

JANE MANN

THE STORY OF  
PORT-VENDRES



Les <sup>éditions</sup> Presses Littéraires



T H E S T O R Y O F  
P O R T - V E N D R E S

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Voilà les Pyrénées-Orientales !*

JANE MANN / KATE HARENG

*Absolutely almost all you need to know about the Pyrénées-Orientales*

JANE MANN / BRIAN COTTON

*Révolution de l'art en Roussillon*  
*Art revolution in the Roussillon*

*L'Histoire de Port-Vendres*

TRANSLATED BY JACQUES CHAULET

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## PREFACE

The story of Port-Vendres, told by our English friend Jane Mann, gives us, doubtless, a different vision of the story of the « City of Venus » than one a native Port-Vendrais might have written.

Made welcome in Port-Vendres, Jane has been able to observe the town and find traces of its history since its distant beginnings.

She has proved the love she has for Port-Vendres by spending her time seeking out as many details of its past as she could find.

I am very grateful to Jane for this investigation into Port-Vendres' past that helps us to look into its future. Port-Vendres has been a welcome harbour to all boats, from the most ancient to the most modern, as well as to those who sailed on them. Its quays have always provided friendly shelter to lost and exiled seafarers.

Through this book we can glimpse the Port-Vendres of the future, open and welcoming, mirroring as it does, the rich culture of the Mediterranean basin.

Thank you, Jane, for this beautiful book

*Voire maire  
de boue.*  


J.-P. Romero  
Mayor of Port-Vendres





## INTRODUCTION

One autumn day, I entered a small building next to a modest park whose tall palm trees overlook the fish market and boat repair yard of Port-Vendres. It was once the town abattoir. From it blood used to run down the cliff into the sea. My neighbours had told me how they swam in the waters of the bay, how they saw shadowy remains of great temple columns before the waterside was filled to create the quays. Now, in the old abattoir building, carefully labelled, stacked on shelves, piled on the floor, leaning against the walls are rows and rows of Roman amphorae.

"These were for wine, these for oil, these for salt fish."

Some of their ceramic or cork stoppers are still intact. Out of one of them a few papery scales, like so many long dead flies, were taken, placed in my hand.

"Sardines from the 1st century AD".

I stared at them for some time, mind whirling, then put them back.

Returning to my house on the other side of the park, I pass the memorial to the young combatants who embarked from Port-Vendres between 1952 and 1962, 30,000 of whom never returned. End of French colonial rule in North Africa...

From my terrace I survey the entrance to the port and the lighthouse of Fort Fanal, built in the mid sixteen hundreds by Vauban, Louis XIV's military genius. Many believe it stands on the site of the Temple of Venus from which Port-Vendres gets its name. Certainly the coastal trader bearing the amphorae of the abattoir would have passed beneath its rocky promontory before foundering in the bay below my terrace.

Not a bad place from which to piece together the story of the small Mediterranean fishing port I regard as my home.

## ANCIENT HISTORY

Somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and fifty million years ago tectonic plate movement caused a chain of mountains to be pushed up between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Where they dipped down into the Mediterranean, almost on the current border between France and Spain, a small deep-water harbour was formed. Rocky headlands embraced the inlet creating a naturally safe shelter.

The town that grew up around it was called Pyrene and it was from that small town that the mountains took their name.

In the mythical version of the same story, Pyrene is the beautiful virgin daughter of Bebryx, king of the Bebryces. Hercules, during the course of his Labours, was passing through the kingdom of the Bebryces en route to steal the magnificent oxen of a fearsome, three-headed monster-king named Geryon.

While enjoying the hospitality of King Bebryx, Hercules became much enamoured of Pyrene. One evening, overcome by lust, he raped the beautiful princess before continuing on his way. When the distraught maiden gave birth to a serpent, fearing her father's wrath, she fled to the woods. There, she poured out her tale of woe to the trees. Her lamentations were overheard by wild beasts. They tore her to pieces and devoured most of her. (There is no record of what became of the serpent).

Hercules, following his victory over the monster Geryon, returned, found the girl's lacerated remains and was filled with remorse. He laid her to rest, creating with his own hands a mausoleum of gigantic rocks. By the time he had finished, a long chain of mountains had been formed, his weeping filled their lakes, his heartbroken cry of "Pyrene, Pyrene" echoed their length and breadth and, for the rest of time, the Pyrenees have stood in memory of his lost love.

