

Shipwreck salvor claims legendary emerald found

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — A shipwreck salvor says he has found a 964-carat emerald off the coast of Florida that he believes was once intended as a gift to Queen Isabella of Spain.

Victor Benilous, a West Palm Beach restaurateur and head of the Archaeological Discovery Ventures Inc., said Friday he was commissioned by descendants — now living in Argentina — of the Spanish ducal family Juana de Zuniga. He believes the gem is the legendary Isabella Emerald.

According to the reference book "Great Gems of the World," the Isabella Emerald dates to the early 1500s. Spanish explorer Hernando Cortes promised one of several big South American emeralds to the

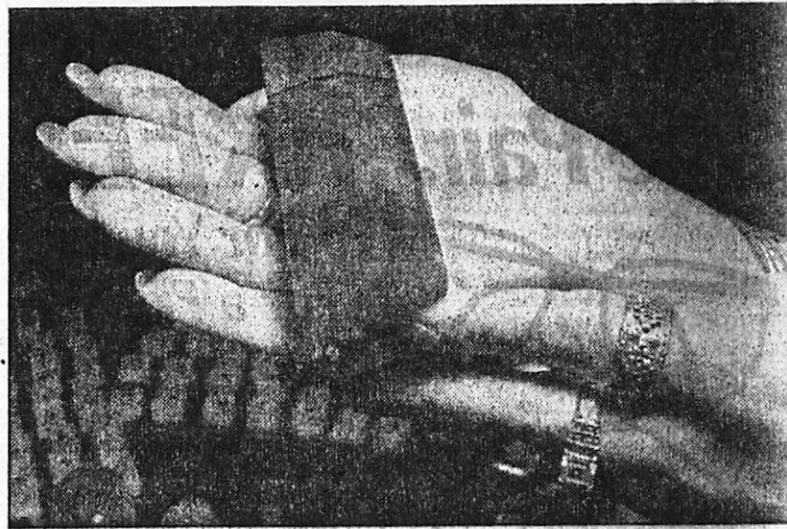
queen in exchange for support of his New World explorations.

Stories vary, but it was believed she never received the gem.

The Isabella Emerald was eventually bought by a wealthy family in the New World and registered as part of the cargo on a ship returning to Spain in the late 1750s, Benilous said. But the ship never arrived. The ship's wreckage was discovered last summer, and the gem was found among the treasures brought to the surface a few months later, Benilous said.

He said he didn't announce the discovery until Friday because he wanted to confirm first that the gem was the Isabella Emerald. He says he has research supporting that claim.

Independent confirmation of Benilous' find was unavailable, but Alex



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Victor Benilous said he found this 4-inch by 2-inch emerald off the coast of Florida and believes it is the legendary Isabella Emerald.

Busch, a gem expert, said he had examined the emerald this week.

"He's found probably the biggest emerald outside of a museum, it being close to a thousand carats," he said.

Benilous said he encourages skeptics to examine it.

He said he will try to sell the gem for \$3 million for the Zuniga family but added, "it really should be in a museum."