

1

Octagonal cup

Tang, first half of the 9th century

Gold

Ht. 8.9 cm, diam. rim 10.9 cm, weight 624 g

Su, oh Su.

*Sing me again the Song of the Willow Branch,
And I will pour you wine in that golden cup,
And take you with me to the Land of Drunkenness.*

Bo Juyi (772–846), 839.¹

The body of this octagonal gold cup was raised by hammering. It stands on a short flared foot ring, which apparently was welded to the base. A cast circular ring handle was similarly joined with a cast and chased thumb plate and then welded or soldered along one of the cup's edges. The upper side of the thumb plate is worked in shallow relief and depicts two bearded faces seen in profile, each looking in the opposite direction. The cup itself shows eight flat, polished, trapezoidal panels, each framed by a simple line of chased beads. Attached to each of the flat side panels is a figure worked in shallow relief. To the right of the handle is a dancer clapping his hands above his head. The other seven figures depict musicians with various instruments. They all are identified as Central Asians, having long curly hair and wearing sumptuously draped clothing. Above the eight panels and underneath the moulded rim runs a diaper band with a ring-matted background. The rounded bottom of the cup above the foot shows eight ovoid frames, each containing a floral sprig. Eight lobes facing down mirror these frames on the foot itself. A simple, four-leaf blossom is chased within the foot ring on the bottom of the cup.

This cup was designed to enhance the pleasure of luxurious entertainment with wine and song, which during the eighth

and ninth centuries was heavily dominated by the fashions of Central Asia. Not only were Central Asian tunes, musicians, and strong, miraculous grape wine cherished throughout Asia at that time,² gold and silver wine cups with a flared foot ring, a ring handle, and a thumb plate with bacchic faces were themselves part of Central Asian drinking customs. During the eighth century cups of that type were especially popular with the Sogdian and Chach elite in Samarkand and Tashkent.³ Figures of musicians and dancers, however, only appear on examples made in Tang China, where the cups were supposed to evoke more generically the ideals of Western entertainment, as illustrated by Bo Juyi's couplet quoted above, which refers to one of his favourite Central Asian singers.

Only a handful of comparable cups have been excavated in the People's Republic of China. Most closely related are the three examples from the hoard discovered in 1970 in Hejia village near Xi'an, which are generally considered to date from the late seventh or early eighth century.⁴ Each of those cups has a ring handle with a thumb plate in the shape of one or two bearded men, eight side panels with beaded frames and relief figures of Central Asian entertainers, and a high, flared foot. Only one of the Hejia cups, however, is made entirely of gold (the others being gilt bronze and parcel-gilt silver), and all three are considerably smaller in size than the Belitung example, measuring 4.3 cm, 6.0 cm, and 6.6 cm in height respectively. They also differ considerably in style. The Belitung cup has a slightly convex body while the Hejia cups are concave. Major stylistic differences occur in the depiction of the figures and the ornamentation as well. These differences indicate that the Belitung cup was made later than

¹ Waley 1949, 196.

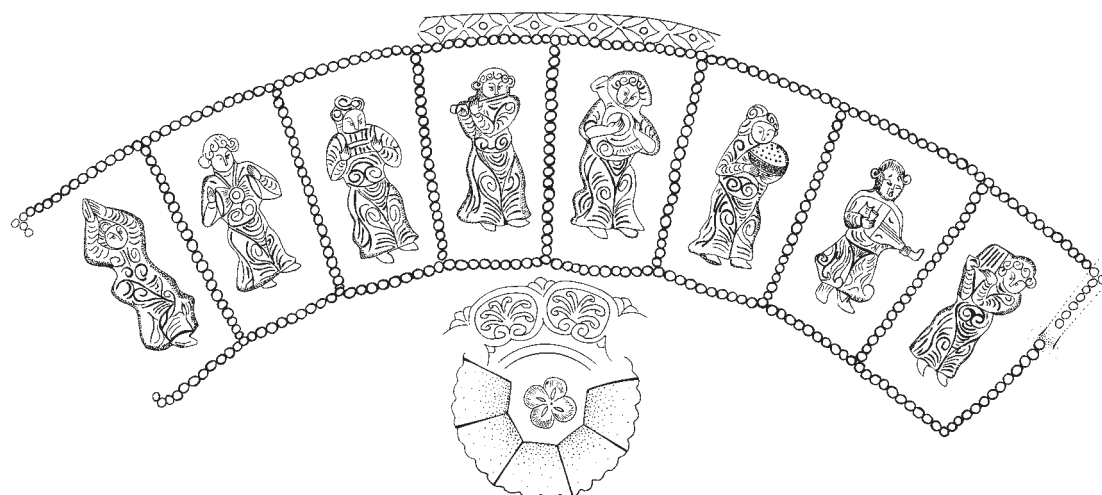
² Schafer 1963, 50ff., 143ff.

³ Marschak 1986, figs 70–81.

⁴ Shaanxi sheng bowuguan 1972, 31; Lu Jiugao and Han Wei (1985, 2) date them to 618–683; Qi Dongfang (1999, 169, figs 6–8) dates them before 712.



No. 1



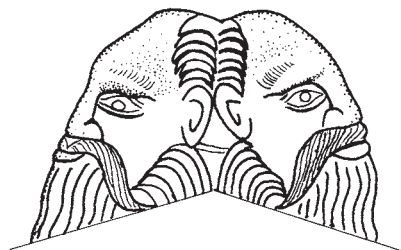
No. 1 Relief and chased decoration (Sc. 1:2)

those of the Hejia hoard, and most likely also in a different part of Tang China. The heavily draped clothes of the entertainers, the dominant swirls in the drapery over knees and torso, as well as their proportions and poses, define a style that is most prominently found in the decoration of the pagoda of the Xiuding Temple near Anyang in Henan province (cf. above p. 147, fig. 22). Although there is no precise date for the construction of that pagoda, scholars have proposed an eighth or early-ninth-century date.⁵ The most useful features for dating the Belitung cup are the ornaments along the bottom. The sprigs, the stylized lotus petals on the foot, and the blossom underneath the foot are typical of objects made during the late eighth and early ninth century. They are also stylistically consistent with the decoration of the other gold and silver items from the shipwreck, which can be dated more accurately to the early ninth century.



No. 1 (Sc. 1:2)

