



Bronze Mirrors

François Louis

Twenty-nine bronze mirrors were recovered from various locations at the wreck site. At the time of discovery most of the mirrors were covered by calcareous sediment, and their surfaces had corroded. Many have turned black. Originally, the mirrors were mostly silver to allow for a highly reflective surface. To achieve such a bright color, casters added more tin to the bronze alloy. On average, Tang mirrors are made of a bronze that is composed of 69 percent copper, 25 percent tin, and 5.3 percent lead.¹

The mirrors from the Belitung shipwreck feature a panorama of shapes and designs popular in Tang China. Most of them are standard types that were commercially produced and widely traded. But the group also included two surprising pieces: an antique mirror from the Han era (206 BCE–220 CE), and a never-before-seen Tang mirror, whose inscription identifies it as one of the famed specimens cast on the Yangzi River in Yangzhou, a so-called Yangxin or Jiangxin mirror.

The Belitung mirrors offer a rare glimpse into a commercial inventory of the early ninth century, the various designs and sizes reflecting different price categories and tastes. About a quarter of the mirrors are of restrained, modest design, with shallow floral reliefs or simple concentric lines on the back. Others, such as the four square mirrors that now look entirely plain, originally may have been splendidly decorated with ivory, mother-of-pearl, or gold and silver inlays in black lacquer. These would have catered to the more affluent customers, as did the heavy, sumptuous, so-called lion-and-grapevine mirrors. Six of the latter were discovered (figs. 164–169). Their backs display frolicking animals, which are conventionally called lions but actually depict various kinds of fabled, auspicious beasts.²

Mirrors decorated with joyful animals and plants were, like the undecorated mirrors, generic enough in design to be easily appreciated outside China. But the ship also exported a few mirrors of a more literary kind, whose decoration included Chinese writing (fig. 168). In Tang China, these mirrors would have been purchased by the educated elite, but in the markets abroad they must have appeared not just very exotic but also authentically Chinese and thus highly desirable.

What made the merchants on the Belitung ship acquire these particular mirrors? Besides their saleability abroad and variety, cost surely guided their selection. In other words, while the twenty-nine mirrors exemplify what was available on the Tang market around 830, their selection may also reflect the business pragmatics of the export trade. Overall, it appears that the merchants selected rather conservative styles. Although some of the mirrors would have been relatively modern at the time—such as the two square mirrors with relief decoration, the circular pieces with floral medallions, and the mirrors depicting a zither player and a dancing

The mirrors found on the ship are of various sizes and designs, all popular in Tang China and reflecting different price categories and tastes.

Distinguishable Types of Mirrors	Quantity
Circular with floral medallions	4
Circular with concentric rings	3
Circular with lion and grapevine relief	6
Circular with auspicious animals and inscription	1
Circular Yangxin mirror	1
Circular Han dynasty mirror	1
Lobed with bird and flower relief	5
Lobed with zither player (<i>zhenzi feishuang</i>)	2
Square with rounded corners, undecorated	4
Square with felines and garlands in relief	2

phoenix—the majority preserve designs that were already popular in the first half of the eighth century. For instance, lobed mirrors with birds had been fashionable since the 730s. Mirrors with prancing animals, such as the lion-and-grapevine mirrors, had been made since the seventh century and were most popular during the late seventh and early eighth century.³ The small Han dynasty mirror dates as far back as the first century BCE or the first century CE (fig. 27); thousands of similar pieces were originally produced, but by the late Tang dynasty the few that remained were stylistic oddities.⁴

The presence of these older mirrors on the shipwreck confirms what we know from tomb finds, namely that it was not uncommon for a good-quality bronze mirror to be used by several generations.⁵ Obviously, not every old mirror ended up in a tomb. Many entered the secondhand market, where their increasingly old-fashioned look may eventually have made them less desirable and more affordable. In this market, international traders would have been ideal buyers, because for them fashionable design was of little concern when trading Tang goods abroad.

Even the most unusual mirror discovered on the shipwreck, the so-called Yangxin mirror, was a seventy-year-old hand-me-down when it left China on the Belitung ship (fig. 26). Part of its story we can reconstruct. The prominent inscription records that this mirror was “made on the twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month of the Wuxu year of the Qianyuan reign of Tang [January 3, 759] in Yangzhou at the heart of the Yangzi River [from metal that was] smelted a hundred times.” Mirrors from Yangzhou made “at the heart of the Yangzi” are celebrated in Tang literature as the finest and most exclusive specimens of their kind.

