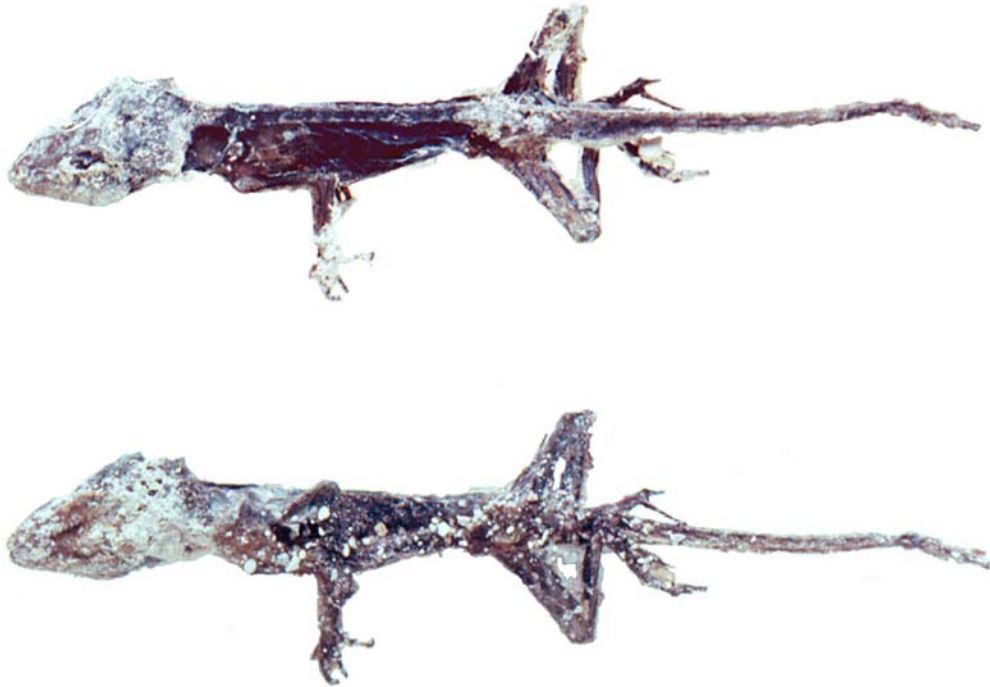


The Atocha Lizard

By Corey Malcom

Reprinted from *Navigator: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society*, Vol.21, No.1, January, 2005



Two views of a remarkably well-preserved anole recovered from the wreck of the *Atocha*.
Photos: Corey Malcom/MFMHS

The excavation of the cargo hold of the 1622 Spanish galleon *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* revealed a spectacular array of never before seen New World treasures, and captured the imagination of many around the globe as Mel Fisher finally found hard-won success. The significance of this great archaeological discovery though, was, and continues to be, revealed in many small and often unexpected ways.

In the summer of 1986, as detailed mapping of the site continued from the previous year, a distinct, small, hard “clump” was found in the silty-sand muck of the galleon’s bilge. It was initially thought that this might be the remains of a bag or sack whose contents could still remain inside. The shapeless mass was carefully recovered intact for its own, more-carefully controlled “sub-excavation” in the laboratory.

As the hard, outer shell of the mass was opened, less compact sand was revealed inside. Layer by layer this was scraped away, but nothing unusual became apparent. Suddenly, one of the interns working on the project shouted, “A lizard!” and there beneath his dental pick was a small, dried reptile very similar to the many commonly found in South Florida and the Caribbean. After the initial excitement, the lizard was carefully extracted from its sandy grave, cleaned, and photographed. The examination of the clump revealed nothing else except a single earthenware ceramic sherd and two wooden “carpenter’s chips,” probably left from shaping timbers during the

construction of the ship. Shortly after, the lizard was placed in the museum as a curiosity, and example of remarkable preservation.

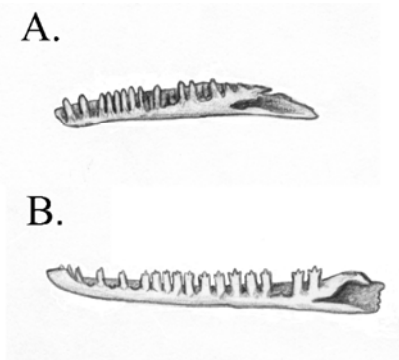
With the 1622 gallery currently being reinterpreted and updated to reflect an increased knowledge of the collection, it seemed appropriate to try to get a better understanding of the lizard. For 18 years its story has not been further explored. Staff from the Division of Herpetology at the Florida Museum of Natural History were contacted, and presented with the crazy-sounding story of this ancient, submarine lizard. The response was enthusiastic, and it just so happened that this creature filled a gap in their understanding of the migration of reptiles.

In December of 2004, Dr. Kenneth Krysko, Senior Biological Scientist with the Division of Herpetology, visited our museum and examined the lizard with the hope of identifying what species it might be, and assessing its significance. His examination, though somewhat limited by the glass vial in which the lizard is kept and displayed, revealed a number details and characteristics which will help with a specific identification. The lizard is very small – roughly 4 centimeters from its nose to the tip of its tail – and completely shriveled and dried. It appears that the lizard was already dead and dried before the ship sank, otherwise it would not have preserved in the marine environment as well as it did. Because of this “mummification,” it is remarkably intact, and things like its skin, claws and teeth are well preserved.

Dr. Krysko was able to tell from the narrow toe pads that this was not a gecko, which would have expanded pads. He also noted, “...[the] teeth are tri-cusped, especially near the back of the jaw” – this, along with the smaller toe pads, is a characteristic of the genus *Anolis*. Combined with its brown coloration and the last port of call for the *Atocha* being Havana, it his tentative conclusion is that the lizard is a Cuban Brown Anole.

Dr. Krysko specializes in the study of exotic herpetological species in Florida, and this particular creature introduces a new element to his range of studies – the Spanish colonial period. Before this example, the earliest documented Cuban anole in Florida was reported in Key West in 1877. Though this particular lizard did not reach shore, it certainly illustrates the much-earlier, potential role that Spanish ships played, deliberately or not, in transporting creatures from island to island, and continent to continent.

This is only a preliminary analysis, and Dr. Krysko hopes to return to Key West with a microscope and camera to study the lizard in detail. As he says of the humble little *Atocha* anole, “It is invaluable to science.”



One of the indicators for identifying the lizard is its tri-cusped teeth (B), typical of the genus *Anolis*.
Image courtesy of Kenneth Krysko FLMNH