trade network."

Previous research on trading networks in the Indian Ocean has a focus on a Roman viewpoint and is a time period predating the voyage of the Belitung Shipwreck. These studies are primarily focused on historical analysis, with little consideration given to archaeological evidence. However, many archaeological studies fail to adequately contextualise their research sites within the broader framework of the Indian Ocean trade network. This leads to a lack of connectivity between archaeological sites on the Indian Ocean trade network. For example, the dominant narrative often portrays India as the central hub of the eastern trade routes. However, a significant amount of Chinese ceramics have been found in Western ports, implying that trade reached further than India.

The integration of both textual and site analyses is crucial for advancing research in the field of ancient trade routes. By merging these two disciplines, we can enhance our understanding of the influences and dynamics of the Indian Ocean trade network (van Aerde, 2022, p. 6).



## 2.1 The History of Indian Ocean Trade

The trade routes in the Indian Ocean date back to as early as the third century BCE and formed an extensive network that connected a wide network of regions, including China, India and the Arab peninsula (Szczepanski, 2019). The merchants on the ancient trade routes of the Indian Ocean relied on the monsoon winds, which blew from the southwest during summer and from the northwest in winter.

### 2.1.1 Classical Period

During the classical era, from the 4th century BCE until the 3rd century CE, several empires participated in the Indian Ocean trade. Their participation was a significant contributor to their local economies. The Achaemenid Empire of Persia, the Mauryan Empire of India, the Han Dynasty of China, and the Roman Empire of the Mediterranean were among the most prominent (Szczepanski, 2019). The range of goods traded between these empires was extensive, with for example, Chinese silk, Indian spices and textiles, African ivory, Arabian aromatics, Afghan gems, Egyptian glass, Syrian wine, and Spanish silver (Seland, 2013, p. 373).

Additionally, the Indian Ocean trade network facilitated the spread of religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam. Merchants played a pivotal role in disseminating these religions rather than relying solely on missionary activities.

Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism expanded from India to Southeast Asia through trade interactions, while Islam followed a similar path of dissemination starting from the 8th century CE (Szczepanski, 2019). The interplay between trade and religion in the Indian Ocean region underscores the complex cultural exchanges that occurred during this period.

### 2.1.2 Medieval Period

During the medieval period, from the 4th century CE until the 15th century CE, trade on the Indian Ocean was at its peak. The major economic powers were mainly located on the Arabian Peninsula, in China and around India.

The Umayyad, 661–750 CE, and Abbasid, 750–1258 CE, caliphates rose to power on the Arabian Peninsula; the empires controlled the seaborne traffic through the Red Sea and the combined sea, river, and overland journey across the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and the

Syrian desert. It seems that during the 8th century CE and 9th century CE the primary route for trans-continental trade in the Indian Ocean was not through the Hijaz or the Red Sea but rather through the Persian Gulf (Chaudhuri, 1985, pp. 45-46).

Similarly, the Tang, 618–907 CE, and Song, 960–1279 CE dynasties of China also placed great emphasis on trade and industry, developing strong relations along the Silk Roads and in the Indian Ocean. The flourishing of several major empires can be attributed to the maritime trade between the Arabs and the Chinese (Szczepanski, 2019).

The Chola Empire, spanning from the 3rd century BCE to 1279 CE in southern India, left a lasting impression on travellers with its opulence and prosperity. Chinese visitors, in particular, documented grand processions of elephants adorned in golden cloth and jewels parading through the bustling streets of the empire. Meanwhile, the Srivijaya Empire flourished from the 7th to the 13th century CE in present-day Indonesia. Even the Angkor civilisation, situated deep inland in the Khmer heartland of Cambodia from the 9th century CE to 1327 CE, was connected with the extensive Indian Ocean trade network (Szczepanski, 2019). These examples showcase the diverse ancient civilisations that participated in the trade networks of the Indian Ocean.

## 2.2 Trade Routes in the 9th Century

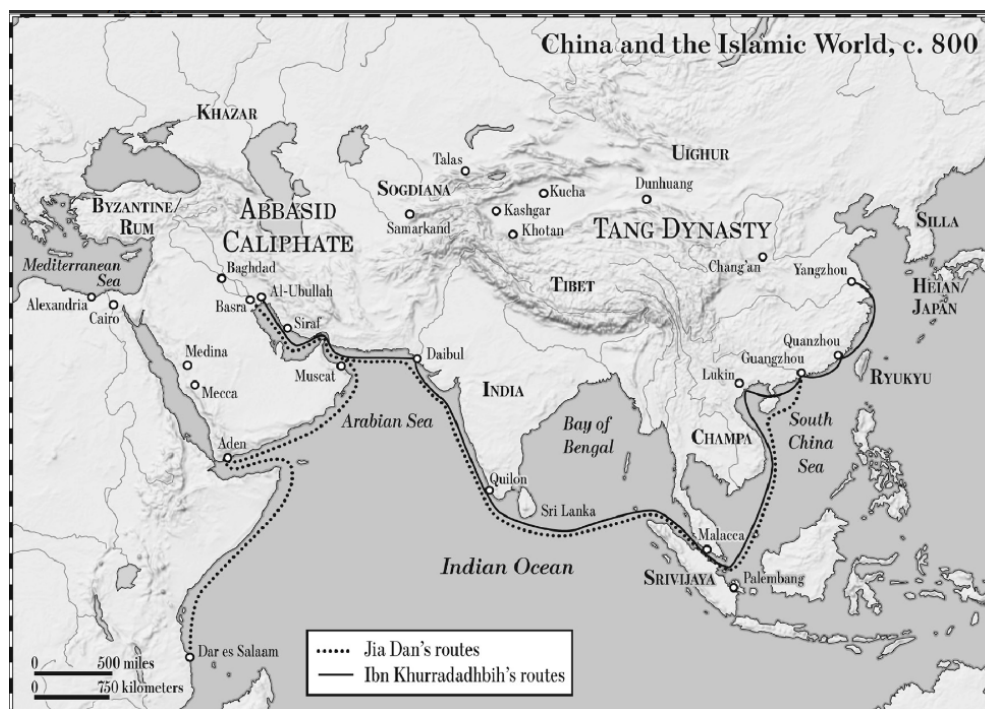


Figure 2.1: Map of the Indian Ocean trade route in the 9th century (Park, 2012).

According to Qin and Xiang (2011, p. 327), the trade route on the Indian Ocean during the 9th and 10th centuries can be categorised into three groups:

1. Trade routes between China and Southeast Asia
2. Trade routes between Southeast Asia and Arabia and the Persian Gulf
3. Trade routes between the Arab peninsula and East Africa.

Prior to the expansions made by the Europeans, these trade routes were known to be the longest trade routes. Many merchants regularly travelled these routes, typically encountering only two obstacles: pirates and weather. It is worth noting that, unlike ports along the trade routes, no one owned the ocean, which was a key factor in the success of these trade routes (Seland, 2022, p. 30).

I will go into more detail about the main empires and ports of the trade routes. Specifically Tang China and Arabia, as they are on either end of the trade routes, and Srivijaya, as it is considered a midway point between the two. I will not be looking in detail at East Africa as the rest of this thesis will focus on trade between China and Arabia.

