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Secret spanish shipwreck yields biggest emerald ever found

John C. Fine

The story is bizarre. Florida divers, commissioned by a South American family, direct descendants of the wife of the conqueror of Mexico, Hernan Cortés, found a shipwreck in deep water somewhere off the East coast of Florida. The exact location remains a secret since the find is in international waters, more than twelve miles off the coast, and would be up for grabs on the high seas where piracy is alive and well.

Victor Benilous, his wife Sue and a small team of trusted divers have been raising treasures from the sunken wreckage of a Spanish aviso, or courier ship that sank around 1757. At least that's the date clearly stamped on a silver bar the team recovered recently. What makes the shipwreck extraordinary is that the Spanish "Took the whole mountain and used it as ballast and were going to sort it out when they arrived in Spain," according to Vic Benilous.

That mountain, from the jungles of Colombia, was an emerald mine and while this ship sank after burning to the water line, the ballast contains clumps of emeralds, jewels and exquisite personal belongings of the ship's passengers. The sunken treasure amounts to a king's ransom.

"We don't want the story out just yet", Vic said clandestinely, "We are negotiating the sale of what was the largest emerald and this newest find would affect that sale."

The "largest" emerald is a magnificent six sided green gem that weighed 964 carats. Research has identified the gem as the Isabella Emerald, a stone Queen Isabella, wanted. The deep green oblong stone, so large that it overlaps the palm of a human hand, was the envy of the Queen's eye.

Vic Benilous told how the Queen hinted to Cortés that he should make her a present of the gem. Instead, Cortés gave it as a wedding gift to his second wife, Dona Juana de Zuniga.

A tennis pro from Argentina whose treasure hunting exploits in the jungles of South America were well known, was approached by friends he made while teaching tennis. As it turned out, the family is descended from the de Zuniga clan. They possessed information about a ship that had wrecked while carrying a messenger back to Spain, from the New World with the Cortés treasure aboard.

"This family told me they had enough documentation that a shipwreck car-



The pink quartz skull is the one the psychic received a signal from. Thousand of emeralds were found on the shipwreck.

B.J.C. FINE

rying the treasure, which included the Isabella emerald, was never recovered. I knew the family for twelve years in Argentina. I taught their children, the whole family, to play tennis," Diego Vallone related.

Diego had been teaching tennis in fashionable Palm Beach, Florida in season. He heard of the exploits of Victor Benilous, a restaurateur-antiques expert-and-diver. Benilous had been involved in the excavation of what he claims to be the oldest shipwreck in the western hemisphere, an unidentified wreck located off Juno beach, said to date to 1554. The 1554 shipwreck was in deep water and while it has not yielded treasure, many pottery shards and artifacts have great historical significance and archaeological value.

"Diego approached me with the story of the emerald associated with Queen Isabella. An emerald Queen Isabella wanted but couldn't have," forty-four years old, Victor Benilous said :



Divers Diego Vallone and John Christopher Fine below with golden cross and emerald.



Golden Aztec effigy of a bird and the 964 carat Queen Isabella emerald with smaller stone.

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"I think the queen was still trying to woo Cortés for future gems. We know Dona Juana de Zuniga followed her husband to Mexico on numerous voyages. Emeralds were regularly being sent back to Spain," Benilous recounted. For thirty-four year old Diego Vallone, this was another great adventure with the promise of great wealth, if the shipwreck could be found.

The men teamed up and began researching the archives and de Zuniga family documents to find clues to the shipwreck's existence. "The de Zuniga family were second cousins to the king and received many land grants from the Crown", Vic Benilous explained. Cortés died on December 2, 1547, and much of the history of his family remains clouded. "We know that a courier came from Spain to the New World in 1756. This was more than two hundred years after Cortés death," Vic added. "We believe the courier was bringing the de Zuniga family fortune back to Spain so they could use the gems to entice the Crown to give the family more favors in land grants," Benilous said.

The courier "was returning to Spain with a small fast ship. According to the ship's manifest, the cargo included a hundred chests of emeralds," Vic recounted. On its way back to Spain the ship caught fire. Another vessel's captain reported what he saw. "They were out to sea and the only information about its position was made by another captain who saw the ship burning and reported that it had been a certain number of hours since they were in sight of land," Victor Benilous said.

From the point where the vague location of the mystery ship was indicated by archival research to finding its exact location, when it was discovered by the divers, is a story so extraordi-

Biggest emerald



The 25,000 carat emerald in its quartz matrix.

