

The discovery SS *Indus* (1885) with Cargo of the 3rd century BC Bharhut sculptures in Sri Lankan waters

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Abstract

SS Indus ran aground in 1885 somewhere in the North east coast of Sri Lanka while she was sailing from Calcutta or Kolkata to London via Colombo. At the time she possessed valuable cargo, a fine collection of sculptures from Bharhut, a 3rd century BC Buddhist monastery in India. They were masterpieces of a collection of Sir Alexander Cunningham, the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India and they were being transported for exhibition in the London Museum. For the last one century, Indian and Sri Lankan archaeologists and historians were interested in finding this shipwreck, yet no one knew the exact location of the wreck. However the recent Maritime Exploration in the month of August 2013 by the Maritime Archaeology Unit, Sri Lanka has traced the possible remains of the SS Indus off Mulativu.

Key words: *SS Indus*, Bharhut sculptures, British India, Mulativu, Trincomalie

Introduction

Interest in Maritime Archaeology in Sri Lanka has been increasing since the early 1960s. Being an island Nation, our past is intertwined with all aspects of maritime life and its history. The Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) was established in Galle in 1992 with the objective of carrying out maritime research in and around Sri Lanka (Dayananda, 2013). From its inception, MAU has done much to further the work in this field and have lead some major maritime research history projects (Samaraweera, 2013). This work has seen the area of research extended in the North, East and North-West coastal regions of Sri Lanka. The end of the Civil War in 2009 enabled us to work in the North and East. Exploration in the North started in 2013.

Archival references of SS Indus

The main objective of this exploration was to trace any evidence of ships wrecked in the region during the last two centuries. The information collected from old news paper reports and other documents. Fortunately there is well preserved collection of the 19th century daily news papers in the Colombo National Archive. The careful investigation of the document some interesting information on hitherto unknown wrecks including the SS *Indus* (*The P & O Liner SS Indus, 1871*) (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London).

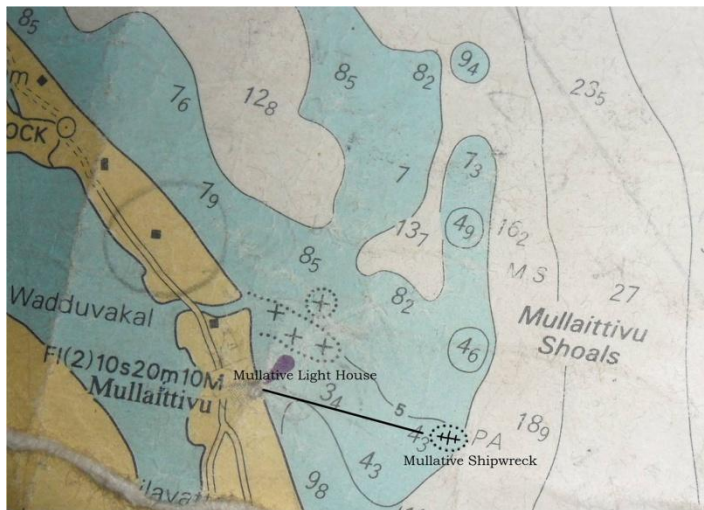


Fig. 1 Figure showing the probable route of the SS *Indus* from Calcutta to London via Colombo and wrecked off the north coast of Sri Lanka.

Bharhut sculptures

The name of the SS *Indus* is well known among Sri Lankan and Indian historians and archaeologists, and especially those interested in the study of the Bharhut as well as the history of art and the sculptures of ancient India. Over the last one century

researchers have worked tirelessly to uncover information about the *Indus's* cargo. They widely believed that the ship was transporting a fine collection of sculptures from the Bharhut (a well known Buddhist Monastery in India founded in the 3rd century BC) and she ran aground in the seas off Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 1885 when returning from India via Colombo to London. At this time of "British India" the renowned British scholar Sir Alexander Cunningham was head of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). It is widely thought that his collection of master pieces from the Bharhut was on route to London Museum, in the hold of the ill fated SS *Indus*. To set the geographical back ground, Bharhut Stupa is located in the present day Satna District of Madhya Pradesh in Central India. It was first identified by General Alexander Cunningham in 1873. On his second visit to Bharhut in February 1874 he collected and recorded scattered pieces of sculptures and tried to understand their

layout and design. He returned there for a third time in November 1874 with some legal right and took several of the sculptures to Kolkata (or Calcutta) and founded a Bharhut Gallery in the National Museum at Kolkata. After a detailed study of Buddhist literature and sculptures from the site, he published a book in 1877 titled “The Stupa of Bharhut”, which remains highly respected study of the Bharhut Stupa. When study the history of the monument and the works of Sir Alexander Cunningham, it is important to focus on the items he collected from the site and especially upon the loss of the SS *Indus* because it is believed to have been carrying the best pieces. Until now, the story of the SS *Indus* was confined only to the interest of scholars as it was believed that the ship was wrecked in water so deep that conventional diving equipment could not be used in the exploration. Until now, it seems no one has made any serious effort to reveal the actual facts related to the wreck, no tracing to identify where the wreck is located. In 2013 the Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU), Sri Lanka decided to extend research works in the northeast coast which include the search for the S S *Indus*. As the first step we studied the historical evidence to confirm a possible location. Our research has revealed that there has previously been great interest among scholars in finding this wreck. However, some misunderstanding of the information available to them had thwarted their efforts; most notably, reports of its location being “50 miles north of Trincomalie” have proven to be misleading.



