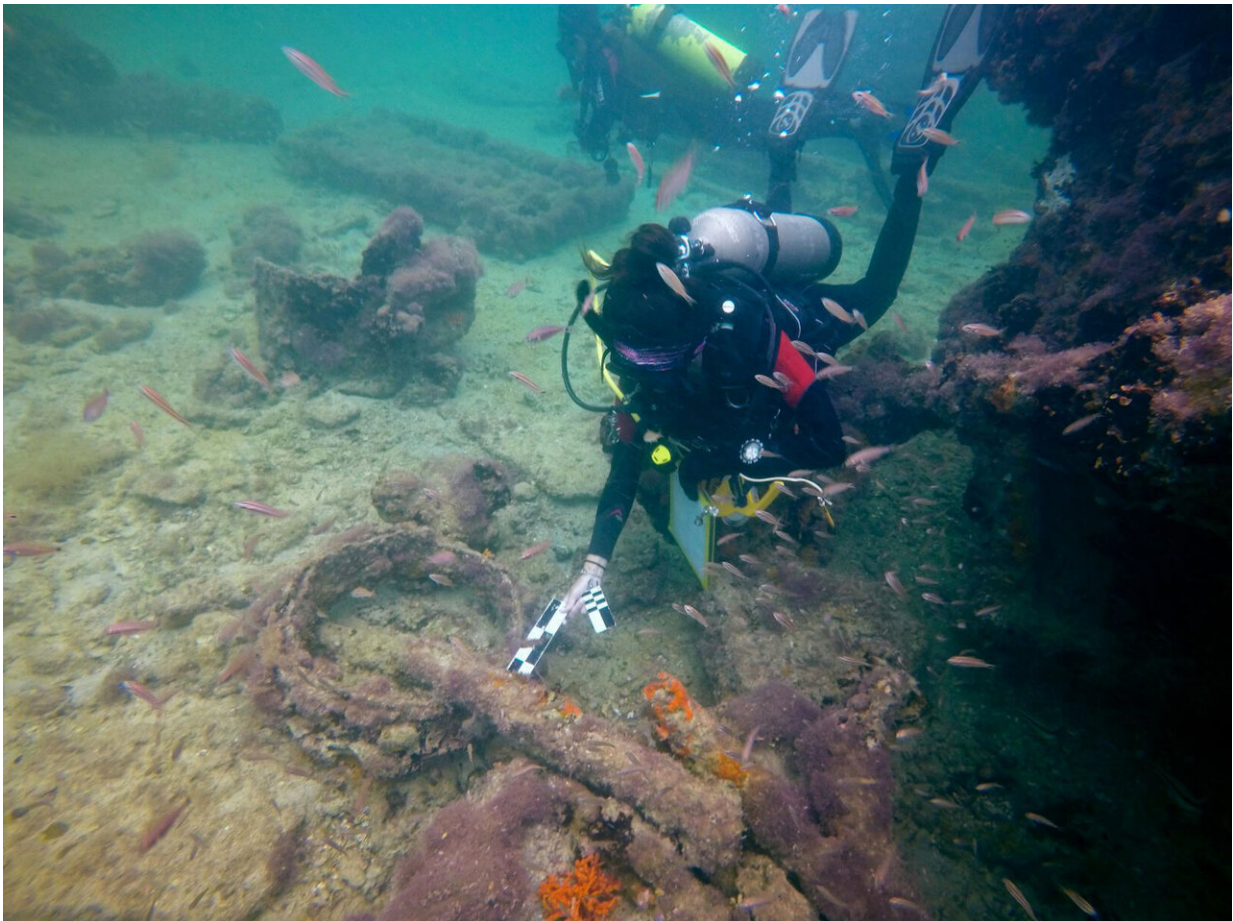


Mexico identifies submerged wreck of Mayan slave ship

September 16 2020, by Mark Stevenson



This July 24, 2017 photo released by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) on Sept. 15, 2020, shows what the INAH says is a detail of the iron skylight from the bow area of the Mayan slave ship "La Union," off Sisal, in the Yucatan peninsula, Mexico. Archaeologists in Mexico say the ship had been used to take Mayan Indigenous people from Mexico, captured during and 1847-1901 rebellion known as "The War of the Castes," to

work in sugarcane fields in Cuba. The La Unión was on a trip to Havana in September 1861 when its boilers exploded and it sank off the once-important Yucatan port of Sisal. (Helena Barba/INAH via AP)

Archaeologists in Mexico said Tuesday they have identified a ship that carried Mayan people into virtual slavery in the 1850s, the first time such a ship has been found.

The wreck of the Cuban-based paddle-wheel steamboat was found in 2017, but wasn't identified until researchers from the National Institute of Anthropology and History checked contemporary documents and found evidence it was the ship "La Unión."

The ship had been used to take Mayas captured during an 1847-1901 rebellion known as "The War of the Castes" to work in sugarcane fields in Cuba.

Slavery was illegal in Mexico at the time, but operators of similar ships had reportedly bought seized captured combatants, or deceived Mayas left landless by the conflict to "sign on" as contract workers, often in Cuba, where they were treated like slaves.

The La Unión was on a trip to Havana in September 1861 when its boilers exploded and it sank off the once-important Yucatan port of Sisal.

Institute archaeologist Helena Barba Meinecke said the inhabitants of Sisal had passed down through generations the account of the slave ship, and one of them led researchers to it.

"The grandparents and great-grandparents of the inhabitants of Sisal told

them about a steam ship that took away Mayas during the War of the Castes," Barba Meinecke said. "And one of the people in Sisal who saw how they led the Mayas away as slaves, told his son and then he told his grandson, and it was that person who led us to the general area of the shipwreck."

The identification was based on the physical remains of the wooden-hulled side-wheeler, whose timbers bore signs of fire and whose boilers had exploded. The location of the wreck also coincides with contemporary accounts of the accident, which killed half of the 80 crew members and 60 passengers aboard.

The team also found silverware with the emblem of the company that operated the ship.

In October 1860, a ship had been caught in neighboring Campeche state taking aboard 29 Mayas, including children as young as 7. Authorities prevented the ship from leaving, but clearly that didn't keep the trade from continuing. Mayas were often transported on ships which were taking sisal fiber and paying passengers to Cuba.

Sisal and henequen were fibers used in making rope, and were usually harvested by Mayas working in serf-like conditions on large plantations in the Yucatan.

It was unclear if there were any Maya aboard on the ship's last voyage. The records are unclear because the Mayas would probably have been listed as cargo, not as passengers, or the ship may have tried to conceal their presence.

Barba Meinecke noted that captured Mayan combatants were frequently sent to Cuba, from where many never returned. "Each slave was sold to a middleman for 25 pesos, and they resold them in Havana for as much as

160 pesos, for men, and 120 pesos for women," she said.

But she said the next stage of research would involve trying to find their descendants. Researchers plan to travel to Havana, where there is a neighborhood called "Campeche,"

"These people, or some of them, could be descendants of the Mayas who were taken by force or deception," she said. "Research has to be done so these (Mayan) people can know where their grandparents or great-grandparents are."

The Maya launched one of North America's last Indigenous revolts in the lower Yucatan Peninsula in 1847, fighting against domination by white and mixed-race Mexicans who exploited them. The Mexican government fought the bloody rebellion with brutal repression, but couldn't wipe out the last resistance until 1901.

The ship was found about 2 miles (3.7 kilometers) off the port of Sisal in about 22 feet (7 meters) of water, after a local fisherman led archaeologists to the wreck.

A few wrecks of African slave ships have been found in waters in the United States and elsewhere, but no Maya slaving ship had been identified.

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