

# Phoenix-headed Vessels

## Recovered in the Philippines



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## Introduction

The phoenix-headed ewer in the British Museum, formerly in the collection of George Eumorfopoulos and often referred to as the Eumorfopoulos ewer, is among the most celebrated and enigmatic works of Chinese ceramic art. For more than a century, this vessel has attracted sustained scholarly attention, yet its date and place of manufacture remain uncertain. Proposed attributions have varied widely, and there is no consensus regarding either the kiln of its production or the period in which it was made.

A group of phoenix-headed ceramics recovered in the Philippine archipelago provides important new evidence bearing on this longstanding question. When examined alongside related examples in museum collections and published literature, these vessels reveal a broader corpus of phoenix-headed ceramics than has generally been recognized, permitting a more systematic evaluation of their chronology, stylistic development, and possible places of manufacture. The Philippine material reveals previously unrecognized relationships among several Chinese ceramic traditions and offers a useful context within which to reconsider the British Museum ewer. In particular, examination of the Philippine ceramics raises the possibility that the Eumorfopoulos ewer may be situated within a Northern Song ceramic tradition, perhaps closely related to Ding ware, and can be understood not as an isolated achievement but as one of the most refined surviving expressions of a wider developmental sequence.

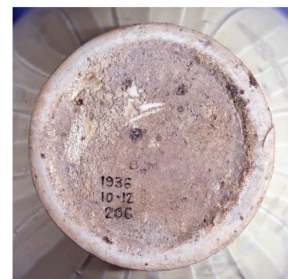
This study examines seventeen phoenix-headed vessels recovered from Philippine contexts and situates them within a wider corpus of related ceramics dating from the Tang through Northern Song and Early Ming periods. The most relevant material spans the 9th through 11th centuries, corresponding broadly to

the range of hypothetical dates proposed for the British Museum ewer. Phoenix-headed vessels were produced both before and after this period, but those vessels differ substantially in form and style from the vessels discovered in the Philippines that are described here.

The recovery of numerous phoenix-headed vessels in the Philippines may be understood within the broader context of pre-Spanish ritualized drinking practices. Fermented beverages derived from coconut, palm, or rice were consumed on ceremonial occasions, and high-quality ceramics that maritime traders brought back from China were likely used in these rituals. Among the most widely distributed phoenix-headed vessels exported along the Maritime Silk Road were the short-necked Guangdong products associated with the Xicun and Chaozhou kilns. These wares, well represented in both the Philippines and Indonesia, were extensively studied



**Figure 1. Eumorfopoulos phoenix-headed ewer in the British Museum collection (H: 34.3 cm).** *Photo credit: The Trustees of the British Museum, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_1936-1012-206](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1936-1012-206).*



by Lam (2005, 2022). Although Lam initially proposed the Xicun kilns as the source of the British Museum ewer, he later rejected that attribution. Because the Guangdong group now constitutes a relatively coherent and well-understood corpus, those vessels are excluded from the present discussion.

## Corpus and Scope

All seventeen phoenix-headed vessels have been recovered from the Kalaga Putuan Crescent, a region of the southeastern Philippines that pioneered maritime trade with China (Olivera 2021; Olivera et al. 2024). All were recovered informally, likely after centuries of burial as funerary objects. One is the well-known Liao vessel in the National Museum of the Philippines (Figure 2), which was acquired from Samar and previously

discussed by Lam. The sixteen other vessels were acquired individually from the Manila antique market and are in a private collection (Olivera 2025): these have not previously been systematically documented. Together, these vessels form a diverse corpus likely produced in China between the 9th and 14th centuries. They include five vases without spouts or handles (Figs. 2–5A), seven true ewers with both handles and spouts (Figs. 5B–7A and 10A–10C), and five pouring vessels without handles (Figs. 7B–9B). The last group is especially important because it includes vessels closely comparable in form to the British Museum example.



**Figure 2. Phoenix-headed vessel in the National Museum of the Philippines collection.**

Recovered from Butuan City area of Mindanao. *Photo credit: National Museum of the Philippines, <https://weblinks.national-museum.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/01123024/Butuan-Ewer-with-Phoenix-head.png>.*



**Figure 3. Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed pouring vessel. Degraded, undecorated body (H: 25.0 cm).**

A



B



**Figure 4** (*preceding page*). **Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed pouring vessels**

- A.** With incised head features and a Jizhou-like carved and combed floral pattern (H: 33.5 cm).
- B.** Liao-style with three-zone decoration of meiping-shaped body and distinctive head below a large crest cup (H: 36.3 cm).

