

CARGO OF THE *CENTAUR*

Captain Arnold Burrowes Kemball (1820–1908), Resident in the Persian Gulf (1852–1856)

to Arthur Malet (1806–1888), Chief Secretary to the Government of Bombay (1847–1854)

In early May 1852, the British merchant vessel CENTAUR wrecked off the coast of Oman. The ship's cargo had consisted of 1.600 casks of indigo, valued at more than £11.000.000 in today's money. When the ship foundered, members of the Beni Boo Ali tribe boarded the ship and began looting. Captain A.B. Kemball, British Resident at Bushehr, attempted to recover the stolen goods. He sent a steady stream of reports, including this one, to his superiors in India.

Bushehr, 17 August 1852

In reply to your instruction under date 17 July last ... on the subject of the wreck of the British merchant vessel CENTAUR near Ras al-Hadd.¹

I have the honor to state for the information of the Right Honourable the Government in Council that—as the only mode which appears practicable from this quarter of carrying into execution the order ... that my utmost endeavours should be directed to recover any portion of the plundered cargo of that ill-fated vessel which might come within my knowledge—I have addressed requisitions to the several chiefs on the Arabian coast, and have obtained orders of similar purport from Prince-Governor of the Fars² to the Persian authorities on the opposite shore, intimating to each the expectation of the British government that he will seize and detain for eventual restitution to its owners any consignments of indigo which may be brought this year to his territories and which (from the circumstances of this commodity being imported only to the Persian Gulf from Bengal, while the CENTAUR was freighted with the whole supply of the season) could be easily traced and identified as the property of the underwriters who insured her cargo from Calcutta.

These documents (being duplicates of the former, of which the originals have been already transmitted) I now forward to their destinations by the H.C. steam frigate QUEEN, accompanied with intimations to our Agents at Lengeh³ and Sharjah⁴ to be on the watch for importations of indigo within the limits of their surveillances respectively. And if any should be effected, to take steps through the medium of the local authorities to ensure their seizure.

In the previous passage of the QUEEN on her way to Basra,⁵ I had addressed an instruction to the above effect to the acting Agent at that port and, as this document embodies the substance of the communications subsequently made by me to the Governor of Fars and to the independent Arabian chiefs, I beg herewith to submit a copy for the information of the government.

Although these now-detailed steps have been taken with all the promptitude of which circumstances would admit, preceded by a requisition (as already reported) upon Sheikh-Sultan bin-Saqr,⁶ the Joasmee chief, for the restitution of a quantity of indigo which is alleged to have been moved from the wreck of the CENTAUR by a vessel belonging to Ras al-Khaimah on her return home from Zanzibar, I must still express my conviction that no material benefit may be expected to result from therefrom.

However conflicting otherwise the reports which have reached me from various quarters—upon none of which, perhaps, implicit reliance can be placed—all seem to combine to certify the facts that only a portion of the cargo

¹ Ras al-Hadd, the easternmost point of the Arabian peninsula

² Firouz Mirza Nosrat ed-Dowleh (1818–1886), grandson and nephew of successive Persian Shahs, governed the southern Persian province of Fars (1835–1836 and 1850–1853)

³ Lengeh, a Persian port 260 miles southeast of Bushehr which served as the primary port for Omani trade with Persia

⁴ Sharjah, capital of the Emirate of Sharjah, just northeast of Dubai on the Arabian peninsula

