

TRADE CERAMICS FROM SELECTED SITES IN WESTERN JAPAN, LATE 14TH TO 17TH CENTURIES

Barbara Seyock

Department of Asian Studies, Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Munich, Kaulbachstr. 51a, 80539 Munich, Germany

ABSTRACT

In this paper I attempt to illuminate the contribution of trade ceramic finds to an understanding of the maritime trade history of Japan in times characterized by international trade restrictions, political turmoil, pirate activities, and the appearance of European ships in East Asian waters. Despite the official maritime trade prohibition policy of early Ming China, junks with cargos of up to several tens of thousands of pieces of porcelain and glazed stoneware sailed between markets around the South China Sea. Junks moreover sailed north, passing the Taiwan Strait, and up to the port cities of the Japanese archipelago, either crossing the East China Sea directly from eastern Chinese ports, or following the route along the Ryūkyū Islands to Satsuma in southern Kyūshū and further north. Lively exchange across the East China Sea is evident in the ceramics from various excavations in the Japanese archipelago. Trade ceramics from China, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as from the Korean peninsula make up a high percentage of the archaeological complexes from 14th to 17th century sites. This paper focuses on the trade ceramics found at selected sites in western Japan. Key questions concern the structure and development of trade networks in the East Asian Seas.

INTRODUCTION

In researching the history of world-wide porcelain trade it is easily overlooked that Japan, just like early modern Europe, was a main consumer of Chinese porcelain and high fired glazed stoneware for hundreds of years beginning with the Southern Song era (1127-1279). In the 16th century Japanese craftsmen still lacked the knowledge of porcelain production, while the Jingdezhen kilns in China looked back on a tradition of manufacturing high fired and glazed wares more than five hundred years old, and Korean potters could recall artistic heights of celadon wares from the Koryō period (918-1392).

It was only in the early decades of the 17th century that porcelain production started in Japan. The story goes that commanders of the troops of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), when returning from his fruitless Korea campaigns (Kor. *Imjin waeran*, 1592/1597), installed

Korean pottery masters in their estates in Hizen Province (North Kyūshū) and elsewhere. The increased demand for luxury goods subsequently generated a rapid development in the manufacturing of fine ceramics. One of those later naturalized Korean potters, Ri Sampei (Kor. *Yi Sam-p'yōng*, 1579-1655), is said to have discovered Kaolin deposits in the vicinity of the small town of Arita early in the 17th century. Arita and the surrounding region developed into the centre of early Japanese porcelain production, and by the late 17th century – due to the crisis in Jingdezhen manufacture in the decades following the collapse of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) – even started to export "Arita ware" (also called Imari after the port from which it was shipped) to European markets in considerable numbers (see also the preceding paper by Takenori Nogami). The Arita kilns, however, were never really in a position to compete with Jingdezhen, where about a million people were involved in the porcelain manufacture by the early 18th century (Reichel 1981: 25-31; cf. Impey 1990).

Porcelain ware was precious in late 14th to 17th centuries Japan. And at the same time – as the abundance of sherds in the archaeological record shows – it must have been comparably easy to obtain ceramics from the outside world. The appearance of the tea ceremony during the time of the Muromachi shōgunate (1338-1573), later to be refined by the famous tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), added much to the fashion of porcelain usage in Japan. The demand for tea utensils, porcelain cups and plates greatly increased among members of the warrior class and the wealthy bourgeoisie, a development that strongly contradicted the general uncertainty and military turmoil of the Warring States period (Jap. *sengoku jidai*) ca. 1470-1570. Although the peaceful age of the Tokugawa realm (1603-1868) was yet to come, nevertheless feudal regionalism seems to have contributed much to a lively maritime trade linking the port cities and coastline areas especially of western Japan to the markets across the Korean Straits, the East China Sea, and further to the South China Sea.

