

INAH identifies the first wreck of a ship trading to trade Mayans slaves in Mexican waters

*** Discovered in Sisal, Yucatan, the shipwreck of the steam “La Unión” was defined after three years of research in the field and archives of Mexico, Cuba, and Spain

*** Between 1855 and 1861, it carried to Cuba a monthly average of 25 and 30 Mayans, captured in war or deceived with false documents

Sisal, Yuc.- Two nautical miles (3.7 km) from this port, a little-known story resurfaces thanks to the work of experts from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), whom as a result of a triennium of research have identified the steamer “La Unión”, the first ship, to date known, which was used for the Mayan slave trade.

For INAH’s Vice Directorate of Underwater Archeology (SAS) researchers, the discovery has a particular relevance since, beyond the complexity of identifying a wreck 'with first and last name', in this case it speaks of an ominous past for Mexico, one that must be recognized and studied according to its context and time.

This acquires a greater sense when evoking that, although slavery was prohibited since the country’s Independence, and despite the fact that on May 6th, 1861, President Benito Juárez issued a statement to prevent the forced extraction of any Mayan individual, the fire that in September 19th of that same year caused the sinking of the steamer on its way to Cuba, shows that slavery continued without obeying any law.

Within the framework of the “Contigo en la Distancia” program of the Ministry of Culture, underwater archaeologist Helena Barba Meinecke, head of SAS’s Yucatan Peninsula office, comments that this research, developed with the support of anthropologist Eduardo Lopez Calzada, director of INAH’s Yucatan Center, and Roberto Junco, Vice-director of Underwater



Archaeology, has international relevance since this is the first time that a vessel that trafficked Mayan people is documented.

In recent years, she adds, other slave wrecks have been discovered: the “Clotilda” and “Henrietta Marie”, in Alabama and Florida, respectively; “El Trovador”, in Dominican Republic; and the “San José”, in Cape Town, South Africa. However, they were all what is known as ‘black slave ships’, those that for over 400 years abducted people from Africa to sell them in America.

“La Unión” wreck was archaeologically located in 2017, within the Project for the Protection, Conservation, Research and Dissemination of the Yucatan Underwater Cultural Heritage by SAS, in coordination with INAH’s Yucatan Center and the inhabitants of the region. Initially, it was named “Adalio” in homage to the grandfather of Juan Diego Esquivel, the fisherman who guided archaeologists to the site.

Back then, it was assumed that the wreck was that of a steamship corresponding to the first stage of that technology, between 1837 and 1860, when these ships were powered by a system of boilers, machines with rocker arms and ‘Mississippi type’ paddle wheels.

Although the boilers exploded and the ship caught on fire, the bilge —the lower part of the hull, in the lowest part of the engine room and just above the double bottoms— descended seven meters to the bottom of the shallow waters.

Covered with sand, wood from the bottom of the hull remained preserved until today. The site has others elements that can be recognized such as paddle wheels, boilers, compartments, and fastening objects such as copper bolts. In addition, artifacts related to daily life on board were identified, among them fragments of glass from bottles and ceramics, and even eight brass cutlery that were used by first-class passengers.

After that first field season, SAS team began to investigate in the provincial archives of Yucatan and Baja California Sur states, as well as in the national archives of Mexico, Cuba and Spain, gathering in three years enough information to claim that the “Adalio” is indeed the steam “La Unión”.

Helena Barba explains that the coincidental elements are: the fact that boilers were found exploded and the wood kept evidence of a fire; the similitude between the technology seen in the site and its description on the ship's plans; and even the location of the wreck itself, similar to the references found in private reports and press releases of the time.



“La Unión” steamer belonged to the Spanish firm Zangroniz Hermanos y Compañía, established in 1854 in Havana and which, a year later, was authorized to trade in Mexico, navigating between Sisal, Campeche, Veracruz and Tampico.

Usually it would carry first, second and third class passengers to Cuba, along with merchandise such as henequen fibers, tanned leather, dyewood and deerskins. However, its commanders were also in complicity with the slave traders, allowing them to introduce and kept Mayans in small and unsanitary spaces.

A year before its sinking, in October 1860, the steamer had been surprised in Campeche carrying 29 Mayans, among them boys and girls aged 7 and 10, but the public derision was not enough to put an end to the smuggling carried out by “La Unión”.

Only after that tragic September 19th, with the death of half of the 80 crew members and 60 passengers in the shipwreck, the Mexican government paid more attention to this issue and began searching the ports in order to prevent people’s trafficking on the routes to Cuba.

It must be noted that the previous casualty numbers do not include Mayan slaves, since they were not considered persons but merchandise.

Recovered history

Documents consulted by historians Abiud Piza and Gabriel Leon, part of the SAS team in the Yucatan Peninsula, speak of how the shipping company Zangroniz Hermanos y Compañía was active during some of the most critical years of the Yucatan Caste War (1847-1901), event that confronted indigenous and creoles due to reasons related to excessive tax collections and farmland grabbing.

A strategy that Hispanic and Mexican oligarchs used since 1848 was to order the expulsion of those Mayans captured in combat, so many were sent to Cuba, where there were a shortage of workforce in the sugar cane plantations.

Each slave was sold for up to 25 pesos to intermediaries, and they could be resold in Havana for up to 160 pesos for men and 120 pesos for women.

There was another way to get slaves, archaeologist Helena Barba says, as there were men called ‘enganchadores’ whose job was to visit towns like Yxil, Kanxoc and Valladolid, offering indigenous people—many of them in bankruptcy after losing their properties during the war—false papers to make them believe that they would go as settlers to Cuba, where they would have land and the possibility to generate income.



Aboard “La Unión” and another Zangroniz steamer called *México*, between 25 and 30 persons were chartered monthly since 1855; most of them never returned to the peninsula. Nevertheless, the memory of those displaced Mayans lives in the Havana neighborhood of Campeche, where many of the slaves and their descendants lived for generations.

The SAS team members investigated that, although Zangroniz name does not appear in Mexican documentation in the years immediately following the shipwreck, during Maximilian’s empire and the late 19th century, the firm won contracts for railway construction.

Another way to learn about this part of the history is visiting INAH’s Museum of Underwater Archeology (Marsub), in the city of San Francisco de Campeche, where Room 6, dedicated to the Industrial Revolution in navigation, exhibits, among other elements, the brass cutlery recovered from the steam “La Unión”.

