

The Collection of Ceramics Excavated by Olov Janse

Research >
Southeast Asia

During his work in Vietnam, the Swedish archaeologist Olov Janse excavated numerous brick-built Han-style tombs and kilns in Thanh Hoa province, and the remains of the Dong Son settlement in North Vietnam. With the support of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* in Hanoi, Janse carried out three series of excavations in Vietnam between 1934 and 1939. During his third expedition he also excavated at the Sa Huynh sites in the province of Quang Nai, central Vietnam. The ceramics he excavated were deposited in numerous museums throughout the world, one of these being the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (MFEA) in Stockholm, Sweden.

By Ruth Prior

The purpose of my visit to the MFEA was to study a largely ignored collection of ceramics from the province of Thanh Hoa, North Vietnam, which Olov Janse had excavated. Originally all of the ceramics from Janse's excavations were deposited either in the Musée Guimet, Paris, or in the Peabody Museum in Boston, USA. However, in recognition of King Gustavus Adolphus' interest in archaeology, and perhaps as a gesture of patriotism, Janse arranged for a selection of objects to be given to King Gustavus Adolphus. Later, these same artefacts were transferred to the MFEA. Since then the vessels have largely remained unstudied and un-displayed.

The original aims of my research were to establish a chronology of the vessels found in the tombs and at the kilns of Thanh Hoa, examine methods used in their production, study the distribution of the vessels made at the Tam Tho kilns, and if possible, sample material for petrographic analysis.

However, during the early stages of my research it became apparent that some of the aims would have to be modified. This was due to the fact that when I began examining the objects there was no catalogue of them, nor was there data available on their provenance or date.

Obviously, these facts needed to be established through careful research.

Janse published detailed volumes, each reporting on one of the three periods during which he undertook excavation in Vietnam (Janse 1947, 1951, 1958). It turned out that the materials which had been stored in the Musée Guimet, and thus the MFEA, were the result of his first two excavations.

The majority of the vessels at the MFEA were marked with a code – usually on the bottom of the vessel base – which appeared to be a site code, for example 'LTII'. I believed this could be interpreted as Lach Truong, tomb two. Upon testing this hypothesis by examining the photographs in Janse's volumes, I found one of the vessels in the MFEA collection illustrated, with its site code visible. This code related exactly to the name of the site and the tomb number, confirming the belief that the markings represented site codes.

Using this, in conjunction with the list of objects sent by the Musée Guimet and the tomb plans, I was then able to proceed through the Stockholm collection identifying each object, the site it was from, and the tomb, if from a tomb. This knowledge enabled me to set up a catalogue that detailed all of the vessels in the collection. This catalogue contains an individual record for each

vessel, including: measurements, surface decoration and glazing, the method of production, references, and a photograph. It also includes the estimated date based on associated grave goods within the tomb.

The Janse collection in the MFEA includes thirty-five individual ceramic vessels as well as over fifty broken potsherds, glass beads, and bronzes. The ceramic vessels include a range of jars, basins, dishes, cups, and vases. These were primarily undecorated, though some were glazed, and some were covered with stamped motifs. Of particular interest were two tripod vessels in the form of birds, which Janse suggested to represent either cockerels or pheasants. The majority of the vessels can be dated to between the first and third centuries AD, corresponding to the period of Han occupation in North Vietnam.

The vessels in the Stockholm collection demonstrate that there were two distinct production traditions used in the forming of the vessels found deposited in the tombs. These two traditions possibly co-existed at the kilns

of Tam Tho or, as I suspect, are indicative of vessels being imported from outside Tam Tho.

Firstly there is a group of high-fired cream wares, frequently glazed, often well formed, and evenly fired. Some of these wares have Chinese characters on their bases. It would seem unlikely that these inscriptions were made by Vietnamese potters, who were most probably illiterate and who would not have been familiar with the Chinese script. Such inscriptions are often interpreted as 'makers' marks' and would have to be made on the unfired vessel, suggesting that they were produced by Chinese potters.

The vessels appear to be made from kaolin-based clays, deposits of which can be found in the Ma and Red River valleys, but not within the vicinity of the Tam Tho kilns. Therefore this group of wares may have been brought into the area for depositing within the tombs.

The second group of vessels are much lower fired earthenwares. They are commonly unglazed but with stamped decoration, often using some wheel technology. Their uneven

colouration indicates irregular firing. The fabrics compare well to the ones I analysed from the Tam Tho kilns, marking them as products of Tam Tho. They seem to suggest vessels made either by careless potters, or more likely, potters who were beginning to adapt to a new technology and new vessel forms. These potters were eager to imitate Chinese forms and motifs but were as yet unable to obtain the greater degree of skill in their production, as shown by the cream wares. <

References

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