

# The Brunei Shipwreck

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

*“Nothing better exemplifies the linking of the East and Southeast Asian states and polities into a coherent regional complex of producers and consumers than the ceramic trade networks.” – Geoffrey Gunn*

(History without Borders: The Making of a World Region 1000-1800, Hong Kong University Press, 2011)

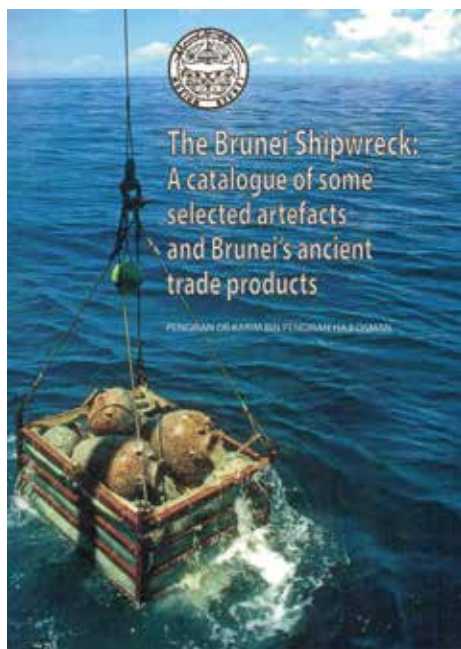
Three Southeast Asian shipwrecks dating to the late 15<sup>th</sup>/early 16<sup>th</sup> century – the *Brunei*, *Lena Shoal* and *Santa Cruz* – were, upon excavation, each found to be carrying more export Chinese blue & white ceramics than found in all earlier shipwrecks combined. This stunning fact led ceramic experts, including Ming-Gap specialist Roxanna Brown, to a myth-breaking conclusion, “The near absence of blue & white roughly prior to the reign of the Emperor Hongzhi, 1488-1505] as revealed by shipwreck cargoes, is startling since blue & white has become synonymous with the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). ‘Ming blue & white’ rolls off the tongue so fluidly that it is difficult to realise that it was exported in significant quantity to Southeast Asia (and perhaps elsewhere) *only* during the second half of the reign of the 276-year dynasty.”<sup>1</sup>

When a long-held truth is discovered to be false, it’s major news, so when the opportunity to visit Brunei’s Shipwreck Museum as well as Kota Batu, one of the two sites in Borneo that gave birth to the term ‘Ming Gap’ presented itself to me, I jumped at the chance.<sup>2</sup>

## The Brunei Shipwreck

Like Singapore’s Belitung shipwreck, the Brunei shipwreck was an accidental discovery by Elf Petroleum (now Total) when carrying out a geophysical survey off the coast of Brunei in May 1997. The nearly intact wreck was excavated in adherence to strict marine archaeological procedures, with a careful network of metal grids laid on the wreck site that ensured centimetre-perfect record-keeping.

The ship’s destination was most likely the capital of



*The Brunei Shipwreck catalogue, out of print and very hard to find*

Brunei’s first royal Islamic sultanate and port at Kota Batu, today an important archaeological site. (Like many of Southeast Asia’s ports, it lies not along the coastline but a few miles upstream along the Brunei River.) Ninety percent of the 13,261 recovered artefacts were ceramics – predominantly export ceramics from China, but also wares from Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. The remaining cargo consisted of various metals (cannons and hand guns), beads, glass bracelets, game tokens and assorted ‘other’ remains.

Some, if not the bulk, of the cargo would have been traded for such extremely valuable local products as camphor (*kapur barus* or *karpura*), considered worth its weight in silver for its use as a preservative and for various medicinal purposes. Brunei’s camphor was considered the best in the world and was highly sought after by both the Chinese and the Arabs. In fact, China’s overseas trade had historically been based upon primary substances from Southeast Asia such as turtle shell, pearls, cowrie shells, bird’s nests, beeswax, rattan, *areca* (betel) nut, and the aromatic gharu wood (still valued at tens of thousands of dollars per kilo).



*The Brunei Shipwreck Museum, photo by the author*

## The Lena Shoal

The second wreck identified as belonging to the Hongzhi Period (1488-1505), was also discovered in 1997, on a reef off the island of Busuanga (northeast of Palawan) in the Philippines archipelago. Like the Brunei wreck, it was a local trading ship, approximately 22-25 metres in length, probably a Southeast Asian, lashed-lug junk made of tropical hardwood planks and dowels.

The *Lena Shoal*’s cargo was dominated by Chinese ceramics, especially blue & white, together with other Asian ceramics that included a small number of Vietnamese blue &

1 Roxanna Brown, *The Ming Gap and Shipwreck Ceramics in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2009, p. 19.

2 The term ‘Ming Gap’ first appeared in the 1950s when an archaeologist working in Borneo noticed a ‘gap’ in the Chinese export ceramics found at the Sarawak River delta and a site at Kota Batu on the Brunei River. Why there was a gap between 1354 and 1436 is a topic for another article.



