

This past fall, two announcements about Roman ships made the newspapers within a few days of each other. The first announcement came out of Mainz, West Germany, where, during the course of building a new hotel, workers discovered not one, but a fleet of wooden Roman warships. A total of eleven ships have so far come to light and been removed from the 15 feet of clay that preserved them from disintegration over the centuries. Archaeologists on the site are working on the assumption that they have found part of a shipyard run by the Romans until 400 A.D.

The ships themselves date from various periods of the Roman occupation. The earliest has been dated (by the use of dendrochronology, more popularly known as "tree-ring dating") to 81 A.D., while the latest vessels seem to belong to the late fourth century A.D. The vessels vary in size, with most being less than 30 feet long; one of them, however, is an impressive 70 feet in length. Made of German oak, the ships are thought to have been employed for local patrol duty, except for the large one which may well have served as a freighter. All the vessels are now being treated chemically to ensure their preservation.

The second announcement is rather controversial, and has created quite a stir in the archaeological world, mainly because of the alleged find site: the bay of Guanabara, 15 miles from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. According to archaeologist Robert Marx, tall jars (amphoras) of the type used in the Roman world in the 2nd century B.C. have been discovered in what he thinks is the wreck of a Roman ship. Marx speculates that this ship must have been blown off course, carried across the Atlantic, and eventually destroyed off Rio. He does not think it was an unmanned derelict, however, since its present position suggests to him that it was purposely navigated into a small harbour.

Marx, when first told of amphoras being found at the site, says he thought it must be a hoax; however, after diving at the site himself, he claims to have become a believer, and rejects the possibility that the jars were "planted" in recent times. He asserts that the jars are covered with barnacles and enclosed in coral, some of them being found beneath 5 feet of mud. Some of these have now been brought to the surface, and were photographed along with Marx for the New York Times of Oct. 10, 1982. The next step is, of course, to have these jars studied by experts in order to determine their age and origin.

Since Marx in the past has sought to prove a theory that Europeans managed to reach the Americas long before Christopher Columbus, some archaeologists have taken his announcement with the proverbial grain of salt. Others, however, have vouched for Marx's credentials and believe this site could rewrite history as far as the European discovery of the Americas is concerned. The wisest approach at present is to withhold final judgement, pending more details and studies. Marx himself plans further work at the site, if granted a permit to conduct an excavation; he hopes to map the site and explore it with sonar in search of any wooden remains of the supposed ship in which the jars were carried. Even the discovery of other Roman artefacts (such as tools or coins) would help build the case for a Roman ship in the bay. For, as Marx himself was quoted as saying, "If we only find amphoras, then I'm in trouble".