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INSCRIPTIONS ON CHINESE CERAMICS FROM BENAT HILIR, SAMARAHAN, SARAWAK

Jonathan Ko and Stephen Chia

INTRODUCTION

Benat Hilir is an archaeological site situated near a village called Kampung Benat in the middle reaches of the Sadong River, Samarahan, Sarawak (Fig.1). The first field survey at this site was carried out by a research team from the archaeology section of the Sarawak Museum Department in the 1970s. A trial excavation was conducted after the area had been identified as a potential site for archaeological research (Nyandoh 1971). However, the excavation team was unable to excavate the potential area because it was situated in a rice field which was ready for harvest. Subsequently, the team excavated an area near the river bank and found only a few ceramic sherds, mostly stonewares.

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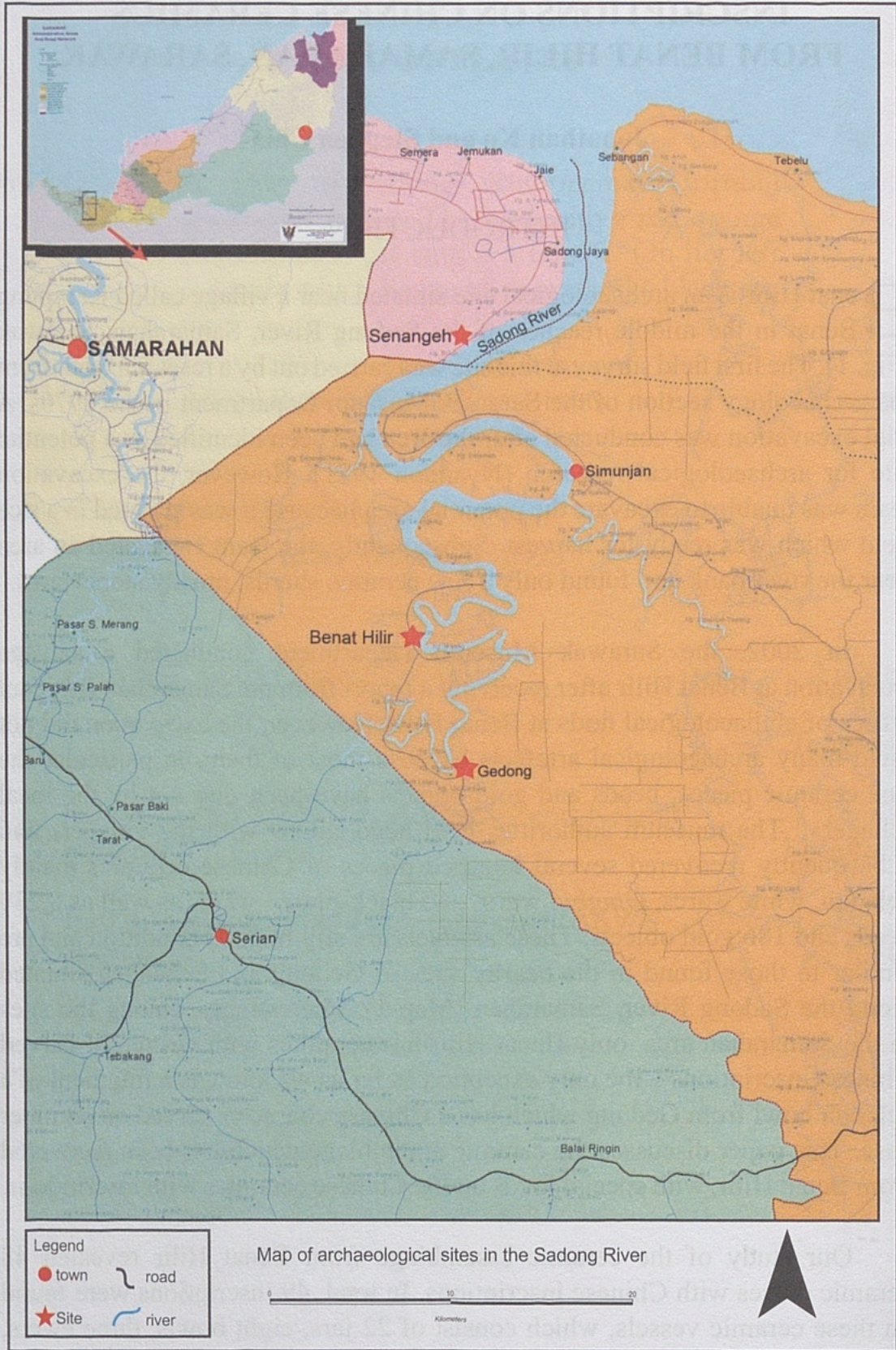
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In 2002, the Sarawak Museum Department conducted a salvage excavation at Benat Hilir after receiving a report from the Samarahan Resident Office of archaeological finds at Benat Hilir. However, the excavation did not yield many archaeological artefacts because most of them, in particular the fine ceramic pieces, beads and gold objects have been dug out by the local villagers.¹ The museum authorities held negotiations with the villagers and subsequently recovered several hundred pieces of Chinese ceramics mainly celadon, white wares, *Qingbai* wares and black-glazed wares as well as 8,230 beads and 186 gold objects. These artefacts are still in good condition and are similar to those found in the nearby sites of Gedong and Senangeh situated along the Sadong River, Samarahan (Map 1). Interestingly, among the sites in the Samarahan area, only Benat Hilir has ceramics with written or carved Chinese inscriptions – the only exception as far as we know is a fragment of a celadon bowl from Gedong which has a Chinese character carved on its inner base. This paper discusses the ceramic assemblage which has been recovered from Benat Hilir, with special focus on the Chinese ceramics with inscriptions.

