

# The Social Life of a Tang Silver Dish

*Hajni Elias*

## Abstract

In 2008, a rare Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) silver dish was sold at Sotheby's in London. The dish was one amongst the many masterpieces of Chinese precious metalwork from the collection of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe (1884–1967). With its simple elegant form and unusual decoration of a rhinoceros-like animal figure chased in gilt, the dish evidences the fine craftsmanship of Tang silversmiths and reflects the advanced metalworking techniques available at the time. This chapter seeks to unravel the possible life story of the Kempe dish, tracing its shifting associations with people and its environment from conception to production and distribution across continents. It attempts to understand the period and culture that affected the dish's early life, and in doing so, explores the contribution made by foreign merchants and craftsmen living in China at the time. Arab and Persian communities in Tang China created a long-distance trading network for the production and distribution of artefacts, made in a hybrid style that catered to both Eastern and Western preferences, which were intended for both the domestic luxury market and for export trade.

On 14th May 2008, a much-anticipated Chinese art auction took place at Sotheby's in London. The auction comprised Chinese precious metalwork and ceramics once in the collection of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe (1884–1967), a highly successful industrialist and renowned Chinese art collector from Uppsala, Sweden (Figure 5.1). The auction was the second in a three-part sale of treasures assembled by Kempe since the early 1930s, a time when interest in Chinese art first reached Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Kempe and Crown Prince Gustaf VI Adolf, who would rule as King from 1950, were Sweden's two greatest collectors of Chinese artefacts at a time when Swedish engineers were closely involved in the development of China's infrastructure, with such excavation works

1 See Gyllesnård 1971, 9.

inadvertently uncovering archaeological riches.<sup>2</sup> Most studies of Chinese gold and silver have generally ignored private collections such as the collection of Carl Kempe, which was, until its dispersal in 2008, amongst the finest in the world for its quality and breadth.

Art historian and critic Souren Melikian in the *New York Times* hailed the Kempe Collection sale as the most astonishing auction of Chinese art that ever took place at Sotheby's, primarily due to its sensational coup of multiplying its estimate by more than thirteen times and raising just over £9 million. Only three out of 126 objects were left unsold. Nearly one hundred pieces of Tang 唐 (618–907) and Song 宋 (960–1279) dynasty silver, together with a small contingent of early gold objects, acquired by Kempe between the two World Wars were offered at the sale. Melikian also noted how 'no collection remotely approaching its scope had ever appeared in the market'.<sup>3</sup>



FIGURE 5.1 Photograph of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe in Ekolsund, Sweden

2 Elias 2012, 142–45.

3 Melikian 2008.

Amongst this formidable group of metalware was a silver dish attributed by the auction experts to the eighth or ninth centuries of the Tang dynasty (Figure 5.2). The dish (herein the Kempe dish) is of shallow circular form with the interior decorated in repoussé and parcel-gilt with a single figure of a standing rhinoceros-like beast. Following a heated bidding war, the dish was purchased by the eminent Chinese art dealer Giuseppe Eskenazi for £168,500. This chapter is a study of the trajectory, or 'life story', of this fascinating Tang period vessel: its shifting association with people and its environment from conception to production, and its journey across continents through time and space. This study attempts to understand the period and culture that affected the dish's life and its journey from China to the West, in turn showing how the life story of the Kempe dish reveals the significant contribution made by foreign merchants and craftsmen in China. These foreign communities created a long-distance trade network for the production and distribution of goods that fed both the domestic luxury market, in particular the Tang imperial court and Tang nobility, and the export trade of artefacts produced in a hybrid style that catered to both Eastern and Western preferences.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, this chapter aims to provide additional information concerning gold and silverware production in Tang China. There is a general agreement amongst scholars that Tang gold and silver wares are 'special' and represent a synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, evidenced primarily in shape, decoration, and iconography.<sup>5</sup> They show the outstanding craftsmanship of Tang silversmiths using a wide range of metalworking techniques. It is commonly stated that the majority of gold and silver wares were made for the imperial court, personal use, gifting, and tribute purposes.<sup>6</sup> Although it is known that private workshops coexisted with imperially-sponsored workshops in the capital of Chang'an 長安, it is generally assumed that both catered to orders by the Tang court and for the use of the imperial family.<sup>7</sup> However, there may well

4 The terms 'foreign' and 'Chinese' are difficult in the context of Tang studies due to the cosmopolitan nature of Tang society. Concepts of national identity and foreignness are very complex to define both now and then. Notwithstanding these difficulties, 'foreign' in this chapter denotes peoples who would have been regarded as external to or remote from the Tang empire and its immediate neighbours and dependent entities. The term is unsatisfactory but employed here because there is no better alternative and refers in this context primarily to the Persian and Arab communities either settled in China or trading with the Tang Empire.

5 See Gao 2012; Geng 2019; Katō 1965; Li 2019; Lu 2007; Qi 1991, 1999, 2009, and 2011; Ren 2018; Tan 2004a and 2004b; and Zhao 2006.

6 Katō 1965 summarises the function of gold and silver in Tang society as prestige artefacts made for personal use, gifting, and bribery. They were also kept as wealth stock, tax payment, tribute, and sometimes as a measure with a high monetary value. See also Liu 2015, 47.