### 2.2.1 Tang China

During the Tang dynasty, the capital was located in Chang'an, which can be found in north-central China. A canal system was used to connect the major cities and ports to the main rivers, making internal commerce and long-distance bulk trade easier (George, 2015, p. 584). Additionally, there were three major port cities that participated in long-distance trade, namely Mingzhou, Hangzhou and Guangzhou. Guangzhou, located the most Southern of the three ports, was especially important for long-distance trade as it was the arrival point for Western merchants. The other two ports were mainly used by merchants from countries closer to China, for example, Japan and Korea (Heng, 2017, p. 143).

In the 9th century CE, silk was documented as China's primary export, but its role in maritime trade was relatively less prominent compared to its significance in land-based trade. Furthermore, the lack of archaeological evidence or underwater

preservation makes it challenging to substantiate the claim regarding silk's involvement in maritime trade. In contrast, ceramics emerged as a major export during this period, and their abundant presence across the Indian Ocean Trade network can be attributed to their excellent preservation in archaeological contexts. This has contributed to the extensive discovery of ceramics from this era (Qin & Xiang, 2011, p. 309).

### 2.2.2 Srivijaya

Srivijaya was established in the third quarter of the 7th century CE (Herrmann et al., 1996, p. 422), and its location played a crucial role in the prosperity of the empire and Indian Ocean trade routes. During excavation campaigns in Palembang from 1989 to 1993, large quantities of imported Chinese ceramics were discovered (Manguin, 2022, p. 801), indicating that Srivijaya was a major trade hub in the region. It was situated midway between China and Arabia and served as a resting place for ships travelling between South Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Srivijaya was also renowned as “the greatest centre of Mahayana Buddhism in Southeast Asia”, attracting pilgrims from all over who came to study and learn. Chinese pilgrims, in particular, visited the capital of Srivijaya during the 7th century CE (Herrmann et al., 1996, p. 423).

### 2.2.3 Abbasid Dynasty

During the Abbasid dynasty, Baghdad became the new capital due to its economic advantages in long-distance trading. The ports of al-Basrah, Al-Ubullah and Siraf were the most important for sea trading as all ships coming from the east arrived at these ports (Hourani & Carswell, 1995, p. 64). Cargo and merchandise would then be transported to Basta and Baghdad via rivers. In the 9th century CE, when the capital changed to Samarra, the cargo would be shipped from Siraf via rivers as well (Whitehouse, 1970, p. 142).

The excavation of Siraf by the British Institute of Persian Studies began in 1966, shedding light on the city's historical importance as early as the 8th century CE. While the city reached its peak during the 10th century CE, it experienced a gradual decline, eventually transforming into a small town by the 12th century CE. The excavations

provided valuable insights into the evolution and eventual decline of Siraf over several centuries. Despite this, the town continued to exist and was never completely abandoned (Whitehouse, 1970, pp. 156-158).

In 671 CE, a Chinese pilgrim made the first mention of Persian merchants, referring to their ships as *Po-sse* (Hourani & Carswell, 1995, p. 62). From then on, mentions of both Chinese in the Near East and Arabs in China increased. By the 9th century CE, Arabic merchants were frequently mentioned in relation to Indian Ocean trade, and trade with Tang China became regular (Hourani & Carswell, 1995, pp. 65-66).

### 3. Background Belitung Shipwreck

This chapter will cover the Belitung Shipwreck, including its location and discovery. Additionally, we will delve into the complex circumstances surrounding the salvaging and ownership of the Belitung cargo. Finally, we will discuss the ship's dating, origin, and possible trade route.

The Belitung shipwreck is a particularly noteworthy site, as it boasts a wealth of artefacts that provide valuable insights into the Indian Ocean Trade network. Understanding the background of shipwreck salvage is important for studying its artefacts. The wreck is commonly known as the Belitung Shipwreck because it was found in Belitung, although it is also called the Tang or Batu Hitam shipwreck. For the sake of consistency within this thesis, the term "Belitung Shipwreck" will be used to refer to this archaeological site.

#### 3.1. Belitung

The Belitung island is a province of Indonesia and lies between the South Chinese and Java seas. The ship sank approximately two nautical miles or 3.7 kilometres in the northwest direction from the island in the Indonesian archipelago. The shipwreck was located in relatively shallow water, roughly fifty-six feet or 17 metres below the surface. The wreck has a fairly low breaking level, around 20%, indicating that the sinking of the ship was not particularly violent or quick (Pearson, 2023, p. 40). Although the cause of the ship's sinking remains unknown, a significant portion of its cargo was found intact during the discovery.



Figure 3.1: Bowls stacked between hull planks (Flecker, 2001).

Seabed Exploration, founded by Tilman Walterfang, was the company that performed the salvaging of the Belitung Shipwreck. Tilman Walterfang was born in Germany and studied mechanical engineering before finding employment as the manager of a German concrete factory (Pearson, 2023, p. 56). He had no prior professional knowledge or experience in the field of underwater archaeology nor any relation to the Indian Ocean Trade network. Seabed Explorations has partnered with both local Indonesian institutes and foreign investors to obtain funding and licences for salvaging operations (Pearson, 2023, p. 58). According to his website ([www.tilmanwalterfang.org](http://www.tilmanwalterfang.org)), he has been working on salvaging projects since 1994, the Belitung Shipwreck being the biggest salvaging.

In 1988, local fishermen discovered a shipwreck in the waters near Belitung Island. This event is widely recognised as the primary account of the discovery of the Belitung Shipwreck. However, there were already considered rumours that the local fishermen had possibly been aware of the ship's existence for years. It was referred to as a "reef in which jars are growing" (Pearson, 2023, p. 54).

On the 24th of August 1998, Seabed Explorations was issued a salvaging license for the shipwreck. If the license to salvage had not been granted, the artefacts from the ship would have likely been illegally salvaged and sold on the black market (Pearson, 2023, p. 60). According to Pearson, the Indonesian government's involvement with underwater archaeology can be described as follows:

Indonesia's complicated, ambiguous, and problematic regulatory framework created new and unexpected trajectories for the vessel and the objects it carried. In the process, the Belitung has become the ultimate example of the tensions that are created when authorised heritage discourses are imposed on underwater cultural heritage with little regard for local context (p. 62).

According to Pearson (2023, p. 63), Indonesia's approach to shipwrecks in its waters from 1989 to 2010 can be summed up as a legalised salvage for profit.



### 3.2 Salvaging and Ownership

This project, according to Walterfang, was a "first aid rescue operation" rather than an archaeological excavation (Pearson, 2023, p. 64). The project was concluded in 1999, marking the completion of the salvaging efforts on the Belitung Shipwreck. However, following the conclusion of the project, local divers, driven by the hope of discovering treasures such as gold, disregarded the site's historical significance and caused extensive damage. Due to a lack of oversight by the Indonesian government, this piece of undersea heritage was lost to time (Pearson, 2023, pp. 68-69).