Our study of the ceramic assemblage from Benat Hilir revealed 48 ceramic pieces with Chinese inscriptions. In total, 49 inscriptions were found on these ceramic vessels, which consist of 22 jars, eight bowls, three ewers,



Map 1: Map of the location of Benat Hilir, Gedong and Senangeh in Samarahan.

five covered boxes, nine storage bottles and two vases. These inscriptions contain one to five Chinese characters, and based on our analysis, 18 of the inscriptions have only one Chinese character, 12 of the inscriptions have two Chinese characters, five of the inscriptions have three Chinese characters, seven of the inscriptions have four Chinese characters, and only one piece of the ceramics was carved with five Chinese characters. There are also six ceramic pieces with unidentifiable numbers of Chinese characters (Table 1).

Table 1: Types of ceramics and number of Chinese characters.

Type	5 characters	4 characters	3 characters	2 characters	1 character	Unidentifiable	Total
Jar			5	7	5	5	22
Bowl		5			3		8
Ewer					3		3
Covered box	1	1		1	2		5
Storage vessel				4	4	1	9
Vase		1			1		2
Total	1	7	5	12	18	6	49

In general, most of the inscriptions have been written on the exterior base of the vessels using a kind of indelible black ink. There are also a few inscriptions carved, incised or stamped on the surfaces of the vessels. All the Chinese inscriptions were written in regular script (楷体) using the original complex form of simplified Chinese characters. Unlike the inscriptions found on ceramics produced during the later periods, none of the ceramic pieces from Benat Hilir has inscriptions in the form of poetry or a literary composition which could run into several hundred words. The majority of the inscriptions refer to either the name or surname of the owner of the ceramics or the name of the trader. This is done in order to indicate and to differentiate ceramic items produced or owned by different people in the cargoes (*pers. comm.*, Prof. Li Jian An, Director of Institute of Archaeology, *Fu Jian* Museum, 25th May 2014). However, some of the inscriptions which are stamped or carved on the ceramic's surface were probably the trademark symbols of certain kilns or production centres. There are also felicitous phrases and good wishes for fortune and prosperity among the inscriptions (Peng 1999). The Chinese inscriptions which we have found on the ceramic pieces from Benat Hilir have provided useful clues for tracing the provenances and dating the Chinese ceramics in Sarawak during the early maritime trade in Borneo.

Table 2: Types of inscriptions and number of ceramic pieces.

Types	Number of pieces
Painted/written	38
Carved	3
Incised	2
Stamped	6
Total	49

CERAMICS WITH IDENTIFIABLE INSCRIPTIONS

Inscription to express good wishes – “金玉满堂”

This type of inscription is a Chinese idiom to describe a lot of wealth and richness in knowledge. It is commonly written or carved on Chinese products including ceramics to express good wishes to someone. “金” means gold; “玉” means jade; “满” means fill, and “堂” means hall (Institute of Linguistics, 2000). The phrase “金玉满堂” (*Jīn Yù Mǎn Táng*) therefore literally means “gold and jades filled the hall” and it is also used to refer to “abundant wealth or many children in the family”. In total, five celadon bowls were stamped with this type of inscriptions “金玉满堂”. Four of these bowls (BS 336-02, BS 488-02, BS 606-02 and BS 771-02) have a green-yellowish tinge glaze while one of them (BS 541-02) has been coated with a glaze in green-greyish tinge. These bowls belong to the same group as they are made to a nearly rounded shape which flares outwards from the bottom and is supported by a thickened ring foot. All these ceramic pieces have a deep belly surrounded by a high and slightly curved wall.