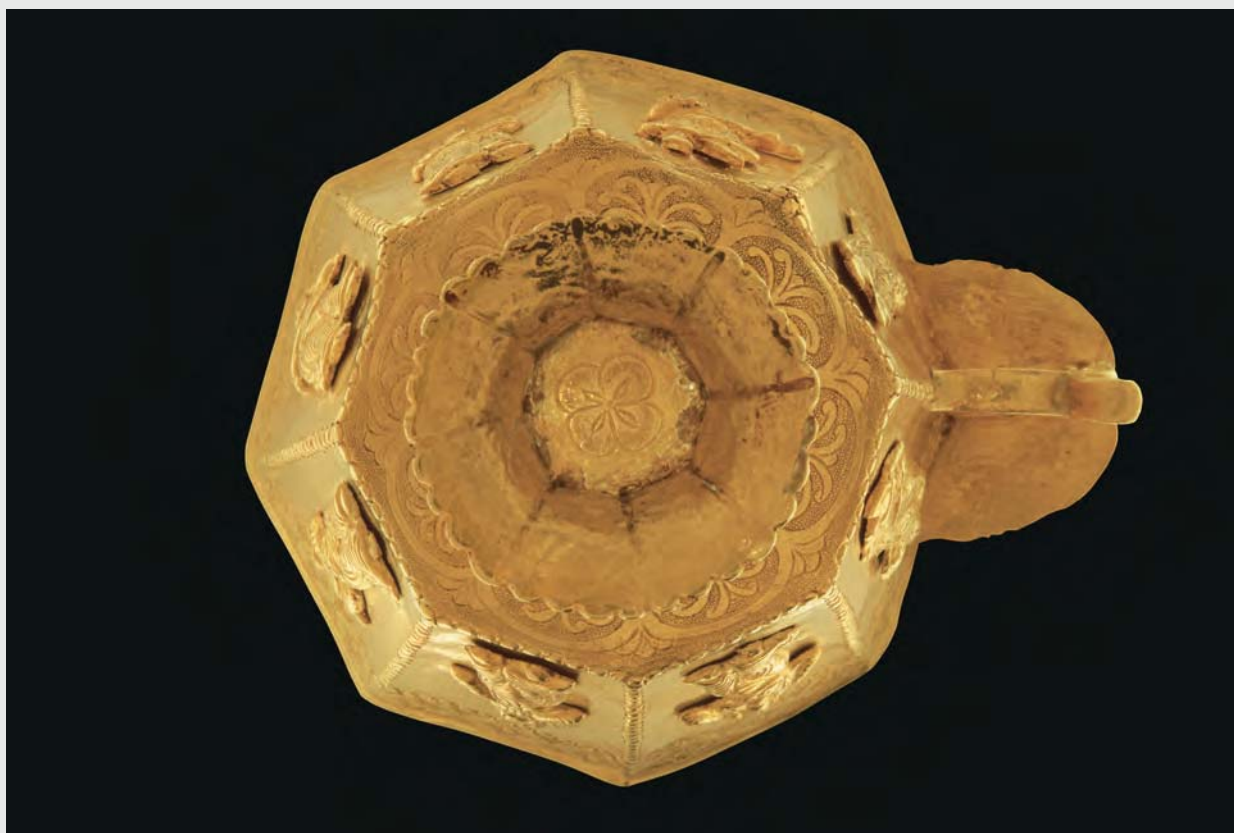
The Belitung cup is significant not only for its uniqueness. It also fills in the gap between the Hejia village cups and a fourth comparable example of this type – two heptagonal cups made of gilded silver which were discovered in 1992 in the Ar Horqin Banner in Inner Mongolia in the tomb of Yelü Yuzhi.⁶ Yuzhi died in 941 and those cups appear to have been made in the early decades of the tenth century. In their panel images they do not depict Western entertainers but figures of Chinese literati.



No. 1 Thumb plate on the handle

⁵ The earliest dated inscription was written in 870. Undated inscriptions could have been placed since 757. Thermoluminescence tests conducted by the Shanghai Museum in 1980 have provided an age of the tested tiles of $1300 \pm 10\%$, which would correspond to a date range from 550 to 820, cf. *Henan sheng wenwu* 1983, 22–29. Swart and Till propose a 'High Tang' date, corresponding to 712–781, cf. Swart and Till 1990, 76.

⁶ *Neimenggu wenwu* 1996, colour illustration I:2; Béguin and Laureillard 2000, no. 147.



No. 1 Bottom



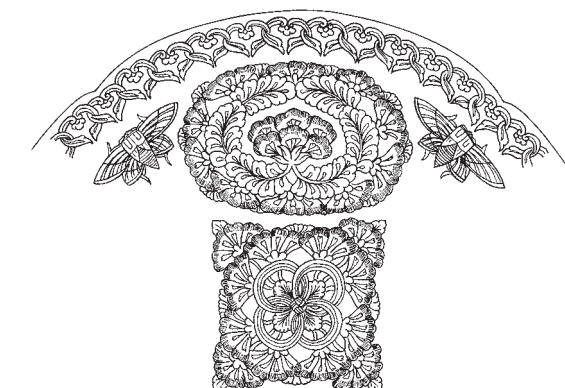
No. 1 Thumb plate on the handle

Circular, quatrefoil dish

Tang, first half of the 9th century

Gold

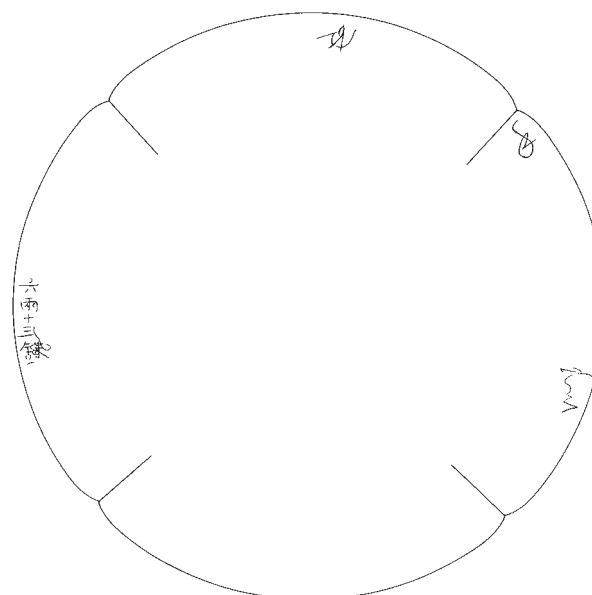
Ht. 0.7 cm, diam. 15.4 cm, weight 282 g



No. 2 (Sc. 1:2)

The circular gold dish is exquisitely chased on its inner surface, while its outer surface is simply polished. The chased decoration shows four medallions of floral sprigs around a central diamond-shaped sprig, which radiates from underneath a sash that is tied into four bows. Interspersed between the medallions are four cicadas with their wings spread. The cicadas face a chain of interlocked ornaments along the border of the dish. The background is matted with a fine concentric pattern of ring-punch marks. This pictorial decoration can be read as a visual pun. The cicadas and the linked ornamental border provide a visual equivalent to the term *chanlian*, literally 'cicada link', which means continuous, everlasting. The sash, *shou*, in the centre can be interpreted in several ways: it may be understood as a homonym for longevity, or, if it is seen as a knot, *jie*, as a pun on tying the bond of friendship or matrimony. It may even be taken as a homonym for words such as pure or brave. The design is thus auspicious in more than one sense and may express the wish for eternal life, everlasting purity of mind, or continuous friendship.

On the back along the edge, the dish carries a five-character Chinese inscription that states the weight of the vessel: '6 *liang* 13 *zhu*'. Given that one *liang* contains 24 *zhu*, we can calculate that the *liang* unit used by the person who inscribed the weight corresponds to 43.1 modern grams. During the past decades several dozen Tang gold and silver objects with weight inscriptions have been archaeologically discovered. According to this data the weight of a *liang* ranged from 38 g to 45 g.¹ The *liang* unit used for weighing this dish was thus relatively generous. During the second half of the ninth century the *liang* unit dwindled to an average of only 40 g, reflecting the fact that precious metals had gradually become more expensive.²



No. 2 Back of the dish with inscriptions (Sc. 1:2)

Aside from the Chinese inscription, which was carefully chased – most likely by the original maker of the dish – there are three engraved marks at different spots near the edge. The meaning of these marks is unclear. Certainly, they were added after the dish had left the workshop of the goldsmith.