**Figure 5** (*this page*). **Philippine-recovered Qingbai phoenix-headed pouring vessels**

- A.** Small vessel with lobed body (H: 13.0 cm).
- B.** Body with carved and combed floral pattern and crackled glaze on head, neck, and spout (H: 17.5 cm).



**Figure 6. Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed ewers.**

**A.** Greenish-gray glaze with carved and combed floral body decoration (H: 23.5 cm).

**B.** Brown glaze with three-zone body carving and combing (H: 26.2 cm).

**A**



**Figure 7. Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed pouring vessels.**

**A.** Molded Qingbai ewer with elaborate head decoration and three-zone body carvings (H: 25.0 cm).

**B.** Green-glazed handleless vessel with ribbed neck and three-zone body carvings (H: 37.5 cm).



**Figure 8. Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed pouring vessels.**

**A.** Cream-glazed pouring jar with ribbing and lotus petal decoration on a pear-shaped body (H: 25.5 cm).

**B.** Tan-glazed pouring jar with elaborately modeled head, ribbed neck, and undecorated body (H: 33.0 cm).



**Figure 9. Philippine-recovered pouring vessels with elaborate heads. A. With stepped, lotus petal shoulder (H: 34.7 cm). B. Repaired (H: 30.0 cm).**

**A**



**B**





**Figure 10. Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed pouring vessels. A. 14th Century underglazed red with dragon and lotus petal motifs (H: 23.0 cm). B. 14th Century underglazed blue with dragon motifs (H: 18.8 cm). C. Qingbai-like glaze with iron splashes (H: 32.7 cm).**

## Analytical Framework

Two principal attributes are used to organize the similarities and differences among the phoenix-headed vessels: phoenix-head morphology and the body decoration system. Together, these characteristics provide a framework for comparing vessels that differ substantially in form, glaze, and presumed place of manufacture.

All vessels included in this study, including those in museum collections, are summarized in Table 1, which illustrates each example and its phoenix-head classification, body-decoration classification, and probable ceramic tradition or kiln affiliation where such attributions can reasonably be made. Although these classifications are intended as descriptive rather than chronological tools, their characteristics can in many cases support a broad estimate of manufacturing date.

## Phoenix-Head Classifications

Phoenix-head morphology may be divided into four stylistic groups. Figure 12 illustrates several decorative features of the phoenix heads, whose treatment varies across the four groups. Three groups represent distinct decorative approaches that recur throughout the corpus, while a fourth group accommodates variant and composite forms that combine characteristics of multiple traditions.

**Group 1 (Minimally Decorated Heads)** is characterized by restrained modeling and limited surface ornamentation (Figs. 2, 3, 5B, and 10C). Facial features are only lightly differentiated, while plumage zones and other subdivisions of the head are not indicated with explicit detailing. The overall visual effect thus depends more upon the shaping of the phoenix head than upon elaborate decorative features.

**Group II (Deeply Incised Head Decoration)** is distinguished by pronounced carving and strong three-dimensional modeling (Figs. 4A, 6B, 8A, and 11A–D). In these examples, the eye region, beak, and plumage are defined through deep carving that creates substantial visual depth. Decorative effects are achieved primarily through sculptural treatment rather than through secondary surface ornamentation. These vessels represent one of the most distinctive decorative traditions within the corpus.

**Group III (Elaborate Head Modeling)** incorporates extensive surface ornamentation and increasingly differentiated decorative zones (Figures 1, 7A, 8B, and 9A–B). Eye regions are carefully segmented, plumage is organized into discrete sectors, and carving is supplemented by combed incisions and decorative edging. Curved punched borders, directional feather patterns, open mouths, tongues, and breathing apertures contribute to particularly dynamic and richly ornamented compositions. The British Museum ewer (Figure 1) represents one of the finest known surviving examples of this decorative approach.