7 Qi 1999.



FIGURE 5.2 Tang parcel-gilt silver dish from the Meiyintang Collection

have been a more prominent foreign trade of these precious metal luxury items than sometimes thought. With the absorption, imitation, and fusion of foreign and Chinese elements, Chinese silversmiths in collaboration with their foreign counterparts, in particular Persian and Arab craftsmen and artisans working in southern coastal towns such as Yangzhou 揚州, created highly sought after objects for both the domestic and export markets.<sup>8</sup>

8 Szmaniewski 2016, 235. See also Schottenhammer 2010, where the author notes that, in the Tang dynasty, the major communication road between the Persian Gulf and China came to be the sea route and that it was Muslim merchants who initiated the era of maritime commerce in China.

In methodology, this study takes inspiration from philosophers and cultural anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, whose work has alerted us to the potential inherent in adopting an object-centred diachronic approach in interpreting societies. Through an examination of the meaning and identity of objects as they interact dynamically with people, we can approach a more informed understanding of cultural and historical processes.<sup>9</sup> As noted by Kopytoff:

In doing a biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its “status” and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realised? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such a thing? What are the recognised “ages” or periods in the thing’s life, and what are the cultural markers for them?<sup>10</sup>

In the case of the Kempe dish, an object-based study allows us to look into a trajectory that is transregional in nature. Objects traded or exchanged between different regions ‘interact’ in a different manner to those that remain ‘locally’. They take on distinctive cultural features and are guided by their life history in ways that are unique.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the Kempe dish may be seen as a type of object which brings together actors from different cultural systems with only a minimal shared understanding (from a conceptual point of view) about the object in question and who agree *only* about terms of trade.<sup>12</sup>

Starting from most recent events and working our way backwards in time, we will first examine the dish’s provenance from the time it entered the collection of Carl Kempe to its current owner. Then, we will attempt to retell its life story in the Tang period through the trajectory of another contemporaneous Tang silverware, a four-lobed bowl decorated with a closely-related rhinoceros-like figure, recovered from the late-Tang dynasty shipwreck, the Belitung. The discovery of the Belitung bowl allows us to propose a likely pathway for the Kempe dish.

9 See Appadurai 2011.

10 Kopytoff 2011, 66–67.

11 Allard, Yan, and Linduff 2018, 13.

12 Appadurai 2011, 15.

## 1 The Kempe Dish in the West

The Kempe dish is of a simple, shallow form with everted edges and foot rims. It is 15.2 cm in diameter and, in the centre of its interior well, the decoration depicts a standing rhinoceros-like figure carrying a three-flowered lotus *howdah*. Although the animal takes the shape of a cloven-footed rhinoceros with a pair of distinct horns, much like Sumatran or African two-horned rhinoceroses, its body is covered in scales which is highly curious and, as we will see, significant. Details of the decoration are executed in repoussé and parcel-gilt techniques enclosed by a raised gilt ridge and set on a plain silver ground. It is made of silver alloy which was originally plated with a layer of a higher-quality silver that has now been worn away. We will return to the possible meaning and iconography of the decoration when we examine the dish in the context of its creation in the Tang dynasty.

The dish was located in Sweden following its acquisition by Carl Kempe, a successful businessman who transformed the Kempe family lumber business into a lucrative pulp and paper production enterprise. According to his close friend and former Director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, Bo Gyllensvärd, Kempe's interest in Chinese art started with ceramics in the 1920s when he joined a group of art connoisseurs who began collecting Chinese art at the time. Subsequently, he also became a member of the Chinese Club in Stockholm, a local branch of the Oriental Ceramic Society in London. The Club met regularly and its members established themselves as the most important Swedish collectors and experts in the field of Chinese art.<sup>13</sup> Kempe's first acquisitions of Chinese pieces were eighteenth-century polychrome porcelains, but following his visit to China with his wife in 1935, he 'discovered' the beauty of Tang and Song dynasty monochrome stoneware and objects in other media. During his trip to China, Kempe purchased some 250 artefacts, which even at that time was considered no small feat.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of the next few decades, Kempe assembled a large collection which fell into three principal categories: gold and silver wares, monochrome ceramics, and glass wares. His collection, including the silver dish, was housed at the beautiful castle of Ekolsund, a former royal palace some forty miles north of Stockholm. However, after his death in 1967, the collection was dispersed following the sale of the property by the family. Many of the ceramics and metalware pieces were loaned to the Museum of Art and Far Eastern Antiquities in the small town of Ulricehamn, where they continued to be displayed for public

13 Gyllensvärd 1971, 9.

14 Christie's 2019.

view. Kempe, who was a long-term benefactor of the museum, gifted his entire glass collection to the museum in his will.<sup>15</sup>

Although the date of Kempe's acquisition of the dish is not recorded (possibly dating to sometime between 1930 and 1950), it was most likely obtained directly from China, perhaps even during his trip in 1935. The dish was part of a matching pair of the same form, size, and decoration. Kempe became interested in Tang metalwork from the 1930s and in the ensuing twenty years he continued (often against the advice of experts, as metal wares were not 'fashionable' items for a collection unlike Chinese porcelain at the time) to accumulate a great variety of precious metal pieces. From the outset, it was his intention to form a representative collection for the study of Chinese gold and silversmith work.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the provenance of the Kempe pieces, we know that some gold and silver items were also obtained through his contact with Orvar Karlbeck, a Swedish engineer who acted on occasion as agent for a syndicate of collectors, dealers, and museums with an interest in Chinese art in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

Whether ceramics or gold and silver wares, the *raison d'être* for Kempe's collecting was to create a scholarly anthology whose composition and quality was such that its study would reveal its historical development over the centuries. He acquired artefacts not only for himself but for all those who wished to carry out research in the field. Gyllensvärd notes how during the years when he was still in good health, he welcomed scholars and students of Chinese art to his beautiful Ekolsund home where his collection was on permanent display. He preferred to show his treasures himself and was always keen to hear the opinions of his guests. He generously allowed the examination of his collection and willingly lent them to exhibitions in both Europe and the United States.<sup>18</sup> The dish's prominence in the collection is evident from its inclusion in a number of major touring exhibitions, such as *The Exhibition of Chinese Gold and Silver in the Carl Kempe Collection* in Washington D.C. between 1954–1955 and at the Asia House Gallery in New York, as well as in nine other American museums in the 1970s.