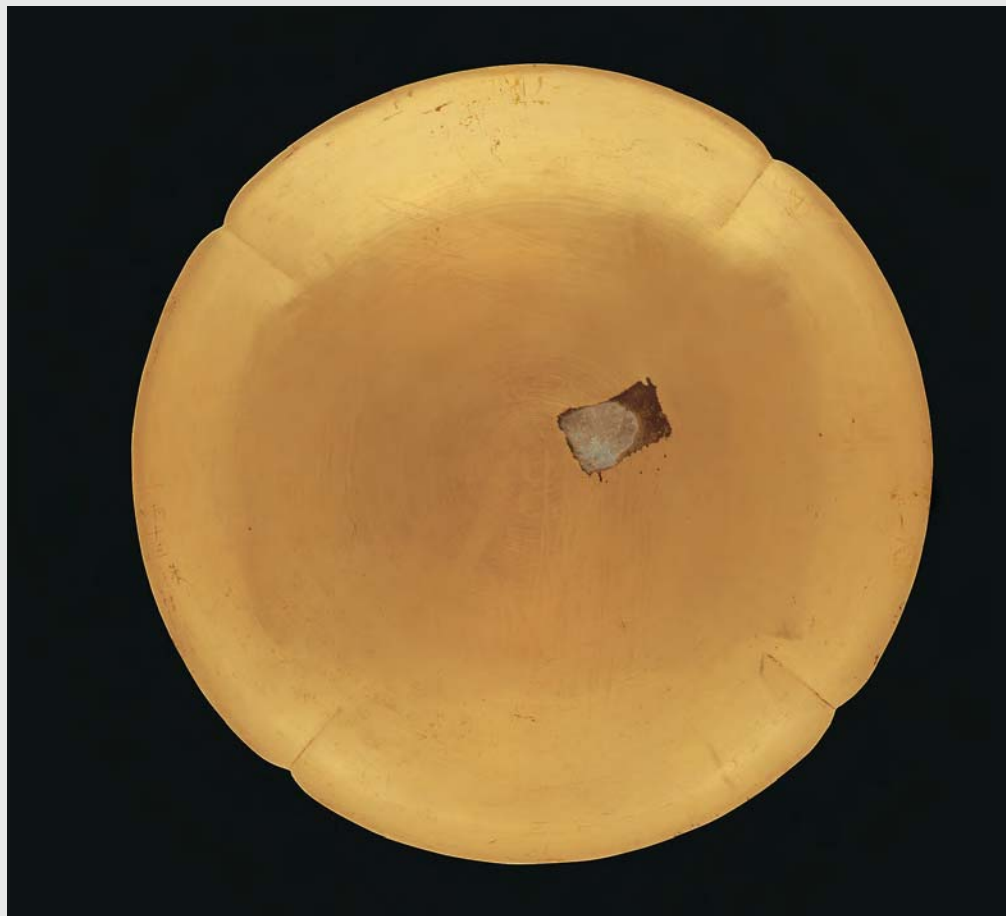
The back of the dish also shows various densely scratched patches and other signs of wear. The scratches were present at the time the ship sank. They came to light after the barnacles and the calcareous encrustation were cleaned from the dish. A small rectangular area of the original patina was left intact during conservation in order to demonstrate the ninth-century origin of the scratches. Such scratch marks suggest that the dish had gone through the hands of various people who apparently tested the purity of the material.

¹ Han Wei 1991; Wang Cangxi 1992.

² Han Wei 1991, 34f.; Wang Cangxi 1992, 52, 58.



No. 2



No. 2 Back of the dish with inscriptions and small area of original patina

3, 4

A pair of square dishes with rounded edges

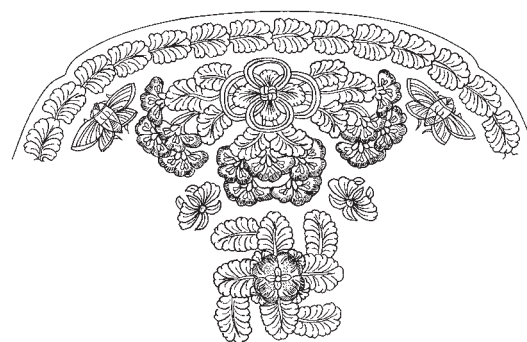
Tang, first half of the 9th century

Gold

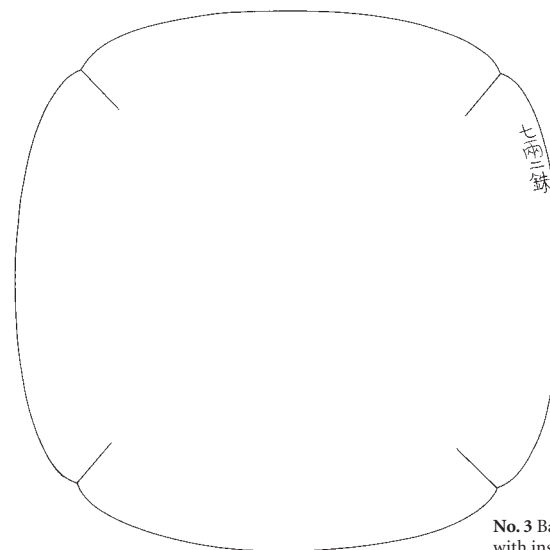
No. 3: Ht. 0.6 cm, l. 15.6 cm, weight 277 g

No. 4: Ht. 0.5 cm, l. 15.5 cm, weight 304 g

The two dishes are almost identical in design. They were possibly intended as saucers for the oval wine bowls nos 5 and 6. Both are elaborately chased on the inside with auspicious images on a ring-matted ground, while the outside is plain and polished. Aside from the flowers and leaves we see cicadas and knotted ribbons as on the circular dish. The centre is marked by a blossom surrounded by leaves which form a swastika, an ancient Indian symbol of good fortune and the Buddha. In China it came to be called *wan*, ten thousand, during the reign of empress Wu Zetian (r. 684–705), because it was considered a symbol that ‘combines all of the auspicious virtues’.¹ Together with the knotted sashes it may also be understood as part of a longevity rebus forming the birthday wish *wan shou*, ‘may you live ten thousand years’. The four small butterflies next to the swastika flower may similarly be taken as wishes for long life.²



No. 3 (Sc. 1:2)



No. 3 Back of the dish with inscription (Sc. 1:2)

¹ Luo Zhufeng 1997, 325; Wang Renbo 1990, 165. For comparable mirrors with swastika designs of the late eighth or early ninth century see also Chou Ju-hsi 2000, nos 75, 76.
² Eberhard 1986, 52.

