

The Oldest Shipwrecks in Pensacola Bay, Florida

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Introduction

The oldest shipwreck ever found in the waters of Pensacola Bay was found by the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research (BAR) in 1992 (Smith 2009; Smith et al. 1995, 1998). It was a large Spanish galleon. Artifacts excavated from the shipwreck indicated that it was one of ten ships of the 16th-Century Luna fleet anchored in the bay when a hurricane struck in September of 1559. The original fleet was comprised of 11 ships that arrived from Mexico. Before the hurricane, one ship was sent back to Mexico with news of the successful landing in the bay. Of the remaining ten ships, seven were sunk or grounded.

A second shipwreck was found by underwater archeologists from the University of West Florida (UWF) in 2006. That shipwreck was also determined to be from the Luna fleet (Cook 2009).

Recently, a third shipwreck was found on the bottom of Pensacola Bay by student archeologists from the University of West Florida. That shipwreck, smaller than the other two, was also determined to be from the Luna fleet (Northwest Florida Daily News 10/21/16; Pensacola News Journal 10/21/16; UWF Newsroom 10/23/16).

The three shipwrecks are remarkable finds relative to the early history of the Southeastern United States. Their discovery, combined with the Spanish writings of the Luna Expedition, provide us with a precious insight into the first European colonization attempts on the northern Gulf Coast.

The three shipwrecks are predated on the northern Gulf Coast by only one excavated shipwreck, dating to 1554, off the Texas coast adjacent to Padre Island. That Texas shipwreck was one of three grounded in the shallows by a hurricane. The three ships were part of a treasure fleet sailing toward the Bahama Channel headed home to Spain when the violent storm blew them off course (Arnold and Weddle 1978).

Congratulations are certainly in order to the State of Florida for funding and conducting the survey for the search, discovery, and test excavations of the three Luna Expedition shipwrecks in Pensacola Bay under the auspices of the Bureau of Archaeological Research and the University of West Florida. The forthcoming articles, papers, and books will definitely add much to our knowledge of the unique colonization of the Gulf Coast by the Spanish in the mid-1500s.

Luna Shipwrecks and the UWF Land Colony Claim

It has been suggested that the three Pensacola Bay shipwrecks support the claim of the University of West Florida that they have identified the terrestrial Luna Colony site adjacent to the shipwrecks (8Es1) (Worth 2016; Worth quote in Northwest Florida Daily News, 10/21/16). That claim may, eventually, prove to be correct; however, the claim is not viable today based on the current archeological data (Contact Archeology 2015; 2016).

While the three shipwrecks appear to be from the Luna Expedition fleet, two of them were not anchored (Cook 2009: pg. 98; Smith 2009: pg. 79). It is yet to be determined if the third ship was anchored (personal communication, John Bratten, 10/25/16). The three ships were likely driven onto a shallow sand bar, probably by the hurricane reported in the Luna documents. If that was the case, the ships could have been blown from their original anchorage anywhere on Pensacola Bay. Therefore, to use the shipwrecks as support evidence to reinforce the UWF claim of the terrestrial colony site is, for now, inappropriate (Contact Archeology 2015; 2016).

Luna Fleet Anchorage

The Spanish, sailing in their original fleet of eleven ships, were very impressed with Pensacola Bay. The Spanish writers recorded its virtues:

The ships can anchor in 4 or 5 fathoms (20-25 feet) a crossbow shot from land (100-300 yards). The port is so secure that no wind can do them any damage at all (Priestley 1928: vol. II, pg. 275).

The Spanish documents of the Luna Expedition also reported the important fact that the anchorage of their fleet was adjacent to their terrestrial colony site:

Seamen say that it is the best port in the Indies, and the site which has been selected for founding the town is no less good, for it is on a high point of land which slopes down to the bay where the ships come to anchor (Priestley 1928: vol. II, pg. 211).

Given these data, it seems plausible that finding the anchorage of the fleet can lead to the discovery of the terrestrial colony site and vice versa. Thus far, that reasonable premise has not been demonstrated with archeological field data. As previously stated, the ships likely broke their anchor lines at the anchorage area and were blown onto the shallow sand shelf. The anchorage area of the Luna fleet has not been found. Underwater archeologists from the State of Florida have reported this fact:

The ship (the first discovered) apparently had grounded violently during a severe storm on a shallow sand bar ... (Smith 2009: pg. 79).

While the locations of these two vessels (first and second discovered) in the same vicinity may suggest that others lie nearby, it still cannot be determined if the ships were blown to this location by the hurricane, or grounded near their anchorage (Cook 2009: pg. 98).

