

Six Dynasties Toad Pots Recovered in the Philippines: a Comparative Analysis and Classification



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Introduction

The Philippine Archipelago has long served as a major repository of Chinese ceramics, with finds dating back to the Han dynasty. Two primary factors help explain the continuous recovery of these ancient ceramics since the 1950s. First, ocean-going watercraft had been developed millennia earlier, enabling the widespread expansion of Austronesian maritime culture and the establishment of strong Southeast Asian trade networks. Second, a long-standing Philippine burial custom involved interring the deceased with their prestige goods. This practice was dramatically demonstrated through the controlled excavations conducted by Cecilia and Leandro Locsin at the Santa Ana churchyard in Manila, where many burials were found to contain dozens of Chinese ceramics alongside jewelry and other personal possessions (Locsin 1967). Their work also helped define the characteristics of Chinese export wares distributed through the Maritime Silk Road during the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties.

The discovery of the Surigao Treasure in the 1970s (Capistrano-Baker 2015) sparked intense efforts throughout the southern Philippines to locate buried gold, leading to the assembly of important collections of highly sophisticated gold artifacts. This search also resulted in the recovery of a greatly increased number of associated ceramics from the southeastern Philippines. Many of these ceramics differed significantly in origin and character from those recovered at Santa Ana and from comparable sites along the western littoral regions of the archipelago.

The most plausible explanation for these striking differences is the existence of an Austronesian maritime confederation in the southeastern Philippines that traded directly with China rather than relying on the conventional Maritime Silk Road distribution system for ceramic export wares. One particularly notable feature of these discoveries is that a substantial portion of the

ceramics predates the traditional Maritime Silk Road by at least five centuries. As previously demonstrated, a remarkable diversity of ceramics from the Six Dynasties period has been found, but only within this crescent-shaped sector of the Philippine Archipelago (Olivera and Granberg 2025a,b). We have referred to this region in previous work as the Kalaga Putuan Crescent (a timeline for the KPC and Chinese dynasties is shown in Figure 8 on page 23).

Archaeological work in Zhejiang (China) in recent years has led to a greatly improved understanding of the ceramics of the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE). Despite the political chaos of the era, it was during this period that the use of celadon-glazed stoneware became widespread across China. There were a number of distinctive zoomorphic vessel types, the most well-known of which are the chicken-headed ewers. An even more idiosyncratic group of ceramics is the set we refer to herein as toad pots, with an amphibian-looking head and four molded appliqué limbs.

In the literature documenting Chinese museum collections, there are seven toad pot vessels from the Six Dynasties period assigned to a more specific dynastic period. In the Nanjing Museum, two toad pots (Figure 1A and 1B) are illustrated in their catalog of collection highlights, both designated as vessels produced during the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE). There is a single toad pot in the Palace Museum, Beijing (Figure 1C), which is assigned to the Western Jin (265–316 CE). The largest number of toad pots are shown in the catalog of an exhibition of celadons from Zhejiang Museums (Crick and Béguin, 2005); two (Figure 1D and 1E) are said to be from the Three Kingdoms, one from the Western Jin (Figure 1F), and a fourth (Figure 1G) from the Eastern Jin (317–420 CE). These seven vessels are compared herein with toad pots recovered informally in the southeastern Philippine Archipelago and acquired from Manila-area antique shops (Olivera 2025).

Some of the ceramic vessels described above come from dated tombs; together, the evidence suggests that these highly idiosyncratic and distinctive ceramics were made by the Yueh kilns for a relatively brief period, from approximately the mid-3rd century to the mid-4th century. Although all toad pots have an amphibian head and four limbs, other features vary between vessels. One of the most enigmatic is the presence of two long, ear-like extensions above the amphibian head; this has led some observers to suggest that the pots were not meant to represent toads or frogs at all, but perhaps

rabbits (see Crick). Another puzzling feature is that some examples have incised wings on their sides. Additional decorative elements also vary; a number of pots display iron-spotted decoration. Notably, incised wings and iron-spotted surfaces are even more commonly observed in other zoomorphic ceramics of the period, such as recumbent rams or bixies.