Piracy was a common nuisance in those days. The notorious *wakō* ('Japanese pirates') pillaged the coasts of Korea and China periodically in the 13th to 16th centuries. Korean annals regularly report groups of up to several hundred *wakō* boats approaching Korean territory and

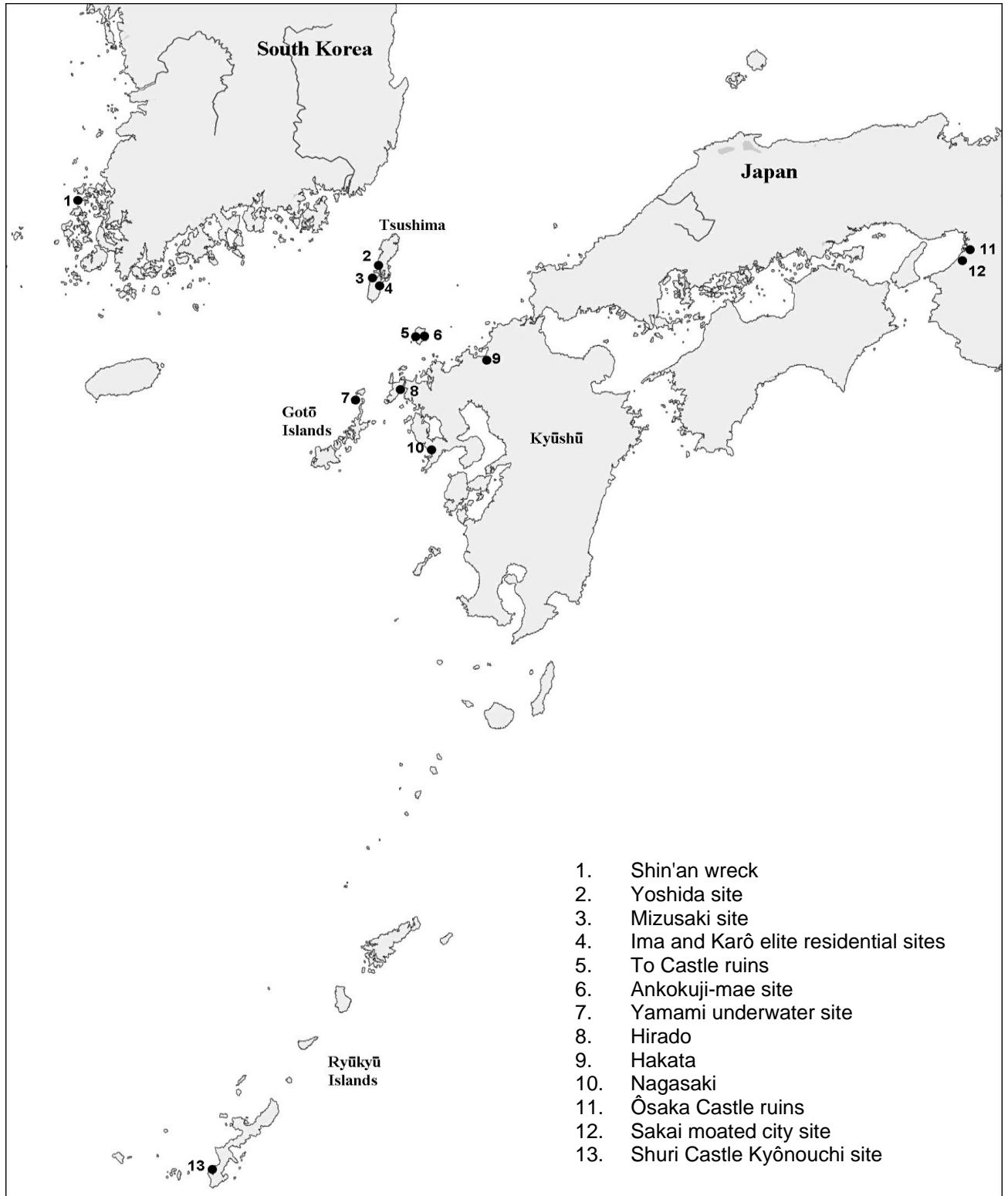


Figure 1: Map of the sites and ports mentioned in the text

even threatening the Koryō capital of Kaesōng. Known pirate centres existed on Tsushima and Iki Islands in the Korean Straits, around Matsuura in Hizen Province (now Nagasaki Prefecture) and in the Gotō archipelago west of Kyūshū. The pirate base on Tsushima Island even pro-

voked military expeditions from the Korean side. Contrary to common belief, *wakō* groups were composed of members from different nationalities. Piracy had always been part of the international trade business in the East Asian Seas. At times of famine or political turmoil piracy

apparently was an option for the islanders in the western Japanese archipelago. The interdependence of trade restrictions and piracy as well as the impact of pirate activity on the development of international relations has already been discussed elsewhere (Robinson 1992; Seyock 2005).

