



# Playa Damas Project

February 2004

## Introduction

In July 2003 I was invited by the Panamanian Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INAC) and the media group *Spiegel* to consider the complete excavation of the shipwreck at Playa Damas, located near Nombre de Dios, on the Atlantic coast of Panama. In news media accounts the shipwreck has been thought to be Columbus' *Vizcaína*, a small 50 ton caravel lost near Nombre de Dios during his fourth voyage, in 1503. This is not confirmed.

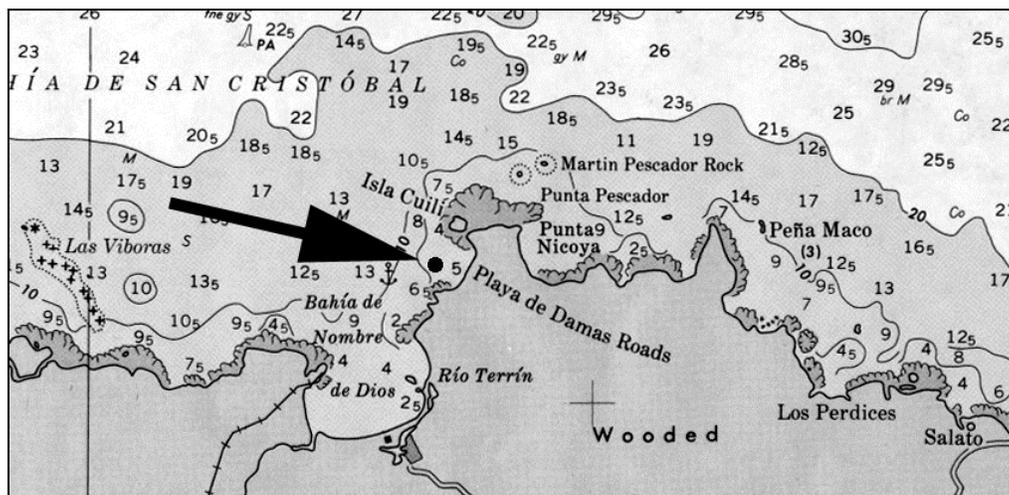


Fig. 1 – Location of the Playa Damas Shipwreck.

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

In July 2003, representing the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA), I went to Hamburg, Germany, to meet with the *Spiegel* team and Dr. Carlos Fitzgerald, the Director Nacional del Patrimonio Histórico. The *Spiegel-TV* team had already done some tests on materials from the shipwreck, and found it to be incredibly old. A sample of the hull's timber – from an oak hull plank – was dated to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Panama had just changed its law concerning the protection of its underwater cultural heritage, and had transposed the UNESCO Convention of the underwater cultural heritage to its national juridical order. This makes it a perfect opportunity to show the world that developing countries can be on the front line in fields like nautical archaeology.

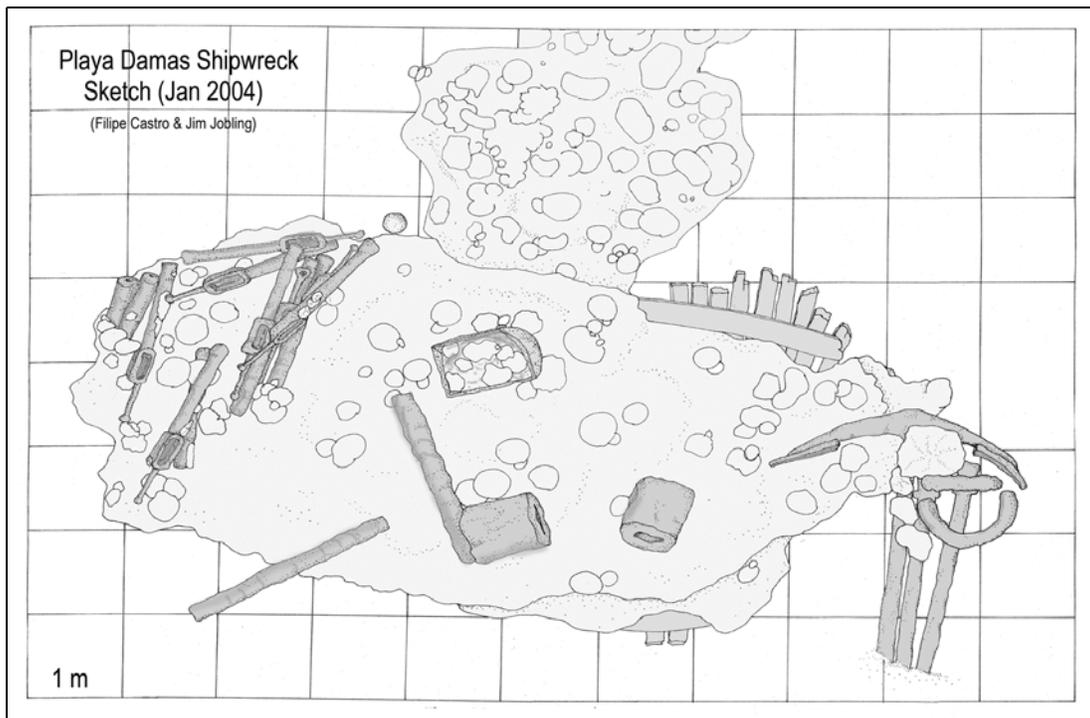
The *Spiegel* group agreed to try to raise a sum of around 1,200,000 dollars to pay for the excavation, conservation, publication, and possibly exhibition of the artifacts of this shipwreck. The details of the exhibition of the artifacts would have to be planned at a later date, depending upon the amount of money raised by the *Spiegel* group, INA and Texas A&M University.