Additionally, some of the toad pots appear to have been intended for use as water droppers, with the amphibian head pierced at the mouth to allow liquids to



Figure 1. Chinese museum toad pots illustrated in the ceramics literature (*reproduced here for comparative purposes*). **A.** Wu Kingdom toad pot, Nanjing Museum (Mei, #2). **B.** Wu Kingdom toad pot, Nanjing Museum (Mei, #3). **C.** Western Jin toad pot with dot-and-line wing pattern on sides, Palace Museum Beijing (TCPL, #26, p.30). **D.** Three Kingdoms tripod toad water dropper, Zhejiang Museum collection (Crick, #12, p.74). **E.** Three Kingdoms toad water dropper, Zhejiang Museum collection (Crick, #13, p.75). **F.** Western Jin toad pot with decorated circular incisions on sides, Zhejiang Museum collection (Crick, #14, p.76). **G.** Large-mouthed, tall-necked, Eastern Jin toad pot with iron spots, Zhejiang Museum collection (Crick, #36, p.104).



Figure 2. Generalized locations of Philippine-recovered Six Dynasties toad pots, where specified.

pour out. In the available literature, it is widely suggested that these vessels were made for scholars' desks, either to contain water for mixing ink or to function as water droppers. They may therefore have served as elite accessories associated with calligraphic practice during the Six Dynasties.

Several of the features described above appear to be useful for dating individual toad pots. The Philippine material, together with the toad pots illustrated in Figure 1 from Chinese museum collections, is used herein to reconstruct a working chronology. Because the total production span for toad pots recovered from dated tombs appears to be only about a century, this proposed chronology may allow the recovery of a toad pot at an undated archaeological site to serve as a

relatively precise chronological indicator. For example, the presence of iron-spotted decoration appears to be a comparatively late feature, characteristic of vessels from the early Eastern Jin dynasty. The discussion section of this booklet presents a developmental sequence correlated from the formal and decorative attributes of these pots.

Ceramics offered for sale in Philippine antique shops are likely discovered in several ways, including through legitimate building, roadwork, and other infrastructure excavations, as well as through informal treasure hunting for gold buried in ancient graves. Locational provenance information is not typically requested or recorded during in-store purchases, as this is generally assumed to be both proprietary and guarded information. However, the senior author—whose private collection includes most of the objects featured in this booklet—has been collecting since the 1960s and has consistently prioritized acquiring pieces for which dealers could provide at least a general description of where they were recovered. When known and shared, these locations have typically been described at the town or village geographic level. A map showing the reported toad pot recovery locations, as provided by antique dealers, is presented in Figure 2.

The Three Kingdoms Period (220–280 CE)

The first group assigned to the Three Kingdoms (Plate 1) consists of small toad pots similar to two that are present in the Nanjing Museum collection. These are characterized by the absence of decoration, with the toads' limbs lacking any incisions. In addition, the bases lack any kiln scars, and the slightly concave light brown biscuit has cracked slightly upon firing. The two toad pots of this type that are found in the Philippines were probably made at around the same time as the vessel in the Nanjing Museum collection from a dated tomb (251

Plate 1.

Three Kingdoms period toad pots. A. With narrow mouth (D: 9.0 cm).

B. With wide mouth (D: 9.2 cm). *Recovery locations specified as Tubod.*



A



B



Plate 2.

Three Kingdoms period toad pot with held cup and tripod legs
(D: 15.5 cm). *Recovery location specified as Tubod.*



Plate 3.

Three Kingdoms period toad pots with held cups. A. *Recovery location specified as Baroy (D: 19.5 cm).* B. *Recovery location specified as Tubod (D: 17.2 cm).*



A

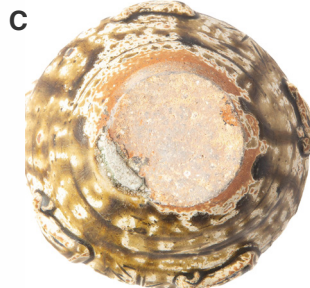
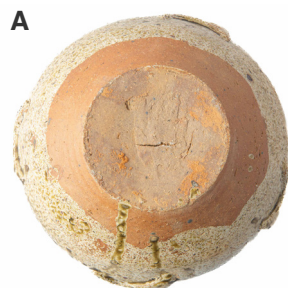


B



Plate 4.

Three Kingdoms period toad water droppers. A. From Barbara Greenlee collection (D: 20.0 cm), recovery location identified as Paranas. **B and C.** Recovery location identified as Paranas (D: 10.2 and D: 10.8 cm). **D.** Recovery location identified as Tubod (D: 9.7 cm).



