

# Keynote Address

■ PROFESSOR DR. GEORGE F. BASS ■

It is fitting that we meet here today in Lisbon to begin this International Symposium on the Archaeology of Medieval and Modern Ships of Iberian-Atlantic Tradition – fitting because we meet in conjunction with the Lisbon International Exposition, EXPO'98, with its theme: The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future. Fitting because we meet on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula. And especially fitting because we are in Lisbon, in Portugal, with its glorious history of naval power, where modern oceanic voyages really started.

I can speak for many of us from other countries when I say how pleased we are for the opportunity to have already seen the new Portuguese National Center for Nautical and Underwater Archaeology, and now to be able to talk to and learn from both old and new colleagues in a city of such historic importance. For making all this possible we are grateful to the hard work and generosity of the Ministry of Culture, the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology, the Portuguese Commissariat at EXPO'98, and the Academia de Marinha, with a special word of thanks to the National Center for Nautical and Underwater Archaeology, and to the untiring Francisco Alves for the enormous task of coordinating it all.

I suppose I was fated to be here before you, in this auditorium of the Portuguese Naval Academy, because I grew up in a house near our U.S. Naval Academy, where my father taught, seeing daily on the wall of our living room a painting of Bartholomeu Dias rounding the tip of Africa. But I'm a Bronze Age specialist, not a post-medieval archaeologist, and, further, I am not sure that I could distinguish a mast from a keel on the seabed! So why was I asked to make these opening remarks? Perhaps because if one lives long enough, people will think you have something wise to say. More likely it was because my excavation of a seventh-century Byzantine shipwreck at Yassiada, Turkey, was the first underwater excavation to show that it was possible to reconstruct an entire ancient ship, with great accuracy, from its scanty seabed remains. But it was my colleague of thirty-seven years, Frederick van Doorninck, who did the actual reconstruction, writing his doctoral dissertation on the hull when we were fellow graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1960's. Overly modest, van Doorninck deserves full recognition for this groundbreaking work in creating true Nautical Archaeology, just as he is even now setting a new standard for how iron anchors should be studied.

I suppose I'm standing here also because I started the first academic program at least in the United States, devoted fully to Nautical Archaeology, the archaeology of ships. But there it has been my colleague of thirty-five years, Jr. Richard Steffy, followed by his student, Fred Hocker, who have trained a generation of archaeologists from around the world in the history and theory of wooden hulls, and how to deal with what I once would have thought was little more than kindling wood for the fireplace. I am so pleased that one of your own, Filipe Castro, has seen fit to enter this academic program.

Now that I have revealed my ignorance of the wooden containers for the things I study, the contents of early ships, let's think about the Symposium.

In 1972, when I published *A History of Seafaring Based on Underwater Archaeology*, the chapter with probably the least archaeological basis was that on early ships in the New World, by the late Mendel Peterson. Later in that decade, when I was raising money for Don Keith to excavate the early sixteenth-century Iberian wreck at Molasses Reef in the Turks and Caicos

islands of the Caribbean, I often explained that we knew far more about how the Greeks and the Romans built ships than we did about how ships were built at the time of Columbus. I used the same argument when criticizing the terrible destruction of early Iberian ships in the New World by treasure hunters. While I was excavating hulls of the fifth, seventh, ninth, and eleventh centuries in Turkey, I dreamed that someone, somewhere, would be able to fill in the gaps between late antiquity and modern times.

Wow! What an explosion of discovery there has now been in Portugal! One must walk carefully here, it seems, to avoid stepping on wooden hulls of that very time. Dig for a subway system, and you run into a fourteenth-century hull! Dig for worms for your fishhooks, and you run into a fifteenth-century hull! Be careful where you build a marina, or you'll cover up sixteenth- and seventeenth-century hulls, with perhaps a nineteenth-century blockade-runner on top! And that's not counting the offshore wrecks we've already been told so much about, like the *Nossa Senhora dos Mártires* that blackened nearby beaches with pepper, and whose timbers are even now being preserved.

Timbers. Wood. Lots and lots of wood. You are going to hear a great deal about wood, so let me comment on the people who used this wood.

I have come to Lisbon directly from Bodrum, Turkey, not far from the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Several coincidences between there and here helped me put some things into perspective as I thought about what I might say this morning.

Bodrum lies on a small peninsula with a summer population between one million and one and a half million. It does not seem crowded. A million people is really not that many – half the population of Lisbon today. How astonishing it would be, then, if the people of that small Bodrum Peninsula dominated more of the world and its trade than any other land. Yet, with the same population, that is exactly what Portugal had achieved by the middle of the sixteenth century. Think about that for a moment. Try to compare that tiny number of people with the population of any modern country or area with which you are more familiar.

