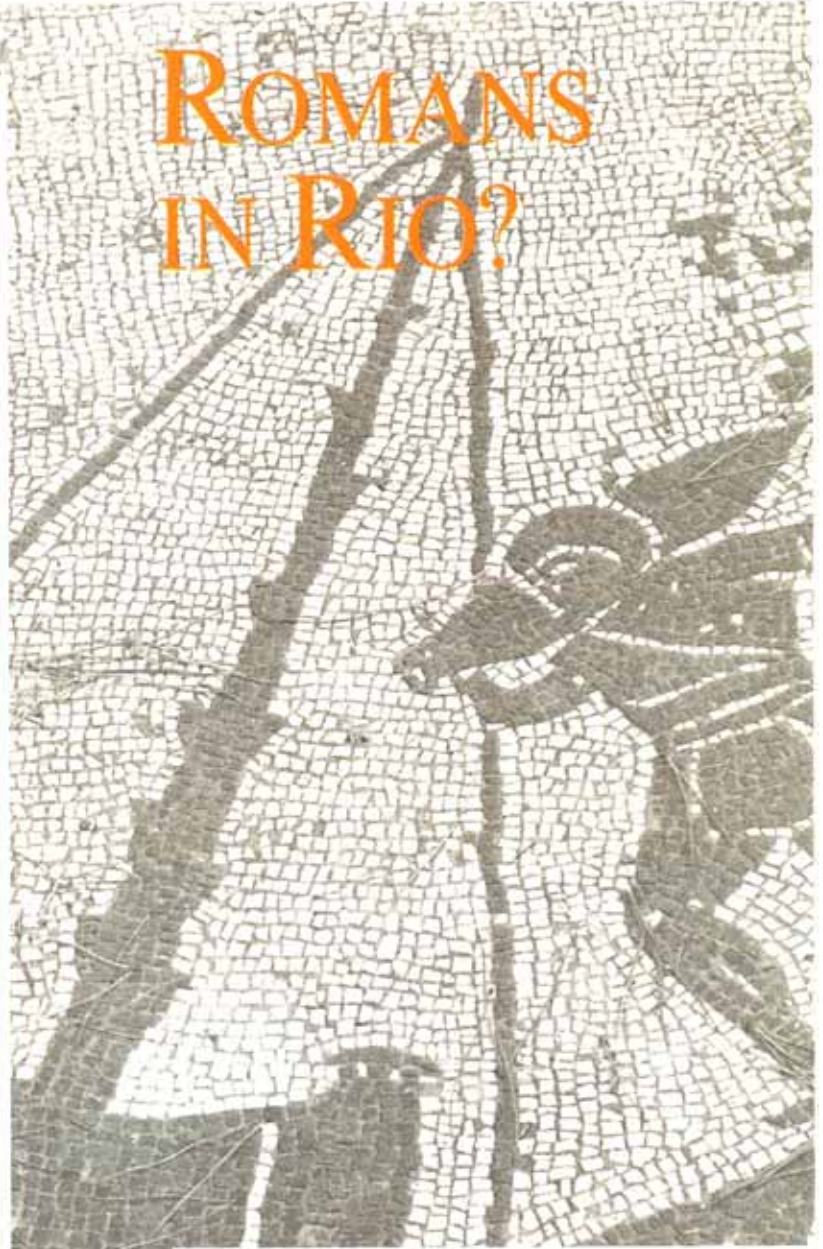


ROMANS IN RIO?



Ancient Amphorae Found in Brazil

Text and Photography by
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WITH THE 500-YEAR anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World approaching, there is renewed interest in his feats and also in the possibility that earlier mariners may have preceded him across the Atlantic. The controversy is not new. Ever since Columbus returned from the Caribbean in 1493, both scholars and crackpots have disputed his claim of discovery. Many of the claims have been spurred by nationalistic pride, but some are supported by impressive evidence. Recent archaeological findings indicate that while the Japanese were probably the first sailors to reach the New World via the Pacific, the Phoenicians may have been the first to touch New World shores via the Atlantic. Now it appears that the Romans, too, may have made the crossing.