CE). It is also noteworthy that the smaller vessels in this group lack the ear-like features; this is a distinction that persists from the Three Kingdoms to the Eastern Jin. The two vessels in Plate 1 show that even among toad pots that were very similar, some were wide-mouthed and others had a narrow mouth on a raised mouthrim. These were presumably intended for different uses.

Among the most idiosyncratic of all toad pots are a series in which water can be poured out of the toad head, but the lower jaw of its open mouth has been converted to a small bowl. One of these pots (Plate 2) has a spherical shape and a narrow mouth, and is supported on three legs. The front limbs are attached beneath the amphibian head in the usual manner. Above them are small ear-like features, with perhaps some similarity to the fleshy projections above the eyes of Asian horned toads. An unusual feature of this pot is the lack of the hind limbs, but the tail has been attached. A similar pot is present in the exhibit from Zhejiang museums (Crick), and it is given a Three Kingdoms provenance.

There are three other toad pots that have a small bowl beneath their spouts. Two of these are shown in Plate 3 (the other, in the Ashmolean Museum, is shown in Figure 7G). In the Plate 3 pieces, small circular incisions decorate the body of the toads and five thick light-colored circular areas of the base indicate the pots were fired on kiln supports. A red-colored marking spreads out from these kiln support adhesion areas, and materials have clearly flowed and mixed somewhat chaotically on the bases. These are very distinctive types of kiln scars seen in no other Yueh vessels. Both pots have the ear-like features, but one vessel (Plate 3A) has a small circular appliqué on either side of its neck.

There are two types of toad pot water droppers which are tentatively assigned to the Three Kingdoms period. One of these, shown in Plate 4A, is the largest water

dropper with a toad head spout known. This is a unique vessel, represented by a single example.

In contrast, the small water droppers shown on Plate 4B, 4C, and 4D are the most common type of toad pot recovered from the Philippines so far. These all share the same design: the toad head has the ear-like features and serves as a spout. There is an incised motif on the sides, generally interpreted as a stylized water plant. The glazes vary greatly on the three vessels. The majority of these were apparently recovered after a landslide east of the town of Paranas

Figure 3. Three Kingdoms chicken-headed jars. A. D: 10.2 cm. B. D: 10.2 cm. Recovery location specified as Paranas.



on Samar Island. A number of similarly glazed pots with a chicken-head motif were found with the toad pot water droppers (Figure 3). It is notable that the chicken heads do not serve as spouts, while all of the toad heads are functional spouts. Chicken-headed ewers became the most common pouring vessel form during the Six Dynasties period (Olivera 2024), supplanting toad pots in fulfilling similar functional demands.

The Western Jin Period (265–316 CE)

The six different toad vessels we assign to the Western Jin dynasty (Plates 5-7 and Figure 4) are mostly characterized by the presence of incised wings, coupled with the absence of both iron spots and red-haloed kiln scars. The two toad pots in the literature given a Western Jin provenance (shown in Figure 1C and 1F) have characteristics that seem highly similar to some of the Philippine material.

One toad pot shown in the Zhejiang Museum exhibit assigned to the Western Jin dynasty is similar to the

vessel shown in Figure 4. Similarities include the small circular appliqué close to the wide mouthrim, the outwardly splayed foot above the flat base, and the incisions on the limbs. The base of this toad pot is similar to those with amorphous red kiln scars, but in this vessel, the amorphous scars are a gray color.

The two vessels shown in Plate 5 are similar to the toad pot from the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing. The two incised wings appear to be a feature of most Western Jin toad pots.

One of the most elegant toad pots which we provisionally assign to the Western Jin period is shown in Plate 6. The wide mouth is surrounded by two bands: the first is a series of slanted incised lines and the second is a series of small circles of eight impressed dots, each with a central dot. There are two incised wings, and two ear-like features. This particular vessel, perhaps, looks more like a turtle than a toad. There are three grayish kiln scars on the base with a darker brown color at the edges.



Figure 4. Western Jin toad pot with incised circles (D: 8.5 cm), recovery location identified as Hinatuan.

Plate 5.

Western Jin toad pots with incised wings. A. With narrow, raised mouth (D: 14.0 cm), *recovery location identified as Hinatuan*. B. With wider mouth (D: 10.7 cm), *recovery location not identified*.



Plate 6.

Western Jin toad pot with incised wings and recurring impressed circular dot pattern (D: 11.7 cm), *recovery location identified as Butuan.*



Plate 7.