From the fall of Troy and Homer's *Odyssey* onwards, Greek myths and legends, full of danger and adventure, of heroes and monsters, of singing sirens and distressed damsels, have inspired travellers to set out to explore the unknown seas. Carrying with them their gods and their goods, fact and fiction blended seamlessly as the intrepid voyagers attributed the legends' mythical settings to the ports they visited on the far-flung shores.

The earliest known Roussillon inhabitant was the Tautavel man who, some 450,000 years ago, left evidence of his lifestyle in a cave now known as *Caune de l'Arago*, outside the village of Tautavel in the Agly valley. He was an extremely early version of *Homo erectus*, one of the earliest of the Neanderthals, thus making the Roussillon one of the first regions of Western Europe to be inhabited by man. From his vantage point of the *Caune de l'Arago* he would have surveyed and hunted moufflon, bison, reindeer, lynx, rhinoceros, panthers, hyenas, bears, lemmings and hamsters to name but a few of the animals whose intestinal parasites have been discovered in his fossilized excrement. Birds were there in plenty as well: eagles, vultures, partridge. Mixed with the animal bones discovered are human ones, cut and fractured deliberately, leading one to suspect those early Roussillonais may well have practiced cannibalism.

Millennia rolled by and, from the Middle East, *Homo Sapiens* made his way across Europe, eradicating *Homo erectus*. He too was a formidable predator. Armed with increasingly sophisticated flint tools, slowly, slowly he morphed from hunter-gatherer to herdsman, from predator to producer. From the valleys of the Euphrates and the Jordan via Anatolia, Greece, Southern Italy, Sardinia and Sicily, the skills of cattle raising and agriculture spread and took root.

And so it was that the *Bebryces* and the *Sordes*, semi-nomadic Ibero Celtic tribes, settled in the Albères and near the coast around the port of Pyrene. In the first century AD the Latin poet, *Italicus*, alludes to an ancient people whose King was called *Bebryx*... It

seems the Bebryces and Sordes mingled with or took over from the Ligurians who inhabited most of the South of France from 1000 BC onwards. They survived by hunting, gathering, cereal growing, livestock raising, pottery making and the beating of iron into useful instruments. By 850 BC working with iron was a common skill among those early Catalans. Initially used for daily domestic and agricultural life, it wasn't long before tribal rivalry, not to mention the fending off of unwelcome newcomers, ensured that weapons of war competed with ploughshares in the ironmongery department.

The true site of the town known as Pyrene as well as the site of the Greek or Roman Temple of Venus from which, later, Portus Veneris took its name is a matter of conjecture much disputed by many learned scholars. Port-Vendres is not actually much mentioned in dispatches until the time of James the Conqueror in the thirteenth century. However, according to several very convincing arguments, it seems more than likely that both Pyrene and Portus Veneris were earlier names of the town we know as Port-Vendres.



*The Temple of Venus, Salle des Délibérations, The Town Hall*



*Greek Emporium ruins*

Strabo, the geographer, historian and philosopher of the first century BC, describes the Temple of Venus as standing on the last slope of Mt. Pyrene marking for Roman sailors the dividing line between Gaul and Iberia. Sadly, the remains of the temple have never been found but it is easy to imagine it dominating one of the headlands that protect the harbour, quite possibly where the Fort Fanal stands now. The *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a road map of the Roman Empire from the fourth or early fifth century AD would appear to bear this out. In 1881 a document attempting to identify the site of the temple tells of two ancient blocks of carved marble that could have fallen into Anse Gerbal from the cliff beneath Fort Fanal. There is, however, no archaeological proof of the legendary Temple of Venus supposedly erected by the Greeks in the seventh century BC.

Roads, before Roman times, were pretty minimal. Sea routes were by far the easiest way to transport goods and people (and armies). As exchanges between Mediterranean peoples increased, boats became swifter and more sophisticated. And, as trade increased, so the culture of the East travelled west. The early merchants,



*Amphorae roman*

notably the Phoenicians, brought their alphabet, their religion and new art forms to the coastal towns they visited all around the Mediterranean.

