

# The Belitung Wreck Site After Commercial Salvage In 1998

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## Abstract

The Belitung Shipwreck Site, located at 17 meters (m) depth in Belitung waters, Indonesia, is a shipwreck site containing Tang Dynasty (AD 618-906) cargo that was lifted by private salvage companies, Limited Corporation/Perusahaan Terbatas (PT). Sulung Segara Jaya and Seabed Exploration Company in 1998. The salvaging<sup>1</sup> process was done without involving Indonesian State archaeologists. The shipwreck is an Arab or Indian vessel that includes 60,000 artifacts from the Tang Dynasty. In 2005, the artifacts sold to Singapore Sentosa Leisure Group.

In 2010, the Office for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Jambi conducted the first underwater archaeological survey at Belitung Shipwreck site in order to find out the conditions of the site after the salvaging operation. The result shows that the site is extremely ravaged, with unidentified ceramic fragments spread out in a radius of  $\pm 20$  square meters (m<sup>2</sup>). It seems clear that the ceramic fragments have been removed by the company then thrown back into the sea because considered non-commercial. Meanwhile, the structure of the actual shipwreck was not found. It was only a big hole with 6 m wide and 15 m long, which seems to be where the ship may have settled. The remnants are now just a few small wood fragments and a sizable chunk of wood, this maybe the mast-step. The Belitung Shipwreck is recognized worldwide as an extremely valuable find in Indonesian waters. Preservation efforts are needed to remind future generations that the shipwreck site very important for underwater archaeology in Indonesia. Some preservation efforts that can be done are legal protection, site rehabilitation, and establishing a maritime museum in Belitung Regency. The last of which efforts have initiated two years ago with the aim to preserve artifacts from Belitung shipwreck site and other underwater sites in Bangka Belitung Province.

**Keywords:** Belitung, Tang cargo, Shipwreck site, Preservation

## Introduction

The Fantastic selling price of the cargo of *De Geldermalsen* salvaged by Michael Hatcher in Riau water has stimulated businessmen in Indonesia who want to try their luck to get treasure. It encouraged the government to form a National Committee, one of its responsibilities is to manage licenses, salvage, and exploitation. One of the salvaged shipwrecks is Belitung Wreck or popularly known as the Tang Cargo. The company which salvaged it was PT. Sulung Segara Jaya and Seabed Exploration, a German company. The company carried out excavation work at the site in September and October 1998, and continued in April 1999 (Flecker 2001:335). The process of salvage was done without involving archaeologists or Indonesian researchers.

The Belitung wreck is the first archaeological evidence for direct trade between the western Indian Ocean and China. A remarkable portion of the ship's hull survived. The hull planks were stitched together, with no sign of wooden dowels or iron fastening. The keel is 15.3 m long, a keelson, stringers, ceiling planks, and thwart beams still in

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<sup>1</sup> The term salvage is associated to random removal of ship parts or cargo for their reuse or sale; excavation is the term used for scientific methodology in the removal of heritage objects

place. The majority of the surviving cargo consisted of ceramics from the Changsha kilns<sup>2</sup> of China. Primarily bowls and ewers, but also a smattering of figurines and jarlets. Other significant finds from the wreck include white-ware from the famous Ding Kilns, and Yue wares<sup>3</sup> from Zhejiang Province, several rare pieces of high-fired blue and white, lead ballasts, some pieces of resin which would come from Sumatra, pillow-shaped silver ingots, and a number of gold vessels (Flecker 2001:336-345).

How is the Belitung Wreck now? Only fragments of tile remain and useless cuts of wood on the site. They are scattered about the seabed in 17 m depth to the west of Belitung Island. The identified cuts of wood are not known from which part of the wreck, if at all, they may have originated. Potentially, a propped-up wood chunk is the mast-step. A long sand pit indicates the site of the shipwreck where it was found by the salvagers. What should be done with the ruins? This shipwreck is the only known ship from the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Anno Domini* (AD) that has been found. It needs preserving.

### ***Belitung Wreck now***

The location of Belitung Wreck site is in the Western Belitung Island. Its geographical location includes Batu Itam (Black Rock) village area, Sijuk district, Belitung regency, Bangka Belitung Archipelago province. To get to the site, we can start from Batu Itam beach about 3 km (1.8 mile) or from Nusantara port in Tanjung Pandan city, from which the distance is 8.8 km (5.4 mile). The visibility is quite good at around 5-7 m.