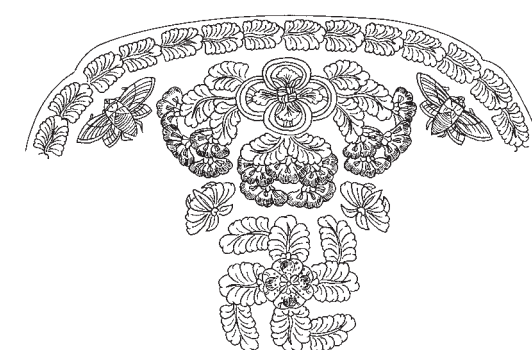


No. 3

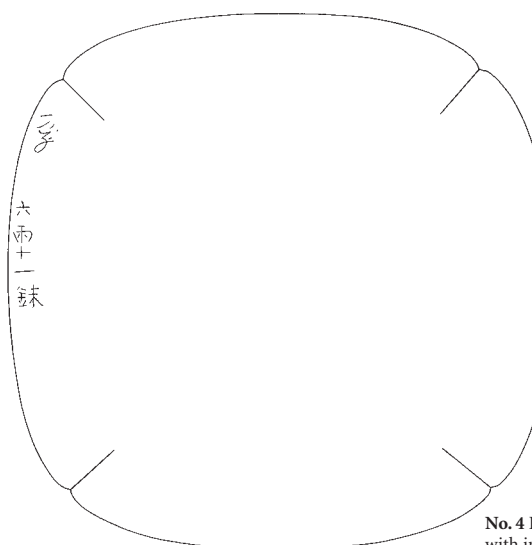
3, 4

The weight of each of the dishes is inscribed on the back near the edge in neatly chased four- and five-character inscriptions respectively. One says ‘6 *liang* 11 *zhu*’, (no. 4) the other ‘7 *liang* 2 *zhu*’ (no. 3). In both cases the *liang* unit is equivalent to 42.9 modern grams. One dish (no. 4) has in addition an incised mark near the edge, whose meaning is unclear.

So far, no other Tang gold or silver vessels of this square shape with rounded corners are known. The shape is, however, familiar from bronze mirrors and ceramics, examples of which have also been discovered on the Belitung wreck (cf. nos 132–134). A bronze mirror of this shape, similarly decorated with cicadas in the corners, was discovered in the tomb of Wei He, who died in 829.³ It also occurs on a high silver stand with openwork decoration discovered in the tomb of Lady Wu, who was buried in Yichuan county near Luoyang in 824.



No. 4 (Sc. 1:2)



No. 4 Back of the dish with inscription (Sc. 1:2)

³ Xu Diankui 1994, 330f.



No. 4

5, 6

A pair of oblong, four-lobed, shallow drinking bowls

Tang, first half of the 9th century

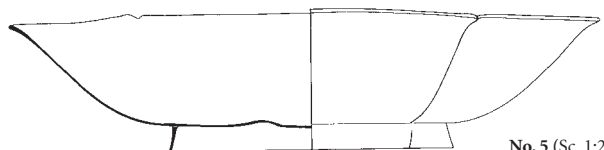
Gold

No. 5: Ht. 3.5 cm, l. 14.5 cm, w. 10.0 cm, weight 302 g

No. 6: Ht. 3.7 cm, l. 15.5 cm, w. 10.1 cm, weight 302 g

The two wine bowls are nearly identical. Both are hammered into an oval, four-lobed shape with a slightly everted lip and a foot ring that was soldered to the base. They are decorated with finely chased floral sprigs and a pair of flying ducks worked in *repoussé* in the centre. The outside is polished.

A closely related pair of gilt silver bowls from the tomb of Lady Wu in Yichuan, Henan province, provides important information for the use and the date of the bowls.¹ The Yichuan bowls were accompanied by custom-made saucers of gilt silver, which suggests that a similar formal pairing can be expected for the Belitung bowls. Quite likely, they were intended to form a set with the two square gold dishes nos 3 and 4. The Yichuan tomb also provides us with dates. Lady Wu died in March 824 at the age of 61. That tomb find confirms the late eighth/early ninth-century date assigned by Han Wei to another closely related silver bowl, which is kept in the Hakutsuru Museum of Fine Art in Kobe.²



No. 5 (Sc. 1:2)



No. 6 Inside decoration (Sc. 1:2)



No. 5 Inside decoration (Sc. 1:2)

¹ Luoyang dier 1995, 25ff. Here the bowls are mistakenly described as 'gold cups'. See *Tô no jotei* 1998, 140f.

² Han Wei 1989, 49. Qi Dongfang (1999, 52) places this type of vessel into the first half of the ninth century.



No. 6 Detail of the inside decoration



No. 5



No. 6



7

Oblong, four-lobed, undecorated bowl

Tang, first half of the 9th century

Gold

Ht. 2.5 cm, l. 14.0 cm, w. 9.0 cm, weight 188 g

The wine bowl is hammered into an oval, four-lobed shape and polished. The lip is slightly everted. The foot ring is soldered to the base. For related examples see nos 5, 6.



No. 7 (1:2)

8 a, b

Two fragments of bracelets

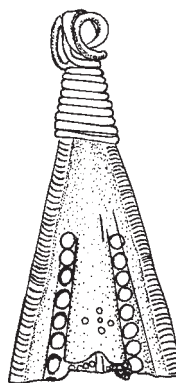
Tang, late 8th or early 9th century

Gold

No. 8a (bead design): L. 4.8 cm, weight 10.75 g

No. 8b (floral design): L. 4.2 cm, weight 8 g

The two fragments appear to be end pieces of two C-shaped bracelets. Bracelets of this type were common in China from the eighth century onwards and characteristically have gold wire wrapped around their ends. Usually, a piece of metal was beaten into a flat strip whose ends were hammered into one or two wires. Once the flat part of the bracelet had been decorated the wire ends were twisted back and coiled around the body of the bracelet. For a fine intact example see no. 9.



No. 8 a



No. 8 b



No. 8 a, b



No. 7

Bracelet

Tang, first half of the 9th century

Gold

Diam. 6.8 cm, w. 2.5 cm, weight 41 g

This magnificent gold bracelet is hammered and chased. The tapering ends coil into a loop and split into two wires which continue the coil and then wind backwards around the bracelet. The end loops presumably served to close the bracelet with silk string and adjust its circumference. While the inside is flat and smooth, the outside is divided into three ornamental zones which are framed by raised angular ridges that resemble ropes. The central zone shows two songbirds amid clouds flying toward a flower-framed diamond ornament. The two outer zones are chased with half-blossoms to create a zigzag pattern. The background on all three zones is ring-matted.

Gold bracelets of this type have rarely been found in Tang archaeological sites. The most notable discovery so far yielded fifteen comparable gold ornaments decorated with flowers. They were found in 1979 within the remains of a wealthy Tang residence in Pinglu county, Shanxi province, along with

82 golden belt ornaments, hair ornaments, gold foil, and 86 ingots, one of which was dated to 758.¹ When found, the ornaments were not bent into a C-shape but were straight, causing the authors of the excavation report to speculate about their use as head ornaments instead of bracelets. However, several bracelets of this type made out of silver have been discovered in Tang tombs, where their purpose was clear.² Examples with floral designs similar to those on the Belitung bracelet (but without birds) were discovered in 1975 in Changxing county in Zhejiang province.³

¹ Shanxi sheng kaogu 1981, 50–51, figs 5–7.

² Cf. the bracelets from tomb 16 at the Qinchuan Engineering Works in Xi'an, reported in Xi'an shi wenwu 1992, 49–50, fig. 19:6. For a selection of similar bracelets see Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming 1988, 194–195.

³ Xia Xingnan 1982, 41, fig. 16; Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming 1988, 194, no. 250.



