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Wreck finds for sale

By Liz Price

How would you like to be the owner of a 1,000-year-old piece of pottery recovered from the Malaysian seabed?

Thousands of such treasures are on sale in Kuala Lumpur in a month-long exhibition. *Treasures of the South China Sea* at Aquaria, KLCC shows pottery and ceramics recovered from 10 shipwrecks found in Malaysian waters, and all the pieces are up for sale. Rest assured that you are buying a genuine piece, as its origin and history are known.

Items include Ming dynasty celadon dishes, vases, Sukhothai fish plate, porcelain ewers, Qing dynasty blue and white dishes, brown glazed jars, covered boxes and jars, teapots, bowls and spoons. There are even 1,000-year-old bronze gongs.

The ships were probably carrying perishable items such as silk and spices, but of course, they didn't survive the long immersion in the seawater.

Swede Sten Sjostrand is a dedicated marine archaeologist who really knows his stuff. His company, Nanhai Marine Archaeology Sdn Bhd, is based in Kuala Rompin, Pahang.



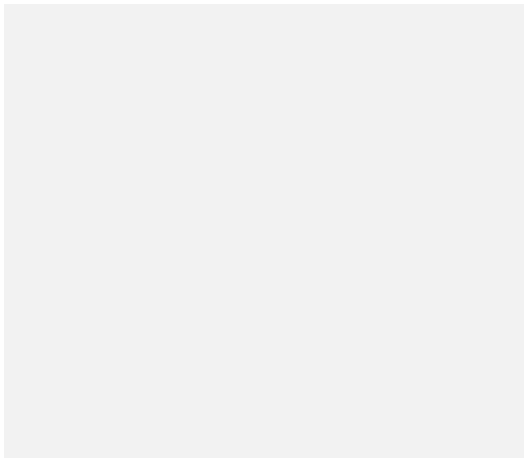
Blue and white ceramics on show/sale at Aquaria KLCC.

Sjostrand has been diving for 35 years and is passionate about his work. His company recovered the artefacts from 10 shipwrecks in Malaysian waters. Most of these were off the east coast, with one from the Malacca Straits and one off Sabah.

Sjostrand and his team were able to determine the origin of the artefacts. And as he was originally a naval architect, Sjostrand could also record details of the ship.

The dating techniques used by Nanhai Marine are surprisingly accurate. This has surprised experts from eminent museums around the world, who have now revised their data on their own collections.

The oldest ship is the *Tanjung Simpang*, from the northern Song dynasty, dated at 960-1127. This was a Chinese ship loaded with goods, from an era when Chinese traders were the sole purveyors of



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pottery to South-East Asia.

The Chinese ship was built of wood from China. From China, the trade route would have passed Vietnam and Thailand, then down the east coast of Malaysia to the Malacca Straits.

The next oldest ship is the *Turiang* dated 1370. It was carrying Chinese ceramics and Thai pottery to Borneo. It is thought that Chinese potters were fleeing the Mongol invasion in northern China for Thailand and Vietnam. Around 1371, ship builders were also leaving China.

The *Nanyang* shipwreck is dated 1380, but shows the distinct shift in trade from China to Thailand. The ship still had a Chinese design but was made of tropical hardwood. Subsequent ships such as the *Longquan* (1400), were made of tropical wood. This ship was difficult to excavate as it was lying in more than 60m of water.

The earlier Chinese pieces had no external decoration. As production moved to Thailand, the art of making the Celadon pieces was perfected, and were exported in large numbers. By 1460, the pieces recovered from the Royal Nanhai had external decorations.

The next century saw another change in the South China Sea trade. The *Singtai* shipwreck (1550) was built in China, but carried Thai pottery, especially storage jars.

Chinese blue and white porcelain took over in popularity from the Thai celadon, resulting in the decline of Thai kilns. The Europeans liked the blue and white style.

The Portuguese had arrived on the scene and affected the general trading. The ship *Wanli* (1625) was of Portuguese design but built in India.

When Nanhai Marine started excavating this ship, they found 9,400kg of broken porcelain. On previous wrecks, only an average of 10% of the cargo was broken. It is thought that the Portuguese attacked the *Wanli* due to disputes with the Dutch traders, and set fire to it. The fire presumably reached the powder room and the ship blew up and sank. Of the cargo recovered, there were still 7,400 registered pieces – a registered piece means it is at least 51% complete.

Colonial presence was still obvious in later trading in Asian ports. *The Anantes* (1795) was a French ship carrying porcelain to Europe.

The last of the 10 ships, the *Desaru* (1830), shows a decline in the South China Sea trade. By this time, porcelain was being made more cheaply in Europe and few ships sailed to China. The *Desaru* was built in China and plied South-East Asia.

Nanhai Marine has been working with the National Museum. The museum gets 30% of the cargo recovered, with at least one item of each type.

Nanhai Marine have been training museum staff over the years and have sent some of them to China to get first-hand experience of the sites of the kilns etc.

An exhibition *Maritime Archaeology Malaysia* was set up in the National Museum in Nov 2001 and was scheduled to run for six months, but it is still open as it proved to be so popular.

The exhibition will soon be upgraded and made a permanent feature. It features historic shipwrecks found in Malaysian waters.

The objective of this exhibition in Aquaria is not just to sell the pieces, but to share information.

You can learn where the items were made, in what style, and discover how the trade changed over the centuries.

One important thing is that the pieces are 100% genuine. So many prominent museums around the world unknowingly house collections that include fakes. W

Sjostrand has also written several books, the latest is for sale at the exhibition.

Some of the jars are priced at RM8,000. There are bowls from RM90-RM450, and a set of two spoons at a mere RM90, which is not much to pay for a piece of genuine history.

This could be the last chance to buy these items in Malaysia. The collection will probably go to China for one last sale, then it is rumoured that Sjostrand will be retiring. So go and see this piece of history. W

The exhibition Treasures of the South China Sea at Aquaria KLCC will be on until Oct 31. It is open daily, 11am -8 pm. Admission is free.

There are guided tours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 2pm and 5pm.

For more information, visit <http://www.mingwrecks.com> or www.maritimeasia.ws.



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