Figure 1. The Location of The Belitung Wreck (Google Earth)

The result of the survey done in November 2010 shows that the salvaging of the Belitung Wreck left broken jar and bowl ceramics. The scattered fragments of jars and

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<sup>2</sup> Changsha kilns located in Hunan Province where the ceramics produced

<sup>3</sup> a porcelain that the ancient Chinese likened to snow because of its delicacy

bowls are in about 20 m<sup>2</sup> surrounding the wreck site. It seems that the fragments were lifted then thrown away again into the sea because of their broken condition.

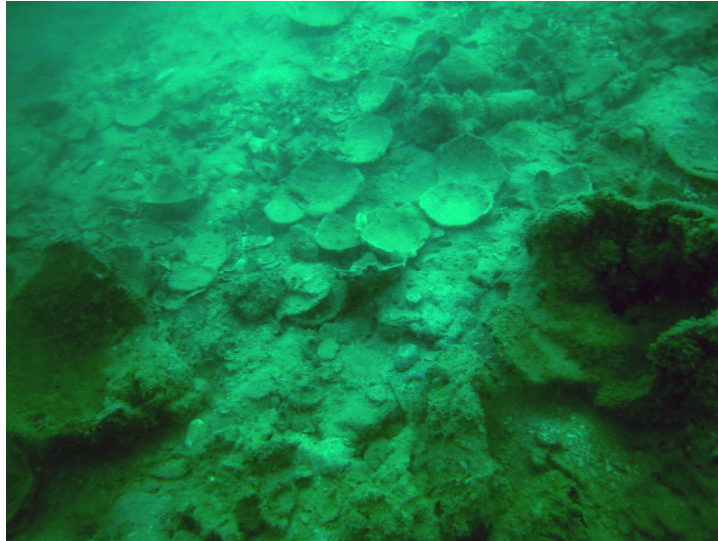


Figure 2. Fragment of Jars and Bowls in Seabed  
(Agus Sudaryadi/Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Jambi)

Meanwhile, the ship itself can not be found again. There are only some small wood chunks left. The sinking of the ship in the seabed left a trace in the form of 6 m wide and 15 m long hole with orientation South West – North East. In the hole, there are many small fragments of tile and a part of the ship which is identified as the mast-step (Manurung 2010:8).



Figure 3. a small wood fragment  
(Agus Sudaryadi/Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Jambi)

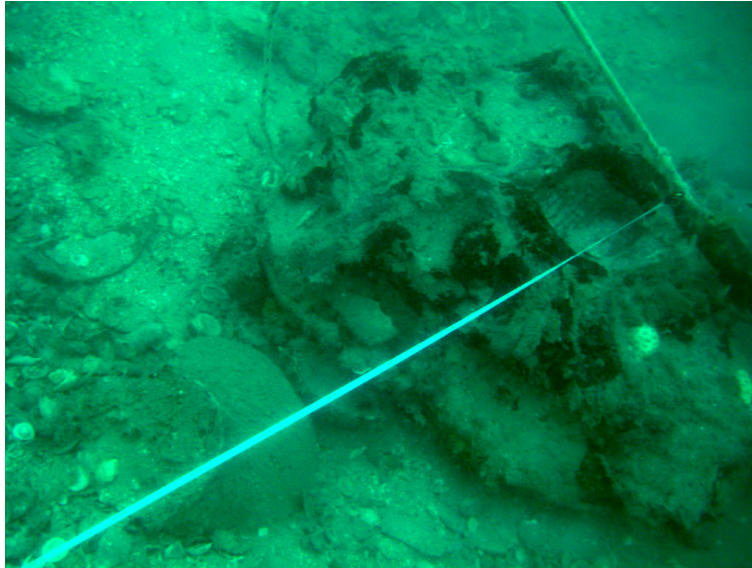


Figure 4. The wood predicted as the mast-step  
(Agus Sudaryadi/Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Jambi)

### ***Preservation Efforts***

The condition of Belitung Wreck is unknown so far after salvaging in 1998. We have no data about its. As a consequence, there have not been any preservation steps taken. There are many factors that cause this, some of which are unavailable human resources (see Wahjudin this volume) and the preservation of underwater sites has never been done before in Indonesia. Due to that case, in my opinion, the preservation that can be done is legal protection, it becomes the collection of maritime museum and a site rehabilitation is needed.