The dish's seemingly tranquil life as a display object in a museum setting, primarily valued as an item of scholarly research and interest, came to an abrupt end in 2008 when it was offered for sale at Sotheby's by a group of art investors and businessmen based in Singapore, who had no specialist

15 For information on Carl Kempe, see Davids and Jellinek 2011, 268–69.

16 Gyllensvärd 1971, 9.

17 Elias 2012, 144.

18 Gyllensvärd 1971, 10.

knowledge of Chinese art. They purchased the Kempe collection of ceramics and metal wares ten years earlier from an industrialist called Anders Welandson who had acquired the entire collection from Kempe's sisters in 1998, a year after Kempe's death. In 2008, the group of investors realised an almost instant return to their investment.<sup>19</sup> Following the sale, the Kempe dish was briefly housed in the Eskenazi Gallery in Clifford Street, Mayfair, London, before its purchase by the prominent Swiss art collector Gilbert Zuellig as part of his private Meiyintang Collection.

Although no longer on public display, the dish is well-known to connoisseurs and researchers in the field of Chinese art. Throughout its twentieth- and twenty first-century life, it has been a treasured object of public and private appreciation. Its link to China's golden era of the arts, the Tang dynasty, is perhaps its most important and esteemed provenance. However, the dish's sale at auction in 2008 gave it another layer of significance: it became an object of high value exchange in the commercial art world. Art auction sales are more than conventional economic exchanges or commercial operations. Instead, as described by Jean Baudrillard, their ethos goes well beyond economic calculations of individual appropriation and extends to notions of prestige, social standing, and conspicuous consumption amongst the elite and wealthy.<sup>20</sup> In the following section, we will go back in time to trace the life trajectory of the Kempe dish in its original setting, when it was also part of an 'economic' exchange, valued more than anything else as a commodity to be traded.

## 2 The Kempe Dish in Tang China

Foreign influence on the Kempe dish is evident from its form and decoration, as well as the production technique utilised in the process of its manufacture. Similar round dishes with a single naturalistic decorative element in the central well bring to mind Central Asian dishes, such as the gilt-silver piece decorated with a reclined stag from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Figure 5.3). This dish was likely made by Sogdian craftsmen whose artistic and cultural influence spanned the Silk Roads. Beyond the Sogdians, foreign influence reached the Tang capital of Chang'an via both land and sea trading routes. In his examination of dozens of silver ewers, cups, dishes,

19 Elias 2012, 144.

20 Baudrillard's theory on the art auction and how individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing through the consumption and display of commodities is given in Baudrillard 1981, 117. See also Appadurai 2011, 21.



and bowls, Qi Dongfang 齊東方 has shown that many of the artefacts which were previously assumed to be the products of Tang silversmiths were in fact imported from Central Asia or beyond.<sup>21</sup>

From the sixth century onwards, foreign merchants were key not only in facilitating trade between China and the western regions of Central Asia, but also in the dissemination of technological and artistic innovations.<sup>22</sup> Important foreign influence in the production of luxury goods came from Persia, which was introduced by those settling in the coastal ports of China via the Maritime Silk Roads.<sup>23</sup> Persian influence may be seen in various artefacts, in particular textiles and gold and silver wares, that were produced in the Jiangnan 江南 region, i.e., cities such as Yangzhou, Zhenjiang 鎮江, and Shaoxing 紹興, all of which were heavily-linked to the Maritime Silk Roads.<sup>24</sup> In his study of early foreign communities in China, Wang Lei notes how some of the main cities where foreigners settled were situated on the coast, arriving there via



FIGURE 5.3 Photograph of an eighth- or ninth-century gilt-silver dish from Sogdiana, housed in the Hermitage Museum

21 Qi 1999, 463.

22 See Rong 2004 and 2015.

23 Rong 2004, 27.

24 Louis 2011, 90.

the Maritime Silk Roads which linked the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Strait.<sup>25</sup> As we will see, the Kempe dish was most probably a product of this community in the south of China.

Life for these foreign communities was not always peaceful, as shown in the biography of Tian Shengong 田神功 given in the *Old Book of Tang* (Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書). This section records a revolt started by an official called Liu Zhan 劉展 in Yangzhou in 760. General Tian Shengong was recruited to suppress the rebellion but:

至揚州，大掠百姓商人資產，郡內比屋發掘略遍，商胡波斯被殺者數千人。<sup>26</sup>

[When Tian] reached Yangzhou, he greatly plundered the properties of [local] ordinary people and traders, and every household in the commandery who [refused] were tracked down and forced to submit. The Persian foreign merchants who died were in their thousands.