One of the UWF terrestrial archeologists suggested that the two original shipwrecks lent support for site 8Es1, their claim as the site of the Luna Colony. This statement contradicts UWF underwater archeologists previously quoted above:

(Site 8Es1) seems likely to have been the closest ideal spot to the inferred landing from the ships at anchor ... (underlining added) (Worth 2016).

The terrestrial archeologist later contradicted his original statement:

As long as we had just two shipwrecks, it could mean that the rest of the fleet was somewhere else. Now we know we really do have the fleet, not just two ships that happened to be from the fleet (Worth quote in the Northwest Florida Daily News, 10/22/16).

The first two shipwrecks that broke from their anchored position and grounded on a sand shelf are not the entire Luna fleet nor do they prove the location of the Luna fleet, nor does the recent discovery of a third shipwreck provide conclusive evidence that ... *Now we know we really do have the (Luna) fleet* To date, archeologists have found three of the seven shipwrecks from the ten-ship fleet that was anchored in the bay when the hurricane came upon them. The other four shipwrecks could be anywhere in Pensacola Bay. One of the four shipwrecks could even be found on land near the bay shore. A shipwreck was reported to have been found upright after the storm with little damage done to it at all: *They found a complete caravel that lacked nothing of anything that was in it, in a grove of tall trees in the middle of a thickly wooded hill ... (Padilla 1596: pg. 23).*

So, how could we identify the original anchorage of the Luna fleet? The best evidence for the fleet anchorage would be the anchors themselves that were left after the anchor lines of the ships were snapped in the storm:

... the most terrible storm and the wildest norther that men have ever seen (struck). As if the cable(s) were string and the anchors were not iron, the force of the wind destroyed them (the ships) (Padilla 1596).

... there came up from the north a fierce tempest, which, blowing for twenty-four hours from all directions until the same hour as it began... without stopping but increasing continuously, did irreparable damage to the ships of the fleet ... All the ships which were in this port went aground (although it is one of the best ports there are in these Indies), save only one caravel and two barks, which escaped ... (Priestley 1928: vol. II, pg. 245).

Might anchors from the fleet still be present on the bottom of the bay? Despite the mayhem and aftermath of the storm, the Viceroy of Mexico suggested to Luna that he might salvage the anchors of the fleet ... if he could. In a letter to Luna on October 25, 1559 (Priestley 1928: vol. I, pg. 73), the viceroy wrote that if it were possible to recover the anchors of the fleet, he should do so. The salvaging of the anchors was a suggestion, not a priority (personal communication, David Dodson, 10/21/16).

Even in this day of high-tech remote sensing, it is difficult to locate individual historic anchors buried in the sediment of Pensacola Bay. In the 16th-Century, locating and salvaging the anchors of the fleet as “suggested” to Luna by the Viceroy would have been an extremely difficult task, particularly considering that the force of the hurricane winds exerted against the ships likely forced the anchors deep into the sediment on the bottom of the bay. Add to that scenario the fact that the fleet would need a considerable space in the bay to anchor so as to prevent entanglement of anchor lines or collisions of the ships swinging in the winds. A viable hypothesis is that widespread, isolated anchors of the Luna fleet are likely still buried in the bottom sediment of Pensacola Bay ... somewhere.

An intensive remote sensing search for the anchors of the fleet seems the most plausible method for determining the location of the Luna Colony. Again, the Spanish specifically stated that the anchorage of the ships was adjacent to the colony site (Priestley 1928: vol. II, pg. 211).

Conclusions

Two, and possibly three, shipwrecks torn from their anchorages and grounded on a sand shelf in Pensacola Bay do not prove the location of the anchorage of the Luna fleet nor do they support the UWF claim of the location of the Luna Colony on shore. Scientific investigation demands irrefutable conclusions based on hard data before hypotheses can be validated.

The archeological criteria to prove the anchorage location include an area of in-situ anchors left on the bay bottom or a shipwreck/s directly associated with their anchors. The archeological criteria needed to prove the Luna Colony land location include numerous Spanish burials, structures, fire hearths, and refuse pits. Numerous Spanish artifacts mixed with Native artifacts in a general midden, while encouraging, do not constitute irrefutable evidence of the Luna Colony location.

Hopefully, the underwater and terrestrial field teams from the State of Florida will continue their diligent fieldwork to recover the archeological evidence necessary to verify the location of the Luna Colony and the anchorage of the Luna fleet.

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