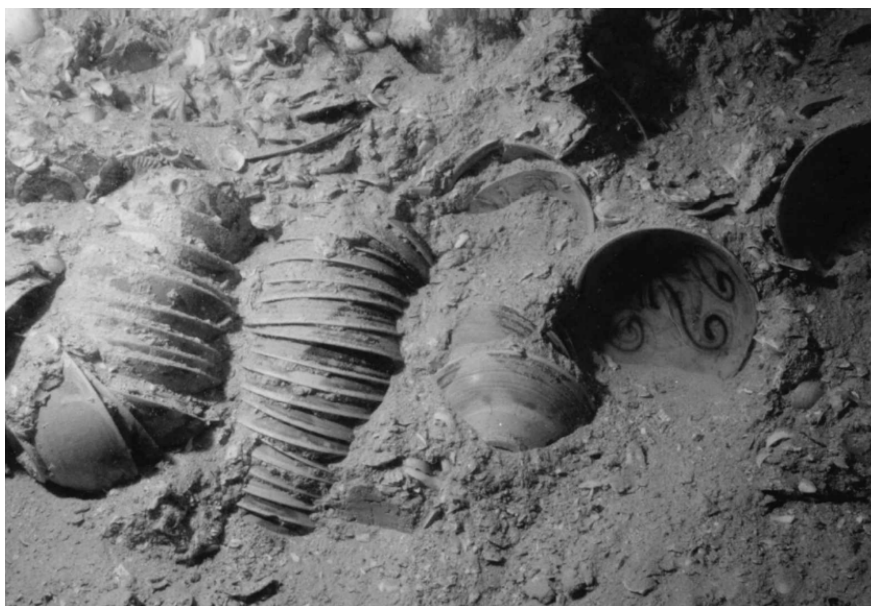


Figure 3.2: Changsha bowls in situ (Flecker, 2001).

During the salvage operation conducted by Seabed Explorations, a remarkable collection of approximately 60 thousand objects were recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck. While gold and silver were sought-after items, the ceramics that were retrieved proved to be the most significant finds.

The most challenging aspect of the operation was adequately conserving and storing the thousands of items found on the ship. Many mistakes were made throughout the operation due to a team with a lack of experience in this field and resources (Pearson, 2023, p. 65).

The artefacts were mainly exported to New Zealand for conservation. The objects were stored in an aircraft hangar because of the size of the collection. The moving of the

artefacts was also a way for Seabed Exploitations to maintain control over the artefacts. As per their agreement, the Indonesian government was entitled to 50 per cent of the Belitung collection. However, Walterfang negotiated that in return for the Intan cargo, he would keep the Belitung and Bakau cargo, 2.5 million in US dollars and publication rights (Pearson, 2023, pp. 72-73). The Indonesian government considered the Intan cargo as more important, probably not knowing the true value of the Belitung cargo.

Walterfang wanted to sell the collection as a whole; in his words, this was evidence of his:

commitment to the object's archaeological and historical significance, reflecting the fact that this collection, but also the collections from the Intan and the Bakau, had been conserved with a view towards installing them in well-appointed museums (Pearson, 2023, p. 76).

The collection was eventually sold to the Singapore Tourism Board and is now on display in the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. Moreover, a notable gap exists in terms of records and sufficiently published works documenting the salvaging process of the Belitung Shipwreck. It is worth noting that the publication rights were sold along with the collection, further contributing to the limited availability of information. As a consequence, the majority of the published research on the shipwreck has emerged only in recent years, a significant time span after the actual salvaging took place.

### 3.3 The ship

At the Asian Civilisations Museum, there are currently 53,227 objects from the Belitung shipwreck. Most of the artefacts recovered are ceramics, with the Changsha ware being the largest group, with around 50 thousand objects. Other ceramic types recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck are Guangdong ware, Gongxian ware, Yue ware, Green-splashed white ware, Xing ware, and Earthenware. Gold, silver, and other metal

artefacts were discovered along with ceramics. Because of the quantity, the collection also includes personal artefacts, such as ink stones.

Changsha ware is known to have been produced during the 9th century CE. The earliest date attributed to this ceramics type is c. 838 CE (Guy, 1990, p. 9). Furthermore, the presence of decorative characters on one of the bowls discovered in the Belitung Shipwreck provides valuable insights into its possible dating. These characters specifically indicate "the sixteenth day of the seventh month of the second year of the reign of the Emperor Jingzong, or 16 July 826" (Flecker, 2001, p. 344). Additionally, coins from the early Tang, 618-626 CE, are known to circulate for centuries in several countries (Flecker, 2001, p. 344), putting the possible date for the Belitung shipwreck around the 9th century CE. Considering these findings, it is plausible to place the Belitung shipwreck in the 9th century CE, aligning with the historical context of the time.

The dating of the Belitung Shipwreck is further supported by multiple radiocarbon dates obtained from various artefacts found at the site. Resin samples from the ship fall within the range of 680-780 CE, while star anise samples indicate a timeframe of 670-890 CE. Additionally, timber samples taken from the ship suggest a dating range of 710-890 CE (Flecker, 2001, p. 344). These radiocarbon dates provide consistent evidence that aligns with the estimated time period of the 9th century CE, confirming the ship's approximate age.

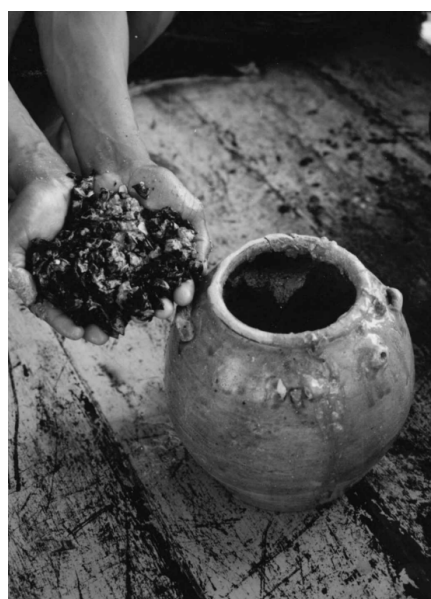


Figure 3.3: Star anise found inside a spouted jar (Flecker, 2001).

The ship itself also gives much information about the trade networks in the Indian Ocean. The ship was believed to have either Arab or Indian origins. The use of teak and coconut as shipbuilding materials is commonly associated with Arab shipbuilders. Interestingly, in the Belitung shipwreck, a different combination of wood types was identified. Rosewood was used for the stempost, teak for the through-beams, Cupressus sp. for the ceiling, and a native African wood type for the anchor shank. It is well known that Arabs import Indian wood, but it would be unlikely that India would import African wood (Flecker, 2001, pp. 346-347). Based on the evidence, it is not possible to definitively determine the origin of the ship. It appears to have originated from either Arabic or Indian origins.



Figure 3.4: Manuscript illustration of an Arab dhow (Guy, 2005).

Another method employed to determine the origin of the ship is the stitching technique used to join the hull planks together. In the case of the Belitung shipwreck, the stitching method involved passing the threads through the planks. This shows similarities with Oman shipbuilding, with the cross-stitching and through-beam

attachment being almost identical to Omani ships surviving to this day (Flecker, 2001, p. 346). Based on the evidence, it is highly plausible that the wood used in the ship's construction originated from India and was imported by Arab traders, who constructed the ship locally.

