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# **Reinvestigating the Wreck of the Sixteenth Century**

## **Portuguese Galleon São João:**

**A Historical Archaeological Perspective**

By

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## List of Abbreviations

AMAFA	- Amafa Akwazulu Natali ( Heritage Kwazulu Natal)
CSIR	- Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
HTM	- Historia Tragico-Maritima (Tragical History of the Sea)
QUADRU	- Quaternary Dating Research Unit
SAHRA	- South African Heritage Resource Agency

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## Preface

In 1488, acting on instructions from King John II of Portugal, Bartholomeu Dias became the first European to sail from the Iberian Peninsula to the southern tip of Africa. The rounding of the Cape of Storms, so named by Dias, was a momentous event offering Portugal the promise of a sea route to India. Unfortunately no log, no journal and no chart has survived of the monumental Dias voyage.<sup>1</sup> What is known of his voyage is a combination of references gathered from brief notes and charts. Nearly a decade passed before anything was done to exploit Dias's achievement. Wars with Castile and the death of the King delayed plans for an Indian expedition. When the Portuguese finally set sail for India, no other European power had tried to reach India before the Portuguese. Dias's expertise and knowledge of the conditions likely to be encountered during the first part of the journey had led him adapt the design of the traditional caravel, producing two ships which, although slower, would also be stronger and better able to cope with the demands of the journey. Dias however, was not given command of these two ships. King Manuel, who had succeeded to the throne in 1495, instead appointed Vasco da Gama to go in search of the legendary Christian Prester John and the much required spices.<sup>2</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1497 the two vessels, accompanied by the 50 ton Berrio and a supply ship, rounded the Cape and after a long and difficult journey reached India in 1499.<sup>3</sup> And so trade was finally established with India and China.

Fifty years later, in the middle of the sixteenth century seven homeward bound ships, inadequately surveyed and repaired in India and also fatally overloaded with

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<sup>1</sup> R. Burton, R. Cavendish and B. Stonehouse. *Journeys of the Great Explorers*. Hampshire, 1992, pp.50-55.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, Cavendish and Stonehouse. *Journeys of the Great Explorers*. pp.50-55; E. Axelson, *Dias and his successors*, Cape Town, 1988, pp.5-9.

<sup>3</sup> E. Axelson, *Dias and his successors*, Cape Town, 1988, Foreword.

trade goods from China and India, wrecked on or near the South African coast.<sup>4</sup> The frequency of shipwreck became such a big problem that a nautical expert was ordered to enquire into these losses and it was recommended that the coast of South Africa be closely explored and documented. This was done in late 1575 and early 1576.<sup>5</sup> It is these records that provide valuable information when doing historical and archaeological research on Portuguese ships wrecked along the South African coast. This particular study focuses on one of the numerous shipwrecks on the south-east coast of Natal, an area actually identified by Da Gama's party. They named the extreme south-eastern coastal region of South Africa 'Natal' because they passed it on Christmas Day. João de Lisboa who, as far as can be ascertained, sailed to India with Vasco da Gama, gives a very detailed description of the 'Terra do Natal' or land of Natal.

Note that the Terra do Natal has these signs: high-lying country, and toward the interior a ridge of ranges made up of large and small sections. Four of 5 leagues toward the north-east there is a valley of forest with great vertical cliffs after the manner of a river. And when this valley is to the north-west, above it is a cut in the ridge which has two or three small hills in the middle of it. The one in the middle creates a shady area, and about half a league in front of this valley there is a mount which lies north-west by north. At its foot on the north-east side is a plain of sand like a barrier, and two little black hills in the northern side. And you will see to the north-north-west a stretch of ridge with two sheer points, and in the north-east a small shaded area, and in front a high black ridge. To the north-east of this terrain it is green except for places that have small, low patches of trees. And from this valley to the south-west, there are some small banks, and above them rock cliff in the interior; and in the interior a little round hill and a long slender range of hills toward the south-west. Above this mount is a ridge with a plain of land that has above it two little hills that resemble round trees. Note that between this valley and this hill there are some very red banks that resemble hay and to the west-north-west of these banks you will see thicket of round trees.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J. Duffy, *Shipwreck and Empire*. Cambridge, 1955, pp. 26-35.

<sup>5</sup> Axelson, *Dias and his successors*, foreword.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

According to historians G. Bell-Cross and E. Axelson, there are two factors which suggest that Lisboa's Terra do Natal might start a few kilometres south of the Mtamvuna River at Port Edward. Firstly, it is in this region that the predominantly hilly and rocky coast of the Transkei gives way to sandy beaches so typical of present day Natal and therefore forms a natural topographical border. Secondly, the mention of 'red banks' suggests the area called the Red Desert located between Port Edward and the Mtamvuna River.<sup>7</sup> This area described by Lisboa is where the artefacts believed to indicate the wreck site of the sixteenth century Portuguese Galleon, the São João are found, as well as its survivor camp.

According to research to date, the only two mid-sixteenth century Portuguese ships which wrecked along the south-east coast of South Africa were the São João (1552) and the São Bento. Research done by archaeologists C. Auret and T. Maggs in 1982, established that the wreck site of the São Bento is located 300m west of the Msikaba River on the coast of Transkei. There is however much speculation about the actual wreck site of the São João and its location still needs to be confirmed.

The aim of this study is to establish whether the archaeological material located at Port Edward is connected to the wreck site of the São João. The first part of this reinvestigation comprises an in depth historical analysis of the primary and secondary research material related to the São João. Chapter one presents a historiographical discussion of secondary publications and research on the São João completed over a period of one hundred years. These include both historical and archaeological works. The second chapter focuses on the two major and most valuable narratives on the São João and São Bento contained in the *Historio Tragico-Maritima*. These are scrutinised for all possible clues relating to the fate and final resting place of the São João as well as the survivor camp.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The second part focuses on an archaeological assessment of the fieldwork material discovered at the Port Edward site. This begins with an outline of the archaeological methodology in chapter three. Again the paradigm of primary and secondary sources is used demarcating the difference between artefacts discovered earlier by other archaeologists as opposed to those discovered by the researcher during the Port Edward project. Chapter four discusses the porcelain, cornelian beads, cowrie shells, pepper, cannons and miscellaneous artefacts discovered and assesses the relevance thereof. Chapter five pursues the integration of the historical and archaeological components, which is in itself a relatively new development in South African maritime archaeology.<sup>8</sup> It considers the records and research of other Portuguese shipwrecks along the South African coast in order to extract more clues and comparative data. The purpose is twofold: one, to create a matrix regarding survivor camp characteristics, and two, to develop a virtual diagram of what the São João survivor camp could possibly have looked like. The sixth chapter takes this further by practically recreating three possible locations or virtual campsites for the survivors of the São João. Arguments to support and negate the proposed areas are set out, finally drawing up a comparative table which then indicates the most probable location. Hereby it proposes and presents a case study of a methodology for archaeologists when researching undefined or unknown sites. The thesis therefore offers an additional dimension to the field of historical archaeology, where not only are the two disciplines integrated, but a methodology is expanded which offers possible solutions to studies with inconclusive or disputable archaeological remains. The scenario thus created offers the researcher the option of delimiting the range of sites and thus a possible solution to ongoing research efforts.

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<sup>8</sup> E.J.S. Werz, *Diving up the Human Past. Perspectives of Maritime archaeology, with specific reference to developments in South Africa until 1996*. Cape Town, 1996.