From the sixth century BC, Port-Vendres was used by Phoenicians, Etruscans and Greeks as a welcome staging point between Massalia (ancient Marseille) and Emporion (Greek for "market", now known as Empuries) on the bay of Roses. (Emporion is the only Greek colony in Spain of which firm evidence exists). It was a flourishing city. Greek culture and civilisation blended seamlessly with the trading activities of the port.

Both Greek and Etruscan merchants recorded their transactions. A fifth century BC lead plaque, discovered in the ruins of Pech Maho, a pre Roman fort in Sigean, near Narbonne, was used first by Etruscans and then re-used by Greek businessmen. One side, written in Etruscan, refers to business in Massalia. On the other, in Greek, is recorded the purchase of some boats from the port of Emporion.

From the sixth to the third centuries BC, Illiberis (Elne) with Ruscino, the largest local towns, had developed swiftly, both agriculturally and economically. Collioure with Port-Vendres was their closest port.

Amphorae filled with wine from Italy, Greece, Spain and the Balearic Islands as well as Etruscan ceramic tableware were traded.

The Latin geographer Rufus Avienus wrote of Pyrene's harbour as being frequented by the Massaliots, the folk of the city of Marseille. He describes trade routes that covered not only the Mediterranean but also ran up the Atlantic coast via Cadiz to Britain. Wine and tableware were not the only exports. Fish, salt,

cereals and iron were exported. Cornish tin is recorded as being imported.

The Greek republic of Massalia also imported tin from southern Spain via Port-Vendres for use in the bronze foundries of the Eastern Mediterranean. The dozen or so coastal traders whose wrecks have been discovered in the waters of Port-Vendres and Cap Béar carried a cross section of most of the goods trafficked at the time. The descriptive title of the little trading post as a *Miroir de la Méditerranée* was not so very far fetched. Of course, until 1823, Port-Vendres was considered part of Collioure. It gets limited mention in any written documents. However, mentioned or not, it existed, its very anonymity making it a discreet and useful harbour, especially in times of war.

Originally begun as a peaceful trading port by the Greeks in 599 BC, by 540 BC, Massalia had become an important Mediterranean city and was administered as a republic. The Greeks brought to the Western Mediterranean their art and architecture, their literature, science, philosophy, mathematics and manufacturing skills. The effect of Greek culture on South Western France was described by the first century BC historian, Pompeius Trogus: "*... from the people of Massalia, therefore, the Gauls learned a more civilised way of life ... by them they were taught to cultivate their lands and to enclose their towns with walls. Then too, they became accustomed to live according to laws, and not by violence; then they learned to prune the vine and plant the olive; and such radiance was shed over both men and things, that it was not Greece which seemed to have immigrated into Gaul, but Gaul that seemed to have been transplanted into Greece.*"

However, despite learning from the Greeks the skill of viticulture, the local wines were decried by the first century AD Roman poet, Marcus Valerius Martialis, as being of "*poor quality*". If Marcus Valerius could taste the wines produced from Port-Vendres vineyards today he might well change his opinion.

The Carthaginians who succeeded the earlier Phoenicians were impressive merchants, trading and interacting closely with the



*Greek harbour wall, Empuries*

Iberian and pre Catalanian peoples. Indeed by 400 BC the entire Mediterranean was well navigated by Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan and Carthaginian vessels. Nevertheless, the remoter peoples of the far Western Mediterranean were often the butt of jokes made by the more sophisticated civilizations of the Eastern shores. That being said, it was the “unsophisticated” Carthaginians, who were to be Rome’s greatest enemy and it was the three wars they fought over the hundred plus years from 264 – 146 BC that would bring Rome to centre stage in the Mediterranean.

At the outbreak of the first of the Punic Wars the Carthaginians were easily the more powerful both on sea and on land. However, thanks, amongst other things, to the cunning invention of a pivotal bridge allowing their soldiers to cross from ship to ship, the Romans were the clear winners.

The Second (218 – 201 BC) and best known Punic War involved the crossing of the Pyrenees and the Roussillon.

In the spring of 218 BC, Hannibal, one of the greatest military leaders the world has ever seen, set off from Carthage to attack Rome with his vast army of 90,000 foot soldiers, 12,000 horses and 37 elephants. After crossing the Pyrenees by the Col des Panisars near modern day Le Perthus, he was obliged to parlay with iberoceltic inhabitants of Illibris for permission to cross the Roussillon. This was only achieved upon payment of a considerable toll.