Subsequently, Tian travelled to Chang'an where he gifted fifty looted gold and silver vessels from Yangzhou to the emperor.<sup>27</sup> This not only confirms the large number of Persians residing in Yangzhou, but also their association with gold and silverware.

Two years earlier in 758, another conflict between the foreign communities living in China's coastal cities and their local Chinese administrators broke out in Guangzhou 廣州. *Old Book of Tang* describes Persian and Arab merchants launching a joint attack on the city, forcing the military prefect Wei Lijian 韋利見 to flee with his army. The foreign mob then raided government warehouses and burnt down various buildings before escaping by sea and returning to their country of origin.<sup>28</sup> Although there is no further information on this incident in any Chinese official documents, in all probability it was caused by foreign discontent with corrupt officials in charge of maritime trade affairs.

Other evidence of the presence of Persians in the south is provided in accounts of an opportunist warlord called Feng Ruofang 馮若芳 who lived on Hainan Island 海南島, just south of Guangzhou. Feng made it his habit to raid foreign ships, enslaving everyone onboard. A large colony of Persians,

25 Wang 2017, 9.

26 *Jiu Tangshu* 74.3533.

27 *Jiu Tangshu* 74.3533.

28 *Jiu Tangshu* 10.253.

originally crew members and passengers of Persian sea vessels, fell into his hands.<sup>29</sup> Accounts by a monk who was stranded on Hainan in 748 confirm the large number of Persian slaves living on the island where, according to the monk, precious sapanwood robbed from ships was piled like a small mountain in the backyard of Feng's lavish home that smelled of the fragrant frankincense, a much-favoured and expensive aromatic resin sourced from Southeast Asia by foreign traders.<sup>30</sup>

The multitude of non-Chinese peoples residing in Guangzhou is also recorded in relation to the 'Massacre of Guangzhou' in 878, when the rebel leader Huang Chao 黃巢 (d. 884) besieged the city and killed 120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians and Mazdeans.<sup>31</sup> Following the massacre, foreign communities abandoned the port and the merchants moved their operations to Southeast Asia. This reorganisation of trade saw the end of Guangzhou's wealth being reliant on the exotic goods its foreign population brought in and distributed throughout the empire. As noted by John W. Chaffee, the Huang Chao rebellion constituted a great rupture in the imperial fabric from which the Tang never recovered. By the time the rebellion was defeated in 884, the Tang court, exiled in Sichuan, faced the threat of other rebellions, and was forced to rely upon foreign troops to re-establish itself in the capital. Not only did the imperial appetite for exotic luxuries dry up, but in the south the breakup of the empire was under way.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 Shipwrecks, Scales, and Howdah: Understanding the Kempe Rhinoceros

What is unusual about the Kempe dish is its depiction of a standing rhinoceros-like beast. Only a small number of comparable images from the Tang period are known, including the pair of Kempe dishes, a bowl from the Belitung shipwreck, three covered boxes, a gilt-copper plaque, a bronze mirror, and a mother-of-pearl inlaid mirror from the Shōsō-in repository, Nara (the latter being given in Figure 5.4).<sup>33</sup> A magnificent rhinoceros carved in stone also paved the Spirit Way of Tang Emperor Gaozu's 高祖 (r. 618–626) Xianling 顯陵 mausoleum.<sup>34</sup>

29 See also Chin 2004, 233; Schafer 1951, 407 and 1963, 16.

30 Chin 2004, 230.

31 Schafer 1951, 407.

32 Chaffee 2018, 51.

33 For illustrations of these items, see Gyllensvärd 1971, pl. 59 (Kempe dishes); Chapman 1999, pl. 2 (gilt-copper plaque); Guang 2006, pl. 355 (silver box); and Qi 1999, pls. 38, 1-245, and 3-4 (bronze and mother-of-pearl inlaid mirrors).

34 As an ode to his father, the mausoleum was built, albeit on a smaller scale, in imitation of the tomb of Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 256 BCE–195 BCE) of the Western Han 西漢 dynasty