A shipwreck was found in 1972 off the Caribbean coast of Honduras with a cargo of Punic—Carthaginian or Phoenician—*amphorae* (tall, narrow storage jars widely used in antiquity). Unfortunately, nothing more is known about this site after its discovery was noted in the press. The men who found the wreck submitted the photographs, as well as several of the amphorae, to the Honduran government for help in identification. They requested permission for foreign experts to verify the site, but the government refused, and the matter was soon forgotten.

When I contacted museum officials in Honduras recently about the wreck, I was told they wanted no investigation of the site as it would be "an affront to Columbus's discovery of America". I was to get a similar reaction from Brazilian officials after an equally tantalizing discovery was made in their waters: Let sleeping discoverers lie!

Credit for the discovery of Brazil is generally given to the Portuguese explorer Pedro Alvares Cabral, a friend of Vasco da Gama, who sailed in 1500 on an expedition to the East Indies at the behest of King Manuel I of Portugal. In attempting to sail to the Indian Ocean, Cabral was becalmed off the African coast. Strong currents bore him to the coast of Brazil, which he claimed for Portugal before heading back eastward.

(The Spanish, however, consider Vicente Yáñez Pinzón the discoverer of Brazil. Pinzón, commander of the *Niña* on Colum-

bus's first voyage to the New World, sailed from Spain in 1499 with his own command and reached the Brazilian coast in January 1500, discovering the mouth of the Amazon.)

There is evidence that a Phoenician ship (OCEANS Vol. 12, No. 4) may have been carried across the Atlantic to Brazil just as Cabral was. In 1892 a stone bearing a Phoenician inscription was found near Paraiba, on the northeast coast. For many years thought to be a forgery, it told of a Phoenician ship being blown to that shore by a storm.

In 1968, however, Dr. Cyrus Gordon, then chairman of the Department of Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University, capped years of research on the Paraiba stone with an announcement that the inscription is genuine. He believes that the vocabulary and syntax which led earlier experts to doubt its authenticity are consistent with idiomatic Phoenician inscriptions found in various parts of the Mediterranean world since the Paraiba stone was unearthed.

The stone no longer exists. According to various scholars in Brazil, it was destroyed by the Portuguese soon after its discovery to ensure Cabral's place in history. Whether or not it was genuine will never be known, but since then many inscribed rocks have been found throughout Brazil, the majority of which are alleged to be Phoenician, Greek, Roman, and even Viking.

The latest challenge to Cabral lies on the muddy bottom of Guanabara Bay, fifteen kilometers from the port of Rio de Janeiro. In 1976 a young diver named Jose Robert Teixeira was spearfishing around a rock off Ilha de Governador (Governor's Island) in the bay and found what seems to be evidence of a Roman shipwreck, most likely from another accidental crossing.

Since the mid-1960s, fishermen in Guanabara Bay had been snagging their nets on amphorae, both broken and intact. When this happened, so they told me, they smashed them into small fragments before throwing them back, so they would not risk snagging them again.

Nor did Teixeira realize what he had found nearby. He located three intact amphorae and reportedly saw others. Soon