He marched his army the length of the South of France, crossing the Alps by a route so difficult it was not even defended. However he never took Rome.

He returned to Carthage.

By the end of the third Punic War, 146 BC, Carthage had been destroyed, 200,000 of its inhabitants had been massacred and 50,000 had been sold into slavery.

Rome had become a major Mediterranean power.



*The Romans – The great tapestry of Port-Vendres*

## PORT-VENDRES IN ROMAN TIMES

In 122 BC the Romans set off to take present day Provence. Roussillon was conquered soon after and would remain Roman until the Visigoths took over.

Soon they were building the impressive Via Domitia just inland from the coast, regularizing and paving the route taken by both Hercules and Hannibal.

Stretching from Rome to Cadiz, it was the first of the vast network of roads built by the Romans in France.

We still call it the Via Domitia. It is also known as the A9.

The town of Narbo Martius (Narbonne), established in 118 BC, perfectly placed at the junction of the Via Domitia and the Via Aquitania, became the capital of Roman Gallia Narbonensis. The Romans described the local Celtic tribes as Gauls and the Gallic tribes did not make it easy for the Romans.

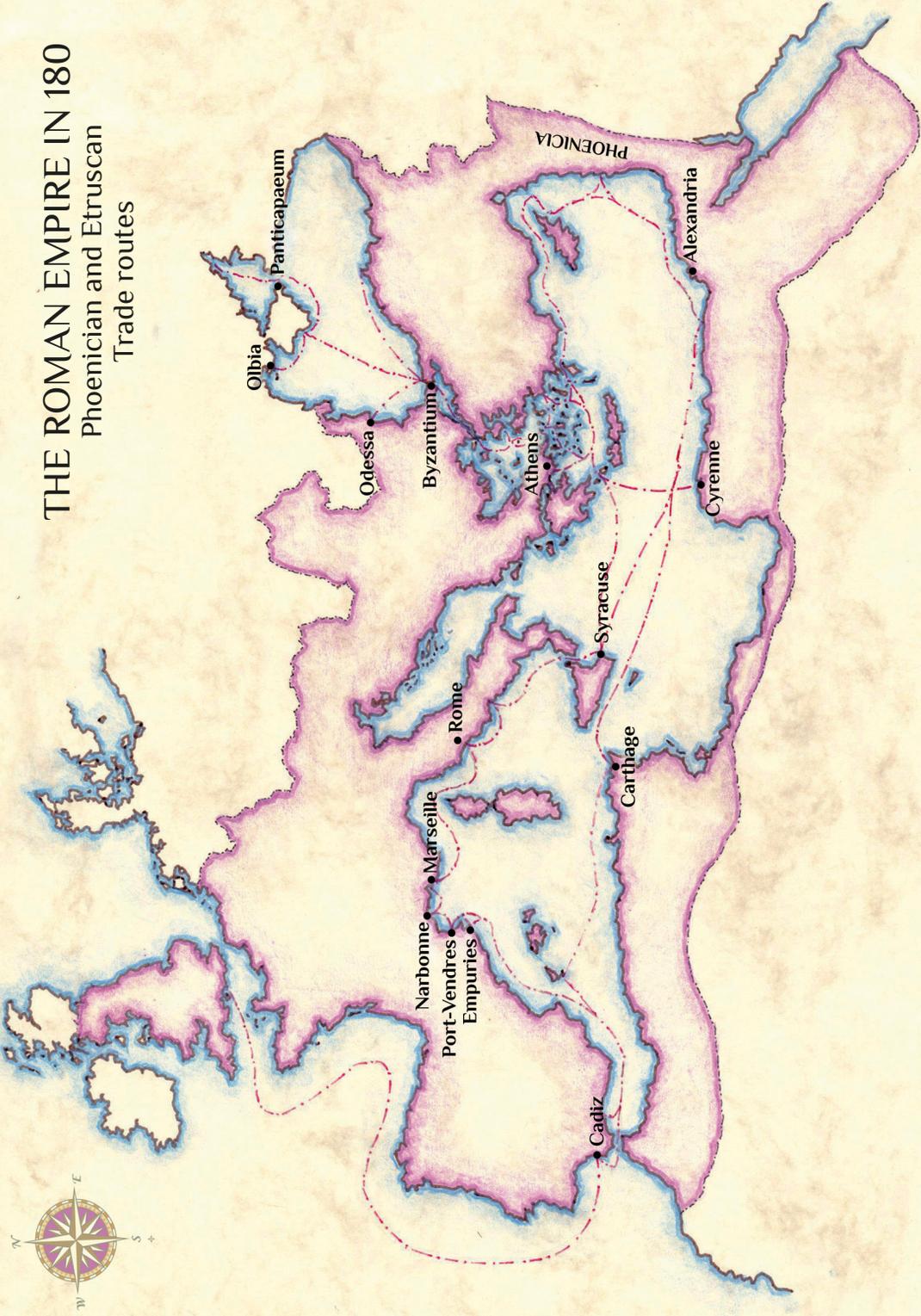
They were annoyed at the hold the Gauls had over local commerce and considered them to be barbarians, bloodthirsty hooligans