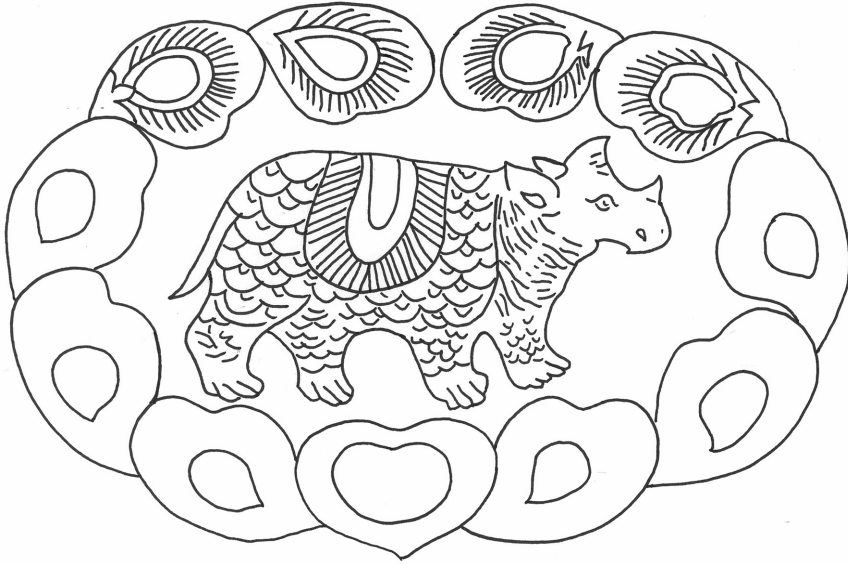


FIGURE 5.4 Line-drawing of the rhinoceros decoration on the Shōsō-in mirror

Rhinoceroses in Tang China were generally perceived as exotic tributes from the southern states and were valued primarily for their horn, with the animal being of secondary importance.<sup>35</sup> Trained rhinoceroses were sent to the Tang court for the emperor's entertainment as tribute from South-east Asia, and even Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) laments in his poem 'Since They Put Down' (Ziping 自平) how, following the rebellion of the import official Lü Taiyi 呂太一 in Guangzhou, living rhinoceroses and kingfisher feathers stopped being sent to the court.<sup>36</sup> On their habitat, Mark Elvin notes that by the Tang, rhinoceroses survived only in the far south and western regions of the empire.<sup>37</sup>

(202 BCE–9 CE). A magnificent spirit road of unprecedented size and a vast quantity of stone guardian sculptures led up to the trapezoid heaped burial mound. Although only a few sculptures have survived, according to the number and placement of those remaining there were supposed to be four pairs of stone tigers, one pair of stone rhinoceroses, a pair of ceremonial columns, and a grand stone tablet. The long distance between the ceremonial column and the stone tiger suggests the possibility of other stone sculptures in between, in addition to the stone rhinoceroses. For further information, see Hong and Yan 2012, 48.

35 For a list of various tribute dates and details related to rhinoceroses, see Schafer 1963, 83–84. On the use of rhinoceros horn, see Schafer 1963, 241–42 and Chapman 1999.

36 Owen 2016, 325–27.

37 Elvin 2004, 31–32. On the main habitat of rhinoceroses during the Tang dynasty, see also Heller 2011, 355.

The scarcity of rhinoceros images in Tang art may be explained by it being a relatively peripheral animal in China's visual culture. As observed by Edward Schafer, it was 'rather an emblem of China's antiquity, a kind of classical behemoth surviving among the barbarians. It was the horns and their magic virtue which had a significant role in the history of exoticism'.<sup>38</sup> Traditionally, rhinoceroses had no specific meaning or auspicious connotation in Chinese art, thus the origins behind their depiction is more likely to have come from foreign influence rather than a domestic one. But was this depiction necessarily of a rhinoceros in the first place?

### 3.1 *The Belitung Shipwreck*

A bowl from the Belitung shipwreck (Figure 5.5) which bears the image of a reclined rhinoceros-like beast is best-situated to shed light into the origins of the Kempe dish's design and dissemination.

This exceptional silver bowl was salvaged from the Belitung shipwreck, a site discovered in 1998 by fishermen diving for sea cucumbers in the shallow waters off the western shore of Belitung Island in the Java Sea. The Belitung shipwreck has provided indisputable evidence of trade conducted on a global



FIGURE 5.5 Four-lobed silver bowl dated to c. 825–850 from the Belitung shipwreck

38 Schafer 1963, 84.

scale between China, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the Mediterranean world during the Tang dynasty. John Guy reaffirms the importance of the ship's cargo, in that this has:

... allowed a radical reappraisal of the Maritime Silk Route to China in the second quarter of the ninth century, when the vessel embarked on its ill-fated journey. The excavated cargo revealed the largest and most comprehensive assemblage of Chinese glazed ceramics from the late Tang dynasty found to date, together with a group of rare gold and silver vessels and silver ingots—one of the most important hoards of artefacts from that era ever discovered at a single site.<sup>39</sup>

The ship's cargo can be dated to around 826, as one of the 55,000 Changsha 長沙 ceramic bowls recovered bears an inscription which records it being made on the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the second year of Baoli 寶曆 reign era (824–826), corresponding to 826. Study of the ship's construction technology and the source of timber used for its building has shown that the Belitung vessel belongs to the Arab-tradition of *dhow* shipbuilding and points to the Arabian Peninsula as its likely origin.<sup>40</sup>

Through the study of the Belitung's cargo, it is clear that the vessel departed from Guangzhou. Indeed, its consignment of gold and silver wares was, according to Qi Dongfang, almost certainly produced in Yangzhou and its surrounds (known as the Zhexi 浙西 region), which was a centre for the manufacture and distribution of gold and silver wares in the south during the Tang dynasty. The discovery of the Belitung treasures clearly demonstrates that gold and silverware production in Yangzhou not only served the imperial family but also produced items for export overseas.<sup>41</sup>

Archaeological evidence has also shown that from the mid-eighth century, mines in southern China dominated the empire's gold and silver production.<sup>42</sup> Tang government policy encouraged private mining and production enterprises in order to stimulate the development of the gold and silver industry and to increase the state's tax revenues. As a result, production of gold and silver during the Tang rose to unprecedented levels.<sup>43</sup> Access to locally-sourced raw material and the availability of craftsmen and workshops in the Zhexi

39 Guy 2011, 19.

40 Guy 2011, 20.

41 Qi 2011, 23.

42 Qi 1999 and 2011.

43 Qi 1999, 461.

area helped the region become the centre of gold and silverware manufacture outside the Office of Arts and Crafts (Wensi Yuan 文思院), the imperial workshop in Chang'an responsible for the production of ceremonial and ornamental items in precious metal for the use of the imperial family.<sup>44</sup> Gold and silver tribute goods sourced from Yangzhou are recorded in historical documents and a silver basin discovered at the Famen Temple 法門寺 even bears an inscription describing it as a tribute product from Zhexi.<sup>45</sup> Trade in cities such as Yangzhou was carried out by Persian and Arab merchants who dominated commerce along the Grand Canal and into the south, setting up workshops with large numbers of employees. They were not only traders but also producers, running small businesses and workshops.<sup>46</sup>