No. 9 Detail; wire end, outside



No. 9

10

Piloncito

Indonesia, late 8th or early 9th century

Gold

Ht. 0.4 cm, diam. 0.7 cm, weight 2.5 g

‘Piloncito’, literally ‘little cone’, is the name given by Philippine numismatists to ancient Indonesian and Philippine gold coins, which have been found in a number of different sizes and with various types of incuse.¹ The Belitung example is a slightly flattened sphere with an angular, hourglass-shaped incuse and a rounded obverse. In his doctoral study on Southeast Asian currency Robert Wicks describes such a coin (class F) as a variation on the piloncito theme in Java.² Closely related but smaller examples have been recovered from Borobudur,³ and hundreds of others of comparable size, but with a different incuse showing two beads next to a central line, have been found in Java since 1860.⁴ Wicks maintains that piloncitos were first minted in ancient Java in the eighth century, and subsequently variants were produced in Bali and the Philippines, while a type with a so-called Sandalwood Flower impression appeared in Sumatra.⁵ Precedents for such gold coins, assigned to the first half of the first millennium, have been discovered in southern Thailand.⁶ These gold coins circulated until the late thirteenth century, when Chinese copper coinage and local Islamic gold currency began to replace them.⁷

In Java piloncitos were ‘primarily intended to facilitate administrative and religious transfers and [were] limited to high-value transactions’.⁸ The weight of 2.5 g corresponds to the principle denomination of this currency in ancient Java, a *masa*. According to the medieval Javanese weight and currency system, sixteen *masa* equalled one *suvarna*, and sixteen *suvarna* equalled one *kati*.⁹ Comparable specimens are in the Hunter Thompson Collection in Singapore.¹⁰

¹ Wicks 1983, 240ff.; Miksic 1990, 37f.

² Wicks 1983, 243.

³ Millies 1871, 10.

⁴ Wicks 1983, 243.

⁵ Wicks 1992, 218–226, 248–252, 290.

⁶ Ibid., 222.

⁷ On the introduction of Chinese copper coins in Java see Wicks 1983, 244–252.

⁸ Wicks 1992, 243.

⁹ Miksic 1990, 37; Wicks 1992, 252–256.

¹⁰ Miksic 1990, 105.

11a, b

Ingots

Tang, early 9th century

Silver

No. 11a: Ht. 2.2 cm, l. 20.7 cm, w. 7.5 cm, weight 2016 g

No. 11b: Ht. 1.9 cm, l. 21.7 cm, w. 7.9 cm, weight 1920 g

Eighteen silver ingots were recovered from the Belitung wreck, two of which (the examples published here) have been freed of their calcification and cleaned (see also above p. 108 and figs 11c, d on p. 109). Both are cast in the form of a slender stick with concave sides, flat ends, and slightly raised rims. Their surface is partly wrinkled; many areas are rough and corroded. No inscriptions are visible.

While ingot no. 11a weighs 2,016 g and thus corresponds neatly to the weight of 50 *liang*, customary for many late-Tang silver ingots, specimen no. 11b only weighs 1,920 g and falls below the standard Tang ingot weight. This discrepancy is explained, at least in part, by the fact that silver in early-ninth-century China was still a commodity and not an official currency. The weighing of individual amounts would therefore have been customary when trading silver, especially when an ingot did not carry an official inscription that would guarantee its weight, place of manufacture, and purpose.¹ Corrosion may be another reason for the weight difference. A small sample of one of the ingots has been tested for its metal contents and the examination indicates that the silver is very pure, 99.5 per cent. It remains to be determined whether the silver quality is the same in all of the ingots.

¹ Lighter silver ingots of similar shape and date have been excavated in Yangjiagou, Lantian county, Shaanxi province. See Lantian xian 1982, 46. On Tang silver ingot inscriptions, see Louis 1999, 44–46.



No. 10



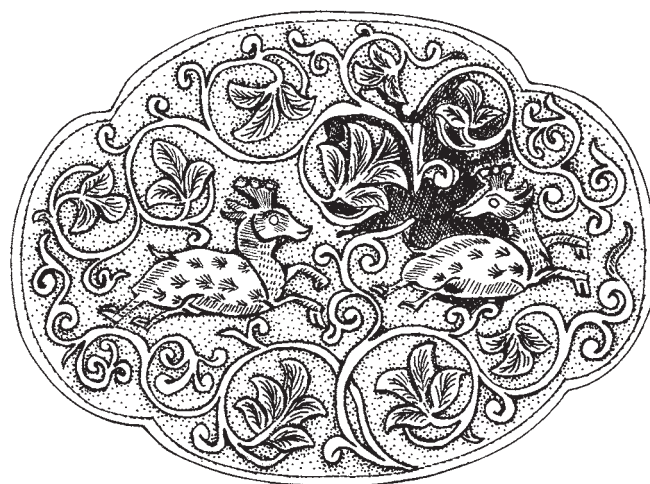
No. 11 a, b

Oblong, four-lobed box

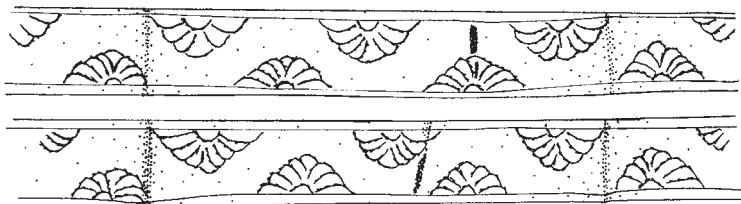
Tang dynasty, first half of the 9th century
Silver, parcel-gilt
Ht. 3.4 cm, l. 8.6 cm, w. 6.16 cm, weight 30 g

The slightly domed lid of this small box is decorated in *repoussé* with two deer chasing each other amid leafy vines. The animal to the right cheerfully looks back at its companion. In the right section the lid was damaged and has been restored (cf. above p. 110, figs 12g, h). The bottom of the box is slightly curved and decorated with a grimly frowning lion that jumps to the left and is surrounded by a blossoming vine scroll. The side shows zigzag bands constructed of alternating half-blossoms.

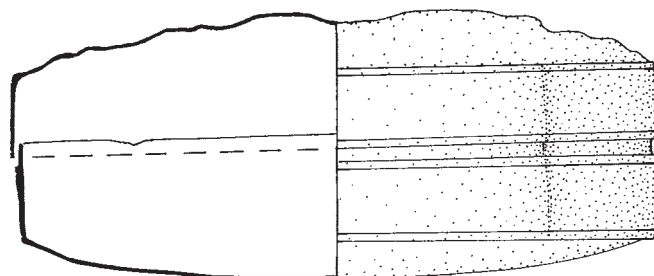
This box was discovered within a large silver box along with three other small silver boxes (nos 14, 15, 18). Two further examples of the same shape and size but with different animals and leaves have been found on the Belitung wreck, one of them within a second large silver box. Boxes of an oblong, four-lobed shape are quite rare.¹ More frequently the shape can be seen in gold and silver wine bowls such as those found on the ship (cf. nos 5–7, 19). Apparently this shape was particularly fashionable during the ninth century.



No. 12 Decoration of the lid (*above*) and the bottom (*below*)



No. 12 Decoration of the side (front part with soldered joints)



No. 12 Shape without decoration

¹ For examples see Han Wei 1989, nos 247, 248 (discovered in 1979 on the campus of Jiaotong University, cf. Zhang Dahong and Wang Changqi 1984, 24); for a gilded box from Hongqing in Xi'an see Yan Lei 1959, 34–35; for an example from the crypt of the Famensi, which had been sealed in 874 and was rediscovered in 1987, see Archaeological Institute 1994, no. 74.