This type of inscriptions is commonly stamped on the centre of the interior base of the vessel with a square-shaped frame surrounding the characters, like a seal. In some cases, the frame is also carved into a flower-like shape or rounded shape. Unfortunately, the inscriptions on three of the celadon bowls (BS 336-02, BS 541-02 and BS 606-02) have faded and are indistinct. The characters in the phrase “金玉满堂” are generally carved in vertical reading from the right to the left such as those found on vessels BS 541-02 (Fig. 1a) and BS 771-02 (Fig. 1b). However, the inscriptions on vessel BS 336-02 (Fig. 2a) is written in an anti-clockwise direction while the inscriptions on BS 488-02 (Fig. 2b) is read from right to left and from bottom to top. Sadly,

not all the stamped characters on these celadon bowls have survived. Only two inscriptions on bowls BS 488-02 and BS 771-02 are fully identifiable while the characters on vessels BS 541-02, BS 336-02 and BS 606-02 are only partially readable. These are not isolated cases found in Sarawak because similar inscriptions have also been reported by Zainie and Harrison (1967:55, 56). Elsewhere, similar type of inscriptions has also been reported at the site of Sungai Limau Manis in Brunei Darussalam (Karim 2004:32). In China, the inscriptions “金玉满堂” is commonly found on the centre of celadon bowls produced by the Long Quan kiln, dated to the Song and the Yuan periods (Li 2011:97, Li & Zhu 1991:56).

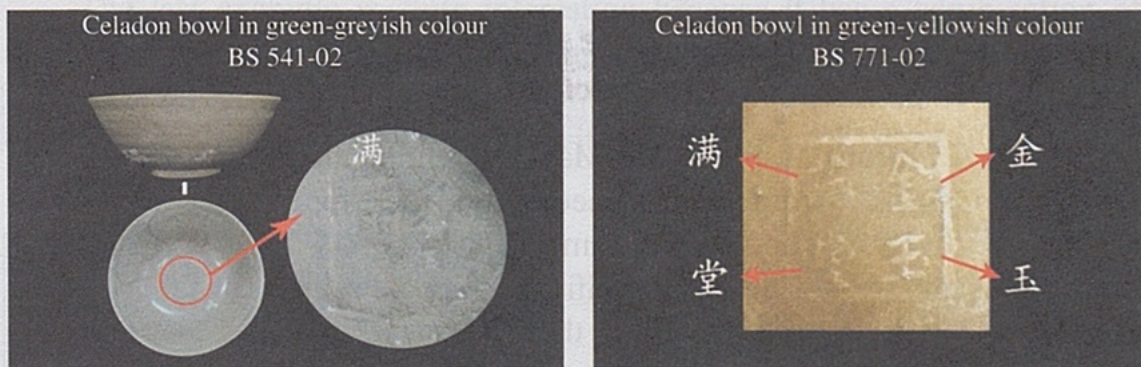


Fig. 1a & 1b: A green-greyish celadon bowl (BS 541-02) and a green-yellowish celadon bowl (BS 771-02) stamped with Chinese inscriptions “金玉满堂” from Benat Hilir.

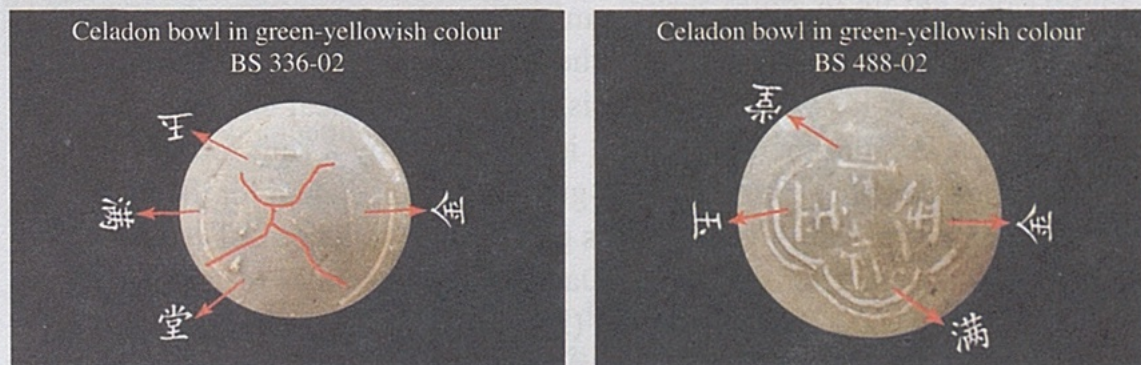


Fig. 2a & 2b: Two green-yellowish celadon bowls (BS 336-02 and BS 488-02) carved with Chinese characters “金玉满堂” from Benat Hilir.