Making use of two recently recovered trade ceramic sites from the western Japanese archipelago, this study tries to show the variety of traded items and the development and change in the ceramic trade during the late 14th to the 17th century at the eastern edge of the China Sea region. The geographical focus of this research derives from the fact that the main ports for international maritime contact during the late middle ages and the early modern period are situated in western Japan, namely Hakata (modern Fukuoka), Hirado, and Nagasaki (Figure 1). Hakata was the main port for ships communicating between Japan, Korea and China in medieval times, while Nagasaki was the only licensed international port for more than two hundred years after the proclamation of national seclusion in the 1630s.

TRADE CERAMICS FROM MIZUSAKI

The first site presented is located on Tsushima Island, the 'stepping stone' in the middle of the Korean Straits. For contacts between Japan and Korea, both politically and economically, Tsushima Island has always been of special importance. Due to their position as intermediaries for all bilateral things, the lords of Tsushima Island, the Sô family, maintained a quasi-independent power base, challenged only by the activities of the pirates in East Asian waters. The complex of the Mizusaki site is directly connected to pirate activities. The location of the site as well as the discovery of an ash layer, which seems to date from the early 15th century, suggests a trading point of the Sôda family, well known from historical sources for their pirate background. A Korean force attacked this place in 1419 and burned down houses and ships (Seyock 2005: 96-97, 111).

The site is situated right in the middle of Tsushima Island, at the entrance of Asô Bay, close to the shore. Excavations in 1997 and 2000 revealed finds from the 14th to the 17th century (Mitsushima Machi 1999; 2001). Many clay net sinkers have been found, leading to the conclusion that commodities used for fishing were produced here in the 17th century. The main feature of the site, however, is the large amount of traded goods that have been unearthed, for example an agate stone belt ornament, which is supposed to be of Korean or perhaps Southeast Asian origin, and Chinese coins, which are a typical find for a complex connected to trade.

The ceramics make up the largest part of the Mizusaki finds. Trade ceramic sherds from Ming China comprise celadon wares (Jap. *seiji*) from the Longquan kilns (Figure 2a), white (Jap. *hakuji*) and blue-and-white porcelain (Jap. *seika*) (Figure 2b). The celadon teacups (*wan*), bot-

tles (Jap. *hei*) and water holders (Jap. *suichû*) date from the late 14th to the early 15th century, whereas the white porcelain cups and plates (Jap. *sara*) are somewhat younger; they come from the 15th or perhaps 16th century. The blue-and-white porcelain pieces, cups and plates, dating from the 15th to the beginning of the 17th century make up the most vessel type. About three quarters of the trade ceramics excavated at Mizusaki originate from the Korean peninsula. Most of the sherds belong to ordinary stoneware without glaze (Jap. *muyû tôki*). The common shapes are bottles and large-sized jars (Jap. *tsubo*) of bluish-green to brown colour. A typical feature is the paddled lattice pattern on the body surface of the brown jars (Figure 2c). Glazed stoneware, mainly cup sherds, is also present (Figure 2d). The chronological position of the stoneware sherds is similar to the Chinese celadon ware.

The Punch'ông ware (Jap. *funseyaki*) as well dates from the late 14th to the early 15th centuries. After the breakdown of the Koryô Kingdom and the sudden decline of the Koryô kilns, Punch'ông ware developed into one of the distinctive branches of ceramic production during the early stage of the Chosôn period (1392-1910). A basic element of these wares is a white underglaze slip. Types with greyish-green glaze and inlaid or stamped white and black-and-white slip are most frequent in the early phase of production. These types draw heavily on Koryô celadon models, but are much coarser in workmanship. Punch'ông ware was produced until the middle of the 16th century with its main kilns in Chôlla Province in southwest Korea (National Museum of Korea 1998; Yamaguchi 1996).

At Mizusaki the Punch'ông sherds form the second largest group of finds (Figure 2f). Again the most frequent shapes are cups and plates. Sherds of bottles, bowls (Jap. *hachi*) and jars (Jap. *tsubo*) are also extant. The white slip filled stamped decorations comprise concentric lines, small circles or dotted fields and some floral like design. Similar to the unglazed Chosôn stoneware, the Punch'ông ware found at Mizusaki comes from the late 14th to the early 15th century. Punch'ông is quite prominent among trade ceramic complexes in northern and western Kyûshû, but it never seemed to have reached further east or south in larger amounts. And it never has been found in sites around the South China Sea. Punch'ông trade apparently was restricted to the Korean Straits region.

