

The Playa Damas Shipwreck An Early Sixteenth-Century Shipwreck in Panama

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Iberian Ships

Located near the lovely little village of Nombre de Dios, on Panama's Caribbean coast, the Playa Damas shipwreck is yet another Spanish shipwreck threatened by treasure hunters. Sunk in very shallow water sometime during the first decades of the 16th century, it was probably initially salvaged soon after its loss, and the only artifacts left were the heavy iron guns and anchors that were probably stored in the holds and were quickly buried in the sand.

There are only approximately eighty known shipwrecks worldwide dating to the period of Iberia's maritime expansion in the early 16th-century. Only a handful of these shipwrecks has been excavated by archaeologists, however, and several of the shipwrecks apparently have been destroyed by treasure hunters in search of valuable artifacts to be sold at auction, or looted by sport divers before any archaeological study or evaluation.

The result is that nautical archaeologists know very little about 16th century Spanish ship building. There is almost no research or scientific study which provides information on the complex technology used to build the ships of Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Magellan. Where was the living space? How was the cargo hold designed? What was the versatility of the riggings and the strength and speed of the hull?

As we are writing these lines, the Playa Damas shipwreck risks being another sad story, another lost opportunity to look into the design and construction of these amazing machines, the space shuttles of their time as Karl Vandenhoe, a producer from Spiegel-TV, has called them. A proposed collaboration between a for-profit salvage company, the Government of Panama and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) is now possibly on the rocks and the investigation of the shipwreck and its artifacts the subject of court proceedings.

The shipwreck, discovered at Playa Damas near Nombre de Dios on the Caribbean coast of Panama in 1997 by amateur historian and diver Warren White, an American expatriate living in Panama, has involved the interests of several groups with overlapping interests. One of the first was IMDI, a salvage company formed by White with Nilda Vasquez of Panama and a group of investors and technical specialists, which removed the first artifacts from the site in 2001. Recovery of artifacts from the wreck by IMDI in 2001 was documented by a video now shown on the Archaeology Channel website. Subsequently, White became estranged from IMDI and has publicly charged that the shipwreck is threatened by IMDI plans to remove more artifacts from the ship. White stated that his biggest concerns for the site are "bureaucratic and governmental mis-management." In

interviews with Archaeological Legacy Institute Executive Director Richard Pettigrew in November 2003, Vasquez insisted that IMDI has a legal Panamanian government permit to conduct archaeological exploration of the wreck, but Carlos Fitzgerald, National Director of Cultural Heritage of the Panamanian National Institute of Culture (INAC), responded that IMDI's permit covered production of a video documentary but not archaeological excavation.

The Project

In July 2003 the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M University (INA) was invited by the media group Spiegel to consider the complete excavation of a shipwreck at Playa Damas, located near Nombre de Dios, on the Atlantic coast of Panama. The media had announced, based on some evidence not confirmed by archaeological analysis, that this shipwreck was thought to be Columbus' Vizcaina, a small 50 ton caravel lost near Portobelo, during his fourth voyage, in 1503. Almost every year somebody finds a piece of wood in the Caribbean and claims that it belonged to one of Columbus' ships; however, regardless of whether or not a ship of Columbus, the shipwreck was of interest, because ships dating from the 15th and 16th centuries are sufficiently rare to be of scientific interest and this one appeared from the evidence to be an early 16th-century Spanish nao or caravel.

The Spiegel group made an agreement with the government of Panama, through INAC, to fully fund the excavation and conservation of the Playa Damas shipwreck. The money was to be donated by several European sponsors who asked for nothing in return.

In July 2003 we went to Hamburg, Germany, to meet with the Spiegel team and discuss the feasibility of this project. Tests carried out by the Spiegel-TV team on materials from the shipwreck, removed with permission from the heritage office and in cooperation with the German government, had already yielded some incredible dates. A sample of the hull's timber – from an oak hull plank – was dated to the late 15th century.

We were very enthusiastic about the project. One of its most appealing features was the fact that Panama had just changed its law concerning the protection of its underwater cultural heritage, being the first country in the world to ratify the UNESCO Convention of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. The Convention had recently been voted by over one hundred countries and its adoption greatly strengthening the state's role in protecting and researching Panama's underwater cultural heritage. This made it a perfect opportunity to show the world that developing countries can be on the front line in fields like nautical archaeology.

The Spiegel group agreed to try to raise a sum of around US\$1,200,000 to pay for the excavation, conservation, publication, and possibly exhibition of the artifacts of this shipwreck. The details of the exhibition of the artifacts would have to be planned at a later date, depending upon the

amount of money raised by the Spiegel group, INA and Texas A&M University.