Western Jin toad and phoenix pots with incised circles and wings.

A. Darker celadon (D: 11.5 cm). B. Lighter celadon (D: 12.0 cm).

Recovery locations identified as Baybay and Catarman, respectively.



A



B



The two toad pots in Plate 7 have a bird motif above the amphibian head and limbs. In these pieces, the wings are relatively large, and an incised circular motif has been applied to the body of the birds.

The Eastern Jin Period (317–420 CE)

Two toad pots found in the southeastern Philippines (Plate 8) are very similar to the Eastern Jin vessel illustrated by Crick (Figure 1G); Crick states that another toad pot of this type was recovered from a tomb dated to 351 CE. These pots have a number of distinctive features, such as the wide mouth on a raised cylindrical neck with two loops. Several similarly shaped pots without the toad motif have been illustrated; all such pots have iron spots applied.

As Plate 8 illustrates, the reddish bases have amorphous dark red kiln scars. The combination of iron-spotted decoration and amorphous red kiln scars on the base is frequently seen on Eastern Jin ceramics; this combination of features is not seen on earlier vessels.

Two water droppers that share some of the advanced features of the Eastern Jin toad pots shown in Plate 8 are illustrated in Plate 9. The first of these (9A) has large iron splashes; this is perhaps the most intensely iron-spotted Six Dynasties ceramic vessel known.

The water dropper in Figure 5 has three iron spots decorating its mouth. The base is covered by a brick-red wash, without amorphous scars. This type of iron decoration was much more common on zoomorphic vessels (particularly small chicken-headed ewers) than the large splashes seen on the toad pot in Plate 9, but is only rarely applied to toad pots.

Other zoomorphic iron-spotted vessels are shown in Figure 6, including another toad pot (Figure 6A), as well as a chicken-headed pot (Figure 6B), both obtained from a dealer in Indonesia, and a third vessel

with a bear head (Figure 6C) that was found in the southeastern Philippines. All of these have the typical dark brick-red base and amorphous kiln scars, similar to the iron-splashed toad pot in Figure 5. The other water dropper shown in Plate 9B has a wide mouth raised on a cylindrical neck with two loops, similar to the vessels shown in Plate 8. It also has amorphous red kiln scars. Thus, small toad pots of these types appear to have been used on scholars' desks to mix ink for calligraphy. It seems likely that these were repurposed in the Philippine Archipelago for pouring liquid condiments such as vinegar or fish sauce.

Plate 10A shows a toad pot with a similar small bowl to those in Plates 2 and 3. However, this vessel has no other decoration and the base has brick-red kiln scars. The glaze on this vessel is more grayish compared to the light celadon glaze seen in the toad pots in Plate 4. The difference in kiln scars suggests that this is an Eastern Jin ceramic vessel.

The toad pot on Plate 10B is in the shape of a wide-mouthed bowl. A most unusual feature of this vessel is the presence of lizards around the neck. The toad bulges out below the neck, and is somewhat flattened. The presence of amorphous red kiln scars covered by yellowish powder links this vessel to those shown on the previous plates.

The large jar on Plate 11 has the wide mouth and ear features above the amphibian head. Above the toad motif, there is a smaller bird motif that has been applied just below the neck including a bird head directly above the amphibian head, albeit much smaller, as well as two small projecting wings. Otherwise, the jar is undecorated. The base also has the brick-red amorphous kiln scars covered by a yellowish powdery layer.

An unusually large trumpet-mouthed toad pot is shown on Plate 12. Above the amphibian head, there are two elongated ear-like extensions. Between the

Plate 8.

Eastern Jin toad pots with raised cylindrical necks. **A.** With spotted neck (D: 14.0 cm). **B.** With unspotted neck (D: 14.0 cm). Recovered in the Philippines, locations not further specified.



A



B



Plate 9.

Eastern Jin toad pots. **A.** With large iron stains (D: 8.0 cm), recovery location not identified. **B.** With lugged neck (D: 10.0 cm), recovery location identified as Baybay.



B



front and rear limbs, there is a banded zone with a diamond pattern which is quite indistinct. The base has three amorphous kiln scars with a brick-red halo under a yellowish powdery layer.

The vessels shown in Plates 8 to 12 and Figures 5 and 6 are all provisionally assigned to the Eastern Jin, likely early during the dynasty. We can therefore summarize some features that are diagnostic of the Eastern Jin: the presence of brick-red amorphous kiln scars, iron-spotted markings and small loops just below



Figure 5. Eastern Jin toad pot with wide mouth and iron spots (D: 9.0 cm), recovery location identified as Carmen.