Goods for the Belitung's cargo were sourced from their respective production centres, i.e., ceramics from Hangzhou 杭州 and Ningbo 寧波 and then metal wares from Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, Shaoxing, and their surrounds, and these were transported by land or sea to Guangzhou where they were likely loaded onto the vessel. The ship commenced the first leg of its journey from Guangzhou heading south towards Sumatra, where it procured substitute aromatics such as camphor, sandalwood, benzoin, and other resins for which there was increasing demand in the West.<sup>47</sup> In all probability, it was sailing for a port on Java's north coast to unload a consignment of trade goods and take on eastern Indonesian spices, before proceeding to Sri Lanka and the Arabian Sea.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, using Persian accounts, Edward Schafer traces the likely route of a Persian voyager from Siraf or Oman to the mouth of the Indus and the markets of Ceylon, then via the Nicobars to the prosperous Indies and the spice-laden ports of Malaya, Sumatra, Cambodia, and Champa. The final destination was Guangzhou, with the whole trip from the Persian Gulf to the Chinese coast taking five months in the Tang period.<sup>49</sup>

44 Qi 1999, 221–22, 461; see also Katō 1965.

45 Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan et al. 2007, col. pl. 87.

46 Szmoniewski 2016, 236.

47 Guy 2011, 23.

48 Guy 2011, 25.

49 Schafer 1951, 404–405. In all likelihood, the Persian language must have been the sailors' *lingua franca* on the sea route. Certainly, by the tenth century, Persian was the most important language in Central Asia and amongst China's Muslim people who were strongly influenced by Iranian culture. See Liu 2010, 88, who also notes how Persian became the common language among the Huihui, an expression designating the Persian and Arab population, and later even the mother tongue of many of their children and grandchildren. There are still many Persian words and phrases in the daily Chinese language used by the Hui people.

Gold and silver wares found on the Belitung thus appear to have been commissioned and acquired for sale in a foreign market. While they exemplify a Tang style, some of the wares carry unusual design elements that suggest non-Chinese artistic preferences and the influence of foreign techniques in their manufacture. For example, the arrangement of the central decoration in the shape of a swastika seen on a pair of gold square-shaped dishes, a motif generally associated with Buddhism, is in fact an ornament fundamental to Byzantine and Persian art.<sup>50</sup> Thus its inclusion on the Belitung dishes should not come as a surprise when we consider their likely manufacture by Persian or Arab artisans.<sup>51</sup>

In the light of above, while we can only speculate over the destination of the Belitung treasures, they represent luxury items that catered to foreign demand and taste. The four-lobed silver bowl decorated with a seated rhinoceros-like beast from the ship's cargo is a perfect example of a piece commissioned for an overseas buyer. The vessel's lobed shape is characteristic of Sassanian and Persian silver work, which in turn became models for their Chinese counterparts.<sup>52</sup> A contemporaneous silver dish of similar lobed form, inscribed with the character *yang* 楊 (Figure 5.6), helps situate its production in Yangzhou where the Belitung bowl was also likely made.<sup>53</sup>

The Kempe dish is closely related in workmanship, style, and decoration to the Belitung bowl and thus likely belongs to a group of wares that were produced in one of the many workshops in South China for the export market.

### 3.2 *Questions Raised Concerning the Rhinoceros and the Howdah*

The most striking aspect of the Belitung bowl is the rhinoceros-like figure in the centre. Although the beast resembles a rhinoceros with a protruding horn above its snout, its body is covered in scales, unlike contemporary Chinese depictions of elephants. This incongruity may be explained by references

50 Pope and Ackerman 1964, 628. The dishes are held in the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

51 See Harper 2006, 52 fig. 26 for Sassanian silver vessel shapes that closely match the forms of gold and silver wares from the Belitung shipwreck. Sassanian art was produced under the Sassanian Empire before the Muslim conquest of Persia was completed around 651.

52 Qi 1999.

53 The dish was included in the 2011 Eskenazi Gallery exhibition titled 'Early Chinese Metalwork in Gold and Silver: Works of Art of the Ming and Qing Dynasties'. The inscription was erroneously understood to be the surname Yang as it appears to be written as *yang* 楊 with a tree radical. The two *yang* characters (揚 and 楊), the former written with a hand radical while the latter with a tree radical, were very similar in handwritten form, thus it is no surprise that they were used interchangeably. See Eskenazi Ltd. 2011, 36.





FIGURE 5.6 Ninth or tenth century parcel-gilt silver dish, with a close-up of the inscription on its foot-ring

to a mythical creature called the karkadann in early Arabic texts.<sup>54</sup> Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048), an Iranian scholar and polymath, describes the karkadann as follows:

It is of the build of a buffalo, has a black, scaly skin, a dewlap hanging down under the chin. It has three yellow hooves on each foot, the biggest one forward, the others on both sides. The tail is not long. The eyes lie low, farther down the cheek than in the case with all other animals. On the top of the nose there is a single horn which is bent upward.<sup>55</sup>

Illustrations of karkadanns may have been based on the one-horned Indian rhinoceros; however, in Islamic and Persian art they represent a mythological animal that later came to be associated with the unicorn.<sup>56</sup> Images of the karkadann may be found in the *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* (Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing) by Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini (d. 1283) which show Persian interpretations of the beast (Figure 5.7). Although these texts both post-date the Belitung and the Kempe dishes, mythological animals such as the karkadann would have been known and imagined from earlier times.