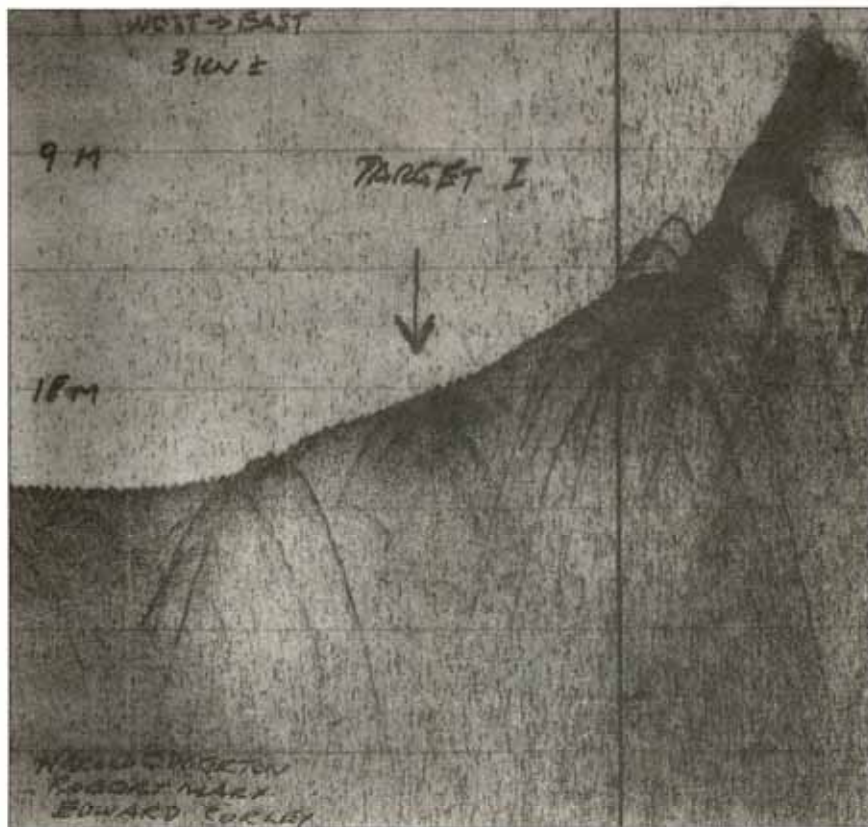
after, when he sold one of them to a tourist, the government became aware of his find, seized the other two, and turned them over to an archaeologist from the Brazilian Institute of Archaeology (IAB). Upset by the confiscation, and despite the threat of criminal action, Teixeira refused to tell where he had found the jars. The Brazilian press made a big splash with the story, and a number of archaeologists were interviewed who claimed the amphorae were either Greek or Phoenician. Eventually photographs were sent to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and a number of European museums, but no exact identification was forthcoming.

Teixeira took a job as a diver on an oil platform off the coast of South Africa, and the matter was forgotten. When Teixeira was next in Rio on his annual vacation, he took two friends for a night dive on the site of his find. One of the divers, a professional movie maker, shot 200 feet of 16-millimeter color film there with the aid of powerful underwater lights. The film reveals a large area of the sea floor covered with hundreds of ceramic sherds, many of which could easily be identified as amphorae fragments because they were the tops and bottoms of the jars. Many sherds were attached to rocks with coral concretions. The divers spoke to no one of their dive. Teixeira went back to South Africa, and once again the matter was forgotten.

There is little doubt the Romans were aware of lands beyond the ocean. Metellus Celer, Roman consul in Gaul (France and Belgium), left us a fascinating account of several strange people with red skin and black hair who were brought before him in 62 B.C. He was told they had been blown across the Atlantic in a large canoe and cast up on the coast. At Pompeii, several murals depict the pineapple, which is of New World origin. Critics of the theory of early voyages and of human and plant transfer across oceans, such as plant taxonomist Elmer Drew Merrill, have accepted them as proof of contact between the two hemispheres.

Some Greco-Roman artifacts which have been found on this side of the ocean, such as a torso of Venus found in the Gulf of Mexico near Veracruz in the 1880s, may well have been brought over at any time after Columbus. Others, however, are not so easy to dismiss. Dozens of classical oil lamps, for example, have been found in the excavation of pre-Inca tombs in northern Peru, and a third-century A.D. Roman terra-cotta head was discovered in Mexico in association with a tomb from the twelfth century A.D.

In 1961, Dr. Garcia Payon of the University of Jalapa uncovered the most startling



Page 18, top left: The author holds a Roman-style amphora (storage urn) reconstructed from pieces of at least twelve such jars found in Brazil's Guanabara Bay. The discovery suggests that an off-course Roman ship may have crossed the Atlantic only to fetch up on a submerged rock in the harbor. The mosaic, taken from a tile floor at Ostia, the old port of Rome, depicts such a ship being loaded with amphorae. Lower right: In 1981 a diver found a glazed bowl off

indication of Roman contact with the New World when he found a large hoard of jewelry in six graves near Mexico City. The jewelry was identified as Roman, from the first century B.C., by Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern of the University of Vienna and Professor Hans Boehringer of the German Institute of Archaeology. It is possible the jewelry came over on a non-Roman ship, but scientific dating of the bones and other material found with the jewelry indicates the burials took place no later than 100 B.C.