### 3.4 The Route

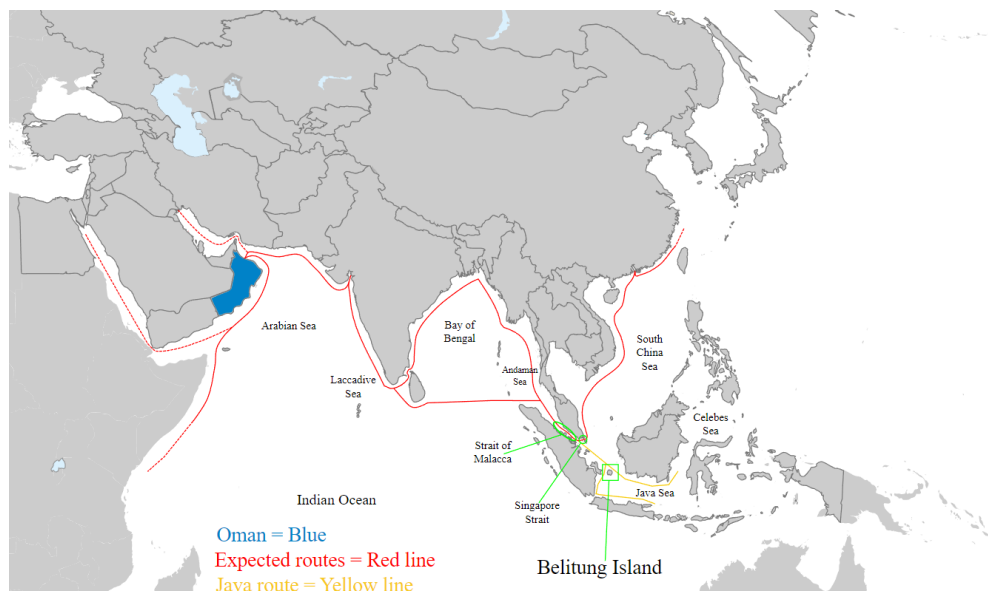


Figure 3.5: The route of the Belitung Shipwreck (Wikimedia Common, 2011).

To understand the route the Belitung took, it is essential to consider the cargo it carried and the type of ship it was. The presence of predominantly Chinese ceramics onboard, combined with the indication that it was an Arabic-style vessel, provides valuable insights into its probable journey. Considering these factors, it is highly plausible that the ship embarked on its voyage from the Persian Gulf region. When it sank, it likely departed from China and was sailing towards the Arab peninsula. It is highly probable that the Belitung vessel departed from China, navigated past Srivijaya, and eventually reached its final destination at Sifar. According to Heng (2017, pp. 157-158), the ship left the Persian Gulf around 824 CE and made a stop around India to trade cargo before arriving in Guangzhou in June or July of that same year. The ship would have had to wait until April 825 CE to leave again due to diplomatic procedures and the monsoon season. To acquire Changsha ceramics and other trade goods, the Belitung had to travel further north to other port cities. In the summer of 836 CE, after obtaining new cargo, the ship set sail to return to the Persian Gulf.

## 4. Case studies: Fusion objects

In this chapter, I will examine several artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck, with a focus on Changsha ware and green-splashed white ware. The objective of this study is to analyse the cultural elements present on the artefacts and determine their origin. The analysis will focus on identifying the manufacturing locations of these artefacts and where the cultural elements observed typically originate. Additionally, the study aims to establish a connection between these cultural elements and the Indian Ocean trade routes.

### 4.1 Changsha bowls



Figure 4.1: Changsha bowl with Makara decorations (Liu, 2015).

The bowl pictured above measures 5.5 cm in height and 15 cm in diameter. Its shape resembles a spherical cap, with the edges and the bottom forming a seamless curve. The exterior is plain, while the interior showcases a detailed fish with a curled snout, large eyes, and fins extending to the back. Its mouth is open, revealing squared teeth

and a thin tongue with a spiral and flame-like design in front of the snout. Smaller lines surround the whole picture and are reminiscent of clouds.

The image is painted in dark olive green and brown on a straw colour base. Surround the image are four brown lines making the image appear square.

#### 4.1.1 Origin

This particular bowl was made in the Changsha kilns situated in Hunan Province.

Before 1953, these finds were categorised as Yuezhou wares. However, it is believed that the Changsha potters were inspired by Sancai and Yuezhou productions (Lam, 1990, p. 33). The kilns were situated along the Xiang River, which flows northwards past the cities of Changsha and Tongguan, finally leading to Dongting Lake. The area between these cities along the river is collectively known as the Changsha kilns. It is estimated that the Changsha kilns occupied around one million squared meters with numerous kiln clusters and other buildings (Lam, 1990, p. 36).

Since 1956, there have been various archaeological surveys and excavations carried out in this region. The archaeological sites are geographically the region has been divided into three areas (Lam, 1990, pp. 33-34):

1. Four sites, two near the town of Shi Zhu on the east side of the river and two at the lake's southeast shore.
2. Thirteen kiln sites in four clusters on the north shore of the lake.
3. Four kiln sites on the east river bank.

During the Tang Dynasty and early Five Dynasties period, the Changsha kilns were able to thrive thanks to the abundant clay deposits in the area and easy access to river transport. The potters in Changsha relied entirely on the clay found in their immediate surroundings for their production (Shuyi, 2017, p. 44).

Furthermore, in the 9th century CE, the Changsha kilns introduced new techniques that revolutionised the production process. These techniques allowed for the mass production of artefacts, enabling the kilns to maintain a consistent production level and meet the demands of exports (Stargardt, 2014, p. 42).



The most popular kiln type during the Tang dynasty was the “dragon kiln”. During the Tang period, the dragon kiln stood out for its larger size compared to other kilns. These kilns were constructed over narrow gorges, creating a hemispherical vault made of brick and clay over the depression. A firing door and chamber were situated in the lower part, while vents were located at the upper end. Early kilns had a length of approximately 30 meters, but later kilns were much larger at around 60-70 meters long and 2 meters in height (Stargardt, 2014, p. 43). Moreover, compared to other kiln types, the dragon kiln was cheaper to operate. The kiln was simpler to construct and needed fewer bricks and metalwork. Furthermore, the kiln was more efficient, costing less fuel and had a shorter production cycle (Lam, 1990, p. 37). These kilns could mass-produce ceramics because of the lower cost and higher production.

In the 9th century CE, approximately 12,000 to 15,000 bowls of Changsha ware could be fired in one kiln (Stargardt, 2014, p. 43). The Changsha ware aboard the Belitung, around 57,500 ceramics, could have been made in a few months.

The largest category of Changsha ceramics received from the shipwreck were relatively deep bowls with wide-mouthed edges and sloped or curved rounded sides. Some have straight sides that are rounded at the base and everted at the lip. The bowls had various sizes, ranging from the larger basin to that of a small cup. The larger ones are used for holding fruits, whereas smaller sizes, known as *wan*, are used for a serving of rice, tea, water, or wine. Medium-sized bowls, called *bo*, served as begging bowls for Buddhist monks, which symbolise the Buddha's stomach (Lam, 1990, pp. 44-52). The bowl above (Figure 4.1) would fit the description of a *wan* or *bo* bowl.