Figure 6. Three Eastern Jin jars: toad, chicken, and bear. Recovery locations identified as, top to bottom, Indonesia, Indonesia, and Philippines (D: 9.0, 10.5, and 8.2 cm).



Plate 10.

Eastern Jin toad pots. A. Wingless with held cup (D: 15.0 cm), *recovery location identified as Kapatagan.*

B. Wide-mouthed with lizard-adorned cylindrical neck (H: 13.7 cm), *recovery location identified as Salvador.*



A



B



Plate 11.

**Large Eastern Jin toad pot with bird
head** (D: 21.5 cm), *recovery location
identified as Placer.*



Plate 12.

Large Eastern Jin toad pot with tall, flaring neck (H: 23.3 cm), *recovery location identified as Salvador.*



the mouthrim. These are features that are not found in earlier toad pots.

Discussion

A large number of celadon toad pots manufactured in China during the Six Dynasties period have been recovered from the Philippine Archipelago. These display an even greater diversity of forms than those documented in the available published ceramics literature. As noted above, many of the Philippine examples overlap typologically with vessels found and documented from Chinese tombs. The archaeological evidence from China indicates that these highly distinctive, idiosyncratic pots were produced for roughly a century—from the mid-3rd century, during the Three Kingdoms, to the mid-4th century early Eastern Jin period. On the basis of this evidence, together with dated material from China, we have attempted to reconstruct a working chronology.

With the exception of the vessel in Plate 2 that lacks hind limbs, all of the ceramic toad pot vessels share several defining features: an amphibian-like head, four characteristically bent limbs, and a tail. They were most likely intended to hold water on scholars' desks for use in calligraphy, although their use for storing other liquids cannot be excluded. Across the corpus, a number of features recur in multiple vessel types.

One of the most distinctive—and least well understood—of these is the presence of ear-like features. As discussed above, these ears appear on toad pots from all periods. Their significance remains unclear. Some ceramics scholars have suggested that vessels with these ear-like features may not represent toads at all, but rather rabbits. We have proposed instead that this feature may represent horned toads and reflect production by two different kilns, one that omitted the ear-like features and another that routinely added them.

Further archaeological discovery and investigation in China will be necessary to evaluate this hypothesis.

Other features are more clearly useful for establishing chronology. Iron spots or splashed decoration, as well as amorphous brick-red kiln scars or brick-red bases, appear to have been introduced relatively late, during the Eastern Jin. By contrast, some elements emerged earlier. Incised wings on either side of the toad's body are found on Western Jin examples, although the motif continued into the Eastern Jin period.

An intriguing pattern concerns those toad pots that function as water droppers. All early examples possess ears, whereas vessels with ceramic features indicating manufacture in the 4th century lack them. The overall picture suggests that toad pots were the earliest ceramic water droppers, appearing in the 3rd century. Significantly, contemporaneous chicken-headed vessels were not used in this way: although chicken heads were attached to vessels, the heads did not function as spouts until later.

By the 4th century, chicken-headed vessels had developed into both water droppers and larger household ewers. At the same time, toad-shaped water droppers became rare and are represented only by small vessels in the Philippine-recovered material, almost certainly intended to support calligraphy. These styles of small water droppers were likely repurposed in the Philippines for dispensing liquids such as vinegar or fish sauce.

In the available literature, the largest group of documented toad pots in a museum appears to be the seven pots in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, from the Ingram collection (Figure 7). These were all featured as black and white photos by Tregear, but multiple views of the pieces are now available in color from the Museum's online photo gallery. The Ashmolean pieces are all described as being from the 4th century. The

reconstructed chronology above allows a more precise assignment of when the individual vessels were made. The toad pots in Figures 7B and 7D are likely to be 4th century Eastern Jin, based on the brick-red color on the base. However, 7C and 7G are probably from the Three Kingdoms period of the 3rd century, given their similarity to dated pots in the Nanjing and Zhejiang Museums illustrated in Figure 1. The other three (Figures 7A, 7E, and 7F) seem to be best assigned to the Western Jin. It is noteworthy that none of the Ashmolean pots has the same set of design features as any single vessel in the Philippine recoveries, evidence for the rich diversity of these vessels over a relatively short period of production.