IFIRST LEARNED of the find in Guanabara Bay in May 1979 when I began underwater explorations in the colonial port of Salvador in Brazil. I approached IAB archaeologists with questions and was told the find was most likely a hoax and that I should not get involved.

Then in March 1981 a diver found a glazed bowl while diving off Salvador. His find generated a lot of publicity. Specialists at the Museu do India in Rio stated the bowl was

Salvador, Brazil. One archaeologist has surmised that the bowl was Phoenician, but to date it remains unidentified. Opposite: Dr. Harold Edgerton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has made side-scan sonar records of the bottom of Guanabara Bay and the peak which may have been the end of the Roman amphora carrier. The sonar reveals a pattern of debris (target one) "such as can be expected to result from the disintegration of ancient ships."

not Brazilian in origin, and then an archaeologist at the Museu da Marinha claimed it was Phoenician. In response to skeptical comments, the archaeologists said certain well-known, though unnamed, experts in Europe and the United States had identified the bowl. I sent color photographs to various museums, but to date it remains a mystery.

Intrigued by the bowl, and aware it might well be a hoax, I contacted the man who found it. Zé Lauro explained that he discovered it on top of a pile of "macumba jars". Macumba is the Brazilian version of voodoo. During various religious ceremonies small jars are flung into the sea with offerings in them. However, these jars are rarely more than a foot high, while those described by Zé Lauro were over a meter high with two handles on the neck. Drawings of the jars made by Lauro resemble Mediterranean amphorae. I spent six days diving with him in an effort to relocate the site; but underwater visibility was less than a yard, and he had only a vague idea of the exact

spot, so not surprisingly we failed to find it.

Nevertheless, after working with Zé Lauro, my initial suspicions were largely appeased. Like Teixeira, he sought neither publicity nor real financial gain for what he had found. In fact, both divers note bitterly that their discoveries have brought them nothing but grief.

When I first contacted Teixeira in April 1982 and expressed an interest in his find, he was so leery of publicity of any kind that he refused to talk. "All archaeologists," he said, "are out to prove I perpetrated a hoax." Eventually, he not only told me where he had found the amphorae but also gave me the names of others who had found intact amphorae on the site. He even gave me the film shot on the 1978 night dive.

Only one of the other divers agreed to meet; the others cited problems with the government as the reason for holding their peace. The second man showed me four intact amphorae, identical to those found by Teixeira, both with handles in place.

I approached the Museu de Marinha in Rio de Janeiro about exploring the site and was able, in September 1982, to begin an official survey under the museum's auspices. It was frustrating, difficult work because of strong tidal currents and an almost total lack of underwater visibility. An oil refinery has been built nearby since Teixeira dove there, and the constant spilling of petroleum had made the water not only black but sometimes gooeey.

The amphorae were found in a part of the harbor where modern vessels would not normally consider anchoring. There is a large basalt pinnacle which rises to within a meter of the surface; today a beacon is mounted on it to warn passing ships of the navigation hazard. It is possible that the ship may have drifted across the ocean, with no one aboard alive. However, it would be an unlikely coincidence for such a vessel to have foundered in a harbor, and well within a river estuary at that.

The threatening rock—called *Xaréu*, Brazilian for a kind of jack mackerel, because of the many game fish that school around it—slopes away to a base approximately 100 meters in diameter at a depth of fifteen meters. Many other rocks, some over five meters high, surround the main spire. On three sides of the base, the bottom drops off to twenty-five meters; the harbor floor consists of about half a meter of coarse sand over one to two meters of soft mud, underlain by mud of a harder consistency up to fifteen meters deep.