54 While historically the karkadann is the name of a mythical creature that roamed the grassy plains of India and Persia, in modern Arabic it is also a word for 'rhinoceros'.

55 Wexler 2017, 104.

56 For illustrations of the karkadann, see Ettinghausen 1950.

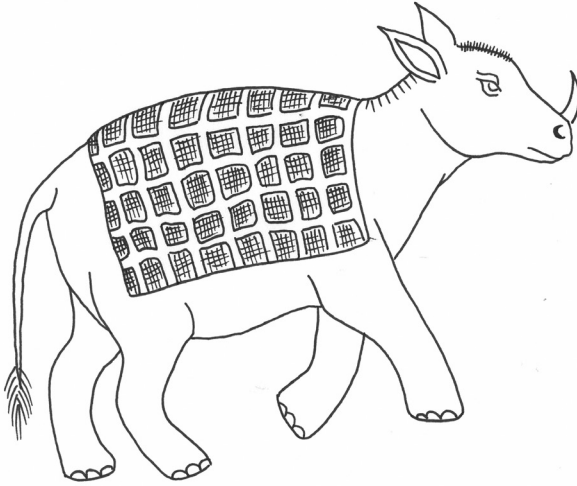


FIGURE 5.7 Line-drawing of a karkadann from *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt*

Considering that karkadanns feature prominently in Persian art and literature, it is likely that the decoration on the Belitung bowl represents a karkadann rather than a rhinoceros. Indeed, a further example of a karkadann, rather than a rhinoceros, can be seen on the lid of a silver box (Figure 5.8).<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that depictions of large animals, such as elephants, in Tang art do not show scales – evidencing that artisans were capable of depicting such beasts without scales. All the representations of rhinoceroses in the Tang period cited herein have scales, raising the wider question as to whether *any* of these figures were indeed intended to represent rhinoceroses.

Returning to the Kempe dish, another foreign element is the lotus *howdah* with three large open lotuses on the animal's back. A similar image may be found on a contemporaneous decorative gilt-copper plaque that depicts a standing rhinoceros-like beast next to a foreign groom (Figure 5.9). Jan Chapman comments how, in this instance, 'it is difficult to decide whether the particular beast shown is an anatomically incorrect Sumatran rhinoceros or

57 For the box in question as well as an additional karkadann on the lid of a second silver box, see Qi 1999, col. pl. 38 and line drawing 1-245. Qi does not give any provenance information concerning the boxes.

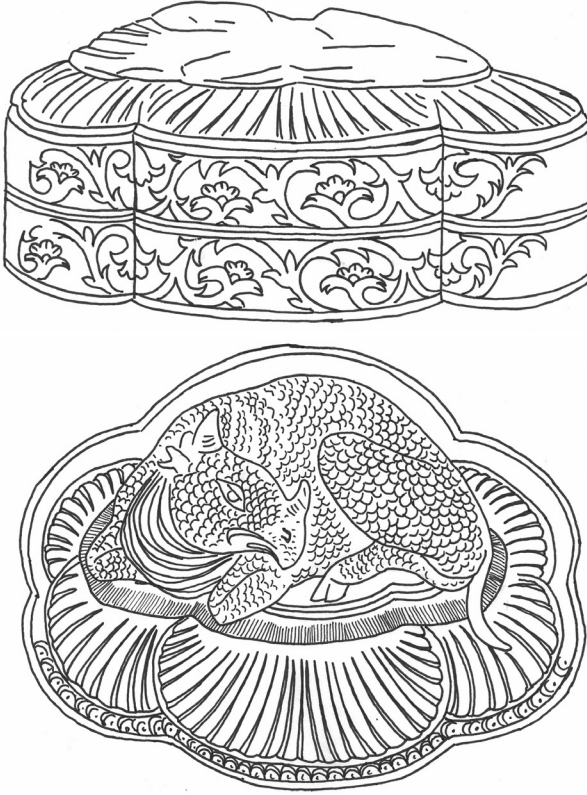


FIGURE 5.8 Line-drawing of a silver box featuring a karkadann motif on the lid

an early version of the mythical *qilin*.<sup>58</sup> I suggest that the beast on the plaque may well be a karkadann rather than either a *qilin* or an anatomically-incorrect rhinoceros.

At first glance, the lotus *howdah* may be seen as a distinct Buddhist element on both the Kempe dish and the plaque. The two pieces are contemporaneous and from their decoration, it is likely that they were made for the religious market; perhaps being commissioned to be gifted to a monastery or a religious institution in or outside China. Rong Xinjiang notes how, in medieval China, Buddhist monasteries were both nurseries for spiritual cultivation and repositories of material culture. Because of the protection offered by Buddhist law and the devotion of Buddhist adherents, the store of objects preserved

58 Chapman 1999, 16 and fig. 2.



FIGURE 5.9 Tang gilt-copper plaque

by monasteries far surpassed that kept in other types of buildings or institutions. The sizeable collection of artefacts found at the base of the stupa at the Famen Temple is a prime example of this material wealth.<sup>59</sup> However, vessels decorated with images of rhinoceros-like beasts have not been found in any Chinese monasteries or religious institutions to date, supporting the argument that it was not an important decorative element in Chinese Buddhist art.