Fig. 2 Shipwreck is marked on the Nautical Chart right before the Mullaitive town.

Opinions of scholars

Rao (1987) mentioned that the “P & O Liner *Indus* which carried the second century BC Buddhist sculptures of Bharhut sank 50 miles north of Trincomalee (Trincomalie) in Ceylon in 1885. An attempt made to salvage them was not successful”. Gaur informed that this wreck was very popular among the archaeologists as Cunningham was first in charge of Indian Archaeology in 1860 and I

believe records may be in the Kolkata Archives as the ship must have sailed from Kolkata and it is sure that this wreck contains stone sculpture from Bharhut (a Buddhist Stupa) of the 2nd century BC (personal communication). As per tradition it is at about 40 m water depth and lies North of Trincomalie. The Archaeological Commissioner of Sri Lanka, Charles Godakubre, in his Annual Report for the year 1962 – 63 has made the following statement about the SS *Indus*: “The possibility of doing more undersea archaeology in Ceylon in the near future takes our mind to the invaluable collection of works of art from the Stupa of Bharhut (2nd century BC) lost of 1885 in the wreck of the P & O liner *Indus* that ship aground on a shoal known as Mulaitivu 50 miles North of Trincomalee. It is known that some salvage operations were attempted at the time, with what results, we do not know. We shall therefore be thankful if anyone with information on this matter would pass on the same to Mr. Arthur C. Clarke or to us”. Arthur C Clarke also asks for any news of the *Indus* in his book, “*The Treasure of the Great Reef*” published in 1964. He gives a description of the supposed location of the site of the wreck as “Fifty miles to the North of Trincomalee, on a shoal known as Mullative, lays another important wreck and one which may contain the most valuable cargo lying beneath the waters around Ceylon. On November 9, 1885 the 3,462 ton P & O liner *Indus* was steaming south from Madras to Colombo when she went aground at full speed owing to a gross error in navigation (She was twenty miles off course, and her captain was lucky to get away with a twelve month suspension of his tickets.)

At high tide, the *Indus* was worked off the shoal, and then had her second piece of bad luck. She came to rest immediately above one of her own anchors, and as she rose and fell in the waves she quickly knocked a hole in her bottom and sank within a few hours. There was no loss of life, but none of the cargo could be saved. Aboard the *Indus* was the collection of the finest works of art from the Stupa of Bharhut which had been specially selected by the director of the Indian Archaeology, General Cunningham. Today, these statues would be priceless – if they are still on Mulattive shoal. But we are not certain of this; we know that salvage operations were later carried out on the *Indus* with a view to recovering the indigo and other valuables aboard her. Would the divers also have bothered to bring up what they probably considered to be a few old statues? We rather doubt it, but until our researchers have settled this important point the *Indus*

will remain on our list of possibilities, not certainties” (Clark, 1964: 239). Arthur C Clark in all the time he spent searching could not find the *Indus*. He was a pioneer of underwater exploration who introduced scuba diving to Sri Lanka in the early ‘60s, arguably the most eminent maritime archaeologist of his generation.

Our investigation of the archival documents confirmed that there have been attempts to excavate cargo from the *Indus* but there is no evidence of any success. It is therefore highly likely that there has been no historical disturbance of the site which remains

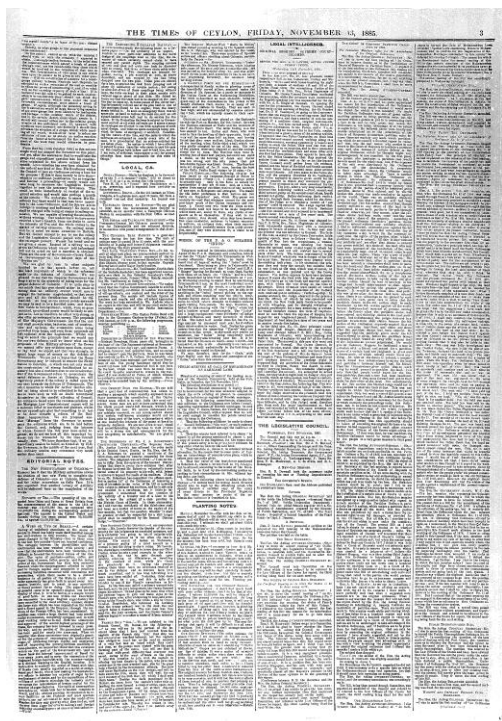


Fig. 3 News Paper article *The Times of Ceylon*, Sunday November 15th, 1885. (National Archive, Colombo)