Blue & White dish with the motif 'Prawn in Eel Grass', 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, from the Brunei Shipwreck, courtesy of Roxanna Brown



Blue & White dish with the motif of a flying qilin (a mythological animal), 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, from the Brunei Shipwreck, courtesy of Roxanna Brown

In the words of Roxanna Brown, "visualise the Hongzhi years [1488-1505] as a great bubble of Chinese blue & white that flowed onto the Southeast Asian market."<sup>4</sup>

The Brunei shipwreck alone carried nearly 5,000 pieces of Chinese blue & white plates, wine/tea cups, jarlets and kendis – one-third of all the recovered wares. They were richly decorated with Chinese mythical animals such as the *qilin* and dragon, along with, spotted deer and cranes, horses, fish, aquatic plants and various floral motifs – the classic designs of the period. Most originated in Jingdezhen, China's foremost production site from 1350 to 1750, but there were also large Longquan plates from Zhejiang Province (which had 20

white, a large Martaban jar, over 100 large Burmese celadon plates, a small number of miscellaneous Chinese brown glazed ware, and a single Sukhothai jarlet. Other trade goods included bronze cannons and bracelets, glass beads and elephant tusks. The cargo was described as a "remarkable trove" of Ming Dynasty ceramics.

### The Santa Cruz

The *Santa Cruz*, the largest of the three ships at 25 metres, tentatively identified as being of Filipino construction, was found approximately 270 kilometres north of Manila close to Hermana Menor Island and salvaged during the summer of 2001 when the looting had reached such a frenzy that the wreck needed to be excavated immediately despite bad weather.<sup>3</sup> The lower hull was still intact, however, and like the two previously named ships, it carried an unexpectedly large number of Chinese blue & white (plates, bowls, small teacups, jarlets, boxes, kendis), again estimated at 90% of the original cargo, some within their original packing. Remarkably, 11,500 pieces have been identified as porcelain or "ceramic of excellent quality and in perfect condition".

The remaining cargo consisted of large numbers of stoneware jars, some Longquan celadon, Vietnamese blue & white, and some Thai (Sawankhalok) celadons, some of which are on display in the National Museum of the Philippines in Manila – together with select pieces from the *Lena Shoal*.

### Chinese Blue & White

Although blue & white porcelain appeared during the Yuan dynasty, it wasn't made in quantity until the Ming dynasty. These three shipwrecks therefore not only testify to the existence and volume of intra-Asian trade during this period, but also mark the dramatic appearance of blue & white in large quantities destined for foreign markets.

kilns during the Ming producing such celadons), many with the foliated edges we can see in the ACM collection.

Furthermore, the presence of Southeast Asian ceramics, even when Chinese kilns were producing large quantities of export ware, shows that there was still a market for Southeast Asian ceramics regionally; they weren't just filling a 'Ming Gap'.

The discovery of the Brunei shipwreck and the number and age of the finds at the Kota Batu site show that Borneo was part of a long-established Southeast Asian trade circuit. This trade circuit's importance grew after the Portuguese arrival in Southeast Asia, an event that marked the beginning of a sea change in the region's peaceful trade patterns.

My visit to Brunei was bittersweet. The Brunei Maritime Museum, although relatively new, had the look and feel of an abandoned property. The parking lot was empty. There were no tours, no museum flyer nor catalogue, no bookshop. The displays were well sign-posted, but not updated<sup>5</sup>. The

projection room showing the video of the shipwreck's story was closed. The best pieces were roped off

(although I was allowed access on request) and no photography was allowed. The

14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century site of Kota Batu,

mentioned by the Italian traveller Antonio Pigafetta in 1521 and a

two-minute drive away, was also

deserted both times I visited. The

nearby Brunei National Museum

(which includes export SEA

ceramics in its collection) remains

closed, as it has been for the past

several years, with no re-opening

date in sight. What appears to be

a lack of local and official interest in

Brunei's historical heritage despite the

position it once held – when it was

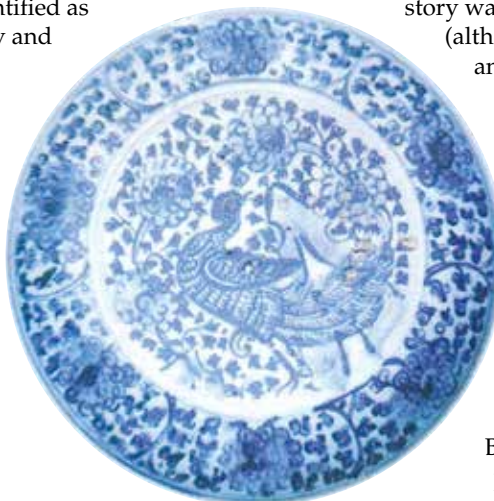
known to the Spanish as "the 'Venice of

the East' with merchants coming from

China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Ayudhya,

Patani, [and basically all of Southeast

Asia]"<sup>6</sup> was most disheartening.



A Chinese B&W plate from the Brunei shipwreck featuring a peacock, from the Brunei Shipwreck catalogue

3 Talk given by Bobby C Orillaneda at the ACM, summer 2013.

4 Roxanna M Brown, *History of Shipwreck Excavation in Southeast Asia*, ISEAS, p. 53

5 Burmese wares originally misidentified as Thai were still identified as Thai.

6 Arthur Cotterell, *A History of Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2014, p. 226

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