This shipwreck was found in April 1995, at a depth of around 6.5 m, during the excavation for a new subway station near downtown Lisbon, in Portugal. It has been dated to around 1500, when the city’s waterfront was 120 m away from the place where it was found. The orientation of a breast hook and the position of part of a whiststaff suggest that the ship’s bow pointed north, in the direction of the 16th century sandy beach. Fragments of 37 frames were preserved over an area 24 m long and almost 5 m wide. Hull and ceiling planking were preserved along with two stringers, one apron, part of the keelson, one breast hook, one orlop beam, one maststep buttress, one fragment of a stanchion, and part of a whiststaff (fig. 1).

The excavation was entrusted to Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico (IPPAR) archaeologist Paulo Jorge Rodrigues. The preliminary results of his project were presented at a 1998 conference on Iberian ships held in Lisbon. Two Texas A&M University field schools organized in Lisbon in the summers of 2001 and 2002 resulted in the complete recording of the ship’s floor timbers at 1:1 and 1:10 scales. In 2002 Paulo Jorge Rodrigues finished his maîtrise at Sorbonne I University under the supervision of Dr. Eric Rieth. The Texas A&M field schools in Lisbon were halted that year, and Paulo Rodrigues’ poor health and his eventual leave from Instituto Português de Arqueologia (IPA, the institution entrusted with the conservation and curation of the ship’s hull remains), slowed the project until it stopped with Paulo’s untimely death in November 2008. In March 2010 CMAC obtained permission to continue Rodrigues’ work and honor his memory by publishing the Cais do Sodré shipwreck. The first phase of CMAC’s research project consisted of organizing, analyzing and publishing the primary data, while the second phase proposes an interpretation of the original research (fig. 2).

This shipwreck is especially interesting because of the construction marks inscribed on its floor timbers. As it happens with other Portuguese shipwrecks from this period – namely Aveiro A, the Pepper Wreck and Arade 1 – the central floor timbers of the Cais do Sodré shipwreck have a number of special characteristics and construction marks engraved that suggest the application of a well-known construction method, described in contemporary texts. These characteristics and marks consisted of:

Two spikes inserted in recesses cut on the aft face of the forward timbers, and fore face of the aft timbers, connecting them to the keel;
Dovetail scarves and three iron spikes in the connections of the floor timbers with the first futtocks;
A number expressed in Roman numerals, from “I” to “XVIII” in sequence, starting from a central, now missing master frame whose number would be “0”;

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Figure 1: Location. Drawing: F. Castro – pictures from Google Maps.

Figure 4: Site plan based on 2010 excavation.
Two vertical lines marking the foot of the floor timber, where it sits on the keel; One or two horizontal lines that may have marked the base of the mold from which all floor timbers seem to have been cut; and One or two vertical marks near the turn of the bilge arc, to the outside of the horizontal line, whose significance is not clear at this point. Fore and aft of the 37 central frames, ―V‖ and ―Y-shaped‖ floor timbers, named enchimentos in Portuguese, were fastened to the keel with a single iron spike, were not numbered, and did not have the horizontal and vertical marks. However, enchimentos numbers 80, 82, 83, 85, 150 and 152 showed evidence of vestigial diagonal lines that may be related to the construction process. Timbers C78 and C81 had one arm scarfed into their lower section, presumably for lack of suitable ―Y-shaped‖ timbers. Since archaeologists were not present at the time of the wreck’s discovery, and the bulldozer operator did not immediately realize the importance of this find, a number of central frames were destroyed. Fastening holes on the keel indicate these positions and permitted a reconstruction of the total number of frames, as well as the determination of the in room and space. The study of the Cais do Sodré hull and its construction marks has just begun and at this time looks rather puzzling to us (fig. 3). The scantlings seem light for an oceangoing ship. With over 24 m of keel length, the absence of keel scarfs has no known parallels in this type of ship; the pronounced outward kinks at the bow and stern frames make it difficult to imagine the depth of hold; and the presence of a whiststaff suggests a ship with more than one deck. It is difficult to theorize about the site formation process because the upper portion of the frames and planking were destroyed by the construction equipment, as well as the mast step arrangement and whatever bulkheads or other structures remained. The lack of a substantial amount of ballast suggests that it was a derelict, but the depth at which it was abandoned seems too far away from the low-tide beach line. We have plotted two of the lines defined by the marks on the frames, and got a fair curve, but no clear units of contemporary measure (neither dedos, palmos de vara or de goa, nor codos castellanos or cantabricos) seem to fit the model. Further study may allow us to extract more information from this shipwreck.
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It is difficult to theorize about the site formation process because the upper portion of the frames and planking were destroyed by the construction equipment, as well as the mast step arrangement and whatever bulkheads or other structures remained. The lack of a substantial amount of ballast suggests that it was a derelict, but the depth at which it was abandoned seems too far away from the low-tide beach line. We have plotted two of the lines defined by the marks on the frames, and got a fair curve, but no clear units of contemporary measure (neither dedos, palmos de vara or de goa, nor codos castellanos or cantabricos) seem to fit the model. Further study may allow us to extract more information from this shipwreck.

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