*Fort Bellegarde from the Via Domitia*



# THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN 180

Phoenician and Etruscan  
Trade routes



with great physical strength and of an uncontrollable warlike temper. They disapproved of their custom of human sacrifice. Roman artists of the day depicted Gauls as fighting naked but for round shields and mud-stiffened hair-dos, whilst the Romans wore armour, carried oblong shields and sported crew cuts.

Nevertheless, the Romans took control of present day Provence and Languedoc / Roussillon and remained in power until the Visigoths swept in some five centuries later.

The Roman economy depended on their vines, olives, figs, fishing, salt farming and mining. Trade in copper, iron, lead, pottery and glass flourished.

The Romans established the laws and were very keen on raising taxes. Maintaining a military presence was important to them. Throughout the Punic Wars their navy had been massively enlarged, indeed their naval battles against the Carthaginians were the greatest in Antiquity resulting in tens of thousands of casualties.

The Romans, a land based nation, had the best wagons and the best roads. The Greeks, with their multitudinous islands, had always been a seafaring power, armed with the best vessels and the best harbours.

At this time the Greeks still ran Massalia as a Republic. Some seventy years later, the Greeks and the Romans fell out and Marseille too came under Roman control.

It remained the last bastion of Greek culture in the west. However, stripped of its treasures, its fleet and trade severely reduced, Greek Massalia had lost its autonomy as a free city. Its name was changed to Massilia.

Despite the misfortunes of Marseille, trade all around the Mediterranean continued to increase and the shipping volume of Roman times was perhaps not reached again until the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was during Roman times that Port-Vendres,

now definitely Portus Veneris, enjoyed its first golden age. Indeed, with Rome in charge politically, with Hellenistic culture expressed in either Greek or Latin, with traders criss-crossing the sea without interference and with most of the peoples sharing even their gods, the entire Mediterranean world enjoyed a bit of a golden age.

While the Via Domitia crossed the Pyrenees at Le Perthus, the Roman Littoral road split off at Elne and passed through Collioure, Port-Vendres and Banyuls-sur-Mer before heading off over the Col de Banyuls into Spain.

On the rocky spine that forms the boundary between Port-Vendres and Collioure, a tomb existed on which were engraved the initials : VA.F.P.P.M.J.V.S.C.L.I.E.E.M. : *Valerius Flaccus prefectus presidii monumentum jussit vivis sibi condi loco intercepto et emunito* indicating that Valerius Flaccus was commandant of a fortress well placed to overlook Collioure and Port-Vendres. It is impossible to find the tomb now as the initials have been effaced and all that remains is a pile of stones much like many other piles of stones hidden in the undergrowth of cactus, rosemary and wild lavender. The view is still spectacular.

The harbour of Collioure, with its slowly shelving bottom and that of Port-Vendres, so much rockier and deeper, were used for differing purposes. Collioure in those times was mainly commercial while Port-Vendres harboured bigger and bulkier military vessels as well as the coastal merchant ships.

Good use was made of the harbour of Port-Vendres to rally the Roman fleet of triremes prior to disembarking their army in Emporion (Empuries). Triple decker warships, they held the key to sea power for the ancient Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans. They were easy to manoeuvre, built for speed, and far faster than boats that ran only under sail. What a spectacle that must have been! Imagine Port-Vendres filled with dramatic warships, richly coloured sails aloft, triple rows of oars manned by slaves and carrying soldiers whose metal head-dresses and armour glittered

and glistened in the sun. The ships were designed for fighting at close quarters, the bows were strong, their powerful metal rams used to pierce the sides of enemy ships. Near the stern was a deckhouse for the captain, seats for the steersmen...

