

SPANISH GALLEON DISCOVERED IN SOUTHERN CHILE

Contributed by Julia Thompson
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Courtesy of Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales de Chile

Remains of a 238-year-old shipwrecked Spanish galleon named 'Our Lady of the Good Council and San Leopoldo' have been discovered on the coast near the Chilean town of Curepto, located in Chile's Region VII. Oriflama S.A., the private archaeological excavation firm that discovered the galleon, is now grappling with Chilean authorities for permission to continue their excavation efforts and receive part of the estimated US\$30 million in booty.

The Chilean National Monuments Council insists the ship and its treasures are state property under terms spelled out in Chile's national monuments law N. 17.2888. Even so, the Council has agreed to grant the company 25 percent of the loot.

'Because the ship was embedded in the sand rather than deep under the ocean 'Our Lady of the Good Council and San Leopoldo' is property of the private business that found it,' the Republic's Comptroller's Office told the Santiago Times.

Most archaeologists expected to find the remains of the ship deep on the ocean floor. But fragments of the 41-meter x 11-meter ship have been discovered embedded in the sand under fairly shallow waters near where the Huenchullami River flows into the ocean. The once ornate vessel was built by the French in the mid 1700s and, loaded with 56 canons, was used by their military until the ship fell into Spanish hands. The Spaniards revamped the ship into a merchant vessel and set it sailing to 'New Spain.'

After several trips to the new world, the ship sank after five months at sea when it was nearing the end of a journey from Puerto de Cadiz, Spain, to El Callao, Peru. The ship was carrying precious glassware from the Spanish royal family to be sold to Peru's Spanish royalty. The glassware, along with garments decorated with gold, gold money, fancy furniture and over 50 canons, today have an estimated value of US\$30 million.

The company Web site gives a graphic explanation of how the ship went down: the crew was so malnourished and sick that they could not even raise all of the ship's sails. They were caught in a terrible storm and could not be rescued, condemning the galleon and its crew to Davy Jones' locker. Twelve bodies and pieces of the ship washed ashore the day after the storm, but no treasure.

Oriflama S.A. was formed in 2001, bringing together a scientific team from Cuba with the sponsorship of several Chilean universities. Later, several local museums joined the effort. The goal was to find the galleon and recover the treasure.

'Despite frequent contact with the company, until today no one had asked or been given permission to start excavation work on the ship,' said Oscar Acuna, the executive secretary of Chile's National Monuments Society, in a press release. 'Since the property is protected under the law, it is the state's property. The state is willing to grant the company 25 percent of the treasure for its work, but the rest will be state property.'

But before the actual worth of the ship's treasure can be determined, the ship's remains must be recovered from under the sand. So far, the project has cost the company US\$1 million, and another US\$15 million in expenses may yet be incurred before the project is completed.

'We are hoping that the National Historical Council will invest in our project so we may complete it,' Oriflama CEO Hernan Couyoudijan told the Santiago Times. 'It will cost an estimated US\$15 million. The National Historical Council does not have rights to the ship and it seems it would be in their best interest to work together with us on the project. We want to make a museum out of it. This would not only preserve some of history, but potentially boost tourism in Curepto.'

Cuepto's city government met last week to decide if they will side with the company or with the National Historical Council in the dispute. No decision had been announced by press time.

The Oriflama S.A.'s scientific team found the ship through the use of magnetometry, a methodology using a machine that detects materials with magnetic properties, like iron. The company continues excavation work, but needs more sponsorships to complete the project.

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