**Group IV (Other / Miscellaneous)** includes the remaining pieces presented herein, whose heads either do not fit within the first three categories or combine characteristics associated with multiple stylistic traditions (see Table 1). Some of these vessels have heads with the strong sculptural modeling typical of Group II together with decorative features more commonly associated with Group III, while others incorporate unusual regional or workshop-specific interpretations of the phoenix form. These vessels are especially significant because they demonstrate that decorative traditions were not isolated from one another. Rather, some phoenix heads display variation in form, with stylistic conventions adapted and combined from multiple sources.

The existence of composite forms suggests that the classification system should not be understood as rep-

resenting a rigid developmental sequence. Rather, the four groups identify recurring approaches to phoenix-head decoration that, at some point, began to circulate across multiple production traditions. As summarized in Table 1 and shown on the back cover, the boundaries between these groups are often permeable, reflecting an ongoing interaction among workshops and kiln systems.

## Vessel Body Decoration Systems

Body decoration likewise falls into several recurring categories ranging from entirely undecorated vessel bodies to highly organized multi-zone decorative systems. Examination of the relationships between these classifications demonstrates that decorative approaches were not fixed packages but were instead combined in different ways by different kilns.

The first category consists of **undecorated vessel bodies**, represented by examples such as Figs. 2, 3, and 8B. In these pieces the visual emphasis is the form, glaze, and sculptural modeling rather than ornamentation.

The second body decoration category employs a **single field of body decoration**, most commonly a floral-scroll design rendered through carving or incision (Figs. 4A, 6A, and 7B). These designs vary considerably in complexity but generally organize decoration around a single dominant visual zone covering most of the vessel between its neck and footrim.

The third category consists of vessels with a **structured three-zone decorative system** (Figs. 1, 6B, 7A, 8A, 9, 10A, and 10C). These compositions typically employ a large central decorative field, usually a floral scroll, framed by secondary zones above and below, often lotus-petal bands. The British Museum ewer belongs to this third category and exhibits one of the most sophisticated examples of this decorative organization.

The relationships between body decoration and phoenix-head morphology are summarized in Table 1. Particularly significant is the fact that vessels with a single-field body decoration system do not correspond exclusively to a particular head group. Elaborate heads occur on vessels with both simple and complex body decoration schemes, while similar body-decoration systems may be paired with markedly different head styles. Likewise, Group IV's variant and composite heads appear across multiple vessel types and decorative arrangements. These relationships indicate that workshops drew upon a shared set of decorative conventions rather than adhering to a single standardized model or a strict evolutionary sequence driven by artistic or market preferences.

### A Shared Northern Decorative Tradition

The classifications summarized in Table 1 reveal recurring decorative principles that transcend individual vessel types. Similar approaches to carving, combing, and punched head ornamentation occur across vessels differing substantially in form, glaze, and presumed place of manufacture. Floral-scroll compositions, lotus-petal borders, segmented eye treatments, and head-plumage treatments recur throughout the corpus in numerous combinations, although the complexity of head modeling may correlate moderately with kiln affiliation and period of manufacture.

The shared features suggest a sustained interaction between ceramic traditions from the late 9th through early 12th centuries. The evidence is most consistent with a broad network of workshops sharing related decorative vocabulary and technical practices rather than production within a single kiln system. Certain examples show strong affinities with northern whiteware traditions associated with Xing and Ding production, while others may represent neighboring kiln systems participating in the same artistic milieu.



**Figure 11. Phoenix-headed pouring vessels in museum collections.**  
 A. Princeton University Art Museum, attributed to 8th century, #2022-78.  
 B. Princeton University Art Museum, attributed to Song dynasty, #135354.  
 C. Brooklyn Museum, attributed to 10th century Jingdezhen kilns, #54.7.  
 D. Cleveland Museum of Art, attributed to Xicun kilns, #1965.468.

The corpus therefore points toward a dynamic process of adaptation and exchange. Decorative approaches to phoenix-head modeling and body ornamentation appear to have circulated among multiple production centers where they were refined, modified, and recombined in different ways. The variant and composite examples assigned to head morphology Group IV are particularly important in this regard, as they provide direct evidence for fluid stylistic boundaries and the continued interaction of decorative traditions across workshop and kiln networks. The two pieces in Figures 10A and 10B are likely the latest vessels presented herein; their head and body decorative motifs are rendered in 14th-century underglazed-red and underglazed-blue painting.