Against this background, the ceramics from Southeast Asia that have been found at the Mizusaki site are of special interest. The pieces make up only about five percent of the whole ceramic assemblage, but they shed light on a far-reaching trade network maintained by the Tsushima people. The Mizusaki site produced sherds of cups made of white or blue-and-white porcelain from Vietnamese kilns (Figure 2e, middle and below left). A celadon cup with a lotus petal like relief on the inside is also believed to come from Vietnam (Figure 2e, above left).

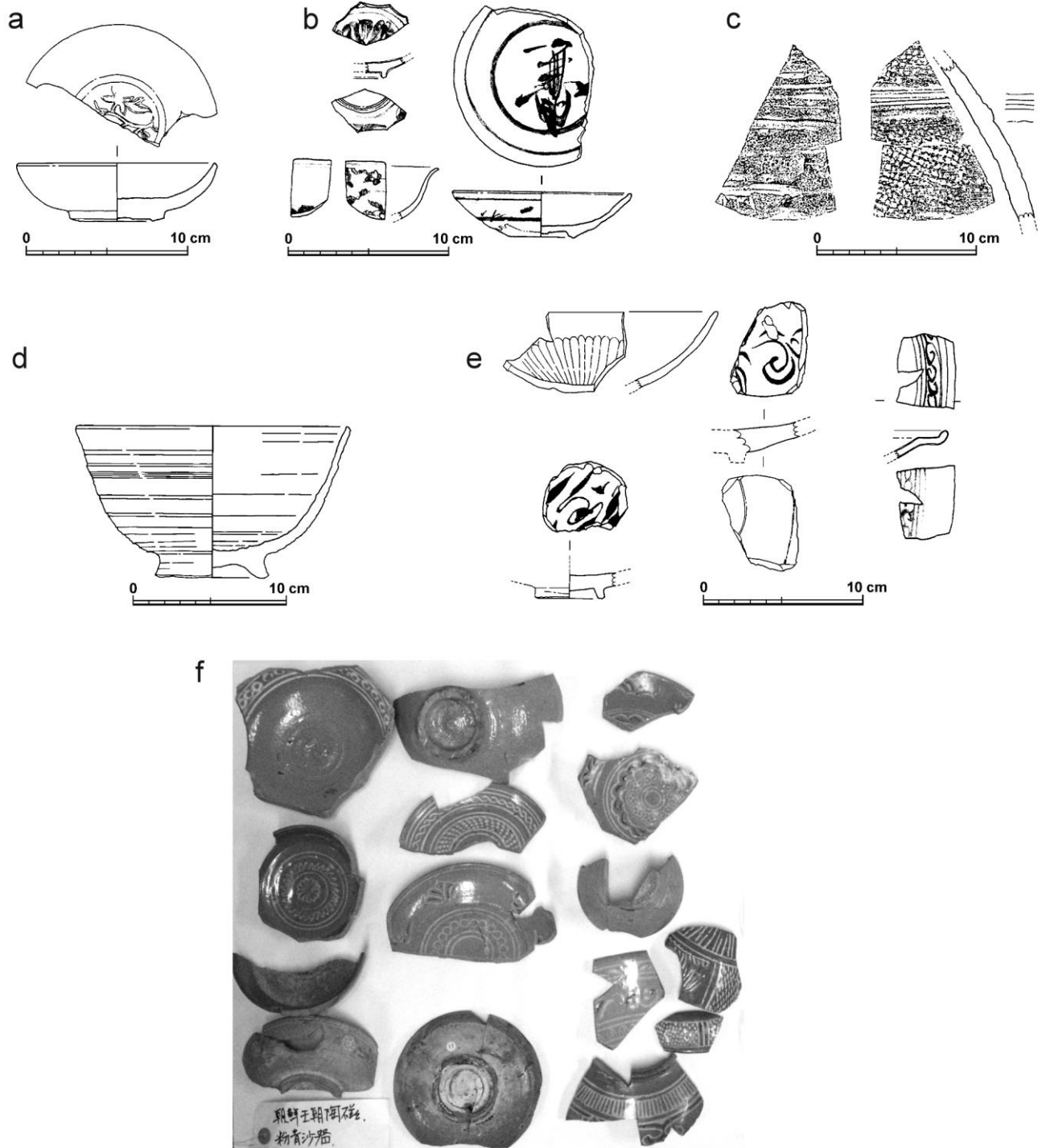


Figure 2: Trade ceramics from Mizusaki: a) celadon ware, China, b) blue-and white porcelain, China, c) unglazed stoneware, Korea, d) glazed stoneware cup, Korea, e) Vietnam (left and middle) and Thai wares (right), f) Punch'ong ware, Korea. (after Mitsushima Machi Bunkazai Hogo Kyōkai 2001, pp. 15, 17, 22, 23, 27; photos by author, Mitsushima City Cultural Meeting Hall, Keichi Town, Tsushima Island, 2003).