#### **a) Legal Protection**

UCH protection in Indonesia is very neglected compared with land cultural heritage. The salvaging of *De Geldermalsen* (The Nanking Cargo) incident in Riau Archipelago waters by Michael Hatcher in 1985-1986 has stirred up government and society (Utomo 2008:20-21). The auction 140,000 tiles and 225 bars of gold was held by Christie's in Amsterdam totaled US\$18 million. The Government reacted by implementing *Presidential Decree No. 43 of 1989* on the National Committee for Salvaging and Exploiting Valuable Objects Retrieved from Shipwreck (henceforth referred to as the National Committee). The National Committee's duty is to manage the licensing of survey, salvage, and exploitation<sup>4</sup>. The laws which protected Indonesian culture heritage at that time was *Monumenten Ordonnantie* (Netherland Law) No. 19 of 1931 (*Staatblad* 1931 No. 238) then changed into *Monumenten Ordonnantie* No. 21 of 1934 (*Staatblad* 1934 No. 515).

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<sup>4</sup> Until now, The Indonesia Government has issued three Presidential Decree, Presidential Decree No. 43/1989, Presidential Decree No. 107/2000, and Presidential Decree No. 19/2007. Now the National Committee Chairman is Ministry of Marine and Fisheries.



From the salvaging of *Geldermalsen's* cargo, Indonesia got neither financial nor non-financial award. The result of the auction was not done clearly, meanwhile the process of lifting, packing, conservation, and auction did not involve Indonesian archaeologists at all. Thus, there was no data, documentation nor improvement of underwater archaeologists' knowledge in Indonesia. One of the more horrendous consequences of the event is that an Indonesian archaeologist is considered dead, his body thus far not found, who was active in the investigation of locating the *Geldermalsen*. He was an alumni of an underwater archaeologist training course held in Thailand in 1985 and 1986 (SEAMEO Project of Archaeology and Fine Arts). That incident left deep pain for Indonesian archaeologists and a gap in the knowledge on Indonesian UCH.

To replace the old ineffective law in the *Law No. 5/1992* was issued concerning culture heritage objects. The weakness of Indonesian law has been exploited by the looter and the salvaging of UCH. The cargo which is known as Belitung Wreck has been desalinated, conserved, and researched in New Zealand. The cargo taken out of the country against the rule. The auction conducted by Christie's with a total earnings of US\$32 million. The agreement that obliged the salvagers to share half the value was broken with only US\$2.5 million delivered in total (Rachel 2009; Sofian 2010:21).

In 1999 salvaging by Michael Hatcher occurred again to a shipwreck in Gaspar straits which is known as Teksing Cargo. The major findings were blue and white ceramics about 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century AD produced in Dehua Kiln in Fujian Province. Not only ceramics, from the cargo found cannon, objects of brass and copper, watches, china ink container, folding knife, and incense burner (Widiati 2007:35). They were shipped to Australia in 43 containers. All the cargo of the ship was sold by Nagel auction in Stuttgart, Germany in November 2000. It sold 350,000 ceramics at a total 7,2 million deutsch marks (DM). The Indonesian government got only 2 million DM and only 1,000 ceramics (Wahjudin 2003:17).

The forming of National Committee did not reduce the illegal salvaging of UCH. During 2005 – 2011 there have been eleven cases. Meanwhile, survey and legal salvaging were only 26. Of all the incidents, there was only one successful archaeological excavation namely the Cirebon Wreck salvaged by PT. Paradigma Putera Sejahtera cooperate with Cosmix, Belgia. The process of salvaging was done systematically under the supervision of government officials. There were 500,000 ceramics, objects of gold, silver, copper, tin, iron, bottle, glass, beads, coin, and precious stones (Utomo 2008:35-60).

Law protection toward UCH in Indonesia has changed by the issue of *Law No. 11/2010 on Culture Heritage*. This new law is more firm in managing the discovery of culture heritage in the water and the repercussions for bringing it abroad. There are heavy punishments for those who break the law. The explanation about that is as follow:

## **Discovery**

Government is obliged to bring about discovering of objects, building, structure and location predicted as Culture Heritage.

The discovery of culture heritage or predicted as culture heritage can be done individually by excavating, diving, and/or lifting in the land and/or in the water.

The discovery as meant in Verse (1) and (2) can only be done through research with caring about belonging right and location authority.