Lisbon then had a population of only around 40,000, scarcely a third of the summer population of the actual town of Bodrum, which is quite small. I can imagine such a tiny place perhaps sending out the voyages of exploration of Dias and Vasco de Gama to seek new routes to the East in the late fifteenth century. But how in the world, in the next half-century, could a country with a population no larger than that of the Bodrum Peninsula send ships into the Indian Ocean, so far away that most of the sailors died before they could return home, and still break the Muslim monopoly on commerce in an ocean where the Muslims, as we say in English, “held the home court advantage”? How in the world could so few people establish and man ports and forts from Morocco to Mozambique and the rest of the east African coast all the way to Macao in China and Nagasaki in Japan? What extraordinary men they were! While we are here in Portugal, we should give some thought to these remarkable ancestors of our hosts, especially those who gambled, and lost, as they saw the landscape we have been seeing fade into the distance for the last time.

What drove such men? Let me return to Bodrum for a moment. There I often work in the Museum of Underwater Archaeology, which is housed in the magnificent fortress of St. Peter, a castle constructed mostly in the fifteenth century. Some of you have seen it. We call it a Crusader castle, but in reality the Crusades were over by the time most of it was built. The fifteenth-century construction was the work of the Knights of St. John of Malta, and was intended to help protect Christian interests in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, especially by providing shelter for Christians fleeing to Christian-held Rhodes from the Muslims of the interior of what is today Turkey. So the old crusading spirit lingered on, and was surely a factor in the contemporary Portuguese expansion into Muslim dominated areas. Another fac-

tor was African gold, and another, of course, was the profit to be made from bringing spices back from the East. But surely Portuguese mariners were after neither of these, nor African slaves, when they sailed west to discover Madeira and the Azores early in the fifteenth century. Had they heard rumors of these places, or were they simply adventurously curious? Curiosity, according to the contemporary chronicler Azurara, was one of the things that motivated the man we call, in English, Prince Henry the Navigator, who instigated the early fifteenth-century voyages of exploration and the establishment of the first fort in Africa. Curiosity, along with a desire for profits from new trade, a desire to learn how much of the Earth was still under the influence of the hated Moors, long since driven out of Portugal, a desire to convert non-Christians, and a desire to form an alliance with the mythical Christian kingdom of “Prester John”. Curiosity. The same kind of curiosity that brings us together here. It is not for profit, or from religious conviction, that we seek the remains of the ships that sailed around Africa to the Orient, that crossed the Atlantic to the New World. No. We do it out of curiosity.

How sad it is that there are still those who seek and find such shipwrecks purely for profit in the Straits of Malacca, gateway to the China Sea, controlled by Portugal for two centuries. But how fortunate it is that those seeking to make their fortunes from historical shipwrecks in waters off this coast, or around the Azores, are now prevented from doing so by your new law, Decree-Law no. 164/97, 27 June ... because the same curiosity that drove at least some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iberian mariners is what drives us today to learn about the ships they sailed — their construction, their contents, and their places in a broader history of seafaring.

If this brilliantly conceived conference lives up to its promise, it will be a true milestone in our study of the Iberian ships that shaped the modern world. Their importance cannot be overly stressed. I look forward eagerly to the next two days.

I began in Bodrum, and let me return there for my closing remarks. There I often show visitors through the great Castle of Saint Peter that houses the Museum of Nautical Archeology, and I usually stop in the English Tower, now restored as a fifteenth-century dining hall for special banquets. There, a bored knight once idled away his hours by carving a Latin inscription on the stone wall just inside one window overlooking the Aegean beyond. Below it is the date: 1492, probably the best-known date in the Western Hemisphere, the date of Columbus’s historic first voyage. My American guests stare at it for a long time. This year, however, for the first time I had a group of visitors from Brazil, and I apologized that I did not have the date for the discovery of their country. Don’t worry, one said, pointing to a fainter inscription very near the first — with the date 1500. So the great voyages of discovery to the New World from both Spain and Portugal have been properly commemorated in the Bodrum Castle. But it often strikes me that the knights who lived in this tower — had not the slightest idea of the momentous occurrences taking place on the other side of the world when they wrote those dates, and probably died without knowing. Yet now I have been in contact with some of the speakers by e-mail, getting instantaneous answers from Asia, Iberia, and North America, all only microseconds apart.

And something else has changed.

When Vasco de Gama returned to Portugal from his momentous two-year voyage, more than two-thirds of his men had died. But his voyage was considered a great success.

When Pedro Álvares Cabral returned to Lisbon from Cochin in 1501, more than half of his men had died. But his trip was again considered a great success.

Can you imagine how long a space program would last if more than half the people sent to the moon died before they could get home? The U.S. Navy abandoned its entire Sea Lab program when a single diver died.

I don’t know what this all means, but it is something to think about during the next few days while you are looking at slides of tons and tons of wood!