The beautiful and prosperous city of Yangzhou, “the jewel of China in the eighth century,” was the great trading port in the Tang Empire.⁶ Located at the center of the main inland trade routes at the junction of the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal, Yangzhou was a major hub of manufacture and commerce, famous for its silk, sugar-refining, boatbuilding, excellent cabinetwork, and refined metalwork—bronze mirrors in particular. Textual records mention that, since the Sui dynasty (581–618), Yangzhou mirrors had been sent regularly to the court as tribute.⁷ The emperor would then distribute some of these treasures as gifts among his nobility and his administration.⁸ In Tang fiction, the fame of the Yangxin tribute mirrors was further

augmented through stories of pieces as large as a meter in diameter decorated with magnificent dragons and imbued with supernatural powers.⁹

A poem by Bo Juyi (772–846) makes clear that the famed foundries that produced the Yangxin mirrors actually cast the mirrors on ships.¹⁰ Then the mirrors were polished with powdered abrasives and rinsed with river water. Those not selected for the court were sold to the public. The foundries advertised their products as the epitome of technical skill and attributed their quality to careful cosmological calculations and an alchemical preparation of the bronze. Hence, they boasted that the mirrors' metal had been smelted a hundred times (*bailian*) and that the casting was done on the Double Fifth, the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, traditionally considered one of the most opportune moments of the year to cast a magically charged mirror. Made when the sun was brightest and the days longest, immediately before the summer solstice, such mirrors were thought to be loaded with *yang*, the essence of brightness, light, and fire. Balanced by the *yin* of the great Yangzi, the Yangxin mirrors could plausibly claim a cosmological cause for their extremely clear reflection.

Not everyone took the foundries' claims at face value, however. Around the time the Belitung cargo was loaded, a Hanlin scholar at the Tang court, Li Zhao (flourished 810–30), stated:

*Of old, Yangzhou has been offering Mirrors from the Heart of the River as tribute. These are cast on the fifth day of the fifth month in the middle of the Yangzi River. Some say that none of them is refined a hundred times, but that there are examples which have been refined sixty or seventy times, and that those are fragile and difficult to make and occasionally even produce sounds on their own.*¹¹

While the narratives in Tang literature regularly link the casting of Yangxin mirrors to the Double Fifth in summer, the Belitung mirror states that it was made in winter, two weeks after the winter solstice, one of the major Tang seasonal celebrations of the year. Ennin (793–864), a Japanese monk, stayed in Yangzhou in 839. He recorded that the festivities lasted for three days and consisted mainly of social gatherings over fine meals, during which monks, laymen, “officials of high and low rank and the common people all offer one another congratulations when they meet.”¹² In cosmological terms, winter solstice marks the beginning of a new solar year, the pivotal time when days begin to grow longer and nights become shorter again. It was considered the time when the cosmological principle of *yin* had reached its maximum growth and began its decline, being replaced by the reborn *yang*.¹³

The cosmological decoration on the mirror is in ideal correspondence to the celebration of a new beginning associated with the solstice. The circle of the Eight Trigrams, ancient divinatory symbols of the universe, makes reference to this cosmic cycle of *yin* and *yang*.¹⁴ The four trigrams whose lines add up to an odd number form the *yang* group; the other four trigrams, whose lines add up to an even number, form the *yin* group. While the trigrams visualize the cycles of nature in abstract figures, the four animals can be understood as representational symbols of the world's cardinal directions. They are known as the Four Spirits, or *sishen*: the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Dark Warrior of the North, which is represented here as a turtle without the snake that often accompanies it.¹⁵ The mirror thus advertises itself as an implement whose usefulness far surpasses any vain concerns. It celebrates the transformative powers of a new *yang* cycle that initiates a time when the world is in harmony.

It remains more difficult to explain why the casting took place on the twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month. In Chinese calendar terms, this day happened to be the first Wuxu day after the winter solstice in what itself was a Wuxu year. It is possible that this calendrical conjuncture was considered ideal for casting mirrors based on the almanac for that year. Or perhaps the day was declared auspicious for the foundry by a politically and commercially savvy diviner. In any case, the political circumstances can offer a partial explanation.



OPPOSITE

Fig. 164 Square mirror with auspicious animals and flowers. Cat. 286.

Fig. 165 Lobed mirror with flying birds and floral sprigs. Cat. 282.

Fig. 166 Foliated mirror with flying birds. Cat. 287.



RIGHT

Fig. 167 Mirror with lion and grapevine design. Cat. 285.