The Playa Damas Shipwreck Project

It seems that this shipwreck site was known for some time by the local fishermen, who dived regularly on it to catch lobsters. As noted above, it was found by an American diver, Mr. Warren White, in 1997. In the fall of 2001 Mr. Warren White visited this site with a treasure hunting company – *Investigaciones Maritimas del Istmo, SA. (IMDI)*, which used a “mailbox” to dig a trench, said to have been four meters deep, around the vessel. A large collection of artifacts was raised. Most were stored at a facility built at Portobelo by the treasure hunters, sometimes mixed with other artifacts from different provenances. A few artifacts may have been lost forever: a lead seal, numerous stone cannonballs, and two iron guns dropped in the bay of Nombre de Dios after being found too heavy to be raised into a truck on a nearby pier.

On September 2003 a team from Texas A&M’s INA visited the site and started the preparation of the logistics of the excavation of the Playa Damas shipwreck. The shipwreck lay at a depth of about 4.5 m (15 ft.) and the site consisted of a ballast pile with an area of about 60 m², roughly 10 x 6 meters, with three large anchors and an important number of iron guns, at least twelve. A portion of the hull was untouched, protected under the ballast pile. The planking was 6 cm thick, frames were 17 to 18 cm square in section, and stringers were 27 x 7 cm. All these scantlings, the number of guns, and the size of the anchors indicated a ship larger than the 50 ton Vizcaína.

A new sample of timber – this time from an oak futtock – was taken and dated. This sample produced a radiocarbon date of 1530-1550, compatible with the previous one, since hull planks were traditionally cut from much larger trees than futtocks, and the sample from the planking may have corresponded to an inner portion of the tree. Reutilization of timber cannot be excluded as another explanation for the early dating of these samples. Carbon dates from the lining of a shard of an olive jar also yielded compatible dates: 1450-1530.

In order to get the project moving it was thought best to start the treatment of the artifact collection in the USA, at Texas A&M University’s Conservation Research Laboratory (CRL), the Nautical Archaeology Program main conservation laboratory. There were enormous difficulties posed by the treatment of the large concretions containing a formidable gun collection, and these could be processed more effectively in Texas.

In September 2003, the week after returning from Panama, INA sent a copy of the protocol signed with the Jamaican government, as a possible model of cooperation, to INAC, for analysis. INA’s protocol with the Jamaican government had governed ten years of archaeological work in Port Royal, Jamaica. Under the terms of that agreement INA agreed to fully excavate the shipwreck, conserve and study the artifacts, and publish the shipwreck both in scholarly journals and popular magazines. The artifacts and records remained the property

of the Jamaican government. During the following months INA received an authorization to transport the artifacts raised by the salvage company IMDI to Texas A&M University, and an invitation to submit a proposal to excavate the shipwreck, which should be the first step to obtain the protocol between INA and INAC.

We had in mind establishing a network of interests in place, contacting the diving centers to bring their clients and see our work, the Nautical Archaeology Society to organize weekend courses on the site, the local tourism organization to prepare a series of panels with pictures of the ongoing projects, and even the treasure hunting company, to discuss the possibility of making replicas of the artifacts for sale, and recover some of the money that they had allegedly invested in the project when they were convinced that they would become millionaires selling the artifacts from Columbus’ Vizcaína.

Problems

Then the problems began. There apparently was a dispute about permits. Fitzgerald reported in November 2003 that IMDI has no legal right to explore the wreck or remove additional artifacts, claiming his understanding that IMDI never received a written permit to excavate or salvage the site, but instead was granted verbal permission to salvage individual artifacts that were thought to be threatened by theft and a permit to film. An apparent misunderstanding regarding the granted permission threatened a confrontation between IMDI and INAC.

Dr. Filipe Castro, INA project manager for the Playa Damas site, nevertheless submitted a formal proposal for collaboration to Ernesto Cordovez, head of IMDI and Nilda Vasquez’s son. The proposed plan called for a cooperative research program by which INA and IMDI both would have a role in the project. According to Vasquez, the last sticking point before agreement can be reached is IMDI’s insistence that artifacts not be allowed to leave Panama.

In November and December of 2003 INA learned that the IMDI had decided to salvage the Playa Damas shipwreck. After contacting several shareholders of IMDI, as well as its CEO, Cap. Ernesto Cordovez, INA believed it had an oral agreement of the larger shareholder of the company, Mr. Gassan Salama, who had been appointed governor of the Province of Colon in November of that year. On the telephone he agreed to turn over the artifacts salvaged in 2001 and promised to help INA overcome some bureaucratic problems that might arise regarding the temporary export of the artifacts to Texas, USA. It was agreed that the second half of January 2004 would be a good time to arrange for shipping the recovered material to CRL.