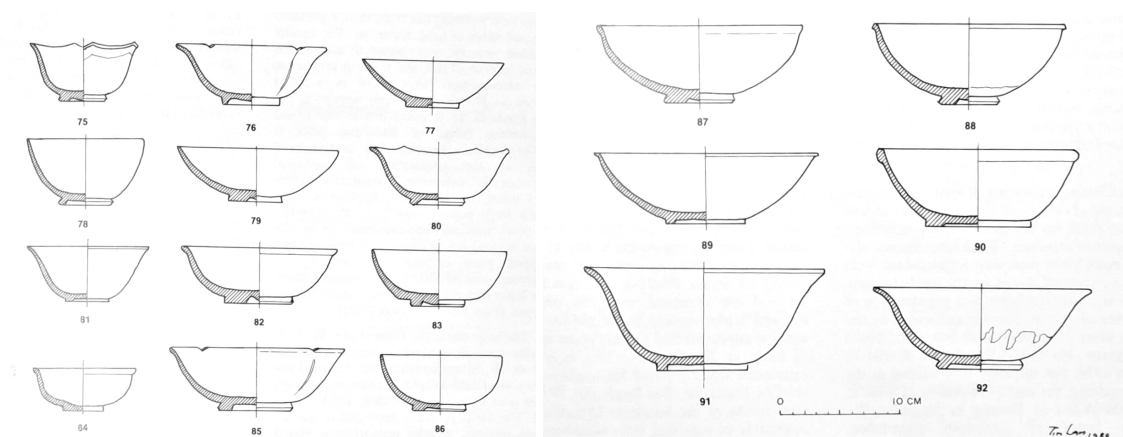


Figure 4.2: Wan bowls (Lam, 1990).

Furthermore, the combination of dark olive green and brown on a straw colour base is a characteristic feature of the three-colour glaze commonly found on various types of Changsha ware. As noted by Lam (1990), this particular glaze combination is prevalent and can be observed across a wide range of ceramic artefacts from the Changsha kilns.

#### 4.1.2 Decoration

The bowl's overall shape and glaze colours appear typical of the Changsha kilns. This is consistent with the kilns' mass production techniques, which would typically result in standardised shapes and colours. However, the decorative elements on each bowl would be unique as individual artisans would have created them.

The most common images painted on Changsha ware were landscapes, flora, fauna and poems. Most of the designs are painted simply and spontaneously. The design of the bowl mentioned above would fall under the flora and fauna category, which is considered “a special category in Chinese art where a feeling of movement, spontaneity and freedom from confinement all contribute towards its excitement and sensuality” (Lam, 1990, p. 122). The image that closest resembles the image on the bowl (Figure 4.1) would be a dragonfish. Lam (1990) does not give any further information about the dragon fish besides mentioning that it slightly resembles a dragon.

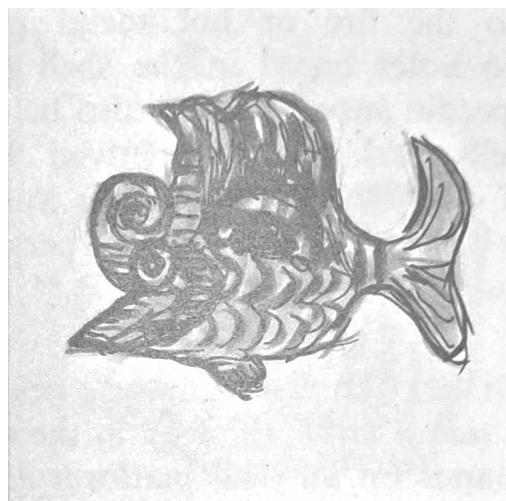


Figure 4.3: Dragon fish (Lam, 1990).

The image depicted on the bowl (Figure 4.1), however, closely resembles a *makara* chasing after a flaming *cintāmaṇi* jewel. The *makara* has been a part of Indian art since ancient times. It is often seen as a representation of the power of water and vegetation and is commonly associated with the vehicle of the River Goddess Ganga. Its design is based on that of a crocodile or dolphin, which has long been a source of mystery and fear in Indian culture (Darian, 1976, p. 29)



Figure 4.4: Illustration of a Makara (Semeka-Pankratov, 1984)

The *cintāmaṇi*, also known as the “wish-fulfilling jewel”, is said to possess the ability to bring riches beyond measure, banish darkness and evil, heal the sick and purify even the foulest of waters (Keown, 2004). It is a powerful symbol that represents a desire to aid worshipers in attaining salvation in Mahayana Buddhism. It is often depicted as a single globe with a pointed extension at the apex or three such globes, surrounded by a flaming halo. This motif was borrowed from Persian art and was associated with divinities such as *Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara* and *Kṣitigarbha*. In Buddhist representations, the *cintāmaṇi* is often depicted resting on the palm of an outstretched hand (Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation, n.d.)

The image of the *makara* shares certain characteristics with the Greek sea monster, *ketos*. The defining features of the *ketos* are a prominent head, which boasts a long snout, bridged nose, often horns, a beard, and leafy excrescences are also depicted. Boardman (2015) suggests there is evidence that the *ketos* image may have inspired the Chinese dragon image during the early Han period and the *makara*. It is noteworthy

that earlier depictions of the Chinese dragons before the 2nd or 1st centuries BCE were more fish-like, but over time, they evolved to become more reptilian in appearance, with clawed feet and a head resembling the Greek *ketos* description (Boardman, 2015, p. 116).



Figure 4.5: Mosaic with a keto (Raddato, 2014)

## 4.2 Another example of Changsha ware



Figure 4.6: Changsha bowl with a decoration of a Buddhist stupa, Changsha kiln (Liu, 2011).

The bowl it is likely also 5.5 cm in height and 15 cm in diameter as this was a standardised shape. The bowl has a deep-rounded body. The exterior is plain, while the interior showcases a bell-shaped stupa with two swastika symbols at either side of the base of the stupa. On either side, next to the stupa, are two flags. Each flag has the *bing* and *zi*, possibly dating to the tenth year of the Dazhong reign, 856 CE (Liu, 2011, p. 121). Similar to the first bowl, this image is painted in dark olive green and brown on a straw colour base. Surround the image are four brown lines making the image appear framed.

Buddhism originated in India and is said to have come to China on the Silk Road during the Han dynasty. In the era of the Tang dynasty, Buddhism had gained a significant following and was regarded as equal to traditional religious beliefs. The widespread popularity of Buddhist beliefs in the region is evident through the recurrent use of specific decorative motifs on Changsha ceramics, which are closely associated with Buddhism (Liu, 2011, p. 121).



### 4.3 Green-splashed white wares plate



Figure 4.7: Green-splashed white ware plate with incised decorations (Guy, 2005).

The size of the plate is unknown, but it has a circular shape with a wide, flattened rim and a shallow body. The inner edge of the rim seems to be curved upwards. The centre is decorated with an incised design. The decoration has a diamond shape with an X shape inside, stretching from side to side. The X is double-lined to highlight its shape. On each corner of the diamond, there is a simple three-petaled flower with a small cloud-shaped leaf on each side. A line runs between the flowers, giving the appearance of a double-lined diamond.