Pieces of an iron-painted platter, on the other hand, are made of coarse clay with small black inclusions (Figure 2e, right). This clay quality as well as the underglaze iron-black painting is characteristic for ceramics from the Sisatchanalai kilns in central Thailand. The Thai kilns, just like the kilns in the Hanoi Delta, benefited from the Ming Chinese trade prohibition policy. Especially in the 15th century, when porcelain from Chinese kilns was difficult to purchase, the demand for Thai and – to a smaller degree – Vietnam wares was high around the South and East China Seas (Brown 2000: 58).

Thai and Vietnamese ceramics turn up quite frequently in western Japanese sites, though only in small numbers. There are examples from other Tsushima sites, Yoshida and the Ima and Karô elite residential sites (Miyamoto 2004; Nagasaki Ken 2004); from neighbouring Iki Island sites (the To Castle ruins and Ankokuji-mae B [Miyazaki 1998]); from the Gotô Islands (Yamami) (see below), from the Hakata site cluster in Fukuoka (Mori-moto 1990), or from the Ryûkyû Islands (Shuri Castle Kyô-nouchi site; see Kinjo 2001) and from many other sites (see Kaneko 2004). On the Japanese main island of Honshû, Vietnamese and Thai wares start to turn up in late 16th to early 17th century assemblages from sites such as Sakai and the Ôsaka Castle town ruins (Mori 2001; Tsuzuki 2001).

In summing up the Mizusaki complex, and in comparison to other complexes from Tsushima Island as well as from the Kyûshû coasts, there are some points to be emphasized. The main part of the Mizusaki complex belongs to the late 14th to early 15th centuries. It is rich in trade ceramics. Depending on the layer, 91% to 98% of the sherds are imports. A high percentage of trade ceramics is a typical feature for Tsushima sites of this age, and it moreover is much higher there than at other Japanese sites. The variety of trade ceramics is also greatest during this period. Mizusaki yielded ceramics from China, Korea and Southeast Asia, and the complex comprises both ordinary ware such as unglazed storage jars, and fine table ware such as celadon cups and bowls.

The position of the site close to a natural harbour at the entrance of Asô Bay as well as the quantity of ceramics found at this spot suggests the existence of an important trading post. Tsushima people seem to have been taking part in a far reaching trading network. The question remains how these ceramics reached Tsushima Island - by intermediate coast to coast trade, or by direct relations to ports lying farther away. Historical records show that at least the Sôda family was in a position to conduct trade with the Ryûkyû Islands directly and independently (Seyock 2005: 98).

We do have hints from an archaeological perspective concerning the trading routes of the East China Sea network. It is striking that, for example, Thai ceramics in 15th to early 16th century sites seem to cluster around Kyûshû, and the surrounding islands, as well as around the Ryûkyûs. Later finds mostly come from sites in central Japan. Trading networks and maritime routes seem to have shifted by the middle of the 16th century. The Mizu-

saki complex thus shows the great extent of far reaching international trade in the Korean Straits in the 15th century.

TRADE CERAMICS FROM YAMAMI

A quite different example of a trade ceramic complex comes from the Gotô archipelago west of Kyûshû. Contrary to the situation in the South China Sea and at the western coast of South Korea, up to now there are no wreck finds from the age of the early world trade in Japanese waters. In view of the sheer quantity of trade ceramics collected from Japanese sites, – archaeological facilities across the country in all probability hold hundreds of thousands of sherds – we should expect that important wrecks will be found. For the Korean coasts, the famous Shin'an wreck was discovered some 30 years ago. This Chinese merchant ship on its way to Japan carried a cargo of over 20,000 pieces of fine ceramics and six million Chinese coins. Some ceramic vessels even still held their organic content, such as black pepper, litchis, betel nuts, and Gingko and peach seeds (Kungnip Haeyang Yumul Chôngsigwan 2003: 50-85). No comparable finds exist for the Japanese waters. Underwater archaeology is still a rather recent development in Japan.