Everyone is prohibited to carry out discovery of culture heritage or predicted as culture heritage by excavating, diving, and/or lifting in the land and/or in the water as meant in Verse (2), except with license from government or local government with its authority. (Article 26, Versus 1-4)

## Carrying

Foreigners and/or law institution can not possess and/or dominate culture heritage, except foreigners and/or foreign law institution that live and inhabit in Indonesia territorial;  
Foreigners and/or foreign law institution as meant in Verse (1) is prohibited to carry Culture Heritage, either all or a part of it, out of Indonesia territory. (Article 14, Verse 1 and 2)

Culture Heritage, either all or a part of it, can only be brought out of Indonesia territory for the sake of research, cultural promotion, and/or exhibition;

Everyone is forbidden to bring Culture Heritage as meant in Verse (1), except by Minister Permission . (Article 68, Verse 1 and 2)

## Punishment

Everybody without governmental license or local government bring about discovery of Culture Heritage as meant in Article 26 Verse (4) is punished by sending to jail at least 3 (three) months and the longest is 10 (ten) years and/or fined at least Rp. 150,000,000,- (one hundred and fifty million rupiahs) and the most is Rp. 1,000,000,000 (one billion rupiahs). (Article 103)

Everybody without ministry licence, bring Cultural Heritage out of Indonesia territory as meant in article 68 Verse (2) is punished by sending to jail at least 6 (six) months and the longest is 10 (ten) years and/or fined at least Rp. 200,000,000,- (two hundred million rupiahs) and the most is Rp. 1,500,000,000,- (one billion and five hundred million rupiahs). (Article 109)

How is the law protection of underwater culture heritage in Indonesia? still a lot of shipwreck site is not determined yet. Whereas, in *Law No. 5/1992* about Culture Heritage Objects Verse 11 states, “Government determines the finding of Culture Heritage Objects or objects predicted as Culture Heritage Objects as meant in Article 10 Verse 1 about the site with its border”. Government Regulation No. 10 of 1993 about the implementation of *Law No. 5/1992* about Culture Heritage Objects Article 24 Verse (1) states, “ in conserving Culture Heritage Objects Government decides the site”.

Meanwhile *Law No. 11/2010* has changed the determining of Culture Heritage becomes national and local government’s responsibility. According to verse (1):

Regent and mayor issue the determining of Culture Heritage status 30 (thirty) days the longest after the recommendation is accepted by experts team which states the object, building, structures, location and/or geographic space unit which is registered as Culture Heritage.

Regency and municipality government convey the result of determining to Provincial Government and continued to the central government. (Article 35)

Government and local government can bring about the ranking of Culture Heritage based on the importance to be national ranking, province ranking, and regency/municipality ranking based on recommendation from Culture Heritage Expert Team.(Article 41)

The determination of Belitung Wreck site as a possible site is due to survey result data (Manurung 2010:8-9). It was done after 12 years since its salvage. Before that, the obstacle of determining the location of the underwater site was lack of survey, so there was no underwater site data available that could aide in its identification.

Legal protection of the Belitung wreck and other underwater sites would need to be followed by marking the protect sites, both on land and at sea. The sign is installed on land are information board. The board provide information about the history of the particular wreck and layout of the site, but will also carry a strong conservation message, stressing the legal protection, and the responsibilities of divers when visiting them. The board installed adjacent to the slipway at a harbor from which divers access to a shipwreck. While at sea, the location of shipwreck with an installed buoy. The buoy is moored with rope/chain which is bound around the cement block in the seabed. On the cement block, there is a bronze plaque of the writing relating its lawful determination.

## **b) Maritime Museum**

Since two years ago the Indonesian government prepared to build a maritime museum in Belitung Island. At that time, there were 8 hectares of land available for development. The choosing of Belitung Island as the location of maritime museum is quite appropriate due to the amount of shipwrecks around the seawater territory of Bangka and Belitung Island. Noted since 1950-1878 43 ships sank in the Gaspar straits and surroundings, including Gaspar Island, Karang Coope, Karang Beldeveree, Karang Arang Marai (Pramono 2005:85; Tangkilisan 2009:10). Wreck site found by Arqueonautas from 2007-2010 include 27 sites located at a depth of 6 m to 53 m. Condition of the sites has been largely heavily disturbed and looted. Seven sites are European shipwreck from the 19<sup>th</sup> century AD. Two of them are believed to be the location of *Alceste*<sup>5</sup> and *Forbes*<sup>6</sup> (Mirabal 2008: 28; Mirabal 2011:30)