Images of *howdah* and lotus flowers are also associated with elephants in Buddhist iconography. One example is the elephant carrying a substantial lotus *howdah* on its back chased on a covered silver box in the Shōsō-in

59 Rong 2004, 15–16.

that appears to have a similar function as the decoration on the Kempe dish. It is intriguing why the artist of the Kempe dish (and the decorative plaque) chose to depict a karkadann and not an elephant in his composition. However, in Persian art elephants and karkadanns were used interchangeably, with the karkadann seen as resembling an elephant and vice versa. Indeed, the karkadann from the *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt* by al-Qazwini (in Figure 5.7) resembles a stocky, tamed elephant with saddlecloth.<sup>60</sup> The close link between the karkadann and the elephant is also seen on a drawing in a miniature version of a *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* manuscript dated to 1337 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Interestingly, the karkadann in this later manuscript has two horns, suggesting that it may have been inspired by images of African rhinoceroses. The artist was undoubtedly familiar with the two-horned species, hailing himself from Egypt where they roamed.<sup>61</sup> The iconographic conflation of karkadann and elephant by Persian and Arab artists may then explain the unusual decoration of the Kempe dish.

In comparing the Kempe dish with the Belitung bowl and additional depictions of rhinoceroses and *howdah*, the mystery of the Kempe dish's design can be unveiled. The figure of the rhinoceros-like beast, much like that on the Belitung bowl, bears scales similar to descriptions of the karkadann popular in Persian and Arab art. Furthermore, the inclusion of a lotus *howdah* suggests a confusion between the elephant and the karkadann, suggesting the piece was conceptualised by a Persian or Arab artisan.

#### 4 A Likely Life Story

So what may have been the life story of the Kempe dish? It is here suggested that we are looking at an object produced in Yangzhou, possibly in a similar workshop as the Belitung bowl and under the supervision of or by the hand of one of the many Arab or Persian silversmiths operating in the city. We can safely date it to the late Tang, more specifically to the early ninth century and not before as suggested by the auction house experts. It was made during a period described by Qi Dongfang as the 'phase of popularisation and diversification', when the monopoly of gold and silver production by the central government was fragmented and there was an increased emergence of privately-owned workshops.<sup>62</sup> There was also a change in the use of gold and

60 Ettinghausen 1950, 14–15 fn.11.

61 Ettinghausen 1950, 27.

62 Qi 1999, 460.

silver wares at the time, which were no longer made exclusively for the Tang imperial family and court, but were also objects for tributes and bribery as well as for commercial exchange and trade. As evident from the Belitung finds, gold and silver objects were also commissioned for the export market. Since ships could transport much larger quantities of goods compared to camels using the land route of the northern Silk Road, we may suggest that the maritime trade between China, Southeast Asia, and the western shores of the Arabian Sea, with its final hub of Abbasid Iraq amongst the major markets of the era, was an important trade route transporting large volumes of goods and connecting markets on a truly global scale.

What the Kempe dish also tells us is that Chinese export of luxury items, apart from silk and ceramics, also included gold, silver and, as can also be deduced from the Belitung cargo, bronze wares.<sup>63</sup> Considering the number of foreign vessels mentioned in official records and from travellers' accounts, such as that of Feng Ruofang on Hainan Island, there was evidently a buoyant sea trade between China and other realms sustained by the Maritime Silk Roads which was perhaps more vibrant and active than previously assumed.

The social life of the Kempe dish has been eventful to say the least. From its possible conception by a Persian or Arab silversmith to its production in a workshop in southern China, the dish's early life story is that of a coveted commercial object. Although we lose sight of it for a time, it reappears in the twentieth century in the West as a treasured item of artistic significance. In the custody of Carl Kempe, who acquired it directly or indirectly from China, the dish's new life became one of academic scrutiny and veneration. In more recent years, its tranquil existence in a museum setting has been interrupted no less than four times, three times in private sales and once at a public auction. Being sold for ever higher prices, this dish has become a store of value and financial investment for a private collection.

The Kempe dish's remarkable journey has enriched its biography, providing it with a remarkable identity that is multi-cultural, multi-regional, and multi-purposed. It is a story of shifting classifications imposed by those in contact with it. Seeking to understand the dish's life, I have suggested a number of hypotheses that are difficult to verify and which perhaps raise more questions than answers. We may ask, as Appadurai does, whether there is any benefit in looking at the social life of this dish. Can we concretely state that the value of the dish is defined solely by its role in past exchanges? What is certain is that

63 Other metal goods retrieved from the ship included twenty-nine Chinese bronze mirrors and several hundred Chinese bronze coins. See Louis 2011, 85.

not all parties involved with the Kempe dish shared the same interests, therefore each change of ownership came with a different set of values. The many paths taken by the dish reflect divergent interests and boundaries.

But our story is not only about a commodity, it is also about people. As noted by Kopytoff, we should not separate the universe of people from the universe of objects: the two together are culturally axiomatic.<sup>64</sup> As with people, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and identity.<sup>65</sup> What happens with the Kempe dish in the next hundreds and thousands of years is anyone's guess. However, what is certain is that its life as an object of study, veneration, and commercial exchange will continue, and its link with the vibrant and successful foreign communities in the Tang tells a fascinating tale of people and trade in southern China.

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64 Kopytoff 2011, 84.

65 Kopytoff 2011, 90.

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