

The Sound of Campeche: A Place Full of History

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Background

During the 16th-, 17th- and 18th-centuries, the port of San Francisco de Campeche was a constant target of pirates, corsairs and buccaneers. Legendary characters such as Francis Drake, Lorencillo, Grammont or even Mary Read, one of the few women who practiced piracy, were responsible for the sinking of several ships in the area known as the Sound of Campeche, in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, there were storms, reefs and hurricanes that contributed as well to the wreck of many European ships. Thus, the Sound of Campeche became an important cemetery of vessels, many of which have survived along the centuries.

The Sound of Campeche encloses the coastal waters of the states of Yucatan and Campeche, in the Southeast part of the Mexican Republic. In 1997, during the first field season of a project undertaken by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) to search for the remains of the ships lost by the New Spain Fleet in 1631 due to a storm in the Gulf of Mexico, 24 sites were located in this area. The following year, during the second field season, this time using remote sensing systems, more than 70 magnetic anomalies were detected; most of them proved to contain cultural vestiges.

These findings included shipwrecks as well as isolated elements, all products of maritime activities that took place between the 16th-century and the present. All this led to the creation of a project entitled "Inventory and Diagnosis of Submerged Cultural Resources in the Gulf of Mexico." More findings have been made during the sea campaigns

of 2003, 2004 and 2005. All findings have been recorded through drawing, photography and video, *in situ* preservation has been applied, and very few recoveries have taken place.

Parallel to the offshore surveys, another group of INAH archaeologists has been working on coastal waters in the state of Campeche with the support of local institutions and individuals.

Many of these sites are at risk from human interference due mainly to two factors: the great distance that makes the task of surveillance difficult or, on the contrary, because of their proximity to the coast which makes access easy. Evidence of looting, including the use of dynamite, was noticed in some of the offshore sites. It is known that sport divers and fishermen have extracted mostly artillery pieces, anchors and iron shots to sell them as archaeological treasures or as well as scrap metal.

Main Findings

The information gathered *in situ* and the analysis of the extracted pieces allowed preliminary results to be obtained regarding chronology, nationality, state of preservation and importance of some of the sites.

One of the main findings is a 16th-century shipwreck, most probably Spanish. This site was located in an area where shallow waters, abundance of corals and the force of the waves make navigation a difficult task. Probably in this area many ships found their end during the exploration, discovery and conquest epochs. Assorted pieces of artillery and anchors typical from the 16th-century were found lying two and three meters deep on the reef formed by the South and East Triángulos keys (Moya, 2003). There are many questions still without an answer regarding this maritime accident.