untouched since the ship sank. No evidence of disturbance soon after the ship was lost because there were perilous waves in monsoon weather at that time, nor in later years before the development of equipment to recover heavy items from a wreck or to stay underwater at such a depth for sufficient time. There is possibility that the strong waves would have resulted in sand covering the cargo which would add to the difficulty of retrieving it. Only in very recent times have new techniques and equipment become available to allow such excavation. These facts, together with Arthur C Clarks’ statement that he had not found the wreck or cargo, is proof of the sculptures remaining intact beneath the sand.

Information about the *Indus* appeared in a news paper “Times of Ceylon” on the 12 and 13 of November 1885 and also from the account given by a passenger on the 15th. Final piece of news of the ships’ loss was printed on the 17th, in which one of the passengers gave a dramatic description of what happened when she sank and afterwards. The news printed on the 12th of November states; “The wreck of the P & O SS *Indus*, Completed brake up off the vessel ... “Information just brought by *H.M.S Ranger* which has return from the wreck with all passengers, native crew, and stewards, that the caption, chief and fourth

officer, and doctor are standing by the ship in boats. *Ranger* reports that the ship is settling down. The four compartment has been carried away, and the after-compartment has started. The ship is full of water. No lives have been lost, and the mails are saved". On 13th "Times of Ceylon" had mentioned about the cargo of sunken ship..... The *Indus* had a large consignment some 200 chests-of indigo shipped at Madras, and many thousands of chests of tea. The latter is of course done for, but the indigo may yet be recovered next year, for it suffers little deterioration in water..... the "Indus" being completely under water and heavy seas braking over her. It is being lived that the treasure on board some 40,000 has been saved, as the mails. Undoubtedly have been and the treasure would undoubtedly be the first thing to which attention would be directed". According to the above list of things there is no any mention about the sculptures, probably it has been there as a personal collection or not much attention was paid on them as important as we consider on this day.

Narration by a passenger of the SS *Indus*

The account which appeared on 15th Sunday in "Times of Ceylon" give us a vivid picture begins with "responsible for the opinions of our correspondent". The dates he gives do not match with the incidents previous dating and thus lead to some confusion however; it does not harm other reliability and authenticity within his account. The reason for the apparent 'error' in his account may have been to protect the Captain from future legal action? "We left Madras in the *Indus* at about a quarter to 2.00 PM on Saturday afternoon, the 8th September bound for London via Colombo. There were but seven first class passengers in all, and all went well until the morning of Sunday, the *Indus* coming to grief in reality but a few hours after we had the started. I had but just finished my *chota hazeri* on Sunday morning, and was just entering my cabin, when I felt the ship bump, and I was nearly thrown off my feet. Running on deck at once, as indeed did everybody, we found ourselves about four miles from land, which lay to starboard and grating against the bottom heavily. I believe, but I cannot say with certainty, that the captain was on the bridge with the officers of the watch at this time. I looked at my watch, and found it was just 6.20 AM. But a few minutes previously, I had seen that we were in sight of land, and though I was rather surprised at this, I naturally did not give the matter much thought. The ships did not heel over but kept grating on

the sandy bottom, and after a while the engines went full speed astern, part without any effect, though we moved from our position. The Captain then ordered the boats out with the lead, and sundry observations were taken from the ship and from the boats.....”

“..... Captain Breeze still made frantic endeavors to get his ship out of the mass she was in, and the engineers were kept hard at it, but we seemed to get struck only the faster. Up to this time, though we had practically been fast for eight or ten hours, absolutely



Fig. 4 Photograph of the SS Indus taken in 1881 in Southampton. (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Gould Collection, London)

nothing had been done to lighten the ship by jettisoning the cargo, though the passengers suggested it to the Captain more than once. The ship at this time, so far as we were informed, it must be remembered, had made no water.