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nary that some have questioned its veracity. Using two psychics, Vic Benilous sent them maps with plastic overlays. "I used the psychics in the past," Benilous recounted. "One of them worked with the U.S. government and helped locate lost submarines. I sent each psychic a plastic overlay map," Vic said.

"When they came back, they were marked in almost the same spot, only centimeters apart on the map, in actuality less than four miles apart."

Vic said. With the location of the shipwreck site narrowed down, Benilous brought one of the psychics out aboard his dive vessel. "When the psychics came with us, seven sites were located. We used a magnetometer, side-scan sonar and a bottom profiler. The instruments identified three anchors of the Spanish colonial period. We eliminated those sites and concentrated on the other four sites identified by the psychic. There was a lot of sand. We discovered a ballast pile. Diving in deep water, we found some charred ribbing on one site and a silver bar dated 1757," Benilous said.

"Psychics are very special people," Diego Vallone said, confirming the episode. "I believed from the beginning but when you see the results you get goosebumps," he added. When divers went down on the site where the psychic energy was received, not ten feet away from where the psychic told them to dive, they discovered the largest of the crystal skulls.

The Aztec ceremonial crystal skulls, ranging in size from a marble to the size of a tennis ball, are rare. "So far we have only been able to identify six other Aztec ceremonial skulls," Sue Benilous said. "The largest is in the London Museum and is about the size of a human skull. These are so finely polished, we really don't know how the Aztecs made them," she added.

The divers brought up conglomerates, lumps that ranged in size from a football to a desk. It was in examining these masses, fused together and corroded after long immersion in sea water, that amazing treasures and artifacts were found.

"The Cortés-Zuniga family crest ring was found originally with the Isabella emerald," Vic Benilous said, holding the ring. "When the courier came from Spain in 1757 to see the magistrate who had the Isabella emerald, he had to show the signet ring before it was turned over to him and he took it aboard ship," Benilous recounted. Rings, precious stones and jewelry of



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great value are among the rare and beautiful treasure the divers recovered. While cleaning a large conglomerate, Benilous and his team found a matrix that weighed about fifteen pounds. Holding the large mass in his office in West Palm Beach, Florida, Victor put a powerful light on part of the stone. The light radiated through the stone, creating a beautiful green emerald glow.

"About forty percent of the stone is emerald. It comes to twenty-five thousand carats plus," Vic Benilous said, turning the massive stone over in his hands. "It was encrusted. It was white and we boiled it. I used hair spray to keep it nice and look shiny like this," Vic said, "without having a gemologist polish it," he added.

The massive rough emerald is extraordinary. Its green glow as light penetrates its body radiates a "green fire", that has captured the imagination of explorers and adventurers for centuries. It is the largest emerald in the world; the greatest treasure ever recovered under the sea.

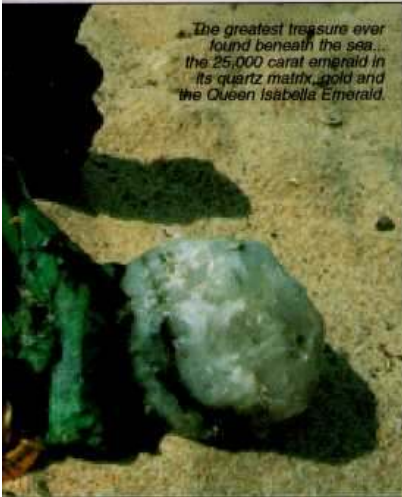


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Aztec skulls; before these finds there were only 6 known to exist in the world. A large one in the British Museum.



Victor Benilous (white shirt) and divers Diego Vallone and John Christopher Fine with the 25,000 carat emerald and gold.



The greatest treasure ever found beneath the sea... the 25,000 carat emerald in its quartz matrix, gold and the Queen Isabella Emerald.

Among the other treasures the divers brought up is a gold cross studded with seven cabochon emeralds. "The biggest stone is 83 millimeters, the smallest 53 millimeters," Vic said. "The emeralds are top gem quality and the gold is twenty-one almost twenty-two carats," he added. Other rings recovered from the shipwreck included a 17.5 carat emerald set in gold with two small garnets on each side.

Among the finds were thousands of rough, uncut emeralds. "We went through literally thousands and thousands of emeralds and found a gem quality stone that was translucent. It was 42 carats. We kept the thickness but cutting and polishing it we lost fifty percent of the weight of the stone," Sue Benilous explained, holding a magnificent green gem stone they had cut. The gem glistened in Florida's bright sunshine, radiating a natural brilliance rarely found in unadulterated emeralds. Writing in the April 1993, American Gemcutter bulletin, expert gemologist Robert A. Silverman said, "Ninety-nine percent of all emeralds are dyed and oiled. The industry is trying to force if a stone is enhanced, it be mentioned." To see a brilliant natural gem give off such deep green fire proved the shipwreck stone's value and rarity.