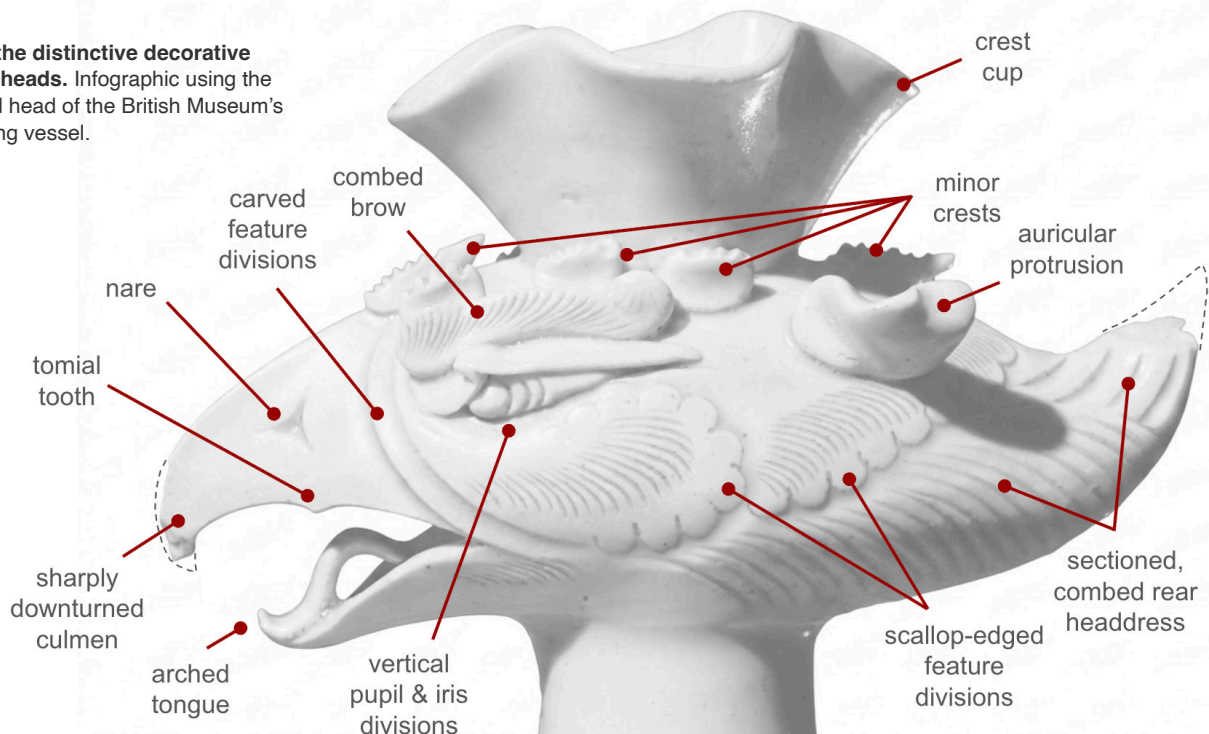
## Reassessment of Museum Collections

The phoenix-headed Chinese ceramic vessels recovered in the Philippines provide important new evidence

for understanding the development of this distinctive vessel type. When integrated with museum collections, this material supports the identification of a northern kiln tradition—perhaps most likely associated with Ding ware—within which the phoenix-headed ewer developed over several centuries. Viewed within this broader context, the British Museum phoenix-headed vessel (Figure 1), long regarded as anomalous, can be understood more clearly.

Earlier scholarship often treated the vessel as an exceptional or isolated achievement. The Philippine corpus demonstrates instead that many of its defining characteristics—segmented plumage, punched borders, combed feather ornament, and a structured three-zone body decoration—occur elsewhere within the wider northern ceramic traditions. What distinguishes the British Museum vessel is not the presence of unique decorative elements, but the exceptional sophistication

**Figure 12. Some of the distinctive decorative features of phoenix heads.** Infographic using the elaborately decorated head of the British Museum's Eumorfopoulos pouring vessel.



with which multiple decorative traditions are integrated into a single work. As summarized in Table 1, this vessel combines an Elaborate (Group III) phoenix head with one of the most fully developed three-zone decorative systems in the corpus.