Toad pots were common until the mid-4th century. After this, toads appeared in ceramics much less frequently and this is represented in the Philippine material, shown

in Figure 9. A sancai-type lead-glazed earthenware toad pot (9A), probably made in the 7th century, early in the Tang dynasty, was perhaps an imitation of the older Six Dynasties-era toad pot form. A marbled-ware *jiao tai* toad water dropper, likely from the Tang dynasty or later, is shown in 9B. Examples of Northern Song dynasty ceramics employing toads (or frogs) as a decorative motif are shown as 9C and 9D. The light blue toad figurine (9C) is completely glazed and was fired on three sharp kiln supports, leaving sesame seed scars, characteristic of Ru ware. The Jun ware jar (9D) has amphibian forms below the neck on opposite sides. Thus, toads continued to be used as a motif, suggesting that they retained some iconic cultural significance in later dynastic periods.

Figure 7. Toad pots in the Ashmolean Museum's Ingram collection. Listed with their catalog numbers assigned by Tregear (1976) and the Museum's accession numbers. **A.** #60 (EA1956.951). **B.** #65 (EA1956.983). **C.** #61 (EA1956.229). **D.** #64 (EA1956.980). **E.** #63 (EA1956.984). **F.** #62 (EA1956.949). **G.** #66 (EA1956.950). Images reproduced here for comparative purposes. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Conclusion

The Philippine toad pot collection documented herein provides fresh insight into this Six Dynasties class of ceramics. The diverse range of toad pot ceramics produced in the Eastern Jin indicates that relatively large ceramic vessels were produced and brought to the Philippines, compared to the smaller recovered pieces from the preceding Three Kingdoms and Western Jin dynasty periods. Figure 10 shows a diverse set of Six Dynasties toad pots together, illustrating how much larger the vessels shown in Plates 11 and 12 are compared to more standard toad pots from earlier periods. These are utilitarian objects for household use, not specialized vessels for calligraphy on scholars' desks.

A second general insight is that some of the toad pots were meticulously decorated to be aesthetically appealing. These were presumably made for customers with more discerning tastes who demanded a more sophisticated product. The careful application of iron splashes in the toad pots shown in Plate 8, and the meticulous punching of circular motifs around the mouthrim of the toad pot in Plate 6, are time-consuming features that required skilled and specialized crafting. Because the Philippine material is relatively well preserved, the sophistication of these intriguing, early celadon stoneware ceramic forms is more fully revealed.

Figure 8. Chinese dynastic periods and the approximate Kalaga-P'utuan Crescent period as established by recovery of Chinese ceramics in the southeastern Philippines.

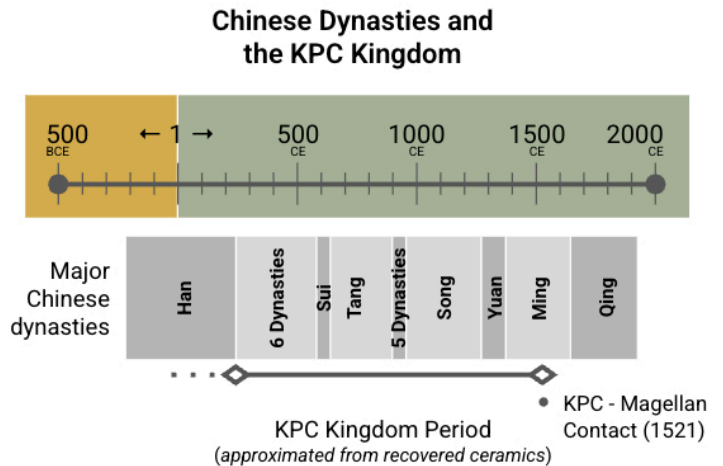


Figure 9. Anuran forms in other Philippine-recovered ceramics.

A. Tang Sancai toad pot (D: 9.0 cm). **B.** Tang jiao tai marbled-ware water dropper (H: 8.6 cm), *recovery location identified as San Policarpo*. **C.** Northern Song water dropper, completely glazed with 3 kiln spur marks on base (H: 6.5 cm), *recovery location identified as Salvador*. **D.** Large Jun ware jar with two toads or frogs on opposite sides (H: 22.5 cm). *Recovery locations for A and D not further specified.*



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Figure 10: A sampling of the diversity of Philippine-recovered Six Dynasties toad pots featured within this booklet.



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