On December 2003, however, IMDI was reportedly visited by executives of a Florida company named Motivation Inc., based in Key West and connected to the Mel Fisher family. After this visit the larger shareholders of IMDI seem to have changed their minds and decided that they wanted to keep the right to sell the artifacts of the Playa Damas shipwreck and start the exploration of a number of shipwrecks for which they had secured salvage permits from the Ministry of Economy

before the publication of the underwater cultural heritage law, which was approved on May 28, 2003 and published in the *Gaceta Oficial* of Panama on April 2, 2003.

The Playa Damas shipwreck already had been declared a National Heritage site by the Panamanian government before Panama signed a UNESCO convention protecting historic shipwrecks. Panama passed legislation in August 2003, based on the UNESCO convention, declaring shipwrecks National Heritage sites.

There were legal problems related to these permits. The most important one was that they were published in the *Gaceta Oficial* on December 30, 2003, after the publication of Law 32, published on April 2 of 2003, and Law 58, published on August 12 of 2003, which forbid salvage and establish INAC as the sole authority competent to grant excavations. The second was that even considering that the permits were issued before the publication of law 32 and 58, although not published until December 2003, salvage works should have started within six months, and the license had therefore expired in September 2003. The third problem was that it was not clear whether the Playa Damas shipwreck actually was inside the areas published with the permits.

INA went to Panama in January of 2004 and met with IMDI CEO Cap. Ernesto Cordovez, his mother, Mrs. Nilda Vasquez, a former collaborator of INAC and sometimes said to be the architect of IMDI, and the major shareholders of the company, Mr. Gassan Salama and his lawyer, Mr. Sarturio Segarra. INA was told that IMDI would like very much to work in a joint venture, but opposed the export of the artifacts to Texas A&M University for conservation treatment. Furthermore, they would not yield the right to sell the artifacts of this or any other shipwreck they had planned to salvage. IMDI also announced its intention to hire Motivation Inc. to build and staff a laboratory and pay the investment, at least partially, with the sale of the treasure they planned on finding.

The example of the relations between INA and the Turkish government was explained in detail: after thirty years of continuous INA work in Turkey, the Bodrum Museum is one of the most visited museums in the whole Mediterranean basin. INA excavated shipwrecks had appeared in *National Geographic Magazine* thirteen times, the INA center in Bodrum received students and scholars from all over the world every year and housed an outstanding library, a laboratory, and a dormitory for students and scholars. A series of TV documentaries has been produced on INA projects in Turkey and elsewhere.

INA also tried to explain that it was not likely that there were any valuable artifacts in such close proximity to the coast – since the Spanish empire possessed an extremely competent salvage industry – and that it was a tragic mistake to destroy Panama’s cultural heritage, sell the valuable artifacts at auction, and let the wreck be poorly researched and published. The media reported that the wreck contained emeralds and gold.

Political Implications

That year IMDI hired a Cuban archaeologist, Mr. Abraham Lopez, formerly employed by Motivation Inc., and started the salvage works on the site early in 2005.

It is not known how disturbed the shipwreck site has been, nor what kind of recording was done by IMDI’s team. No report has been released and INA was asked not to make a planned inspection dive early in 2005, after the salvage works were stopped by a court injunction.

In the meantime the *New World Legacy*, a ship belonging to a treasure hunting company named Admiralty Corporation, was impounded in Panama and found to carry archaeological artifacts, allegedly recovered from a shipwreck in Honduras. The *New World Legacy* had been impounded before in Panama, in 2000, then carrying a number of archaeological artifacts said to have been recovered from several areas around Portobelo.

The Panamanian government has shown signs of support for the archaeological community and the promotion of long term archaeology projects instead of short term treasure hunting ventures.

Texas A&M University’s INA is still trying to get a permit to excavate and study whatever is left of this shipwreck.

As INA’s founder, George Bass, says, Sweden’s main tourist attraction is the Vasa Museum, which brings many millions of dollars in net revenues every year, employs lots of people and gives Sweden an amazing international visibility. The Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, created by the INA, is now the most visited archaeological museum in Turkey, takes in about \$2.5 million a year in ticket sales alone, to which one must add souvenirs, extra meals eaten in restaurants, taxis, hotels, plane fares, etc. Only the future will say whether the contending parties and the overlapping interests can reach an agreement so that Playa Damas will have a similar happy end.

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