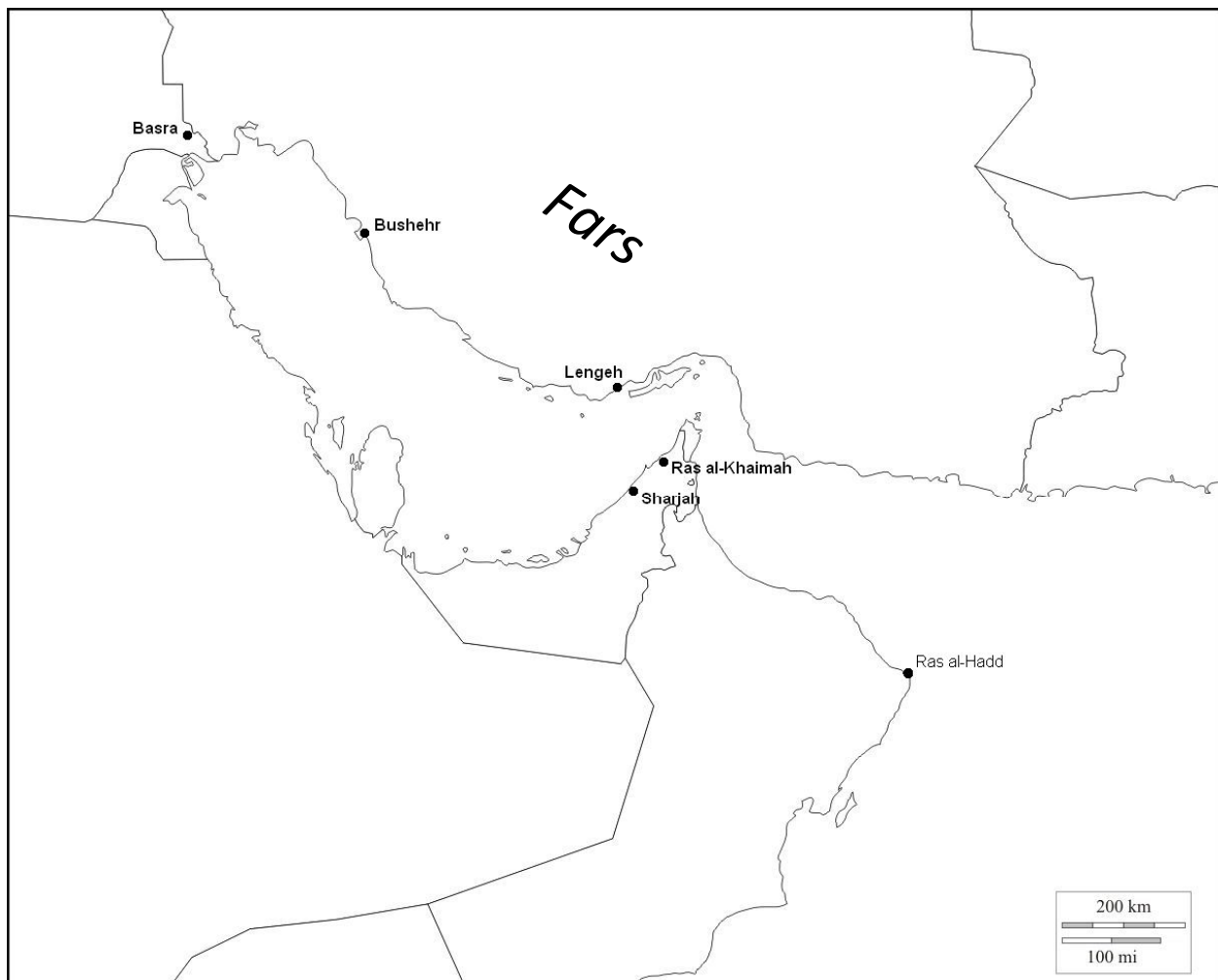
⁵ Basra, the only significant Ottoman port on the Red Sea [in modern Iraq], 220 miles northwest of Bushehr

⁶ Sheikh-Sultan bin-Saqr al-Qasimi, Emir of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah [both part of the modern United Arab Emirates]

of the CENTAUR (amounting to not more than one-half) was conveyed to the shore by the plunderers, in consequence of the vessel having gone to pieces on being burnt before the rest could be landed. Of such portion, the cotton piece goods and other general merchandise (being immediately apportioned to individuals) were so scattered and dissipated in the interior as to be no longer tangible. With regard to the indigo, Major Hamerton,¹ in his report to the government, intimates that the chests, on being landed, were broken up on the beach as being too heavy to be transported in the bulk by camels, and in such a state (in whatever way it may have been disposed of), its discovery or detection afterwards would seem to be morally impossible.

The same officer, however, in a private communication of a subsequent date having mentioned rumours of a quantity of this article having found its way to Ras al-Khaimah, Lengeh, and even to Basra, I venture to think I have adopted the measures best calculated to carry out the wishes of the government with a view to its recovery.

National Archives, IOR / R / 15 / 1 / 130, 136r°–138v°.



¹ Major Atkins Hamerton, British Consul at Zanzibar (1841–1857)