

Liao & Other Pilgrim Flask Ceramics

Recovered in the Philippines



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Introduction

Ceramics produced during the Liao dynasty (907–1125 CE) are among the most distinctive wares of medieval China, combining northern Chinese ceramic traditions with distinctive Liao influences. The Liao were originally a nomadic pastoral people of the eastern Inner Asian steppe known as the Khitan. During the late Tang dynasty they emerged as a major military power. Following the collapse of the Tang Empire they established control over Mongolia, parts of northern China, and territories extending eastward toward Korea. Although ceramics made for the Liao elite drew heavily upon Tang dynasty Chinese traditions, they retained clear features derived from Khitan culture. Liao ceramic production ended with the Jurchen conquest in the early 12th century, after which Liao political institutions disappeared and Khitan culture was progressively absorbed into the Jurchen and, later, Mongol imperial orders.

The so-called pilgrim flasks are among the most characteristic forms associated with Liao ceramics. These unusual vessels, also referred to as ‘leather-pouch ewers’ or ‘stirrup ewers,’ were modeled after leather pouches traditionally carried on horseback by the nomadic Khitan. Most of the surviving ceramic pilgrim flasks have been recovered from tombs of Liao nobility. Among ceramic forms produced by Chinese kilns over the past three millennia, these have one of the strongest cultural associations with a now-vanished ethnic group.

The goal of this study is to document a small group of Liao pilgrim flasks recovered from the Philippine archipelago. The discovery of these ceramics in the Philippines is both remarkable and unexpected. To our knowledge, such vessels have not previously been reported from anywhere outside China. Liao kilns did not participate significantly in the commercial maritime trade networks that distributed Chinese ceramics from the

great trading ports of South China beginning in the 9th century. The known production of pilgrim flasks of this type was concentrated in northern China, particularly at the Gangwa kiln within Liao territory (Li and Kwan, 2012). Their appearance in Southeast Asia therefore represents an anomaly requiring explanation, which will be addressed after the individual vessels are described.

The Philippine assemblage includes examples of forms similar to those already documented in the ceramic literature, but many vessels possess unique characteristics. Thus, they display substantially greater diversity than previously published collections of Liao pilgrim flasks. As discussed below, this diversity may reflect the fact that many of these vessels were produced by Chinese kilns outside direct Liao control. Because the contemporaneous Northern Song dynasty sent an annual tribute to the Liao as part of a political settlement intended to preserve peace, it is possible that certain examples in the Philippine collection were produced specifically for this purpose.

Cockscomb Flasks

A typology of Liao pilgrim flasks was proposed by Medley (1976), whose classification remains a useful framework for describing these vessels. According to Medley, the dominant form during the first half of the 10th century is the so-called “cockscomb” flask, named for the crest-like bracket with a perforation at the top resembling a rooster’s comb.

Three examples of this type which differ considerably one from the other have been recovered in the Philippines. The flask illustrated in Figure 1A, with its amber monochrome glaze, is a typical lead-glazed product of a Liao kiln. Comparable examples with either amber, white or monochrome green glazes have frequently been recovered from Liao tombs in China. An unusual feature is that the vessel is decorated with relief details imitating

Figure 1. Liao pilgrim flasks with single-holed crests. Recovery locations not further specified.

A. Amber-glazed with narrow, raised strips and rivet-like fasteners (H: 23.8 cm).

B. Late Tang black-glazed with additional double lugs (H: 14.4 cm).

A



B



the stitching and metal studs of the original leather prototypes. Its slightly splayed foot and recessed base are unglazed, exposing a light gray biscuit body.

A smaller cockscomb flask, illustrated in Figure 1B, is covered with a black glaze splashed with bluish tones characteristic of late Tang ceramics that are widely regarded as precursors to Northern Song Jun glazes. The unglazed lower portion reveals a brown-fired biscuit body that has undergone substantial corrosion. Like the previous example, this flask also reproduces the stitched and studded details of the original leather containers.

A third example, shown in Figure 2, is a miniature cockscomb flask made of marbleware covered with a glossy brown glaze. Unlike the other two vessels, it lacks additional decorative relief.

The next stage in Medley's typology of Liao pilgrim flasks is represented by the large and elaborately decorated vessel illustrated in Figure 3. Instead of a cockscomb-shaped bracket, a similar effect is achieved with a two-part crest, each with a single perforation. The vessel is covered with a green ground glaze and decorated in relief with a dragon on one side and a phoenix on the other, highlighted with amber and white glazes. The base is flat and unglazed, lacking a foot rim. Ranging from 12.5 to 32.3 cm in height, these four flasks exhibit a substantial variation in size, in addition to their differences in form and decoration.



Figure 2. Miniature marbleware cockscomb pilgrim flask with single-holed crest. *Recovery location identified as San Policarpo (H: 12.5 cm).*

Figure 3. Liao pilgrim flask with double-holed crest. The flask is decorated with a phoenix with elaborate tail feathers on one side and a splayed dragon on the other. *Recovery location identified as Burauen.* (H: 32.3 cm).



