

THE IMPACT AND EXTENT OF LOOTING AND COMMERCIAL INTERVENTIONS - THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE AND THE PLANNED PORTUGUESE / SPANISH COLLABORATION ON THE NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL ROSARIO

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In May 2007, the largest and most valuable shipwreck treasure in history - a seventeen-ton haul of 500 thousand gold and silver coins, copper and tin ingots, and other commercially valuable objects - was raised by the US Company Odyssey Marine Exploration from the bottom of the sea of the Portuguese Contiguous Zone. The cargo was later found out to have been recovered from the wreck site of the Spanish frigate Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes, sunk by the British in 1804.

The Black Swan case, as this affair became known in the media, is a good example of how a thin slice of Humankind’s maritime history, no larger than 300 years, is targeted by commercial companies - with Iberian ships being the main targets for plunder and destruction. As such, the decades-old archaeological adage that states that “we now know more about Roman shipbuilding than we do about the ships of Discoveries” still rings true.

In an age where public perception is everything, the lack of an appropriate and coordinated management plan of the Iberian underwater cultural heritage sunk in Portugal and Spain coastline, hinders nautical archaeologists efforts for archaeological research, conservation and dissemination of knowledge. As such, the authors will bring insight into the formulation of an Iberian co-directed project that aims, amidst other scientific objectives, for the first archaeologically controlled survey of a treasure ship – in this case, a Spanish nao lost in Portuguese waters.