Indonesia has 275 museum with only two categorized as maritime museums. They are the Museum Bahari in Jakarta and Museum Bahari in Ende, Flores. However, the museums do not have underwater heritage collections. Museum Bahari in Jakarta is Culture Preserve building inherited from the Dutch government. The building was used by Dutch government officials as storehouse to keep, choose, and pack Indonesian commodities. Museum Bahari of Jakarta was officially opened on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1977. The collection exhibited in the museum consist of various kinds of classic *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) boats, Indonesian traditional boat, and models of modern boat. It also includes the equipment of sailing such as navigation tools, anchors, lighthouse models, and many kinds of cannon. It displays sea biota collection (fish in Indonesia's seawater), technology of traditional boat building, and folklore of Indonesian fishermen customs. The museum exhibits Indonesian Navy dimension, cartography, maritime kingdom heroes and figures, and photos of the voyage of *Koninkelijtke Paketvaart Mattscappi* KPM) ship. Museum Bahari in Ende collects sea biota in Nusa Tenggara area. The total collection amounts to 22,000 kinds.

The Maritime Museum in Belitung must build a new building. Ideally, the architecture of the building reflects Indonesian culture, like the shape of the ship, Indonesian traditional building, history of Indonesian maritime, or Indonesia's sea potential . However, based on the comparison of maritime museums in Osaka Maritime

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<sup>5</sup> The English ship was on voyage to China with a famous ambassador on board. The ship was wrecked on this reef which now bears its name, Alceste Cliff (Wells 1995:94)

<sup>6</sup> Forbes is a English country trading ship which sank on November during its voyage from China to India (Ibid.)

Museum, Japan, Western Australian Maritime Museum, Fremantle, Australia and Maritime Museum of Chicago, USA, the maritime building in Indonesia needs to consider the concept of developing modern architecture. For the collection, museum needs to add the collection of (1) Indonesian Maritime History, (2) Indonesian Maritime Culture, (3) Sailing technology and safety, (4) Variation of water transportation, (5) Port and shipping (6) Various kinds of weaponry, tools and social material cultures related to territorial defense and security (Supardi 2009:8-13).

Problems with the collection that came from the Belitung wreck is most of the objects have belonged to the Singapore Artsience Museum. Indonesian Government has only 39 ceramics which are in the National Museum. For that we need to do a good negotiation so that Indonesia government to get additional artifacts the Belitung wreck. Artifacts from Belitung Wreck will also be the collection the Museum Timah in Belitung but most of the ceramics is broken. Other ceramics are in private collections and their number is unknown.

### **c) Site Rehabilitation**

As illustrated above the rest of the site is only the scattered fragments of ceramic jars and some unprovenienced wood. I think that site should be preserved in a way rehabilitated. According to Indonesia Big Dictionary, rehabilitation is the recovery to previous condition (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia 1990:737). So in this paper, rehabilitation means the recovery to condition before the salvaging.

The consideration factors to do the rehabilitation of Belitung Wreck are :

1. Important underwater site as the proof of sailing in 9<sup>th</sup> century AD
2. The location is near Belitung island
3. It is located about 17 meters deep
4. It can be developed for under water tourism resorts and complete the maritime museum

Site rehabilitation activity is the reordering of scattered objects on the seabed and the returning the land objects to the sea. The land objects are the fragments of ceramics in a villa which used to be a basecamp when the salvaging took place and the seizure of court given to the Museum Timah in Belitung. In addition, it is needed to make the imitation from the pieces of the ship and other objects. Belitung Wreck Site Rehabilitation is expected to support society's curiosity after visiting the maritime museum. They conduct diving tourism to know the situation under the sea. There are two spots that can be diving tourism destination which are the location of sunken ship and the reef that cause the sunken ship.

### **Conclusion**

Belitung Wreck is one of underwater site salvaged without involving Indonesian archaeologists. Since it was salvaged not many people has known the condition of the site. It is different from the objects exposed in permanent exhibition or travelling exhibitions. It causes amazement and also controversy as lifting is considered an infringement of the 2001 Convention.

Belitung Wreck site can be an example of how salvaging is a loss of objects to National governments. More importantly the information of the site was lost due to there



being no report submitted to the Indonesia government on the salvage operations or any of the conservation or auction follow-ups. There were only pieces of ceramics and planks of wood left on the seabed. It would have been best if the shipwreck site had been approached as a research and preservation activity; with the inclusion of scientific considerations and the preservation/monitoring of in situ objects. In my opinion it is much better to excavate only some objects designated to be exhibited in museums while leaving the rest in situ.

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