Flasks with handles

Four of the Philippine pilgrim flasks belong to a class characterized by the presence of handles, a form generally dated from the late 10th through the 11th centuries. Two examples (Figure 4A and 4B) are sancai-glazed products of Liao kilns, decorated on both sides with amber, green, and white lead glazes. Their somewhat splayed feet lack foot rims, while the slightly concave bases expose a fine gray biscuit body.

Like the flask shown in Figure 3, the vessels illustrated in Figures 4A and 4B employ the relief decoration characteristic of Liao sancai ceramics. The flask in Figure 4A depicts an ascending phoenix on both sides. Although somewhat difficult to discern, the vessel in Figure 4B appears to depict, in bilateral symmetry, several beautiful flowers together with the *Jīvajīvaka* of Buddhist mythology, a two-headed bird that shares a single body. In one well-known parable, while one head is asleep, the other eats a beautiful flower. Although the sleeping head receives the nourishment through their shared body, it becomes jealous because it did not have the opportunity to enjoy the flower itself. Out of resentment, it later eats a poisonous flower in an attempt at retribution. Because the two heads share a single body, however, both are poisoned, illustrating the destructive nature of jealousy and resentment, as well as the fundamental interdependence of beings who share a single life. A similar double-headed bird figure is in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art (#S2012.9.4498).

The flask shown in Figure 5A differs significantly from these examples. Covered with a white glaze accented by a green splash, it is characteristic of wares generally attributed to the Gongxian kilns, most likely produced during the Five Dynasties period. Its handle is modeled to resemble a twisted rope. Other flasks have been recovered in China with a white glaze and green highlights, but these appear to be from a different kiln (see Lu, cat. #140 as an example).

The final flask in this group (Figure 5B) is a northern temmoku-type vessel with iron spotting. During the Northern Song period, similar black-glazed wares were produced by several kilns, particularly those associated with the Cizhou tradition.

The diversity represented by the vessels illustrated in Figures 1–4 is notable; four (Figures 1, 3, 4A, and 4B) are lead-glazed products of Liao kilns. The other vessels have characteristics more closely associated with Northern Chinese kilns operating from the late Tang through the Northern Song periods.

Two unique pilgrim flasks found in the Philippines do not fit into any of the conventional categories, and can be assigned with confidence to kilns outside Liao-controlled territory. These are almost certainly products of northern Chinese kilns of the 11th century. Both share a distinctive zoomorphic motif on the crest. One vessel, shown in Figure 6A, is covered with a uniform yellowish green glaze; its glazed base bears a Tiansheng reign-mark seal identifying the 1023–1032 CE reign of Emperor Renzong. The second flask, illustrated in Figure 6B, is nearly identical in form but features a crackled white glaze. We propose that both vessels were Northern Song wares produced for the court, possibly intended as tribute to the Liao under the treaty concluded in 1004, in which in exchange for peace along the northern frontier, the Song agreed to provide an annual tribute. The Liao kilns produced pilgrim flasks with dragon handles (see Lu, cat. #103 and #104), but these are very different in every respect from the vessels in Figure 6.



Figure 4. Philippine-recovered Liao pilgrim flasks with pinched handles.

A. Golden-brown glaze with green phoenix. The opposite side is shown in cover photo. *Recovery location identified as Balabac* (H: 36.5 cm).

B. Orange-brown glaze with two-headed Jivajivaka and flower scene, in bilateral symmetry. The opposite side is shown on the cover. *Recovery location not further specified* (H: 25.5 cm).



Figure 5. Pilgrim flasks with twisted handles.

A. White glaze with green splashes. Possibly a product of the Gongxian kilns. *Recovery location identified as Burauen* (H: 26.6 cm).

B. Northern temmoku-type ware, black glaze with brown spotting. Likely a product of the Cizhou kilns. *Recovery location not further specified* (H: 21.7 cm).



Figure 6. Northern Song pilgrim flasks with fox-like zoomorphic handles.

A. Yellow-green glazed pilgrim flask with a Tiansheng reign-mark seal identifying the reign period of Emperor Renzong (1023–1032 CE). *Recovery location not further specified* (H: 21.5 cm).

B. White glazed pilgrim flask with dark gray crackle and four-character seal identifying the vessel as a Northern Song official kiln product. *Recovery location identified as Tubod* (H: 22.0 cm).



Discussion

The small set of pilgrim flasks recovered from the Philippine Archipelago and currently part of a private collection (Olivera 2025) is significant in several respects. Ceramics of this form were primarily produced during the 10th–11th centuries and are among the most readily identifiable ceramic forms of that period because of their distinctive shape. Current evidence suggests that pilgrim flasks were produced exclusively by northern Chinese kilns, primarily for the Liao elite. Most known examples discovered in China have come from tombs of Liao nobility, and no kilns south of the Yangtze River are known to have manufactured ceramics in this form.