To date I have spent close to 200 hours surveying the site, and more must be done before any excavation can begin. I located

several hundred sherds, including the necks and handles of at least twelve amphorae. I found almost all of the them on the south side of the peak where divers had found intact amphorae in the past. Smaller sherds were embedded in rock near the top of the peak. I found two halves—the top of one amphora, the bottom of another, or possibly parts of the same one—attached to the base of the rock by coral growth. I also located ceramic sherds of smaller jugs and plates, as well as a circular stone with a center hole resembling a grinding wheel, which may have been a small anchor.

In December 1982, Dr. Harold Edgerton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducted a three-day sonar search of the area in an effort to locate any wooden remains of the ancient amphora carrier, if such a ship existed in the first place. Dr. Edgerton reported: "Two buried targets were located below the sea floor which produced sonar records such as can be expected to result from the disintegration of ancient wooden ships. If these two targets are indeed parts of the Roman sailing ship, it would appear that after hitting the dangerous high pinnacle of rock, the ship broke into two or more pieces. The largest piece (target one) drifted off to the north-northeast before submerging, which could be expected since the prevailing wind blows from the southwest.

"The smaller section (target two), which might be the stern of the ship, slipped off the pinnacle top and slid down the south side of the rock. The scatter pattern of amphorae sherds suggests that this occurred. The fact that intact amphorae have been found on the surface of the sea floor over the top of both buried targets indicates that the targets may possibly be the Roman ship.

"However, there is always the possibility that both targets are more recent shipwrecks and that the amphorae were deposited over the targets by tidal currents or when snagged in fishing nets. A proper excavation of the site may resolve the matter."


SHORTLY AFTER EDGERTON'S visit the Portuguese and Spanish governments expressed great concern to the Brazilian government over the possibility that there might be a Roman ship found which would displace Columbus and Cabral as discoverers of the New World. Then the Italian ambassador to Brazil indicated that if the ship were Roman, the Brazilian government would be obliged to extend immediate citizenship to all Italian immigrants as descendants of the Romans, just as they now make Portuguese immigrants citizens without the long, tedious process others must undergo. The

Brazilians countered by claiming that the wreck was not Roman but Phoenician, and the local press has continued to refer to it as a Phoenician wreck.

When I returned to Brazil after Christmas, university students were actually picketing the United States consulate in Rio de Janeiro with placards saying, "Cabral Si! Marx No!" I requested permission from the Brazilian authorities to bring in a team of European and American archaeologists to help determine the nature of the site. Permission was denied, and my license to continue working was cancelled. Several days later a large dredge boat covered the entire site with mud and silt to prevent, so the authorities said, "others from plundering it".

More than a year has passed since I last worked on the site, a time of great frustration. Requests for permission to continue work on the site have been met with refusals. I have been told the whole subject is too controversial and that Brazil would not benefit from further investigation.

Until further research is done, I cannot state with any certainty that there is a Roman ship in Guanabara Bay. At this point, however, I feel sure this is not a hoax. Dr. Elizabeth Will of the Department of Classics at the University of Massachusetts has identified the amphorae as from the third century A.D., "apparently manufactured at Kouass, the ancient port of Zilis (Dchar Jedid), on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, southwest of Tangiers." The archaeologist who had conducted excavations on Kouass, Dr. Michael Ponsich, agrees with Dr. Will on the origin of the amphorae.

The conjunction of the ancient artifacts and the buried targets Dr. Edgerton disclosed pose a tantalizing question. In the last century alone, at least 600 forced crossings of the Atlantic by sailing ships were recorded. The narrowest passage across the Atlantic is from Africa to Brazil. Modern sailing ships often make the crossing in eighteen days. If a storm-blown Roman ship found itself on the coast of a distant unknown land, I doubt Columbus or Cabral would be surprised, and certainly such an event in no way detracts from the importance of their later epic voyages. I hope one day soon to be in a position to tell the next chapter in the story of early transatlantic adventures. 

Robert Marx has worked on marine archaeology projects all over the world and has written many books and articles on early explorers. He intends to build replicas of Columbus's ships and cross the Atlantic with them in 1992.