The base is a staw or light beige colour. The rim has around seven large splashes of an emerald green colour in several shades. The centre has around six splashes of the same emerald green colour. On the upper and right side of the rim, the glaze has started to flake off.

#### 4.3.1 Origin

Around 200 artefacts of green-splashed white wares were recovered from the Belitung shipwreck. This type of ceramic ware is not well known; however, its origins seem to be in China around the 6th century CE. The earliest known examples of green-splashed

white ware can be traced back to a bottle and jar that were unearthed in the tomb of Fan Cui, who passed in 575 CE and was buried in Anyang, Henan province. The production of green-splashed white wares most likely reached its peak during the late Tang dynasty, namely the 9th and 10th centuries CE (Krahl, 2017, p. 118).

It is highly probable that most green-splashed white ware artefacts found in the Belitung Shipwreck originate from the Gongxian kilns in Henan province. The Gongxian kilns are mainly known to produce *sancai* ware (Hsieh, 2011, p. 167).

This is supported by the discovery of similar wares in the same region. Scientific testing of the green-splashed fragments found in the shipwreck reveals that they share chemical properties with items produced by the Gongxian kilns but differ from those made in the Xing and Yaozhou kilns (Krahl, 2017, p. 118). However, the majority of green-splashed white ware from the Belitung shipwreck can be grouped into different categories according to morphology, body, and glaze, which likely means that they were produced in several kilns (Hsieh, 2011, p. 170).

It is also plausible that a few of the green-splashed pieces were made at other locations, such as the Xing kilns situated in Hebei province. Some of the green-splashed artefacts from the shipwreck share some characteristics with Xing wares, including their shapes and bi-disc feet (Krahl, 2017, p. 118).

#### 4.3.2 Missing link?

According to Guy (2005), the discovery of green-splashed white ware is highly significant in the world of ceramics, as it helps to connect the styles of late Tang China to the early Islamic potters in the Basra region of the Persian Gulf. This link between the ceramic types can explain the appearance of green-splashed wares in 9th century CE, Iraq. Previous explanations using classic Middle Tang *sansai* wares were not convincing, as they did not match up in terms of periodisation or the colours used (Guy, 2005, p. 15).





Fig. 4.8 *Imitation Green-Splashed Samarra Ware from the 9th-10th century CE. (The Met, museum number: 39.40.10, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449547>)*

The potters of Basra in lower Iraq seem to have invented the unique combination of green-splashed decoration with painted in-glaze cobalt blue, which they held a monopoly on, for reasons that are not entirely clear. It is puzzling to determine the transmission of styles and influences in the ceramics they created. While it is commonly assumed that the use of cobalt blue was inspired by Chinese imports, we know that Chinese ceramics actually used imported Iranian cobalt. It is likely that Middle Eastern merchants encouraged the use of this foreign colourant in order to promote production specifically for the Persian Gulf market (Guy, 2005, p. 16).

This bowl (Figure 4.8) appears to have taken inspiration from a style of bowl produced in Basra, Iraq, which itself was influenced by Chinese designs. The unique inscription on the bowl, created using a dark purple glaze instead of the typical cobalt blue found on Iraqi ceramics, indicates that it was made in Nishapur (Imitation Green-Splashed Samarra Ware | the Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). Nishapur held significant economic importance because of its strategic position along the Silk Road. The bowl shows the influence Basra potters had on pottery production and, in turn, the influence of Chinese ceramics on the production of ceramics in the Indian Ocean trade networks. Furthermore, the bowl (Figure 4.8) seems to be a combination of the blue-and-white decorated stoneware and green-splashed white wares plate, showing the expansion from Chinese imitation to a more local style.



Left: Figure 4.9 Bowl with white slipcovered with splashed green glaze from the the 9th-10th century CE, Iran, Nishapur (The Met, museum number: 40.170.161, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/449849>).

Right: Figure 4.10 Ceramic bowl rim sherds with splashes of green from the mid 9th-10th century, Sifar (The British Museum, museum number: 2007,6001.8243, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_2007-6001-8243](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2007-6001-8243)).

The bowl on the left (Figure 4.9) is an example that was excavated in the 1940s in Iran, Nishapur and dates to the 9th or 10th century CE. On the right (Figure 4.10) is another example of green-splash ware from the 9th to 10th century CE excavated in Sifar, Iraq. Both of these examples strongly resemble the green-splashed white wares plate from the Belitung Shipwreck. This, combined with the earlier imitations of white and cobalt ceramics by early Islamic pottery of the Basra region, makes a compelling argument that Chinese green-splashed white wares inspired Islamic ceramics.

#### 4.3.3 Decoration

The bowl from the Belitung Shipwreck is decorated with a lozenge incised design. Several other green-splashed white wares from the Belitung Shipwreck also feature an incised geometric or lozenge design, which suggests that they were intended for the Islamic market. The lozenge design on the bowl has floral or palmette projections at each corner, which is a distinctive motif with a long history in pre-Islamic Middle Eastern design. Similar designs can be found in early Islamic ceramics from the Persian Gulf region, particularly in Basra, Iraq. It is likely that these wares with non-Chinese motifs were commissioned specifically for the Persian Gulf market (Guy, 2005, p. 16).

## 4.4 Relations

The Changsha bowl's decoration from the first example (Figure 4.1) could have Roman origins, with would show the influence of foreign culture transported by trade, even if the spread occurred prior to the 9th century CE. Furthermore, it would show the adoption and integration of the image into Indian and Chinese culture.

The second example of the Changsha ware bowls (Figure 4.6) features distinctive Buddhist imagery on traditional Changsha ware, reflecting the influence of Buddhism during the 9th century in China. While Buddhism did not originate in China, it gained significant popularity during this period. It is worth noting that regions like Srivijaya and India, which had strong maritime trade relations, were important centres for Buddhism at that time. It is plausible to argue that Chinese ceramics decorated with Buddhist imagery aimed to attract foreign merchants and promote the spread of Buddhism in China.

The green-splashed white ware plate is an excellent example of the relationship between cultural elements and trade routes. With decoration that resembles Islamic art and later Arab ceramics resembling the Chinese green-splashed white ware

## 5. Discussion

This chapter delves into the concept of “fusion artefacts” and offers a comprehensive definition of the term. Additionally, I will present several ideas for potential future research and improvements for the continuation of this study.

As stated in the introduction, the definition of fusion artefacts in this thesis are objects that exhibit this fusion of cultural elements; cultural elements include production centre locations, materials used, or decorative elements. The term "fusion artefacts" can be applied to other cases beyond the thesis' case study. Through various publications, this concept has been acknowledged and utilised. However, there is no consistent term used for this concept in these examples. Based on the definition provided, it seems likely that the objects discovered in the Belitung Shipwreck are fusion artefacts. After studying artefacts, it is clear that they combine multiple cultural elements into one object.