## The Shipwreck Site

On September 2003 I visited the site with Dr. Donny Hamilton, President of INA 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 consists of a ballast pile with an area of about 60 m<sup>2</sup>, roughly 10 by 6 meters, with three large anchors and an important number of iron guns, at least 12.



**Fig. 2 – The Playa Damas shipwreck (photo: Karl Vandenhole, *Spiegel-TV*)**



**Fig. 3 – The Playa Damas shipwreck (Sketch: Filipe Castro)**

An extensive portion of the hull lies protected under the ballast pile. The planking is 6 cm thick, frames are 17 to 18 cm square in section, and stringers are 27 x 7 cm. All these scantlings, the number of guns, and the size of the anchors indicate a ship larger than the 50 ton *Vizcaina*.

In order to verify the early 16<sup>th</sup>-Century date obtained by *Spiegel* another sample of timber – this time from an oak futtock – was taken and dated. This sample produced a radiocarbon date of 1530-1550. This date is 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. The two wooden sample dates were from two different laboratories and the early dates were confirmed. We are still waiting for the results of the reanalysis of the futtock sample. Carbon dates from the lining of a shard of an olive jar also yielded compatible dates: 1450-1530.

## History of the Shipwreck Site

It seems that this shipwreck site was known for some time by the local fishermen, who dived regularly on it to catch lobsters. It was shown to an American treasure hunter, Warren White, in 1997, by local fishermen. 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 four meters deep around the vessel, and raised a small collection of artifacts. Two guns were dropped in the bay of Nombre de Dios, near the pier, and it is not known if they have been recovered.

After the announcement by Reuters and Associated Press of a possible trove of artifacts from a supposed Columbus’ shipwreck, the Playa Damas site was visited by several archaeologists. Dr. Don Keith, from Ships of Discovery visited the site in January 2002 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.

The artifacts were stored at a warehouse built by IMDI in Portobelo, under custody of the Panamanian state, due to the lack of facilities at INAC headquarters in Panama City.



**Fig. 4 – Artifacts at IMDI facilities, Portobelo (Photo: Karl Vandenhole, *Spiegel-TV*).**

### Playa Damas Shipwreck Project

It was agreed that INA would propose a protocol of cooperation to be signed by the government of Panama and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, following the terms INA had arranged with the Jamaican government, which governed the 10 years of archaeological work in Port Royal. The INA would fully excavate the shipwreck, conserve and study the artifacts, and publish the shipwreck both in scholarly journals and popular magazines.

The *Spiegel* group will retain the rights to an article in the *Der Spiegel* magazine, to produce a documentary to be broadcast in all European countries and perhaps in Canada, and to publish a “coffee table book”.

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 are enormous difficulties posed by the treatment of the large concretions containing a formidable gun collection, and they can be processed more effectively in Texas. For instance, the X-ray machine necessary to X-ray the large concretions alone costs almost half a million dollars. This would allow us to start the conservation immediately and give us the opportunity to start on the conservation of the more diagnostic artifacts prior to the start of the excavation.

The advantages of this solution are nevertheless relevant for Panama because it was agreed to create grants to bring Latin American students to Texas A&M University, to study conservation and start a sustainable program of conservation of waterlogged artifacts in Panama. In the future, after training in Texas, Panamanian staff could then establish a laboratory in Panama. Excavation should not start until conservation facilities were installed and working. Thus, the CRL solution would allow us to start the excavation immediately.