No. 12 Top



No. 12 Bottom

13

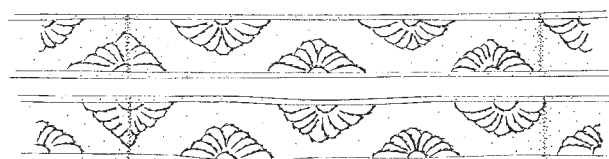
Oblong, four-lobed box

Tang, first half of the 9th century
Silver, parcel-gilt
Ht. 3.6 cm, l. 9.3 cm, w. 7.1 cm

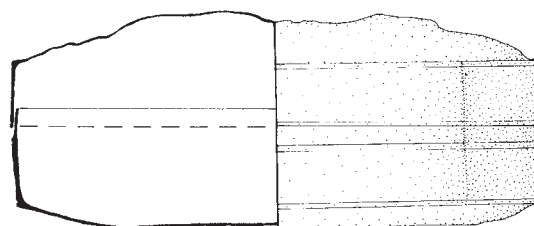
This box shows a pair of ibexes jumping across the pictorial space on the slightly domed lid. Like the flowering vines which frame them they are gilt and worked in *repoussé*. The sides are decorated with gilt half-blossoms and a ring-matted zigzag band. The bottom of the box shows a chased decoration of floral scrolls with a central pair of flying parrots with long tails. To the left of the parrots the bottom is damaged from corrosion. The box is very similar to no. 12 and a third example found within a larger silver box, which has not yet been cleaned sufficiently to recognize its ornament.



No. 13 Decoration of the lid (*above*) and the bottom (*below*)(Sc. 3:4)



No. 13 Decoration of the side (Sc. 3:4)



No. 13 Shape without decoration (Sc. 3:4)



No. 13 Top



No. 13 Bottom

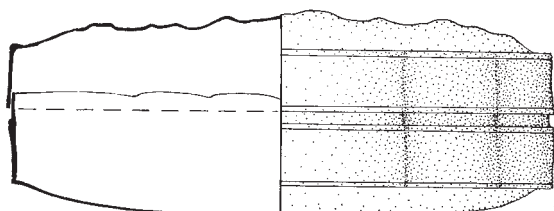
Lobed box

Tang, first half of the 9th century

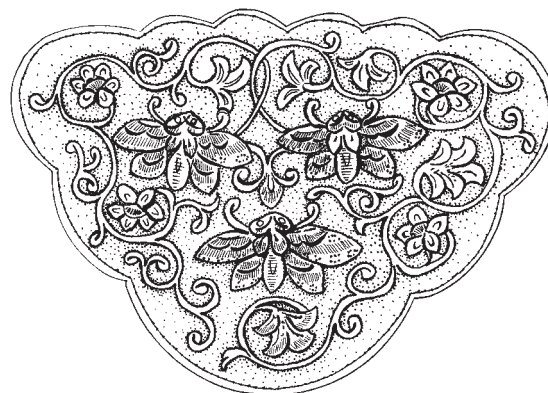
Silver, parcel-gilt

Ht. 3.5 cm, l. 9.6 cm, w. 6.7 cm, weight 105 g

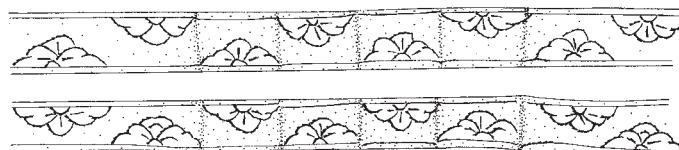
The slightly domed lid of this multi-lobed box is decorated in *repoussé* with three flying cicadas amid leafy vines, a favorite subject of ninth-century designers. The bottom of the box is slightly curved and decorated with a chased pair of flying waterbirds surrounded by floral scrolls. This container was one of four small silver cases (cf. nos 12, 15, 18) that were found within a large silver box. It is well preserved.



No. 14 Shape without decoration (Sc. 3:4)



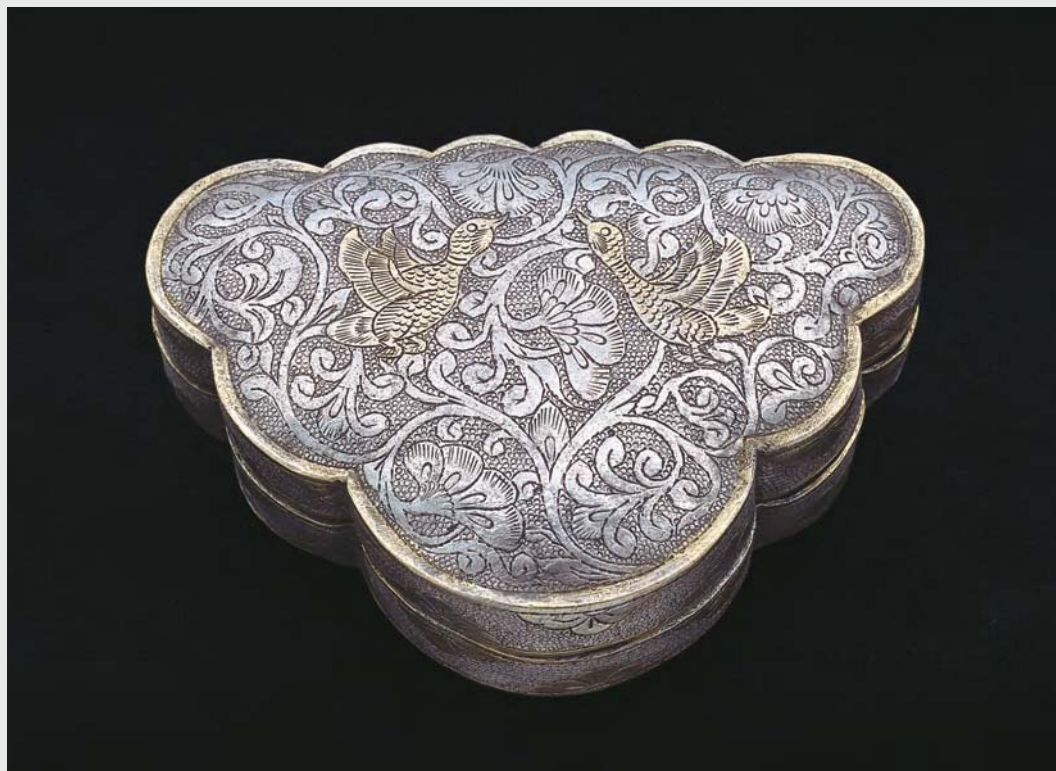
No. 14 Decoration of the lid (*above*) and the bottom (*below*) (Sc. 3:4)



No. 14 Decoration of the front (*above*) and back (*below*) side (Sc. 3:4)



No. 14 Top

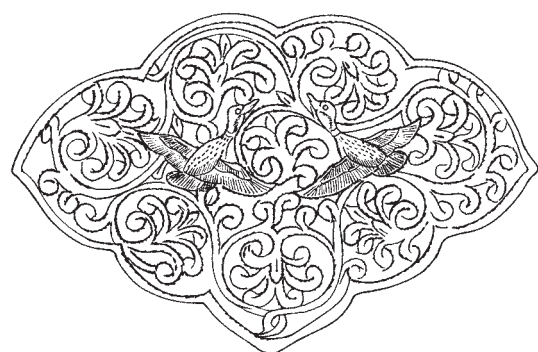


No. 14 Bottom

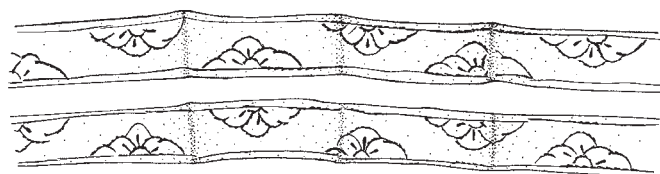
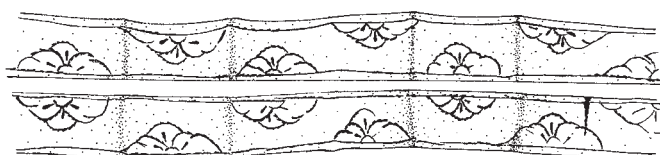
Leaf-shaped box