The fusion artefacts can be observed in various spheres, such as cultural exchange, globalisation, innovation and intercultural understanding. The artefacts are created through cultural exchange between different societies. Different artistic techniques, design aesthetics, and cultural symbolisms result in the emergence of unique and distinct cultural expressions, showcasing the diversity of combined traditions. Furthermore, fusion artefacts show how globalisation impacts culture. As the world becomes more connected, people, ideas, and goods move across borders, creating artefacts that combine cultural elements from different regions. These artefacts represent the interconnectedness of societies.

The core of the terminology lies in how we interpret culture and its ever-changing nature. Google defines culture as "the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a specific society or group of people." According to this definition can be interpreted as the ideas and customs belonging to one particular culture. The culture of a particular group is defined by its particular characteristics.

While certain elements may be unique to a particular culture, not everything is exclusively associated with one culture. This is particularly true in the modern world,

where we have access to and can learn about every culture, past or present, from the comfort of our homes through our screens. We adopt elements of these cultures and incorporate them into our own lives, enriching our own culture. This broad example highlights the fluidity of culture and the adoption of cultural elements.

The implications of fusion artefacts also extend to the realm of identity and representation. By embodying the fusion of cultural elements, these artefacts challenge the notion of singular cultural identities. They embody the complexities of individual and collective identities in a globalised context, where individuals often possess multifaceted cultural backgrounds and experiences. Fusion artefacts encourage a broader understanding of identity, highlighting the fluid nature of cultural affiliations and fostering inclusivity by celebrating diverse cultural influences.

Mixing different cultural influences in art and design leads to new and unique styles, looks, and features. These mixed creations also inspire innovation and progress in both the art and technology industries, leading to exciting new ideas and advancements. By introducing foreign objects to their home country, an artisan may be inspired to create a unique object that combines different cultural elements. This new creation would not solely belong to Arab or Chinese culture but would instead be a fusion of both. In turn, this may inspire another artisan to create an object that is not strictly part of Arab or Chinese culture but rather a new creation—a fusion—with distinct cultural elements but not specific to any one particular culture.

Culture is fluid, and objects created from the amalgamation of cultures should be recognised as a new concept instead of trying to fit them into a single culture.

Therefore, I propose the term "fusion object" for this phenomenon, acknowledging its distinctive nature as a product of cultural fusion.

Integrating elements from different cultures helps preserve and spread a new type of artefact. Fusion artefacts attract wider interest and generate economic opportunities, in the case of this study, for merchants. The artefacts promote intercultural understanding and dialogue by showcasing the interplay of diverse cultural elements. They become bridges for cultural exchange and showcase the expanding connectivity between cultures.

In conclusion, fusion artefacts encompass objects that exhibit the fusion of cultural elements, reflecting the blending of multiple cultural influences. The Belitung Shipwreck serves as an example of fusion artefacts, combining diverse cultural elements into one object. This concept extends beyond the specific case study, as evidenced by various publications that acknowledge and utilise the idea of fusion artefacts. Terminology plays a vital role in interpreting and understanding culture, with culture itself being dynamic and subject to change. With the fluidity of culture and the adoption of cultural elements from diverse sources, the concept of fusion objects emerges to acknowledge the unique creations that result from the mixture of cultures. By recognising and appreciating fusion objects, we celebrate the interconnectedness of cultures and the creative expressions that arise from cultural exchange.

## 5.1 Expanding Future Research

The study acknowledges that the sample size is limited; this is mainly because of the time and size limitations of the research. The chosen artefacts are just a small sample compared to the number of artefacts recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck.

Especially the Changsha ware, of which almost 60,000. Some of the imagery discussed is found on a small number of bowls; however, there are more designs that would be worth studying in this type of research.

Besides the small sample size, all of the artefacts come from the same shipwreck.

Comparable artefacts found in the shipwreck suggest there may be other designs that could provide further answers. As this research is specifically about the Belitung Shipwreck, this poses no big issue; however, it would be interesting for further research to include more sites in a bigger sample group.

Another limitation of this research paper was the availability of photographs of the artefacts. The official photographs by the Asian Civilisations Museum and in the publication by the Smithsonian have all right reserved on the use of the photographs. Permission can be granted however was not possible for this research paper.

Furthermore, only around 20 artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck are public on the museum's website, making the choice of artefacts limited for the sample size.

This last constraint was the availability of prior research. There were many research papers on adjacent topics, but not much relating to the Belitung Shipwreck, especially the cargo, because of publication rights held by the Asian Civilisations Museum. Moreover, the lack of published excavations records by Seabed Explorations. Because I want to focus on the artefacts themselves, most of the interpretations and arguments about the shipwreck are heavily based on already published research papers. Because of the time and size constraints, it would not have been possible to look for and examine the objective information available on the Belitung Shipwreck.

Based on these limitations for any further expansion of this specific research, fusion-objects from the Belitung Shipwreck would be to expand the sample group. By either focussing on one type and then researching all artefacts from this group or what would be more feasible because of the size of the cargo, more ceramic types and large samples depending on the amount of ceramics found per type.

Furthermore, this type of research, fusion-objects, could be examined to explore similar artefacts from other shipwrecks to gain a broader understanding of cultural fusion in trade.

However, for both of these types of expansion of research, the Belitung Shipwreck and the other shipwrecks should be placed in the wider context of trade on the Indian Ocean. Despite the significant amount of publications on the Maritime Silk Road, there are very few publications that connect, for example, all the shipwrecks found from the 9th century CE to the Indian Ocean trade network. This is the same for ports. Most ports are mentioned by themselves with little contention to other ports or the broader role in the trade network. For the articles that do put their research in a broader context, there are even fewer publications that mention archaeology to support the argumentation and connection of regions.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis aims to discuss the study of cultural fusion in a selection of artefacts, with a focus on the Indian Ocean trade network during the 9th century CE. The Indian Ocean Trade network was a significant trade route in history, with ceramics being a major export.

During the 9th century CE, the Tang dynasty in China saw flourishing trade facilitated by a canal system connecting major cities and ports. Guangzhou served as a crucial hub for Western merchants, with ceramics being a significant export. Silk, although a primary Chinese export, has limited evidence of its role in maritime trade. Srivijaya, a prominent trade centre, imported large quantities of Chinese ceramics and attracted pilgrims. The Abbasid Dynasty, with Baghdad as the capital, played a vital role, and ports like Basrah, Al-Ubullah, and Siraf were essential for sea trading. The Mekong River also served as a trade route to connect with the larger network.

The Belitung Shipwreck, likely sailing from the Arab Peninsula to China, holds significance in the maritime trade route between China and the Middle East. The salvage operation faced challenges in preserving and storing the numerous daily findings due to limited experience and resources. Unfortunately, the site suffered damage from unregulated visits by local divers, endangering its historical value.

Approximately 60 thousand objects were recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck, with ceramics, especially the Changsha type, being the most important discovery. The collection was exported to New Zealand for conservation and eventually sold to the Singapore Tourism Board. Today, the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore showcases the collection, featuring ceramics, metals, and glass artefacts.

To come back to the main research question of this thesis: Can artefacts from the Belitung shipwreck give insight into how trade expansions led to fusion objects? To answer this question, I will refer back to the sub-questions asked in the introduction.



