Playa Damas
Artifact Inventory

Filipe Castro

Ship Lab Report 9
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It is impossible to know exactly what the shipwreck looked like before the salvage company Investigaciones Marítimas del Istmo SA (IMDI) first worked on the site, in 2001. We are fortunate to have a sketch by Mr. Warren White, and personal information from Mrs. Nilda Vasquez that there were around 150 stone cannon balls on the site, when they first got to it.

There is a video that shows a mailbox being used, and Mr. Warren White told me that IMDI dug a crater about 4 m deep on the west and north sides of the shipwreck. According to Mr. Warren White there was another portion of the hull underneath the shipwreck.
The list of artifacts in Mr. White’s map is quite interesting but it is not clear if there is a corresponding official list in IMDI’s salvage papers.

Mr. Warren White also informed me that there were another two guns lost somewhere in the bay, between the shipwreck site and Nombre De Dios’ pier.

After raising a number of artifacts the treasure hunting company IMDI produced a list of the artifacts raised, which was published in the government’s official journal, Gaceta Oficial, in January 2002 (Table 1).
Table 1

Inventario preliminar de los artefactos de Playa Damas acorde a la Gaceta Oficial, lunes 14 de enero de 2002, Nº 24,499:

A. **Armamento y accesorios de metal:**
   a. 3 cañones tipo verso
   b. 1 cañón tipo lombarda
   c. 1 cañón pequeño
   d. 2 morteros
   e. 1 servidor de bronce
   f. 5 servidores de verso
   g. 2 piezas de alambre

B. **Proyectiles:**
   a. 9 proyectiles esféricos de piedra

C. **Otros materiales líticos:**
   a. 1 piedra grande de lastre
   b. 252 piedras de lastre pequeñas y medianas
   c. 2 piedra de color blanquecino

D. **Vidrio:**
   a. 5 botellas de color verde oscuro (4 quebradas)
   b. 1 pedazo de botella color verde oscuro

E. **Otros recipientes:**
   a. 5 recipientes de tipo “caneca” de principios del Siglo XX

F. **Cerámica torneada:**
   a. 1148 fragmentos de botijas o peruleras

G. **Materiales afectados por concreciones de coral:**
   a. 275 elementos no identificados cubiertos de coral
   b. 5 segmentos de cadena de meta
   c. 1 concreción con tres servidores de metal adheridos a otros materiales
   d. 1 artefacto en forma de barril con otros elementos no identificados adheridos

H. **Fragmentos de Madera:**
   a. 130 fragmentos no identificados, de distintos tamaños

I. **Otros materiales orgánicos:**
   a. 3 huesos no identificados
These artifacts were stored at a warehouse built by IMDI in Portobelo, under custody of the Panamanian state, due to the lack of facilities at Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INAC) headquarters in Panama City.

In January 2002 Dr. Donald Keith, from Ships of Discovery, visited the site and shot some video footage of the shipwreck.

Later, in the fall of 2002, Dr. Roger Smith and Dr. Cheryl Ward also visited the site on behalf of the Florida Association of Volunteers in the Caribbean to evaluate the possibility of excavating this shipwreck with students from Florida State University. Both Dr. Smith and Dr. Ward took pictures and made sketches, which they were kind enough to share with me.

![Fig. 03 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Dr. Roger Smith (2002).]
Fig. 04 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Dr. Roger Smith (2002).
In March 2003 a team from the German media group *Spiegel* visited the site while filming a documentary and produced a both underwater pictures and video footage. The producer of this documentary – *Kolumbus’ letzte Reise*, Spiegel TV, 2004 – and produced a report which included a number of sketches by Mr. Karl Vandenhole.
Fig. 06 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Mr. Karl Vandenhole (2003).

Fig. 07 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Mr. Karl Vandenhole (2003).
Fig. 08 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Mr. Karl Vandenhole (2003).
Fig. 09 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Mr. Karl Vandenhole (2003).
In September 2003 I have visited the shipwreck site and IMDI’s warehouse, where the artifacts raised in 2001 were stored and made a sketch.
I was not authorized by IMDI’s Mrs. Nilda Vasquez to take pictures, but I have used the pictures taken by Dr. Cheryl Ward and Mr. Karl Vandenhole to try to map the artifacts stored at IMDI’s headquarters.

Fig. 12 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).

Fig. 13 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).
Fig. 14 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).

Fig. 15 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).
Fig. 16 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).

Fig. 17 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).
Fig. 18 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank – cannon balls (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).

Fig. 19 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank – timber (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).
Fig. 20 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank – Ceramic shards (Photo: Dr. Cheryl Ward, 2002).

Fig. 21 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank – Large chamber (Photo: Mr. Karl Vandenhole, 2003).
Fig. 22 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Mr. Karl Vandenhole, 2003).
Fig. 23 – Artifacts in IMDI’s tank (Photo: Mr. Karl Vandenhole, 2003).
In January 2004 I visited the shipwreck site once again with Mr. Jim Jobling from Texas A&M University’s Nautical Archaeology Program and made a sketch of the shipwreck site.

Fig. 24 – Sketch of the Playa Damas shipwreck site by Filipe Castro and Jim Jobling (2004).

The larger artifacts exposed were numbered and measured when possible (Table 2). Other, smaller artifacts were photographed. Later, at INAC’s headquarters I saw another two stone cannon balls, which I have numbered C001 and C002.

Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 and 02</td>
<td>Metal tubes, presumably a versos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 to 12</td>
<td>Versos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Metal tube, presumably a verso.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 and 15</td>
<td>Bombardetas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 and 17</td>
<td>Metal concretions, presumably bombardas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 20</td>
<td>Anchors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is impossible, at this stage to make sense of this collection and produce a full inventory of the artifacts. I have numbered the different collections from 1 to n, assigning the letters A to the IMDI collection, B to the artifacts that are said to have been kept at Mrs. Nilda Vasquez’ house, and C to the artifacts stored at INAC headquarters, in Panama City.

In early May 2005 Mr. Warren White visited the site and took pictures from the surface, which suggest that the shipwreck site was extensively worked by the salvage company. The guns and ballast photographed by Mr. White do not show any kind of tags, nor the site shows any positioning system in site, a puzzling situation, since the salvage company mentioned publicly the hiring of a Cuban archaeologist, Mr. Abraham Lopez, which was formerly employed by Motivation Inc., a treasure hunting company from Florida with whom IMDI had some sort of relations during the later part of 2003 and 2004.

It is worrisome to think that this site has been worked by a company in search of artifacts with market value for sale – as Mr. Gassan Salama told me he intended to do – because such a shallow shipwreck, located so close to a Spanish port, was certainly salvaged of all important values soon after the loss of the ship occurred. Spain had a very well organized corps that would recover all treasure situated within reach of its sailors and divers.
Fig. 26 – Sketch by Mr. Warren White in early May 2005.

Fig. 27 – The site in May 2005 (Photo: Warren White, 2005).
Fig. 28 – The site in May 2005 (Photo: Warren White, 2005).

Fig. 29 – The site in May 2005 (Photo: Warren White, 2005).
Fig. 30 – The site in May 2005 (Photo: Warren White, 2005).

Fig. 31 – The site in May 2005 (Photo: Warren White, 2005).
The salvage company IMDI has allegedly worked the site from late 2003 to 2005 and has certainly produced a site plan for INAC. We hope that the rumors of sale of artifacts – which are said to have been exported to Indiana – are unfounded.

Fig. 32 – Media clip mentioning rumors of possible exportation of artifacts to the USA (El Siglo, November 2004)

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