Tang dynasty, first half of the 9th century
Silver, parcel-gilt
Ht. 3.1 cm, l. 9.1 cm, w. 6.1 cm, weight 22 g

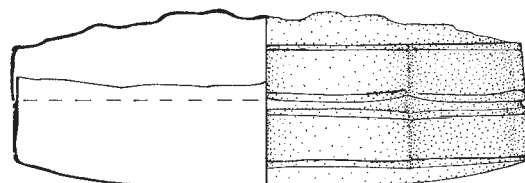
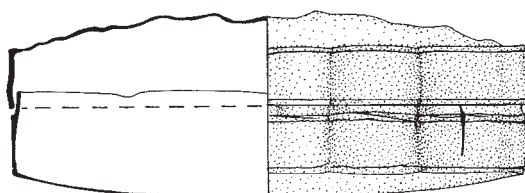
No boxes of this symmetrical multi-lobed shape have previously been discovered. Because the box had been stored within a larger silver box, it survived nearly 1,200 years under the ocean without much damage (cf. p. 110 figs 12d–f). Its slightly domed lid is decorated with a pair of parrots in *repoussé* facing each other and holding a floral garland in their beaks. A tight, linear ring-punch matting forms the background. The convex bottom of the box is decorated with palmette scrolls and a pair of flying ducks which, like the parrots, form an auspicious bird couple and conjure up the ideal of marital bliss. Like most of the Belitung silver boxes, this one was as much intended to be used as a container for drugs or make-up as to be given as a polite and precious gift.



No. 15 Decoration of the lid (*above*) and the bottom (*below*) (Sc. 3:4)



No. 15 Decoration of the front (*above*) and back (*below*) side (Sc. 3:4)



No. 15 Shape (without decoration); front (*above*) and back (*below*) side (Sc. 3:4)



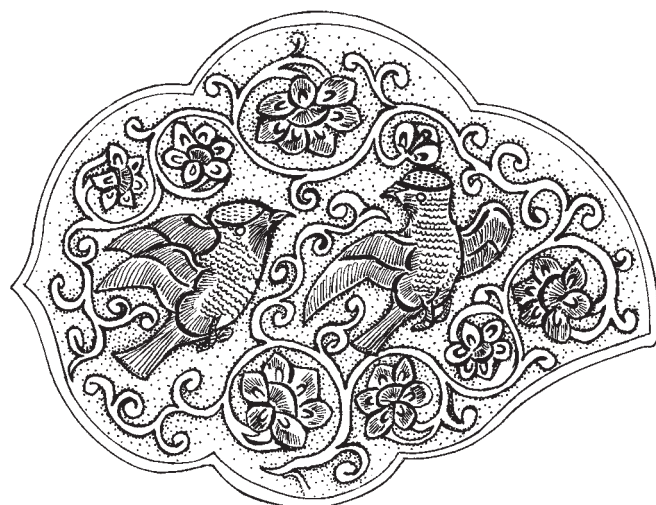
No. 15 Top



No. 15 Bottom

Leaf-shaped box

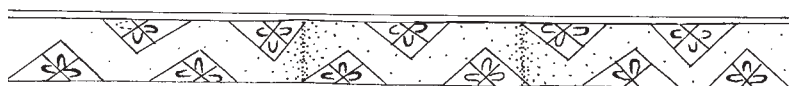
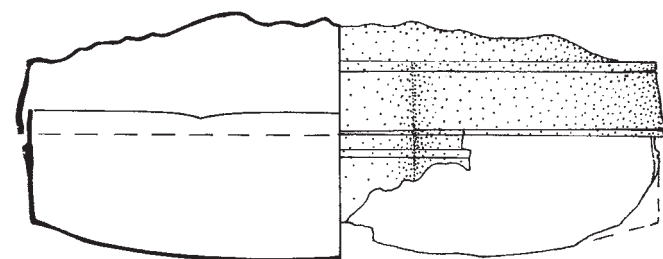
Tang dynasty, first half of the 9th century
Silver, parcel-gilt
Ht. 3.1 cm, l. 8.5 cm, w. 6.5 cm, weight 19.8 g



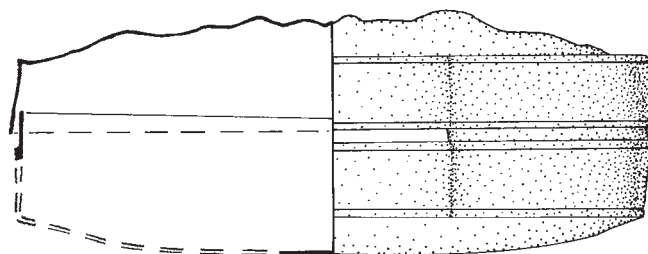
While flower-forms are very popular among Tang vessels, leaf-shaped specimens are a great rarity. This elegant box has a lid which is decorated in *repoussé* with blossoming vines and a pair of crested songbirds. Its fragmentary bottom shows similar birds among leafy scrolls.



No. 16 Decoration of the lid (*above*) and the bottom (*below*)



No. 16 Front side; shape (without decoration) and decoration



No. 16 Back side; shape (without decoration) and decoration



No. 16 Top



No. 16 Bottom

17

Four-lobed circular box

Tang, early 9th century

Silver, parcel-gilt

Ht. 2.9 cm, diam. 8.7 cm

Like the majority of silver boxes from the Belitung wreck, this four-lobed example has gilt *repoussé* decoration on the lid, and flat, somewhat coarser chased decoration on the bottom. While the lid is well preserved, the bottom has only survived in fragments. A flying songbird, the head of a second and a few floral scrolls can still be recognized on the bottom. The parrots on the lid are depicted quite naturalistically and fly around each other in a symmetrical swirl.