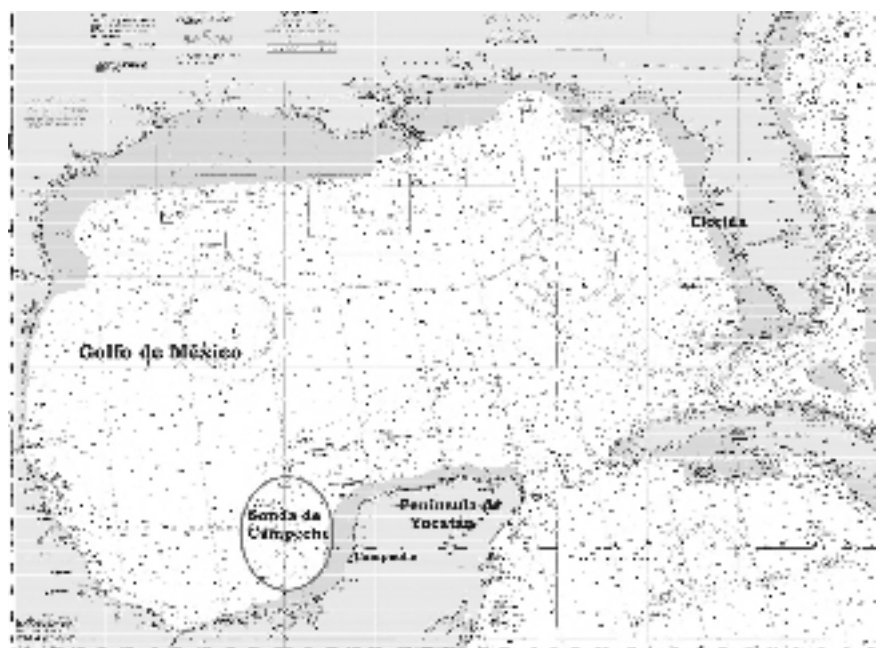


Figure 1: The Sound of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico has been a witness of five centuries of navigation (INAH/SAS)



Figure 2: Part of the 40 lead ingot collection recovered in 1998 at the Sound of Campeche (INAH/SAS)



Figure 3: Archaeologist Donald H. Keith facilitating a training course for members and collaborators of INAH's projects in Campeche (INAH/SAS)

However, the logistics involved, the dangerous characteristics of the zone, the climatic conditions and financial and time obstacles have not allowed a second visit to this site.

Other important discoveries are two shipwrecks dating from the second half of the 18th-century. Both are probably British, one of them apparently corresponding to the *Meleager*. This site was named Cañón de Cañones, due to the geographical features of its location — inside a “canyon” — and the amount of cannons found there. The second site was named Don Pancho, honoring the local fisherman who acted as our guide and who played a vital role in its location. Here, artillery pieces, navigation instruments, lead bullets, iron shots, and lead ingots were found.

Regarding these ingots, during the 1997 works twenty of them were found; one was recovered as a diagnosis element. When returning to the site in 1998, one ingot was missing and the place showed traces of looting. To manage this threat, it was decided to extract all the pieces, which resulted in a collection of 40 ingots, most of them oval shaped while others are rectangular, semi-triangular or have an irregular shape. The average weight of each piece runs between 49 and 79.5 kilos. 32 show marks, and of those 15 also have holes. Until now, no relationship has been established according to shapes, marks or holes. In the past, when carried in a ship,

lead ingots had a triple use: 1) as ballast to stabilize the ship 2) as merchandise that could be sold or exchanged in any port and 3) as metal that could be melted and transformed into bullets or pieces to repair the ship (Galindo 2003). Apparently, this is the largest lead ingot collection ever recovered in the Western Hemisphere.

An Enriching Experience

The experience in Campeche has proved to be quite positive in many aspects. A campaign to raise consciousness among the local community has been taking place over the last three years, involving mainly fishermen in the protection of the coastal sites. In fact, many of them have taken us directly to sites discovered by them, or have informed INAH about the location of cultural remains. Each field season, there are more fishermen and more local people willing to share with us the location of new sites and to collaborate in their protection and in the inventory project.

As part of this consciousness campaign, lectures on the importance of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage have been given in diverse forums. Articles and interviews often appear in the local press, radio and TV.

Solid links have been established with local and regional authorities and civilian, academic and military institutions, while collaboration with international institutions and colleagues has played a vital role. In short, the work in the Sound of Campeche has resulted in an excellent training field not only for the members of INAH's projects, but also for collaborators as students, divers, fishermen and even a local policeman.

This has paved the way to begin a permanent underwater archaeology program in Campeche and to sign a collaboration agreement with the state university in order to start working on the treatment of archaeological materials recovered from the sea, with the intention of eventually creating a full laboratory.

At the same time, plans have begun to transform some underwater sites into museums along the coastal waters. These will be opened to the public, under the surveillance of an official guide, as a recreational and educational visit. It is anticipated that this will increase the interest of the local community and the visitors in the submerged cultural patrimony and its preservation.