Comparisons involving two of the Philippine phoenix-headed vessels further illustrate these relationships. The British Museum ewer and the celadon vessel shown in Figure 13A share an unusual overall form consisting of a long neck, phoenix-head spout, no handle, and a floral-scroll panel framed above and below by lotus-petal borders. Despite these shared design principles, the vessels differ markedly in glaze, ceramic body, and decorative execution, indicating that they were almost certainly produced within different kiln traditions. Their close correspondence nevertheless suggests that this distinctive vessel form and decorative program had become established across multiple northern production centers and may have served a common function.

A second comparison, between the British Museum ewer and the vessel illustrated in Figure 13B, highlights the treatment of the phoenix head. Although the vessels differ more substantially in overall form, the modeling of the head—including the segmentation of the eye region, open beak, organized plumage, and richly articulated surface ornamentation—is strikingly similar. The Philippine vessel, however, also displays a floral-scroll treatment executed in a manner consistent with the Ding ceramic tradition. Additional vessels recovered in the Philippines, like the red-glazed vessel in Figure 13C, exhibit comparable floral-scroll decoration and vessel proportions and may represent products of closely related northern kiln traditions, perhaps within the broader Cizhou tradition. Together, these comparisons suggest that decorative vocabulary circulated among closely associated workshops and kiln systems, and strengthen the possibility that the British Museum vessel belongs within a Ding-related northern ceramic tradition.

More broadly, these findings underscore the importance of the recent, diverse Philippine material in reconstructing the history of Chinese ceramics and demonstrate how such evidence can clarify relationships between objects that have long been studied in isolation.

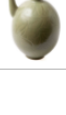


**Figure 13. Decorative schemes sharing phoenix-headed ewer elements. A.** See also Figure 7B. **B.** See also Figure 9A. **C.** Red-glazed Cizhou vase (H: 14.0 cm), recovery location identified as Catarman.

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**Table 1. Phoenix-Headed Vessel and Body Classification**

| Figure<br>Description                                                              | Image                                                                               | Head<br>Decoration<br>Group | Body<br>Decoration<br>Group                               | Kiln Notes                                    | Comments                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Figure 1</b><br>British Museum<br>Eumorfopoulos<br>Pouring Vessel               |    | III. Elaborate              | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and decorative<br>scrolls) | Strong<br>similarities<br>with Ding<br>ware   | 5 neck ribs,<br>no handle,<br>original spout<br>missing     |
| <b>Figure 2</b><br>National Museum<br>of the Philippines<br>Butuan Phoenix<br>Vase |    | I. Minimal<br>Decoration    | Undecorated                                               | Late Tang                                     | Double<br>meridian line<br>atop meiping<br>shaped body      |
| <b>Figure 3</b><br>Qingbai Pouring<br>Vessel                                       |    | I. Minimal<br>Decoration    | Undecorated                                               | Jingdezhen<br>Qingbai<br>glaze,<br>degraded   |                                                             |
| <b>Figure 4A</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                                |    | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Single Zone<br>(floral)                                   | Jizhou<br>similarities                        | Floral<br>decoration<br>carved and<br>combed                |
| <b>Figure 4B</b><br>Liao Phoenix<br>Pouring Vessel                                 |    | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Three Zone<br>(floral)                                    | Liao                                          | Large crest<br>cup                                          |
| <b>Figure 5A</b><br>Small Qingbai<br>Pouring Vessel                                |    | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Undecorated,<br>but lobed                                 | Jingdezhen<br>Qingbai<br>glaze,<br>blueish    | S-shaped<br>flourishes in<br>place of crest<br>cup          |
| <b>Figure 5B</b><br>Qingbai Ewer                                                   |   | I. Minimal<br>Decoration    | Single Zone<br>(floral)                                   | Jingdezhen<br>Qingbai<br>glaze, bluish        | Double<br>meridian line<br>atop body                        |
| <b>Figure 6A</b><br>Qingbai Ewer                                                   |  | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Single Zone<br>(floral)                                   | Jingdezhen<br>Qingbai<br>glaze,<br>grayish    | 2 neck ribs                                                 |
| <b>Figure 6B</b><br>Northern Song<br>Ewer                                          |  | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and decorative<br>scrolls) | Yaozhou-like<br>glaze                         | Double<br>meridian lines<br>at top and<br>bottom of<br>body |
| <b>Figure 7A</b><br>Jingdezhen<br>Ewer                                             |  | III. Elaborate              | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and decorative<br>scrolls) | Jingdezhen<br>Qingbai<br>glaze.<br>Molded.    | 5 neck ribs                                                 |
| <b>Figure 7B</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                                |  | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and decorative<br>scrolls) | Northern<br>Celadon,<br>Guan<br>similarities? | 10 neck ribs,<br>long spout, no<br>handle                   |

