

# The sunken treasure of the San José shipwreck is contested—but its real riches go beyond coins and jewels

March 17 2024, by Ann Coats

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Wager's Action off Cartagena, 28 May 1708 by Samuel Scott (1772), a painting showing the moment the San José was blown up. Credit: [National Maritime Museum](https://www.nationalmaritimemuseum.org/)

The San José was a galleon ship owned by King Philip V of Spain (1683–1746) in the 18th century. It sailed from Portobelo in present-day Panama to Cartagena in Colombia in 1708.

[The ship was sunk](#)—still laden with treasure including 11 million gold and silver coins, emeralds and other precious cargo—during the Battle of Barú (also known as Wager's Action), part of the War of the Spanish Succession. This war was between Spain and France on one side, and Britain, the Holy Roman Empire, the Dutch Republic and other European allies on the other.

The search for the San José and its treasure, sunk 600 meters deep, has now become possible thanks to advances in remotely operated underwater vehicle technology. The ship is now in the process of being [pulled up from the sea floor](#). But who is entitled to San José's riches?

In 1979, the US salvage company Sea Search Armada made an exclusive agreement with Colombia to divide the proceeds of the San José 50:50. They had bought out the Glocca Morra Company which discovered what was thought to be the wreck of the San José in 1982.

In 2007, the US Supreme Court ruled that Colombia holds the rights to items deemed to be "national cultural patrimony". Anything else will be halved between the US salvage company Sea Search Armada and Colombia. Ownership of each item would probably have to be [decided by independent experts](#).

However, in 2015, Colombia's president, Juan Manuel Santos, [challenged the location](#) Sea Search Armada's suspected held the San José wreck. He confirmed that the San José's true location had been found by the Colombian navy—with the help of British maritime archaeology consultants and the US Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution—in Colombian waters.

Spain and Peru have [also claimed ownership](#), since the San José was a Spanish ship carrying wealth created by enslaved indigenous Peruvian workers. The descendants of the indigenous Bolivian Qhara Qhara people and enslaved African workers in New Granada, who were forced to mine precious metals, have [also made a claim](#).

Spain colonized Colombia, Peru and Bolivia after Christopher Columbus reached America in 1492. The 1494 [Treaty of Tordesillas](#) divided the new territory between Spain and Portugal. This resulted in the destruction of indigenous culture, seizure of natural assets and exploitation of inhabitants and enslaved African people. Part of San José's wealth should therefore surely be reserved to create a cultural legacy that would beneficially balance that harmful past.

Research to discover how the San José was built by its Spanish shipbuilders and find out about the crew and the local communities in Colombia and Bolivia [is feasible](#). Documents survive in the archives of the Casa de Contratación de las Indias (Trading House of the Indies), the National Archives of Spain and Lima and Spanish dockyard and shipbuilding archives. Oral history could reveal community folk stories and passed down memories.

The experience of recovering, conserving and interpreting the Tudor ship, the Mary Rose, which sunk in 1545 and was brought up from the seabed in 1982, is a superb example of what could be done with the San José. Scientific analysis of the wreck and remains could determine where the crew came from. [As with the Mary Rose](#), new technology could be used to bring those stories to new audiences.

## **San José's loss and legacy**

In an [excellent film](#) analyzing the context of the San José's loss, and exploring its underwater remains, nautical archaeologist Professor

Ricardo Borrero argues that the ship's "real value is its historical value and its potential to deliver a lot of information if we ask the proper questions".

Juan David Correa, Colombia's minister of culture, also insists that the value of the wreck is patrimonial and not monetary, saying "[history is the treasure](#)".

In 2024 Colombian archaeologist [Carlos Reina Martínez](#) said the Colombian Institute of Archeology and History is seeking to discover what life was like for the 600 people on board the San José when it sank. They also wish to study daily life, the cargo, artillery and merchandise of the colonial era in America. Colombia will invest US\$4.5 million (£3.5 million) to recover the ship and its contents and conserve them.

The proposed Colombian investigation is inspired by the University of Portsmouth Arts and Humanities Research Council Project [Unpath'd Waters](#), which I am a part of. Our research into the British HMS Looe, shipwrecked in 1705, has revealed that its twice-yearly Newfoundland convoys were vital to British global goals during the War of Spanish Succession.

Unpath'd Waters seeks to connect dispersed historical collections to bring new stories to new audiences. Inspired by our work, the recovery and restoration of the San José could also connect its many stories—the Spanish shipbuilders, the craftspeople, the 600 passengers and crew and their descendants. But will their voices be heard? It will take a concerted effort from teams around the world, not a power struggle, to ensure that they are.

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