Collioure, Caucoliberis, was then and always has been, the richer and smarter town regarding Port-Vendres as its working class annex. Nevertheless, the importance of Port-Vendres as a haven for vessels redistributing goods picked up in Andalucia, Empuries, Languedoc and Provence between the first century BC and the fifth AD seems undeniable. The Roman provinces were developing fast. And, as they grew, so did their need for the base commodities of wine, olive oil, salt fish.

Lying halfway between the major distribution ports of Narbonne and Empuries, (the Roman city port replacing the Greek, Emporion), Port-Vendres was a welcome harbour in which to shelter from the vicious currents and fearsome winds that hurled themselves against the wild and rocky coast. But it was not always easy to enter. The boats, around 12-20 metres long, redistributing cargoes picked up from the warehouses of Narbonne, Tarragona





### *Roman Ballast*

and Barcelona, had to round the point of Cap Béar and make it to Anse Gerbal, the deepest and safest of the port's three inlets. This required great navigational skill and a degree of luck. Thanks to the unfortunate ones who did not make it we have a vivid insight into the commerce of the early Roman era. Many boats were smashed against the rocks on the southern side of the harbour. Badly damaged over the centuries, of those wrecks little remains. However, among the cargoes of the boats that sank in the sands of Anse Gerbal on the northern side and particularly that of the wreck of La Mirande, a coastal vessel of the first century, the amphorae were in amazingly good condition.

At the time of writing most of the treasure trove is stored in the ancient abattoir of Port-Vendres, next to the Square Henri Bès. The rows of amphorae, different shapes for wine or oil or salt fish, are all carefully labelled. In one, the papery husks of sardines from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD are easily recognizable. Large blocks of marble paving, protected for centuries by sand, are as smooth as the day they left the quarry. Others, sinking less completely, are encrusted with coils of sea creatures. Treasures remain: fragments of ornate cornices, used as ballast as goods were unloaded, small

decorated oil lamps, a dice used by sailors to while away the long coastal voyages, a small bronze rhinoceros, a cunning and perfectly preserved wooden carpentry tool for piercing and screwing, for all the world like an ancient marine "Black and Decker"...

Most of the recovered items have been collected and recorded by the team of ARESMAR (*l'Association pour les recherches sous-marines en Roussillon*). The collection is touchingly personal.



*A lucky rhino*



*Roman Black and Decker*

One wreck had a particularly varied cargo of goods from the Roman provinces of Baetica (now Andalusia) and Lusitania (now southern Portugal) in the first century AD. The usual wine, oil, salted fish were complemented by ingots of copper and tin from Extremadura Baeticara. Stamped 41, 42 and 48 (AD) the ingots illustrate the importance of tin and its exportation to Rome.

Many merchants would share the same vessel, often dividing their cargoes between different vessels so that a wreck would not wipe out their entire stock.

Two wrecks bear witness to the trade of goods from Baetica (Andalusia) and Arles sur Rhône. In fact, the treasures stored in Port-Vendres prove that the harbour was used at the very least as a landing stage for goods from the entire Mediterranean: oil lamps, decorated ceramic bowls, African kitchen pottery, wine from the Near East, glass from Egypt... All illustrate the commerce and distribution of objects from all over the Mediterranean before, during and after the time of the Roman Empire.

A magnificent *Centre d'Interpretation de la Mer* was promised at the annual New Year Greetings Ceremony in 2017. The DRAC (*Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles*) will take it in hand and the economic history of the Mediterranean in general and of Port-Vendres in particular from Roman times onwards displayed for all to enjoy near the Horseshoe Barracks on the Place de l'Obélisque.

Visitors will be able to imagine the merchants landing their goods on the Anse Gerbal, the warehouses surrounding the bay dominated by the Temple of Venus, Port-Vendres, once again, could become Portus Veneris.

However, it is also possible Port-Vendres may just have been a harbour allowing coastal vessels to shelter from dangerous seas as they plied their way along the Tarragona Empuries Narbonne trade route: a stopping off place for ships in difficulty, a few huts, a temporary haven, a warehouse, maybe a repair yard...  
The temple columns mere ballast.  
The temple itself merely a myth.

*Baelo Claudia, Beasica*