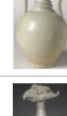
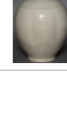
| Figure<br>Description                                                   | Image                                                                                | Head<br>Decoration<br>Group | Body<br>Decoration<br>Group                               | Kiln Notes                                                  | Comments                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Figure 8A</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                     |    | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and ribbing)               | Ding<br>similarities                                        | Double<br>ribbed neck                                                 |
| <b>Figure 8B</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                     |    | III. Elaborate              | Undecorated                                               | Changsha<br>similarities                                    | Double<br>meridian lines<br>atop body, 7<br>neck ribs                 |
| <b>Figure 9A</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                     |    | III. Elaborate              | Single Zone<br>(floral)                                   | Ding-like<br>carving style                                  | 4 neck ribs                                                           |
| <b>Figure 9B</b><br>Northern Song<br>Pouring Vessel                     |    | III. Elaborate              | Three Zone<br>(lotus petals<br>and decorative<br>scrolls) | Ding<br>similarities                                        | 4 neck ribs,<br>reconstructed                                         |
| <b>Figure 10A</b><br>Jingdezhen<br>Ewer                                 |    | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Three Zone<br>(large dragon<br>motif)                     | Jingdezhen<br>underglaze<br>red                             | Double<br>meridian<br>lines, neck                                     |
| <b>Figure 10B</b><br>Jingdezhen<br>Ewer                                 |    | IV. Other /<br>Misc.        | Three Zone<br>(large dragon<br>motif)                     | Jingdezhen<br>underglaze<br>blue                            | Double<br>meridian lines<br>frame body                                |
| <b>Figure 10C</b><br><i>Jingdezhen</i><br>Ewer                          |   | I. Minimal<br>Decoration    | Undecorated                                               | Jingdezhen-<br>like glaze,<br>Northern<br>Song-like<br>base | Iron<br>splashes, 2<br>neck ribs, no<br>crest cup                     |
| <b>Figure 11A</b><br><i>Princeton Art<br/>Museum Pouring<br/>Vessel</i> |  | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Undecorated                                               | Attributed to<br>late 8th<br>century                        |                                                                       |
| <b>Figure 11B</b><br><i>Princeton Art<br/>Museum Pouring<br/>Vessel</i> |  | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Undecorated                                               | Attributed to<br>Northern<br>Song                           | 5 neck ribs                                                           |
| <b>Figure 11C</b><br><i>Brooklyn<br/>Museum Pouring<br/>Vessel</i>      |  | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Undecorated                                               | Attributed to<br>Jingdezhen<br>kilns                        | Triple neck<br>meridian<br>lines, 2 neck<br>ribs                      |
| <b>Figure 11D</b><br><i>Cleveland<br/>Museum Pouring<br/>Vessel</i>     |  | II. Deeply<br>Incised       | Undecorated,<br>but lobed                                 | Northern<br>Song<br>similarities                            | Triple neck<br>meridian<br>lines, 2 neck<br>ribs, crest<br>flourishes |



**Figure 14. The diversity of phoenix heads across vessels in notable museum pieces and Philippine-recovered vessels.** Figure numbers correspond to those used in this booklet. Phoenix head classification groups described on pages 10 – 11 are denoted by colored circles: **I** **II** **III** **IV**. Institutional photo credits are provided in the referenced figure caption. Some images have been mirrored to achieve a consistent facing direction.

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**Cover:** Detailed view of the Philippine-recovered phoenix-headed ewer shown in Figure 9B. Behind the title text is a projection of the ribbing and lotus-petal pattern from the vessel shown in Figure 8A.