

A Rare Ceramic Bangle From Borneo

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GLASS bangles are a regular feature of prehistoric sites of all sorts in West Borneo and widely in the region, though none have been found in contemporary use (see Harrison 1962). A great variety of upper- and lower-arm bangles occur in historic times and are richly represented in the Sarawak Museum; they are made of ivory, shell, bone, semi-precious and base metals, beads, rattan, and other vines and were obviously designed for male and female wearers. But the only one known of porcelain (or fine porcelainous stoneware) was located at Kampong Tai'i, Serian District, First Division, Sarawak, in July 1959, by W. G. Solheim II (see Plate I). He kindly gave it to me, and I, in turn, presented it to the Museum on his behalf.

The Tai'i people, Land Dayaks, regarded the bangle as an heirloom and were certain it originated across the Indonesian border in Kalimantan, probably up the Kapuas from Pontianak, around ten generations ago. It is a massive, but not very heavy, upper-arm male bangle, 80 mm internal diameter, 37 mm broad, smooth within, and quite strongly concave outside. The porcelain is glazed a finely crazed, dull, buffy white. The "look"—if transposed to a bowl or pot—is "early Ching," perhaps seventeenth century; but it could be considerably earlier. It was probably made in South China, certainly *not* in the archipelago (see below).

From about the advent of Islam in the fifteenth century onward until the advent of better order at sea with the later Europeans in the early nineteenth century, very little was coming to West Borneo direct from the mainland to the north, and almost nothing was arriving directly to the southwest part of what is now Sarawak. It is therefore plausible that the bangle did come over from the other side of the central Bornean watershed.

It is also *possible* (if unlikely) with such anomalous ware that the bangle was made elsewhere, for instance in Holland where so much Chinese ceramic style was copied for reexport to the east. This explanation would be consistent with the origin story, as also with the apparent absence (unless overlooked) of any similar artifacts, such as sherds, in the extensive excavations around the area since 1947 (see *SMJ*). From present evidence, the Chinese and others supplied a wide range of bangles for barter with native Borneans; we have even found a bangle of iron incompletely fired in a crucible at the "Chinese" iron and ceramic site of Sungei Ja'ong, Sarawak River delta, dated ca. A.D. 1000. The Brunei Malays still make bronze bangles and earrings, some elaborate, which have reached the furthest nomadic Punan

Busang of the remote interior. But we have no sign of porcelain bangles in any of the pre-Ching sites; and no rich Ching sites have been found to excavate.

This apparently unique piece for Borneo is therefore put on record:

1. to alert others to look out for sherds or other traces of similar bangles in collections in Borneo and elsewhere;
2. to watch out for similar pieces being worn now, especially over in Kalimantan and in Indonesia;
3. to look for such pieces as European (Dutch, Doulton?) ceramic factory products—perhaps also sent to other Asian countries.

Clearly, it cannot have been unique. Commonsense suggests that this rather specialized product is the survivor of a considerable manufactory to meet a consumer need. Such needs were often also “vogues” inside Borneo. The sorts of bangles preferred varied from group to group—and still do. The current favorites include reworked brass off army ammunition box handles. Special fashions develop locally, and then spill over and out. That may have been the case, quite a long time ago, with the not very “practical” use of porcelain for arm ornaments. Even less practical though, was glass! Yet glass was used over at least six centuries, from T'ang into Ming, in Borneo (Sarawak River, Niah Caves; Brunei) and elsewhere as far as Luzon and Micronesia.

REFERENCE

HARRISSON, TOM

1962 Translucent glass rings from Borneo. *AP* VI, 1-2: 236-238.