

The following 15 works from Cu Lao Cham are grouped as cat. no. 86 a–o.

## Cu Lao Cham

Sometime in 1993 or 1994, fishermen near Cu Lao Cham Island off the coast of Hoi An, formerly the most important port located along the central Vietnamese coast, began to bring up ceramics in their nets as they trawled the bottom of the sea. Recognizing the value of the ceramics, they maintained secrecy as long as possible, continuing to drag their nets across the sea bottom; then, when this method no longer brought up objects, they dislodged the ceramics with long metal rakes on rollers. Authorities got wind of the finds as they appeared in the marketplace, and once aware of the exact location of the site, began excavation.

Because of the site's depth, seventy meters, the divers who worked during the 1997–99 seasons lived in pressurized chambers on deck and were carried between site and ship in a pressurized bell. The bottom dimensions of the ship that they had found was approximately thirty meters long and seven meters wide, divided into eighteen compartments into which the cargo of Vietnamese ceramics — dishes first, then bowls, and filling the spaces, small pots — had been loaded. The wood was teak, and skulls found in the ship appeared to be Thai; these facts suggest the ship had been built in Thailand, where teak was abundant, and that it was then manned by Thai sailors. Evidence of doweling in the timbers, a technique used in Southeast Asia, along with the division of the ship into compartments, a method used in China, suggests the ship was one of a number of hybrid ships known to have been built in Southeast Asia.

Carbon 14 tests conducted on the ship's timbers arrived at a date of 1449 plus or minus fifty years; Chinese porcelain found in the galley dated to the Interregnum period (1436–64), and thus provides us with a date in the late fifteenth century. Menson Bound, the excavator of the site, has suggested a working chronology for the wreck of 1430–80.<sup>19</sup> One large charger (cat. no. 86j) features a dragon similar to that carved on a stele of King Le Thanh Tong (1460–1497) and dated 1498; this motif is also painted on blue-and-white dishes recently excavated at the Ba Dinh site in Thang Long (modern Ha Noi) and ascribed to Le Thanh Tong's reign. (See Kerry Nguyen-Long essay, p. 257.) The charger included here can therefore be dated to this period or slightly later; thus, a late-fifteenth-century date for the wreck would seem appropriate.

The ship had set sail from a northern Vietnamese port, possibly the large port of Pho Hien, and was headed south along the coast, either to Ayutthaya, the important trade center of Thailand, or to Indonesia or the Philippines. Comparison of the ceramics on board with those from the kiln site of Chu Dau, located on the Thai Binh River in the extensive Red River basin, indicate a large portion of the cargo came from those kilns; the thousands of ceramic items uncovered indicate its importance. Chu Dau potters specialized in celadon, black-brown glaze, brown glaze with a white interior, and underglaze blue decoration in a wide range of forms, as the wasters indicate. Chu Dau, as in the Cu Lao Cham shipwreck cargo, blue-and-whites offer the largest group.<sup>20</sup>