Towards the afternoon the anchor was let go, and attempt made to warp her off into deep

water, which the boats had found by casting the led. This was the beginning of our worst misfortunes. I am unable to give a consecutive account of what took place during Sunday afternoon and night. Sleep we naturally get little of, and by morning we heard that the main hatch was full of water and the ship was fast. It appears that through some mismanagement we had gone ahead on our anchor and driven the fluke right into our bottom, and not content with this, we had gone on moving backwards and forwards, and had of course worked a great hole in the bottom of the vessel” (The Times of Ceylon, 1885). “..... The ship was filling fast and we naturally desired to be out of danger. Our luggage was piled up on the main deck-to be washed in to the sea. As it eventually proved—but we were not allowed to take it ashore. We took a few wraps with us and

rowed ashore with little or no difficulty. There we found a small fishing village called Mullativu where we went to the Rest house and made ourselves as comfortable as we could....” (The Times of Ceylon, 1885). His detailed description creates a dramatic picture of the incident and portrays its effect on the passengers and crew and the part played by the Captain. Some of his information is most useful to our research as it includes many incidents and the consequences. Interestingly we found evidence of the rest house he mentioned but unfortunately it is no longer standing however I found a photograph of it.

Last moments of the Indus

The times of Ceylon on Tuesday, November 17, 1885 reported the final stage of what happened to the *Indus* and the information given is important to our understanding of the cargo she carried “The *Indus* had not settled down to one side or the other, and her masts stood straight up with the sail caps on, clean and smart. Orders were left that as much as possible should be saved, and all that remained above water dismantled, but, the bad weather coming on, compelled the wreck to be abandoned, and forced the brig to make the best of her way to Trincomalie, as already described” (The Times of Ceylon, 1885).

News about Indus in an Australian news paper

The loss of the *Indus* was published in “The Daily News” in Australia. She had previously sailed there a few times “Wreck of the P & O Company’s SS *Indus* “The Melbourne Superintendent of the peninsular and oriental steam navigation company (Mr. Geo Withers) has received a telegram from the head office in London stating that the company’s’ steamer *Indus* which left Calcutta on the 1st November for London has been wrecked at Sandra on the Indian coast a few miles north of Ceylon. The message is stated that there were some hopes of her again being successfully floated, and that the steam “Clyde” had gone to her assistance, but beyond that passengers and mails had been all saved. No further particulars were given. The *Indus* was one of the best known of the P & O Company’s fleet, having many voyages to Australia since the initiation of the fortnight mail service. She was built in 1871 by Messer Denn Brothers, of Glasgow, who designed her for the Indian and China trade, which was then the principle field of the company’s operations”. It was interesting to find couple of internet images of

SS *Indus* taken at the time of a Census on 20th July 1882, three years prior to her ill fate. These are under the rights of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, Gould Collection and P & O Heritage Collection it describe the detail as “The P & O liner SS *Indus* (1871, 3462 GRT) in July 1882. She was in the port of London at the time of the census of April 1881. She had 17 Goan crewmen on board. She was wrecked off Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1885; fortunately, no lives were lost.”

Commencing our field work to discover the *Indus*

Utilizing nautical charts is a necessary means to successfully trace and record the position of the wreck. They enabled us to find and record the approximate site of the wreck. . This “pre-survey” was most useful in providing opportunities to meet the local fishing communities. We knew from previous experience how useful it is to develop a good relationship with the local fishing and diving community. Much helpful and reliable information about shipwreck can be obtained from local people. We started our Field Study in August 2013 in Mullaitive in the north of Sri Lanka:-

Our first task was to meet with local people, boatmen, guides, fishermen, divers and navy personal etc. We then studied all the information available to us. We used local suggestion and knowledge to target our underwater survey methods to locate the shipwreck site. We discovered that the nautical chart was incorrect and after a few days of searching, we decided to stop and find some reliable data. After much persistence, and on our last day on site, we found the exact location of what is likely to be the location of the SS *Indus*! The site is fully covered in fishing nets and it would be a risk to dive there before clearing the nets. Due to its age, the wreck must be in a fragile condition. We observed that it rests on a sandy bottom in water at a depth of around 8-10 m. The wreck is some two miles away from the location marked on the nautical chart. The location is matching with data collected from archived in terms of distance from land and seascape. It is resting in less than 10 m of water. There is no other record of a similar ship being lost in this area. The evidence on site confirms that it is unlikely

that the wreck has been previously excavated. The Maritime Archaeology Unit is planning to start a test excavation on the shipwreck towards the end of 2014.

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National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Gould Collection, www.flickr.com/photos/nationalmaritimemuse.

Biography

Samaraweera Mudiyansele Nandadasa, (b. 1966), working as a Research Officer in Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU), Central Cultural Fund (CCF), Ministry of Culture and the Arts, Galle, Sri Lanka. He has obtained special degree in Archaeology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka (1992) PG diploma in Architectural Conservation of Monuments and Sites from the Department of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka (1993). He joined the Central Cultural Fund in 1993 as a Excavation Officer and conducted leading excavations in the World heritage Site of Sigiriya (1993-1997) and Lead the Conservation Branch as the Chief Conservation Officer (1997- 2004), Officer in Charge of the World Heritage Site of Galle project and Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) (2004- 2008) and presently working as a Senior Research Officer for MAU.