The Philippine assemblage of only ten pilgrim flasks displays far greater diversity than that represented in the published literature, which comprises over 200 documented vessels. The vessels described here appear to have been produced by at least six different kilns. Even the lead-glazed examples likely made in the Liao Gangwa kilns differ from those recovered in China which mostly have monochrome glazes. Three of the Philippine vessels feature exuberant sancai decoration.

The newly identified forms described above suggest that these flasks may have served purposes beyond functioning as grave goods. Some may have had ritual or domestic applications; the vessels illustrated in Figure 6, for example, would have been well-suited for practical use as containers for wine or other liquids. The Philippine collection may be more representative of the range of flasks actually produced than the surviving Chinese corpus, most of which were recovered from Liao tombs.

The collection also appears to span nearly the entire period during which this ceramic form was manufactured. The vessel shown in Figure 1B closely resembles Tang dynasty black-glazed ceramics with bluish-white splashes, a style associated with kilns that later became

famous for Jun ware. This flask may therefore date to the late Tang dynasty. By contrast, the vessels illustrated in Figure 6 are clearly identifiable as 11th century Northern Song ceramics, perhaps commissioned by the Song court as part of the annual tribute sent to the Liao, which consisted mainly of silk and metal coinage.

Taken as a whole, this collection offers new insight into the complex political and economic relationship between the Five Dynasties/Northern Song courts and the Liao Empire. If the intended consumers of these vessels were primarily within Liao-controlled territories, the assemblage suggests an active exchange network that crossed imperial boundaries and involved numerous kilns operating under different political authorities. The richly decorated Liao vessels suggest the existence of a market in the Song capital for this type of Liao sancai ware, which may not have been produced primarily for use in tombs.

Another potentially important aspect of the Philippine discoveries is the geographic distribution of the known recovery sites of Liao sancai ceramics, which fall within a crescent-shaped region of the southeastern Philippine archipelago that we have previously termed the Kalaga Putuan Crescent (KPC, Olivera 2021 and Olivera et al. 2024). It is highly unlikely that these ceramics reached the Philippines through the well-documented Maritime Silk Road. Recent archaeological excavations of 10th century shipwrecks have revealed the composition of contemporary ceramic cargoes. Particularly important is the 10th century Cirebon shipwreck, discovered in the northern Java Sea in 2003, from which over 150,000 ceramics were recovered. The majority of the ceramic cargo was greenware products from the Yue kilns of Zhejiang province. Notably, despite the enormous size of the assemblage, the published inventory of the Cirebon ceramics (Liebner 2014) does not definitively identify any of them as products of Liao kilns.

Instead, it seems more plausible that Liao ceramics reached the Philippines through a direct connection between the Northern Song capital of Kaifeng and trading centers in the southeastern Philippines. In the early 11th century, these trading hubs were associated with a maritime trading polity or network identified in Northern Song records as P'u-tuan, or Pudian. We hypothesize that the Philippine assemblage was directly obtained by traders or tribute mission delegates from the southeastern Philippines while they were in Kaifeng. Thus, rather than representing a random subset of the vessels recovered from Liao tombs, the small Philippine collection may represent a selection of vessels available in Kaifeng, filtered through the preferences of P'u-tuan mission delegates and traders.

A further hypothesis concerns the maritime route by which such goods may have reached the Philippines. Half a millennium later, the Manila galleon route transformed global maritime commerce. These massive commercial vessels of the 16th–18th centuries departed Manila by first sailing southward in order to access the powerful seasonal current near the San Bernardino Strait. This current carried the ships northward until they could intercept the westerlies that enabled their eastward crossing to North America. We propose that this northward maritime route had already been used for centuries by Austronesian traders from the southeastern Philippine archipelago engaged in direct trade with China. If so, the initial segment of the galleon tor-naviaje route—traditionally regarded as a discovery of Andrés de Urdaneta in the 16th century—may in fact have followed a much older and well-established maritime corridor used by ocean-going balangays that, like the Manila galleons, were capable of supporting bulk, long-distance maritime trade.

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Figure 7. Examples of other Liao ceramics recovered in the Philippines. A. Phoenix-headed ewer, *recovery location identified as Balabac* (H: 36.3 cm). See also Olivera and Granberg, 2025, for a discussion of phoenix-headed vessels recovered in the Philippines. **B.** Oblong floral-patterned dish with brown foliated rim, *recovery location identified as Balabac* (L: 26.9 cm). **C.** Oblong floral-patterned dish with green foliated rim, *recovery location identified as Bulan* (L: 27.2 cm). For similar patterned dishes, see monochrome plate #52 in Hayashiya and Hasebe, 1982.

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Cover: Liao pilgrim flasks shown, from left to right, in Figures 3, 4B, and 4A.