Nevertheless, the complex under discussion here comes from an underwater site. The Yamami underwater site was surveyed in 2001 (Kyûshû-Okinawa 2002; Seyock forthcoming). The site is situated close to the coast of Ojika Island, which is a small island of the Gotô Island chain. The ceramic complex recovered from a sea depth of about 5 m comprised mainly Thai stoneware and some Chinese blue and white porcelain pieces. Some fragments are believed to be of Vietnamese provenance. In comparison to the Mizusaki find, where several hundred trade ceramic sherds have been collected, the Yamami complex is rather small. Only 87 ceramic sherds have been found, among them 17 Thai stoneware jars (Jap. *tôki tsubo*). The jars show four horizontal lug handles and some incised, parallel decoration lines around the shoulder (Figure 3a). These storage jars were most likely manufactured in a kiln of the Noi River region in Thailand during the late 16th to the early 17th centuries.

There are several other examples of this kind of storage container from the Japanese islands, for example from the Sakai moated city site. The port city of Sakai was one of the most important trade centres of the Tokugawa period. Another example comes from the Ima and Karô elite residential sites in Izuhara on Tsushima Island (Nagasaki Ken 2004: 28, 33). Both finds were identified as storage jars from Noi River kilns, probably from the Singburi kilns. Another artefact type originates from this region, namely two small stemmed mortars. Mortars are not commodities in the first place; they certainly have been in use by the ships team. This supposition is supported by finds of other kitchen utensils such as lids and neck parts of freshwater containers, as well as pieces of a portable kitchen oven, and cooking bowls (Figure 3b). We may suggest an original position of these utensils on the deck of the ship, for every-day usage.