The advantages of cooperation with INA and *Spiegel* group are considerable. All the material gets conserved and the visibility provided by the *Spiegel* magazine and television coverage is estimated to be the equivalent of many millions of dollars in publicity for Panama.

In September 2003, the week after returning from Panama, I sent a copy of the protocol between INA and the Jamaican government to INAC for analysis. 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.

However, in November and December of 2003 I learned that IMDI was still planning to salvage the Playa Damas shipwreck and had decided not to yield the artifacts raised in 2001 to the Panamanian government. After contacting several shareholders of IMDI, as well as its CEO, Cap. Ernesto Cordovez, I obtained the agreement of the larger

shareholder of the company, Mr. Gassan Salama, who was appointed governor of the Province of Colon in November of that year.

On the telephone he agreed to turn over the artifacts and promised to help me overcome some bureaucratic problems that might arise regarding the temporary export of the artifacts to Texas, USA. We agreed that the second half of January 2004 would be a good time to arrange for shipping the recovered material to CRL.

In December IMDI was visited by Mr. Kim Fisher and Mr. Pat Cline – son and son-in-law of the renowned treasure hunter Mel Fisher – executives of the company Motivation Inc., based in Key West, Florida, who had been invited to work in Panama by the company. After their business contacts with Motivation Inc. the larger shareholders of IMDI – Mr. Gassan Salama, Mr. Sarturio Segarra and Cap. Ernesto Cordovez – decided that they want to keep the right to sell the artifacts 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.

According to Dr. Fitzgerald there are legal problems related to these permits: the most important one is 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; second, even considering that these 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, having expired in September 2003; and third it is not clear whether the Playa Damas shipwreck falls inside the areas of the permits.

I went to Panama in January of 2004 and met with IMDI CEO Cap. Ernesto Cordovez, the major shareholders of the company, Mr. Gassan Salama and his lawyer, Mr. Sarturio Segarra, and the mother of Cap. Ernesto Cordovez, D. Nilda Vasquez, who started this project and is a decisive person in its future development. I was told that IMDI would like very much to work with INA, but opposed the export of the artifacts to

Texas A&M University for conservation treatment and would not yield the right to sell the artifacts of this or any other shipwreck they plan 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 plan to find.

I tried to explain the ruinous business of investing in treasure hunting and the benefits of starting a long term, sustained cooperation between Texas A&M University and the state of Panama and gave the example of the relations between INA and the Turkish government. After thirty years of continuous work Bodrum is one of the most visited museums in the whole Mediterranean basin. Turkey has appeared on *National Geographic Magazine* 13 times, the INA center in Bodrum receives students and scholars from all over the world every year and houses an outstanding library, a laboratory, and a dormitory for students and scholars. A series of TV documentaries have been produced on INA projects in Turkey and Port Royal, Jamaica.

I tried to explain that it is not likely that there are any treasures in such close proximity to the coast – since the Spanish empire possessed an extremely competent salvage industry – and that it is a tragic mistake to destroy Panama’s cultural heritage, sell the valuable artifacts at auction, and let the wreck be poorly researched and published. We cannot afford to have a shipwreck as significant as the Playa Damas wreck suffer this fate.

As I am writing this report the artifacts of the 1622 Dry Tortugas shipwreck – salvaged by the treasure hunting company Seahawk and infamous for a well-advertised law inquiry carried out by the Securities Exchange Commission in the 1980s – are being auctioned on the internet – on *EBay* – and will be lost forever, before having been studied or published.

Treasure hunters have destroyed all the shipwrecks they have salvaged. In the last 60 years a long list of shipwrecks has been destroyed forever, their artifacts sold before being studied or published, many times before being conserved properly. We know more about the Roman and the Viking ships than we know about the Iberian ships of discovery, commerce and exploration. And yet these were the very vehicles of the age of the European expansion, perhaps the most complex machines built by the men of their time.

During my staying in Panama I was told that governor Gassan Salama has enough political power to stop INAC from inviting INA to excavate the shipwreck of Playa Damas, and perhaps even get Dr. Fitzgerald fired. But I have met Mr. Salama and I know that he is a well meaning person, and as Governor of the Province of Colon he wants the best for his people. I am convinced that we can reach an agreement and convince him to stop treasure hunting in Panama and start a long-term scholarly program of study, conservation, and publication of his country's underwater cultural heritage.

Filipe Castro, Ph.D.