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Chinese porcelain coffee drinking bowls in the Islamic world (16th-19th centuries)

During the period of the 9th -17th centuries, the Islamic world comprised the main regions to have imported a large quantity of Chinese ceramics. The assemblage of the last seems to have been in concordance with the evolution of the ways and the styles that might have occurred in material culture and daily life in these very regions. For instance, among these Chinese imports, one can observe jars and bowls as the main types for the period of the 9th-12th centuries, larges bowls and dishes for the 13th-15th centuries, and coffee utensils from the 16th century onwards. The paper will deal with the last case: Chinese porcelain coffee drinking bowls during the 16th-19th centuries.

Coffee originating from the south of Ethiopia might have been introduced into the port states of the Red Sea such as Aden and Moka somewhere in the 15th century. From the early 16th century, coffee would probably have been drunk only within the Sufi religious groups and high social circles of various regions of the Middle East such as Egypt, Syria and Turkey. From the 1560s onwards, coffee began to become a popular drink on the coastal areas of the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Arabian Sea. The manner in which coffee was consumed may have changed during the last decades of the 16th century: from a ritual collective way with a large bowl to an individual way with a small bowl. These different coffee utensils might have become the main types of Chinese ceramics imported into various regions of the Islamic world according to the progression of coffee consumption. The conference aims to establish the catalogue of coffee bowl types in Chinese porcelain imported into these regions. This analysis will be done with recent archaeological data both from port sites of the importing areas and from Chinese kiln sites. Some cultural phenomenon related to these exotic utensils (price, usage, method of transport and the production of imitations) would be discussed.

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