Legal Aspect

The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) was founded in 1939 as the official agency to protect, research and preserve archaeological sites in the Mexican Republic. Although Mexico has signed and ratified several international treaties related to the protection of the cultural patrimony, it has not created a specific law regarding the underwater cultural heritage. In the last thirty years, INAH has applied the *Ley Federal sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas* (Federal Law on Archaeological,

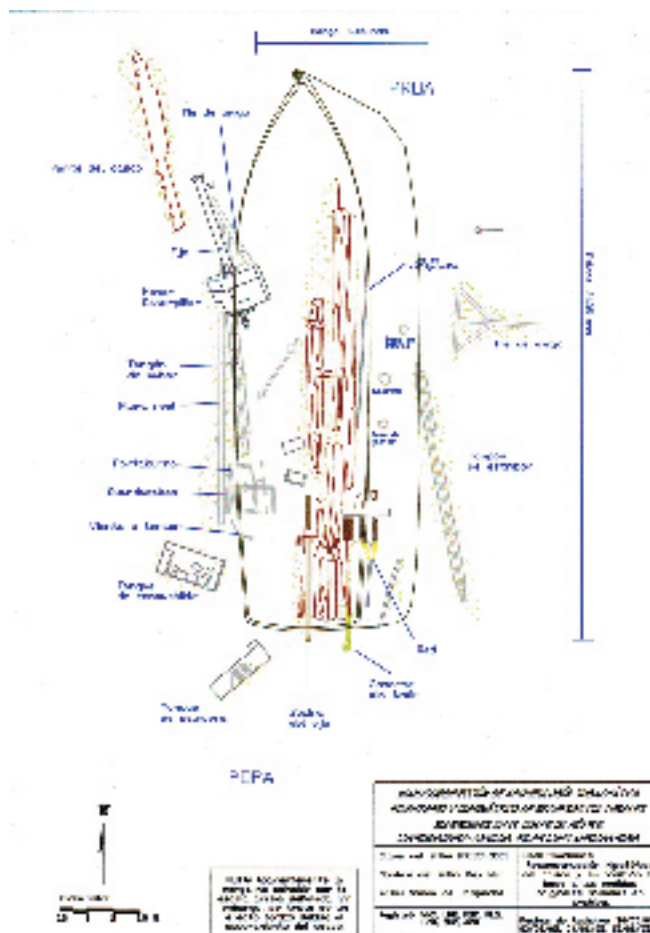


Figure 5: Reconstruction of a modern shipwreck located at the coastal waters of Campeche, based on information gathered in situ and completed by data found at a local archive (INAH/SAS)

Artistic and Historical Monuments and Zones) (INAH 1972) and its *Disposiciones Reglamentarias para la Investigación Arqueológica en México* (Regulations for Archaeological Research in Mexico) (INAH 1974), in the struggle to prevent looting and damage to the national patrimony including the underwater cultural vestiges.

Within INAH there is a Consejo de Arqueología (Council of Archaeology), constituted by eleven members of different specialties and institutions, in charge of evaluating and approving or rejecting any archaeological project to be fulfilled in Mexican territory, on ground or underwater, and based on the Reglamento del Consejo de Arqueología (Norms of the Council of Archaeology) (INAH 1990). Every year, this Council receives applications of treasure hunters groups trying to get permits to exploit shipwrecks, many of which are located in the Sound of Campeche. In fact, several of these applications are related to Nuestra Señora del Juncal, one of the flagships of the 1631 New Spain Fleet currently under study by INAH's Vice-Directorate on Underwater

Archaeology. None of these applications have succeeded; nevertheless, minor looting exists due mainly to the lack of consciousness of some sport divers and fishermen who are not aware of the importance and cultural value of this legacy.

Mexico's position regarding the protection of its cultural patrimony has been internationally recognized. This position was defended by the Mexican delegation during the experts meetings to elaborate the text of UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. Mexico was one of the countries that voted in favor of the Convention in November 2001, and is currently working in the process of its ratification. The above-mentioned federal law and regulations have served to stop treasure hunters and commercial exploitation. However, once the UNESCO Convention becomes a legal instrument, it will do even more. The Convention includes norms for responsible archaeological work and ongoing management of underwater cultural heritage. Ratification will prove of great value not only for Mexico, but for all nations who care for their history.

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