A fine mosaic consisting of thousands of little pieces of tiny gems, some only the thickness of two human hairs, was also found among the treasure. "It probably took someone eight or nine years to make something like this," Vic Benilous said, holding the small mosaic in the palm of his hand. "From our reser-

ch, we believe it to be from the neo-classic period made during the early 1700's. We have information from a Glasgow museum that they have a Florentine mosaic plate about eight by six inches that was made about 1780," he added.

"When this was found it was wrapped up with four inches of materials around it. The coverings swelled up over the years. Apparently, the outside box broke open and it was inside another box. In there was the cross and the Crown ring," Benilous said. The divers are still trying to piece the evidence from the mystery ship together. The ship was a courier vessel, not a normal passenger ship and carried a maximum of fifteen to twenty passengers. "Part of the original manifest shows that the ship carried a hundred chests of emeralds," Victor Benilous said from his office, holding hundreds of uncut gems in his hands. "Back then emeralds didn't have the great value they have today," Vic smiled, knowing that a top gem quality emerald can bring \$ 15,000 per carat.

The shipwreck site is so deep that it is at the limits of compressed air diving. It is located in the Atlantic Ocean, some twelve miles off shore between Sebastian and Cape Canaveral, Florida. More treasure remains on the bottom and while the team remains purposefully vague about the wreck's exact location, it is certain that what they have found amounts to the most valuable cargo ever recovered from a sunken ship. That the treasure is associated with one of the most controversial and notorious conquistadores of the New World will only enhance the booty's value. The story and the evidence these finds reveal about Hernan Cortés, conquerer of Mexico, his greed and accumulation of wealth, underscores the cruel history of the conquest of the New World and the destruction of native cultures whose advances in science and the arts were all but lost by religious repression. The Aztec and Mayan artifacts recovered by the divers are rare examples saved for history from under the sea.

John C. Fine

Aztec ceramic whistles rare finds since the Spanish smashed such "pagan" symbols.

Les sifflets aztèques en céramique sont rares. Les Espagnols les détruisaient car ils représentaient pour eux des symboles païens.

UNE MYSTÉRIEUSE ÉPAVE ESPAGNOLE

digest

Des plongeurs mandatés par les descendants directs de Dona Juana de Zuniga, la seconde épouse du conquérant espagnol Hernán Cortés(*), ont découvert l'épave d'un navire au large de la côte est de la Floride.

D'après les archives et les documents détenus par la famille, un messenger parti d'Espagne pour le Nouveau monde en 1756, avait pour mission de ramener la fortune du clan Cortés-de Zuniga sur le vieux continent. Le navire courrier prit feu et s'abîma en mer sur le chemin du retour, en 1757.

Selon les registres, sa cargaison comprenait, entre autres richesses, une centaine de coffres remplis d'émeraudes.

Diego Vallone et Victor Benilous, deux chasseurs de trésors, se sont associés pour mener les recherches. En mer, ils ont fait appel à des médiums qui leur ont permis de situer précisément le lieu du naufrage.

Vic Benilous, sa femme Sue et une petite équipe de plongeurs de confiance ont remonté des trésors de l'épave : un lingot d'argent portant la date de 1757 ; l'émeraude Isabelle, une pierre taillée de 964 carats convoitée par la reine Isabelle la Catholique mais que Cortés préféra offrir à sa seconde épouse, Dona Juana de Zuniga ; l'anneau sigillaire de la famille Cortes-de Zuniga, que détenait le messenger en signe de reconnaissance ; une croix en or ornée de sept cabochons d'émeraude ; des bijoux ; trois crânes cérémoniaux aztèques en cristal ; des milliers d'émeraudes non taillées ; et la plus grosse émeraude connue à ce jour, une pierre brute, encore prisonnière de sa matrice.

Ce trésor extraordinaire, reflet de l'avidité de Cortés, rappelle aussi l'histoire cruelle de la conquête du Nouveau monde, la destruction des cultures indigènes très avancées dans les domaines scientifiques et artistiques.

Les vestiges maya et aztèques découverts par les plongeurs sont des témoignages historiques rares conservés par la mer.

(*) Il part à la conquête du Mexique (1516), détruit l'empire aztèque (1521) et devient gouverneur général de la Nouvelle-Espagne (1522). En 1541, il rentre en Espagne et tombe en disgrâce.

