

# Continuing the Work: The Group for the Study of Iberian Seafaring

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When I came to Texas A&M University in 1998, I had it in mind to write a master's thesis on the reconstruction of the hull of a Portuguese Indiaman recently excavated in Portugal, and then to go home.

Seven years later I am still here, now proudly as a part of the Nautical Archaeology Program faculty, and I am still studying the ships of the Iberian Peninsula. There is so much to uncover about these ugly and, reportedly, smelly vessels! Without decorations or other particular aesthetic arrangements these vessels were, nevertheless, symbols of power and commanded respect around the world. They carried a multitude of sailors, soldiers, merchants, priests, and adventurers around the seven seas; all this in an age when there were no means of communication and each one of these ships had to be an autonomous floating city for up to eight months at a time.

We do not know much about the way these ships were conceived, designed, built, sailed, or inhabited. We do not know much about their performance. Nor do we know much about these ships as sailing machines, war vessels, living spaces, or conveyors of peoples' ambitions, dreams, and ideas.

The task of understanding such a diverse number of ships and boats, all solutions for particular problems at a particular time, is daunting. It cannot be tackled by any scholar alone; not in one life time. That is why I have organized an informal group dedicated to the study of Iberian seafaring primarily in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The student response was great. Their enthusiasm was contagious, their competence outstanding, and their focus reassuring for any coordinator of such a group.

We setup weekly meetings to define strategies and list needs, in terms of research—for instance, bibliographical reviews of each subject—and in terms of resources: how much research we must do, where, for how long, and at what cost. My second ongoing effort was to identify professional niches for these students, keeping in mind that they were going to graduate and would need to get jobs, and would hopefully continue their research in this and related subjects.

Last year I thought that it was time to make sense of all this work and organize a symposium at the 2006 Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Meeting—which was held in Sacramento, California, from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of January—where all of these students could present their research and discuss it with their peers.

The symposium was approved and, even better, I received an offer to publish the proceedings from Dr. Rui Loureiro, on behalf of the municipality of Lagos. Dr. Loureiro is a Portuguese historian that, among many other things, is coordinating an incredible project in Lagos—the city where Henry the Navigator lived and worked—to study and divulge the Portuguese discoveries. He is starting a project to assess and inventory the city's nautical and underwater cultural heritage, in which the Institute of Nautical Archaeology and the Nautical Archaeology Program will play an important role.

The Society for Historical Archaeology meeting's theme this year was "Life on the Edge", and Dr. Jerome Hall, former INA president and Underwater Program Chair of this SHA's annual meeting, suggested that our symposium be called "The Edge of Empire: Iberian Ships" (Fig. 1).

This event was fully funded with two grants, one from the Luso-American Foundation and another from Dr. Peter Amaral, which allowed all students to present their research, meet people, network, and get acquainted with their



Fig. 1 *The Team at SHA. From left to right: Carlos Monroy, Pearce Creasman, Blanca Rodriguez, Alez Hazlett, George Schwarz, Tiago Fraga, Filipe Castro, Brad Coombes, Katie Custer, Erika Laanela. Not pictured: Gustavo Garcia.*

peer's ongoing research. In fact, these meetings offer invaluable opportunities for students to present their research, gather comments and opinions about it, network, make friendships, combine summer projects, exchange ideas, discuss practices, and, not less importantly, gossip about their universities' politics and their teachers and advisors.

Our presentations were scheduled for Friday morning, leaving the students free for the Friday afternoon and Saturday sessions and, as I learned in shock, to party hard in the traditional Friday evening Annual Banquet and Awards Ceremony!

When I was asked to change the time of the symposium at the SHA 2006 Annual Meeting, in order to accommodate a few urgent last minute schedule changes, I felt a little bit guilty about ruining my students' deserved party schedule. I was also told that very few of our colleagues would be brave enough to try to attend any symposium on the Saturday morning after the great SHA reception. I knew that all those interested in Iberian Ships would come, and I promptly agreed with the change in the schedule. I was not wrong.

The symposium started right on time and all Texas A&M University students presented their research with impeccable professionalism, keeping an exciting rhythm and faultless timing. I could not be prouder, or happier. It was an enormous pleasure to see how much work these students have done, how focused they are in their research, and how fast they are moving towards completion.

I must say that this is not the first time that students at Texas A&M University have worked on Iberian seafaring! Almost 30 years ago Robin Piercy started the excavation of a late 17<sup>th</sup>-century Portuguese frigate at Mombassa, the *Santo António de Tana*, lost in 1697 (Fig. 2).

Then, in the early 1980s, a group of students of the Nautical Archaeology Program started a number of projects related to Iberian ships (Fig. 3). In



Fig. 2. Robin Piercy during the excavation of the Mombassa Shipwreck. Photo: INA Archives

1986 they formalized their joint work in a project named EXPLADISC—an acronym for Exploration and Discovery—and developed a series of coherent projects aiming at the study of the technology of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries that led the Europeans into the New World (see the INA Newsletter 13.1).

The many projects carried out by this group included surveying St. Anne's Bay in Jamaica and the mouth of Belén River, in Panama, in search of Columbus ships; excavating two early 16<sup>th</sup>-century shipwrecks—the Highborn Cay Shipwreck, in the Bahamas, and the Molasses Reef Shipwreck, in the Turks and Caicos Islands; and surveying a number of other shipwrecks in the Caribbean Sea.

The quantity and quality of the information gathered, organized, and produced by the first Nautical Archaeology Program group of students, in the 1980s, has been the basis for all the research carried out now by this second group of students twenty years later, and I know that their work will also be the basis of other students to come, always improving our knowledge of this amazing period of discoveries and its sailing ships.

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Fig. 3. The Exploration and Discovery group. From left to right: Donald H. Keith, Denise Lakey, Joe Simmons, Mark Meyers, Bill Lamb, Roni Polk, Harding Polk, Tom Oertling, Roger C. Smith, and KC Smith. Photo: KC Smith

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