No. 17



No. 17 Top



No. 17 Bottom

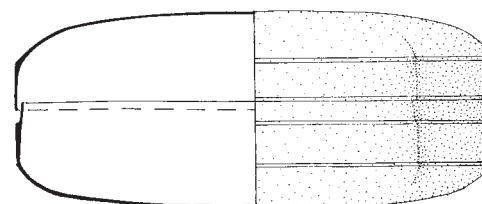
Circular, four-lobed box

Tang dynasty, first half of the 9th century

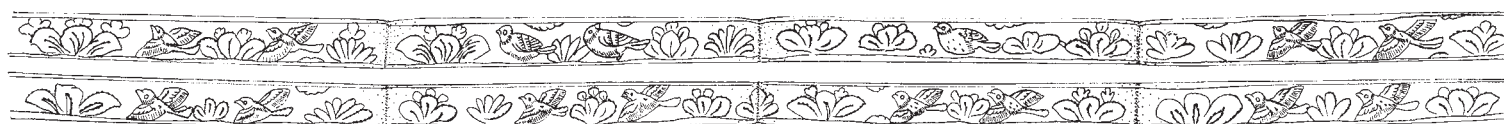
Silver, partly gilt

Ht. 3.25 cm, diam. 8.5 cm, weight 100 g

This precious box survived alongside three other boxes within a larger silver case. It has been preserved in excellent condition (cf. p. 109, figs 12a–c). The domed lid of the box is decorated with a crisply chased landscape scene, dominated by a splendid pair of mandarin ducks, a classical image of marital bliss. This marriage theme is reiterated by a pair of flying ducks and a pair of finches or similar songbirds in the lower half of the scene. The side of the box shows rectangular panels with more songbirds, all of which face to the left and fly or squat amid grasses and flowers. The decorated outer surface of the lid and sides is entirely gilded. The bottom is slightly curved and undecorated.¹ The inside of the box shows scratches and other clear signs of use. It may once have contained medicine, make-up, incense, or similar precious essentials.



No. 18 Shape without decoration (*below*) and decoration of the lid (*above*)(Sc. 3:4)



No. 18 Decoration of the side (Sc. 3:4)

¹ For a discussion of the stylistic relationship of this box to the other silver boxes and gold and silver vessels of the wreck, see above p. 139.



No. 18 Top



No. 18

Oblong, four-lobed bowl

Tang, early 9th century

Silver, parcel-gilt

Ht. 3.9 cm, l. 14.3 cm, w. 10.3 cm, weight 67 g

This silver bowl was recovered in fragments and many areas of its surface show heavy corrosion. Its narrow foot ring and much of the lobed wall section to the right are missing. Originally, it had the same four-lobed shape as the gold bowls nos 5–7.¹ A second silver bowl of this shape is still covered with sediment.

The bowl shows chased and gilt imagery on the inside only. This decoration has survived remarkably well and provides us with a fine example of a rare design. In the centre, is a medallion with a comfortably reclining rhinoceros worked in *repoussé*. A floral sprig encloses the animal, and a thin rope pattern and a band of volutes frame the entire scene. Along the inside walls two bands of a chain design resemble ripples on water, while the rim shows pairs of flowers on a ring-matted ground.

By the early ninth century the rhinoceros had become a well-established motif in the decorative vocabulary of the Tang silversmith, although it was employed relatively rarely. The earliest known example, a small silver box from the Hejiacun hoard, dates from the middle of the eighth century and

shows a standing rhinoceros with an auspicious wheat plant in its mouth.² The same species of standing rhinoceros, this time carrying a lotus with three flowers on its back, is seen on two silver bowls formerly in the Kempe Collection.³ And a further, recumbent rhinoceros is depicted on an oval silver box from the tomb of a certain Mu Cong, who died in 847 and was buried in Yanshi, Henan.⁴ Interestingly, in all these examples (including the one from Belitung) the animal has only a small horn on its nose but a much more prominent one on its head. Obviously this type of animal has a clearly defined iconography which describes no regular rhino, but rather a special variety of the species with supernatural characteristics. During Tang times, the rhinoceros, or 'rhinoceros ox' (*xiniu*) as it was called, roamed wild only in the far south of China; but it was well known at the imperial court, where many animals were received as tribute from southern and western states.⁵ Exotic and celebrated for its horn, which was believed to have all kinds of magical properties,⁶ the rhinoceros was considered an extremely auspicious creature, which appeared when government was good and which was said to be able to communicate with Heaven.⁷

¹ Four closely related silver bowls were acquired in 1968 by the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology in Xi'an. See Li Jian 2003, no. 109; Qi Dongfang 1999, 50–52.

² Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 72.

³ Gyllensvärd 1953, no. 120.

⁴ Qi Dongfang 1999, 30, 90, colour plate 38.

⁵ Schafer 1963, 83–84; Schafer 1967, 226–228.

⁶ Schafer 1963, 241.

⁷ See note 4.



No. 19 Decoration on the inside



No. 19

Circular, four-lobed bowl

Tang, early 9th century

Silver, parcel-gilt

Ht. 6.2 cm, diam. 22.3 cm, weight 243.2 g

When discovered, the bowl was heavily encrusted. Its low foot ring is lost, and there is a small hole in the wall near the bottom. The bowl is decorated on the inside only, the designs being chased and gilded. The bottom of the bowl depicts a lotus pond with curling waves and two carp – presumably the Tang ancestors of the colourful koi we know today – swimming clockwise and in perfect symmetry around a lotus with nine buds. Lotus (*lian*) and fish (*yu*) formed a much-used visual pun to express the wish for wealth, literally ‘may you live in abundance (*yu*) year after year (*lian*)’. Bowls with this type of decoration would therefore have made excellent gifts,

which partly fulfilled their pictorial promise at the time they were bestowed. The fish and the lotus are worked in an appealing *repoussé* and protrude softly from the surface. Flower medallions decorate the walls, and half-blossoms alternate along the rim in a way that creates a zigzag pattern fashionable during the second half of the Tang period. This type of bowl was quite popular from the second half of the eighth century and a number of early-ninth-century examples, which are stylistically related to the Belitung bowl, have survived.¹



No. 20

¹ Cf. Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, nos 137, 138, 141, 143, 182.



No. 20 Detail of the inside decoration



No. 20 Decoration on the inside

Flask with ring handle and lid

Tang, early 9th century

Silver, gilt

Ht. with lid 35.7 cm, ht. without lid 32.1 cm,
l. 24.7 cm, weight 3,164 g (lid 102 g)

The silver bottle is entirely gilded and covered with lush and masterfully executed decoration. Its body is oval in cross-section and stands on a wide, flaring foot ring. A ring loop riveted to each shoulder holds a movable handle. The neck flares out and is covered by a lid. A loop inserted on top of the lid and a small ring handle allow the lid to be lifted off easily. The linear decoration, both on the top of the lid and on the foot ring, replicates the surface texture of a lotus leaf. Stylized, overlapping lotus petals worked in *repoussé* cover the bottom of the vessel body, while the remaining surface is covered by lush leaf-and-flower imagery on a linear ring-punched background. A large medallion in the centre of each of the two main sides, framed by a band with a stylized wave pattern, depicts a couple of mandarin ducks in amorous play. This favorite Tang image of conjugal bliss is identical on both sides of the bottle.

The bottle was heavily encrusted when discovered (cf. pp. 111–112, figs 13a–d). The neck is entirely broken off and some fragments along the break are lost. There are also some areas of corrosion, especially on one of the narrow sides, where a small part of the lower body and the end of the handle are missing. But these damaged areas do not detract from the impressive quality of the artisan's work and the uniqueness of the vessel in the archaeological record so far. To this author's knowledge, no closely comparable silver bottles have yet been discovered. Of different shape and without handle or lid, but similar in cross-section and date, is a double-fish-shaped bottle discovered in a hoard in Liaoning province in 1976;¹ earlier ring-handled jars are known from the Hejiacun hoard.² The specific metal shape seen in the Belitung vessel was, however, copied in clay. The Belitung cargo, for instance, included an example of a green-splashed white earthenware jar, which is similar in shape to the silver vessel (no. 78).

¹ Lu Jiugao and Han Wei 1985, no. 151; Kalaqinqi wenhuaguan 1977, 327–334.

² Qi Dongfang 1999, 98.



No. 21