

Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road. Adam T. Kessler. Brill Academic Publishers. 2012. 587 pp. (ISBN-13: 9789004218598)

Kessler's central claim is that blue and white porcelain was produced during the Song era, and did not first appear during the Yuan era as the currently accepted periodization has it. He furthermore claims that the Yuan state did not produce the *shufu* (imperial-marked) wares, as the Mongol ruling class did not consider porcelain to be a proper material for cups or dishes for people of high rank, and instead preferred gold and silver (Kessler, 271). Kessler's central claim has implications that extend beyond art history to global cultural and economic history, as Chinese ceramics are widely used for the dating of archeological sites, and thus also as an indicator of economic activity. Kessler had previously argued for this dating of blue and white porcelain in an exhibition catalog, *Empires Beyond the Great Wall* (Los Angeles: Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1994) that presented objects from archeological sites he studied; his dating of these finds was widely rejected (e.g. Suzanne G. Valenstein. "Concerning a Reattribution of Some Chinese Ceramics," *Orientalism*. December, 1994, 71-74). In *Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road*, he defends his claims with a great quantity and variety of evidence. This book is intended for specialists and will prove largely impenetrable to the non-specialist reader, as the author does not explain the stakes of his arguments sufficiently to anyone not already familiar with the subject-matter.

The conventional dating of early blue and white ceramics has the new style being developed by the Yuan dynasty during the second quarter of the 14th century under the influence of Islamicate ceramics and metalwork, which much early blue and white porcelain is said to have imitated to suit the tastes of foreign, especially Muslim, recipients. Among the main evidence supporting the currently-accepted dating are the Sinan shipwreck, which contained inscribed wooden tags with dates up to 1323 and yielded a large quantity and variety of porcelain, but no blue-and-white wares, and the Percival David vases, with inscriptions indicating that their year of production was 1351. These two large vases represent a highly-developed state of technique and decoration for blue and white porcelain. The art of blue and white porcelain is thus held to have reached a high degree of sophistication within the space of a few decades before the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368. In fact, Kessler maintains that by 1352, the region around Jingdezhen was experiencing turmoil that would have prevented the kilns from being used by the Yuan government. Therefore, most of the Yuan blue-and-white wares must have been produced in the space of about 25 years, during which time its availability went from being poor enough that it was completely unrepresented in the Sinan shipwreck in 1323, to being available enough that it could reach Africa and Western Eurasia, as attested by pre-Ming blue-and-whites in the Ardebil Shrine and Topkapi Palace collections (Kessler, 320).

The principal evidence Kessler marshals for his central claim is a series of archeological digs – from a city at the Ejina River Oasis in Inner Mongolia and hoards from Hebei Province in northern China and various regions in southern China – which are interpreted in light of historical records about warfare, evidence for occupation of the sites, and trade between the Xixia and Jin and Song states in chapters I and II. He also discusses a number of other sites – Chapter III Section 14 has a table summarizing 42 different sites, comprising 79 hoard burials. He dates 53 of the hoards located in northern China, which contain blue and white porcelain, to between 1211 and 1213 based on the theory that they were buried by Jin elites in locations safely removed from the action as their states were conquered by the nascent Mongol Empire. By conventional dating methods, the presence of blue and white porcelain necessarily places these hoards within the Yuan period. Kessler offers a detailed discussion of the history of the sites and establishes a *terminus ante quem* for each one based on historical sources and numismatic evidence from the hoards. Here, the author paints a clear picture of the circumstances leading to the burial of treasure. Most of these hoards contain coins, numbering all together in the high hundreds of thousands, and dating to no later than the Southern Song and Jin periods (generally, up to 1189 AD). While there are far fewer extant Yuan coins than Song, the Yuan did issue coinage starting in the early 14th century (Nancy Shatzman Steindardt, “Currency Issues of Yuan China,” *Bulletin of Sung and Yuan Studies* 16, 1980: 70), so the complete absence of Yuan coins from multiple mid-14th-century hoards each containing tens of thousands of coins would indeed be improbable given that Yuan coins were in circulation for more than ten years by the time blue and white porcelain is supposed to have become common. (If Yuan-era coins constituted even a tenth of a percent of the coinage in circulation in the region when a hoard was buried, the probability of their being omitted *by chance* from a hoard containing tens of thousands of coins is quite small, *a fortiori* for multiple hoards). Kessler’s explanation for the absence of blue-and-whites from the Sinan shipwreck – that the buyers simply had not ordered that kind of porcelain – is more plausible. He also cites findings that much of the ship’s porcelain cargo consisted of Song-era wares from China and Korea, which were sought as antiques by their Japanese buyers (Kessler, 321).

Kessler argues for reconsideration of the dating of a number of pieces of pre-Ming blue and white porcelain and porcelain shards from a number of archeological sites. He argues in Chapter II, Section 12, that the Percival David vases were commissioned by a private individual for a Daoist temple, and thus not evidence of Yuan patronage of porcelain production. He rejects stratigraphic evidence for a Yuan-era origin of blue and white porcelain from the waster heaps at the Jingdezhen kiln sites on the grounds that these sites are not well-suited to stratigraphic analysis (Kessler,

361). He discusses shards of blue and white porcelain found in Aidhab (on the Red Sea), East Africa, South Asia, Java, the Philippines, and the ruins of Hama and Fustat (Kessler, Chapter III, Sections 39-45). Fustat was largely abandoned in 1168, whereas trade with the Indian Ocean was especially promoted during the Fatimid period (969- 1171). Thus, porcelain shards found there are more consistent with Fatimid/Song dating, although a later dating cannot be ruled out. He discusses a number of blue and white porcelain objects dated to the Yuan period and argues for a Song-era dating based on analysis of visual motifs and philological analysis of writing on the objects (Kessler, Chapter III, Sections 25-38). The fourth and final chapter discusses chemical analyses of the cobalt pigments used in pre-Ming blue and white porcelain and concludes that chemical evidence obtained so far indicates that the cobalt pigment used in these wares came from Indonesia and Afghanistan rather than Kashan, Iran, contrary to the conventional wisdom that cobalt blue dye was first procured in Iran.

One broader theory used to explain his Song-era dating of blue and white porcelain concerns an ideological and ethnological dimension of the objects. Kessler argues that the Song court made porcelain replicas of Zhou and Shang ritual bronzes, part of a larger trend of historically-conscious fascination with antiquity, and that the Mongol Yuan disapproved of porcelain tableware. He interprets the Ming court's production of blue and white porcelain as a self-conscious revival of a Song-era tradition. During the Song era, the Xixia and Jin valued porcelain as exemplifying Chinese forms of aesthetic refinement. Given the Central Asian courts' awareness of political circumstances in China during the Timurid era (see e.g. Joseph Fletcher. "China and Central Asia 1368-1884," in *The Chinese World Order*, ed. Joseph Fairbank. (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1968), 209-211), his interpretation of the meaning of porcelain for the Ming court may have important connections to the Islamic world's memory and reception of the Mongol legacy. The present reviewer agrees with Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt ("*Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road* by Adam Kessler," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 25/1, 2015, 184-7) that Kessler's work merits careful consideration by scholars in the relevant fields. His central claims, if they turn out to be correct, have great implications for global history.

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