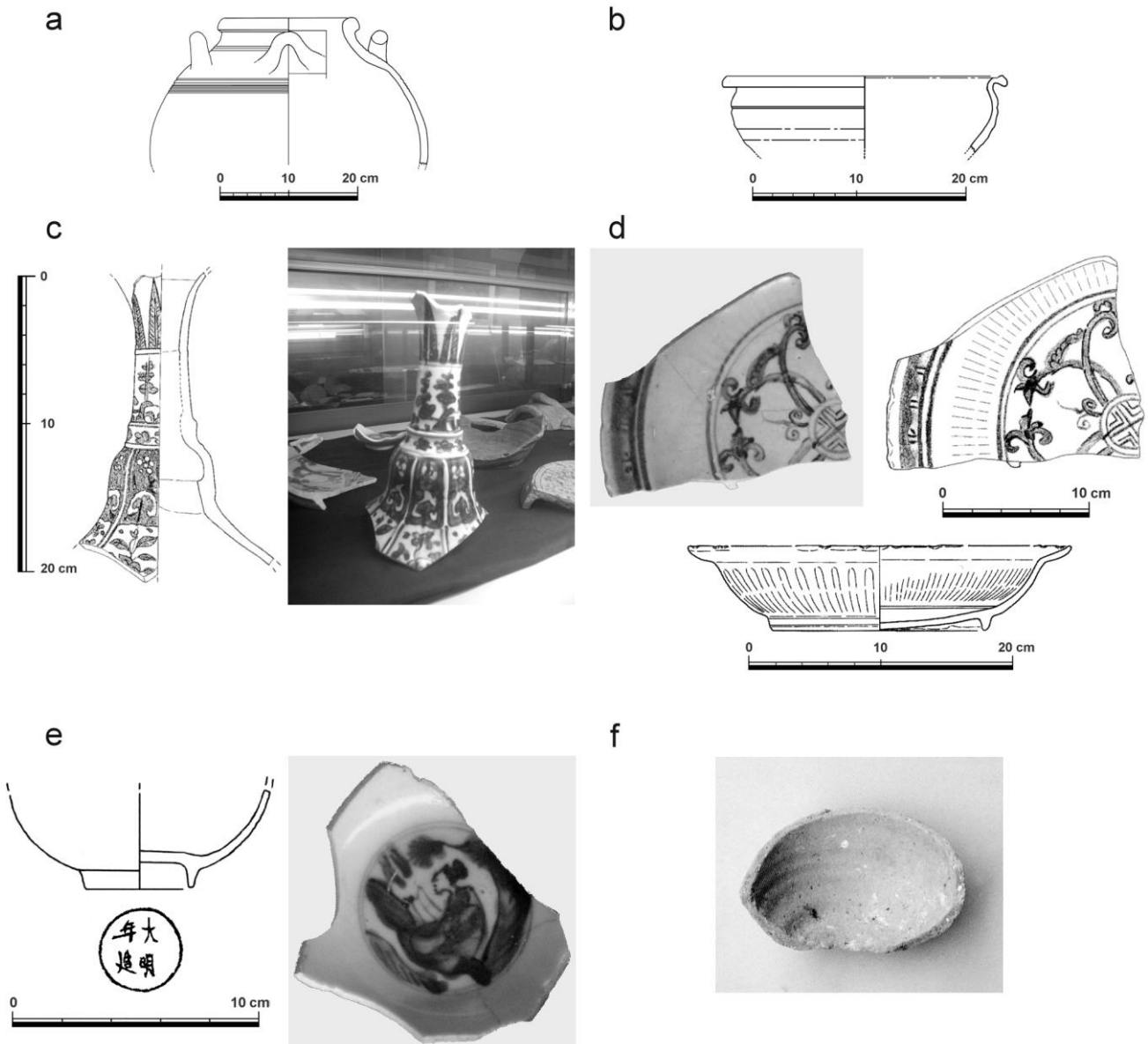


Figure 3: Trade ceramics from Yamami a) jar with four lug handles, Thailand, b) cooking bowl, Thailand, c) blue and white bottle, China, d) blue and white plate, China, e) blue and white cup, Japan (?); f) lid, Vietnam. (after: Kyūshū-Okinawa 2002: pp. 16, 18; 19, 36; photos (c, d, e): author, Ojika History and Folk Museum, Ojika Island, 2004).

Several sherds of blue-and-white wares have been found at Yamami; for example the upper part of a bottle (Figure 3c). The shape of the piece is rather unusual with its double-twisted tail. Only two other examples of a bottle with this irregular shape could be verified, one is in the Pierpont Morgan collection (see Bushell 1919: 32, and Figure 21), a piece from the Wanli period (1573-1620), but with a different design. The other one was in a Sotheby's auction in 1974. It is very close to the Yamami example both in shape and design. It is said to have been inspired by a

Near Eastern metal shape (Sotheby & Co. 1974: 51). Concerning the dating of the Yamami bottle, it was supposed that it comes from the second half of the 16th century from a Jingdezhen kiln (Kyūshū-Okinawa 2002: 23), but taking into account the style of ornamentation and the blurred colours, and in comparison to pieces of similar design and workmanship, it should be placed nearer to the end of the 16th century or even at the beginning of the 17th century. The same is true for a plate sherd (Figure 3d) and a cup sherd, both blue-and white porcelain. De-

sign and workmanship suggest they belong to Chinese wares from the Wanli period (1573-1620) (Seyock forthcoming; cf. Kyūshū-Okinawa 2002: 22-23). Another blue-and-white piece from the Yamami site is quite interesting. It is a sherd of a teacup with the picture of a hermit sitting underneath a pine tree (Figure 3e). This motif is quite common for Chinese export wares at the end of the 16th century (Crick 1997: 153). The colour, however, is quite unusual. It bears a tinge of purple not typically seen. The cup bears the mark “*dai-Ming-nian zao*” (made in the great Ming-Dynasty) on the exterior base, which actually suggested Japanese workmanship of later centuries, as the reign is missing. This kind of mark is quite common in ceramic complexes excavated in Japan, and they have been interpreted very differently concerning their place of origin and chronological position. The cup shard, just like some additional Hizen ware pieces collected at the same spot, thus may have no connection to the main complex.

Finally there are some sherds that appear to be Vietnamese. There are only two pieces. One is a semi-spherical sherd which is unglazed and of coarse quality (Figure 3f). It is supposed to match some bulbous lids found at Vietnamese sites. The other fragment may come from a jar of finer quality. The outer surface shows brown and yellow paint, the inner surface is brown with a tinge of purple.

Taking into account the origins of the wares, the quality of the pieces, as well as the dating in comparison to comparable pieces from other sites, I would suggest that this ship was of Thai origin and that it sailed at the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century directly across the East China Sea after calling at various ports in the South China Sea.

One interesting point about Yamami is that contrary to the Mizusaki complex on Tsushima Island the Yamami complex does not reveal the customer's side. The complex shows the belongings of the ship's crew, such as cooking utensils, freshwater containers, and storage jars. All these items seem to have been stored on the deck of the ship. As the Yamami complex is moreover relatively small, we may suggest a sailing accident that cleared the deck of a trading vessel, while the actual cargo was possibly not lost. That would moreover explain why there has not been any sign of a hull or an anchor stone. From historical sources we can learn that in cases of emergency, like strong winds or storm, decks of ships were cleared, to help get the ship under control again (Seyock forthcoming). This is what appears to have happened here.