*Are there significant cultural elements observed on the artefacts salvaged from the Belitung Shipwreck?*

There are distinct cultural elements observed in the sample of chosen artefacts. The cultural elements are easy to observe and recognisable without extensive prior knowledge of the particular regions where the elements originate from.

*Which cultural elements are observed, and where do they originate from?*

Of the two Changsha bowls discussed in this thesis, the first bowl has an image of a makara. The image may have been inspired by the Greek sea monster, ketos, and later influenced the evolution of Chinese dragon depictions. The second bowl of the Changsha ware bowls features the decoration of a Buddhist pagoda with swastika symbols and flags. Buddhism's influence on Changsha ceramics is evident through the frequent use of specific decorative motifs associated with Buddhism.

The shape and colours used, dark olive green and brown on a straw colour base, present on both bowls are typical for Changsha ware.

The green-splashed white ware plate with incised decoration was found in the Belitung shipwreck. The plate has a circular shape with a wide, flattened rim and incised lozenge design in the centre. The lozenge design is typically associated with Islamic art. The origin of green-splashed white ware is uncertain, but it is believed to have come from China around the 6th century CE. The green-splashed white wares reached their peak during the late Tang dynasty, namely the 9th and 10th centuries CE. Similar bowls from the Arab region have been found that were likely inspired by the green and white splash ware from China.

*Is there a relation between the possible trade route of the Belitung ship and the cultural elements observed?*

During the 9th century CE, the cultures and empires mentioned above had connections with the Indian Ocean, which is the route the Belitung shipwreck would have been sailing. It is believed that the ship originated from an Arab seaport city, travelled to

China and was on its way back to the Arab peninsula. The ship could have possibly stopped in Srivijaya along the way, as it was considered the halfway point between the regions. As previously mentioned, these locations are connected to the cultural elements observed on the selected objects.

So to answer the main question on the basis of the answers to the sub-questions: *Can artefacts from the Belitung shipwreck give insight into how trade expansions led to fusion objects?*

The artefacts recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck provide compelling evidence for the fusion of distinct cultural elements originating from various regions active in the Indian Ocean trade network. They serve as evidence for the connections and interactions between different cultures during this period, highlighting how trade routes and networks played a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of ideas, artistic styles, technologies, and materials.

During the era of expanding trade networks in the Indian Ocean region, people and cultures were brought into closer contact, contributing to the process of globalisation. The artefacts recovered from the Belitung Shipwreck provide evidence of this increased interaction and demonstrate the dynamic nature of the cultural exchange that took place.

By studying these artefacts, we gain insights into the most active and imported cultures during the 9th century CE. The artefacts on display showcase the impact of various cultural traditions and demonstrate how foreign influences have been incorporated into the production practices of their respective regions. As trade routes grew and access to foreign markets became easier, production centres began to incorporate cultural elements from these regions to meet their demands. This blending of cultural influences gave rise to fusion objects, where different artistic styles, materials, and techniques melted together to create one-of-a-kind artefacts that highlight the interconnectedness of cultures.

The research findings strongly suggest that the Belitung Shipwreck artefacts give insights into how trade expansions led to the development of fusion objects. These

artefacts provide evidence for the transformative power of trade, as they represent the cultural blending and synthesis that occurred due to increased trade activities.

Researchers can trace the exchange of ideas, the spread of artistic styles, and the integration of various cultural elements by examining these artefacts. In summary, the artefacts from the Belitung Shipwreck offer a comprehensive and tangible record of the impact of trade expansions on the creation of fusion objects. They highlight the cultural diversity and interconnectedness that arose through trade networks, illustrating the profound influence of trade on the material culture of that time.

With this thesis, I have made a modest contribution to the expanding research on Indian Ocean trade and the Maritime Silk Road. I am optimistic that this field of study will continue to flourish, and as archaeologists, we can collaborate to gain a deeper understanding of our shared history. It is my sincere hope that my exploration of fusion artefacts and the Belitung Shipwreck will serve as a catalyst for further discussions and investigations in these fascinating areas.

## Abstract

The Belitung Shipwreck, discovered off the coast of Belitung in 1998, sheds light on the complexities of trade and cultural integration during this era. The artefacts recovered from the shipwreck provide valuable insights into the diverse trade relationships and the fusion of cultural elements within the Indian Ocean region. However, the salvage operation for the shipwreck faced numerous challenges, including the preservation and storage of the vast array of artefacts. Limited experience and resources posed difficulties in maintaining the integrity of the findings. Regrettably, the historical value of the site suffered further damage due to unregulated visits by local divers, emphasising the importance of responsible preservation and conservation efforts.

During the 9th century CE when the Belitung Shipwreck was active, the Tang dynasty in China experienced a period of robust trade facilitated by an extensive canal system that connected major cities and ports. One significant hub for Western merchants was Guangzhou, which served as a crucial gateway for trade. Ceramics emerged as a prominent Chinese export, while silk, although a primary commodity, had limited evidence of its role in maritime trade during this period.

Srivijaya, a powerful maritime kingdom located in present-day Indonesia, emerged as a prominent trade centre during the 9th century CE. It imported substantial quantities of Chinese ceramics, which were highly sought after in the region. Additionally, Srivijaya attracted pilgrims, particularly from China, who travelled to the kingdom for religious purposes, further facilitating cultural exchange.

The Abbasid Dynasty, with its capital in Baghdad, played a vital role in the trade networks of the time. Ports such as Basrah, Al-Ubullah, and Siraf served as crucial hubs for sea trading, connecting the Arabian Peninsula to various destinations across the Indian Ocean region. These ports were bustling centres of commerce, where goods from China, India, and other regions were exchanged.

This thesis aims to explore the cultural fusion observed in trade objects from the Belitung Shipwreck, focusing on the convergence of various cultural elements of the above-mentioned empires. Fusion artefacts, arising from exchanges between different societies, embody this blending of cultural elements, including production centre

locations, materials used, and decorations. Through the research of these objects, a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of cultures and the reciprocal influences that shaped trade and cultural exchange in the Indian Ocean region can be achieved.

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## Figures

Cover image: Ewers and ceramic fragments from the Belitung Shipwreck,  
Photographed by M. Flecker

Figure 2.1 Map of the Indian Ocean trade route in the 9th century (Park, 2012).

Figure 3.1: Bowls stacked between hull planks (Flecker, 2001).

Figure 3.2: Changsha bowls in situ (Flecker, 2001).

Figure 3.3: Star anise found inside a spouted jar (Flecker, 2001).

Figure 3.4: Manuscript illustration of an Arab dhow (Guy, 2005).

Figure 3.5: The route of the Belitung Shipwreck (Wikimedia Common, 2011).

Figure 4.1: Changsha bowl with Makara decorations (Liu, 2015).

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Figure 4.8: Imitation Green-Splashed Samarra Ware from the 9th-10th century CE (The  
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Figure 4.9 Bowl with white slip covered with splashed green glaze from the the  
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Figure 4.10 Ceramic bowl rim sherd with splashes of green from the mid 9th-10th century, Sifar (The British Museum, museum number: 2007,6001.8243, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_2007-6001-8243](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_2007-6001-8243)).