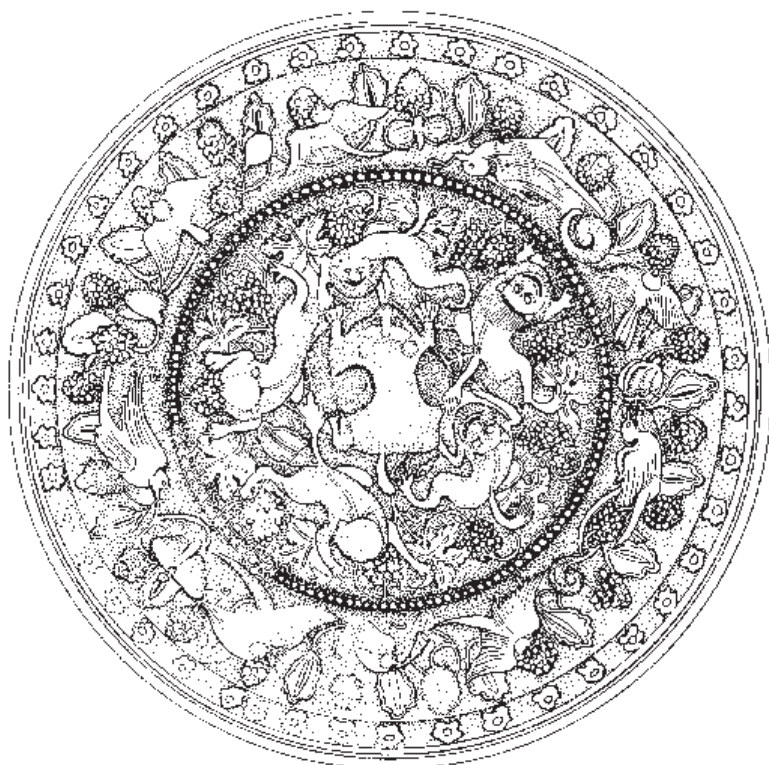
Fig. 168 Lobed mirror with musician and phoenix in a garden and inscription. Cat. 283.

The "lion and grapevine," a popular Tang motif, was adapted from West Asian sources; the other mirrors shown here have more traditional Chinese designs.





Fig. 169 Mirror with lion and grapevine design (which can be seen more clearly in the drawing). Cat. 284.



Tang mirrors that commemorate the date and place of manufacture in their inscriptions are exceedingly rare and all the more so if the year in which they were cast is historically memorable. The Wuxu year of the Qianyuan reign can be considered such a year.¹⁶ It was in 758 that the Tang dynasty was first able to recover from the disastrous rebellion initiated in December 755 by An Lushan (703–757), one of the emperor's trusted generals. The rebellion marked the tragic end of one of the most splendid reigns in Chinese history. After more than four decades of rule, Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–56) was forced to flee into exile and abdicate, while the two capitals fell into the hands of the rebels. Only in November 757, under the leadership of the new emperor, Suzong (reigned 756–62), were the imperial forces finally able to recover the capitals and establish temporary sovereignty.¹⁷ “Supernal Prime” (Qianyuan), the name of the reign Suzong proclaimed in March 758 after he restored Tang dynasty control, programmatically celebrates that new beginning.

To further demonstrate that the imperial family was back in control, many administrative names were changed that year, including that of Yangzhou.¹⁸ The city had been known as Yangzhou since 626, but in 742 it had been renamed Guangling. In 758 its name was officially restored to Yangzhou, and major changes were made to its administrative structure.¹⁹ Quite possibly there is a connection between the prominent display of the name Yangzhou in the mirror's inscription and the official restitution of the city's traditional name. Having the famous Yangzi foundry cast mirrors that iconographically invoke a new beginning may have been part of a hope-inspiring effort to demonstrate not only that a time of healing and regeneration was about to begin but also that business could flourish even in times of war.

Yet despite the proclamations of a new beginning, the political situation of the Tang Empire at the beginning of 759 was far from relaxed. Wars continued to rage in the northern and northwestern provinces, and the court would be unable to quell fully the internal rebellions and insurrections for decades to come.²⁰ In 760 rebel forces even managed to retake briefly the eastern capital Luoyang, and during the same year Yangzhou itself was the scene of historic bloodshed. Tian Shengong (died 776), one of the Tang commanders, ordered his troops to loot the city and massacre several thousand foreign merchants who resided there.²¹ Symptomatic of the court's shaky political situation, the Qianyuan reign lasted only two years. In June 760 a new era, “Highest Prime” (Shangqian), was proclaimed. It too would last for just two years and end in another coup and the looting of the capital Chang'an.

When the Belitung mirror was for sale some seventy years later, the decade from 755 to 765 was primarily remembered as a time of chaos and misfortune. A reference to the short-lived Qianyuan reign would hardly have invoked the same future of peace and prosperity as it did at the beginning of 759. The mirror, moreover, was cast in winter, a time that also could be interpreted as inauspicious, given the myth that the Yangxin mirrors were best cast during the summer. Thus in the late 820s, this Yangxin mirror may not have been an easy sell in a place like Yangzhou despite its excellent provenance, unless the buyer was unacquainted with Yangzhou's history. In that case, it might have looked like a bargain.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Twelve centuries ago, a merchant ship—an Arab dhow—foundered on a reef just off the coast of Belitung, a small island in the Java Sea. The cargo was a remarkable assemblage of lead ingots, bronze mirrors, spice-filled jars, intricately worked vessels of silver and gold, and more than 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers, and other ceramics. The ship remained buried at sea for more than a millennium, its contents protected from erosion by their packing and the conditions of the silty sea floor. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds* explores the story of both the sailors and the ship's precious cargo through more than 400 gorgeous photographs and essays by international experts in Arab ship-building methods, pan-Asian maritime trade, ceramics, precious metalwork, and more.

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