CONCLUSION

As I was trying to demonstrate above, the ceramic complex from the Mizusaki site on the coast of Tsushima Island indicates a lively trade between western Japan, Korea and the East and South China Sea regions in the late 14th and 15th centuries. Tsushima held an important position with regard to the coast-to-coast trade between Japan and Korea. The concentration of Korean stoneware and Punch'ông ware is highest in Tsushima site complexes, and is still high in Northern Kyūshū, especially at

the Hakata site cluster, the ruins of the main port of Korean-Japanese trade. Korean ceramics were not successful beyond the borders of Kyūshū, except for some finds in central Japan, whereas products from Southeast Asia – as the Mizusaki complex shows – apparently were in increasing demand on the Japanese Islands. The distribution of comparable finds suggests that intermediate trade ran via the Ryūkyūs in this period. From historical sources we know that Tsushima islanders were able to get hold of respective articles by conducting direct trade with the Ryūkyū Kingdom, the main centre for intermediate trade between Southeast and East Asian countries from the early 15th to the mid-16th century.

The Yamami find on the other hand, dating from the late 16th to the early 17th centuries, points to a direct connection between western Japan and the Southeast Asian Seas. The Ryūkyū Islands were not necessarily involved at this time. Thai ships now came directly across the East China Sea. The Yamami complex is especially enlightening as it apparently comprises articles for the use of the ship's crew, not being part of the cargo. It was therefore possible to figure out the provenance and the probable route of the ship. The quantity and quality of finds from other sites on the Gotō Islands (see Seyock forthcoming) moreover suggest a lively trade during the 12th to the 17th centuries, which brought especially Chinese and Korean ceramics in masses to these islands. The question remains, what kind of cargo this Thai ship, which apparently had an accident at the Yamami find place, actually was carrying. In view of the wreck finds from the South China Sea, and with regard to the trade ceramic collections from Japanese sites, the actual ceramic cargo of the ship in high probability comprised Chinese porcelain and celadon wares as well as fine wares from Thailand and Vietnam.

One point to be emphasized is that the research situation in Japan is different from the South China Sea region. There are no wreck finds, which makes it difficult to build up an interpretation concerning the development and shifts in ceramic trade. However, there is much to be expected from future research at submerged sites. Earlier surveys have already revealed a wealth of ceramic finds waiting to be recovered near the Yamami underwater site (Nogami Takenori, personal communication, Manila 2006). Although the funding of underwater campaigns bears great difficulties due to the fact that they are not counted among the category of ‘emergency excavations’, underwater archaeology in Japan is certainly a very promising discipline.

For trade ceramic research, it is important to take into account the different function of the ceramic wares under discussion. When talking about imports from Southeast Asia, for example, a clear distinction between fine table wares and storage jars is crucial. Storage jars are commonly categorized as ‘trade ceramics’, but had a completely different function. Ceramics like those from Yamami – regardless of their original function and quality – were actually never meant to be traded on site. The ceramics collected from this spot are connected to trade, but

are not trade ceramics in the true sense. Shifting trading routes around the mid-16th century may at the same time have been connected to a shift in the function of the ceramics that reached Japan.

Future research has to elaborate further on the different aspects of trade ceramics in Japan. Essentially, the research on trade ceramics opens a direct view on the actual trading activities. Aiming at a better understanding of the international and inter-cultural relations in the region of the East China Sea, especially in times when official trade relations were alternately facing severe restrictions and even prohibitions, trade ceramics hold a special position. As Renfrew and Bahn (1991: 320) state, for the investigation of exchange between cultures or nations, 'the study of traded goods themselves and the identification of their sources [...] are eminent approaches. And moreover, ceramics are characterized as "virtually indestructible if well fired" (Renfrew and Bahn 1991). We know from historical sources that important commodities of the East and Southeast maritime trade were spices, textiles, exotic woods and fragrances, animal skins and so forth, but it is apparent that these kinds of materials can rarely be recovered from archaeological contexts. Trade ceramic sherds, on the other hand, are abundantly recovered from Japanese sites. The ceramic complexes of the Mizusaki and Yamami sites allow only a limited insight into the enormous material heritage from the centuries of world trade in Japan. Further analyses of the qualitative and quantitative composition of trade ceramic complexes, as well as the positions, chronologies and distributions of the respective sites, will further contribute to an independent perspective on maritime trade in the East China Sea, broadening and at times questioning historical perceptions.

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