

Chapter II

Using historical evidence as part of the maritime archaeological research

In this chapter, the importance of incorporating documentary evidence when investigating a maritime archaeological site (such as the one in Port Edward) will be illustrated in the discussion of the original documents and published accounts of the events surrounding the wrecking of the São João. The discussion is based on an examination of all available primary sources containing reference to the São João.

To a certain extent this thesis deals primarily with archaeological artefacts presumed to have originated from the wreck of the São João, which includes Chinese porcelain shards, cowrie shells, cornelian beads and cannons. However, attention is also given to documentary evidence as this provides valuable information with regards to the most important aspect of this study of the wrecking of the São João, which is the location of the wreck and campsite. Both the physical evidence and texts are the indispensable tools, the sources of information, by which the events relating to the wrecking of the São João can be reconstructed and are viewed as it were as “witnesses” to this past event.

The incorporation of historical texts in archaeological investigations determines the fundamental nature of the historical archaeological approach, which is the study of people of the past, their culture, achievements and sometimes, also the tragic events surrounding their lives. Archaeologist Barber states that one of the great advantages of historical archaeology is that the archaeological record can be enriched with other data sources such as the written and oral resources.¹

¹ R.J. Barber, *Doing historical archaeology, exercises using documentary, oral and material evidence*. New Jersey, 1994, p.5.

According to maritime archaeologist, Dr. Bruno Werz, historic-archaeological sources that can be used by historians and archaeologists alike have some general characteristics and may contain a wide variety of information regarding culture and events.²

For this reason, a variety of sources were consulted in order to obtain different types of information pertaining to the wreck. This was done to establish a more balanced and comprehensive impression of the events before and after the wrecking. The sources that were used in this investigation not only supplemented existing information on the location of the São João, but also verified, and in some cases indicated contradictions in research done by previous investigators. Factors that determined which sources were to be used depended largely on the nature of the research, the motivation behind the research and the availability of sources.

Documentary evidence was particularly helpful as the bulk of the archaeological material has been lost over the period of 450 years due to destruction, theft, and treasure hunting, as well as natural deterioration on the site. Because information contained in the documentary sources that were used for this investigation were also recorded with a specific goal in mind, it was important to investigate the intent of the composition of two narratives compiled in the *História trágico-marítima*. Research on the “Account of the very notable loss of the great galleon S. João” and the “Account of the loss of the Sao Bento” was firstly done to establish the origin, the purpose and the identity of the person responsible for their documentation and what information they contain. In the historical context this type of analysis refers to what is known as internal criticism.

To explain the concept of internal criticism, historian R. J. Shafer states that when working with authentic documents the researcher will be faced with both

² E.J.S. Werz, *Diving up the Human Past. Perspectives of Maritime archaeology, with specific reference to developments in South Africa until 1996.*

fact and fiction. According to Shafer the fabrication or distortion of events within documents is not always intentional and for this reason the researcher must use certain principles to determine the presence and degree of distortion.³ The first essential concept when analysing events within authentic historic documents is language. Thus words within the particular document must be studied within context and the literal meaning of words must be taken into account. This is not always possible since the document may be written in a foreign language, certain terminology is not in use anymore, punctuation marks may be absent or incomprehensible abbreviations were used. The author may also use words in an obscure fashion, to have an ironical or sarcastic meaning. Therefore when studying historical events described in documents it is essential to refer to dictionaries or other sources of reference.⁴ Secondly, time and place also contributes greatly to the author's interpretation of events. Written and spoken language may differ from place to place and may change over time where some words may change in meaning.⁵ In addition to the above stated rules, it is thirdly important to take the literal and figurative meaning of words into account, thus placing words and sentences in context with prior and subsequent events. For this reason the whole document must be studied, not only words and phrases within the document. Shafer lists the following as factors that may contribute to distortion of facts and events: ignorance, failing senses, cultural differences, a feeling of superiority and misinterpretation of events. Of this list, one or more factors may influence the author and distortion of events may be intentional or unintentional. Furthermore, Shafer states that intentional distortion may be the result of the following human or social desires: lust for money, power or the approval of others, political ambition, jealousy, fear or thoughtlessness.⁶

³ R.J, Shafer, *A guide to historical method*. Wadsworth, 1980, p.149; Barber, *Doing historical archaeology*. pp.8-9.

⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

The reasons for distortion or falsification of events cannot always be determined, but Shafer stresses that any researcher studying historical documents must use internal criticism to try and determine the amount of distortion.

To prevent restricting the interpretative value of the sources that were used, no division was made between the disciplines of archaeology and history. For this reason a historical archaeological approach was chosen, and therefore this study was done in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology in alliance with the Department of Historical and Heritage studies at the University of Pretoria, on an inter-disciplinary bases.

The História Trágico-Marítima

The Portuguese were one of the first European nations to carry out far-reaching voyages of maritime discovery and exploration. Because these voyages formed such an integral part of Portuguese society, the genre of world shipwreck stories had its modest beginnings within this culture. Some of the narratives on the theme of shipwreck were compiled in a series called *História trágico-marítima* (Tragical Maritime History or HTM)⁷. These narratives are important not only because of the symbolism of the theme within sixteenth and seventeenth-century Portuguese culture, and the fact that they focus on details of Lusitanian maritime practices during the period between 1550 and 1650, but also because they assist maritime archaeologists and historians in locating wreck sites. This source is particularly relevant in the case of the numerous shipwrecks along the notoriously dangerous South African coastline. Twentieth century researchers such as Duffy⁸, Maggs⁹, Ferreira¹⁰ and Esterhuizen¹¹ confirm this.

⁷ Duffy, *Shipwreck & Empire*. p. 21.

⁸ Duffy, *Shipwreck and Empire*.

⁹ Maggs, The Great Galleon São João: remains from a mid-sixteenth century wreck on the Natal South Coast. *Annals of the Natal Museum*. 1984, 26(1). p. 175

¹⁰ Ferreira, *Die Stranding van die São João*.

The editor of the *História trágico-marítima*, Bernardo Gomes de Brito, who was born in Lisbon on the 20 May 1688, compiled it between 1735 and 1736. Limited information exists concerning many of the authors in the *História trágico-marítima*, including the author of the story of the wrecking of the São João. However, it is believed that they were generally ordinary people, such as sailors, priests, pharmacists and passengers who were on board these ships.¹² For this reason, the stories told in the *História trágico-marítima* are simple and lack literary sophistication. Some researchers such as Duffy, see this as a positive aspect in that it implies a certain frankness and it affirms the authenticity of the stories.¹³

To study the narratives from the *História trágico-marítima* is a difficult task. Only a few of the original copies still exist and they were written in an older Portuguese dialect. Fortunately, in the early twentieth century, historian George MacCall Theal directly translated the eighteen narratives contained in the *História trágico-marítima* into English. His translations were compiled into a series called “*Records of South-Eastern Africa*” comprising of nine volumes, and they contain both the original Portuguese narrative as well as the English translation.¹⁴ It is a classical two part series and compilation of oral and written tradition on the theme of Portuguese shipwreck between 1550 and 1650. These two works are the most frequently used by historians and archaeologists studying the São João and São Bento¹⁵.

¹¹ Personal communication with Esterhuizen, 2002.

¹² Duffy, *Shipwreck & Empire*, p. 26.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Theal, *Records of South East Africa*.

¹⁵ Boxer, *The Tragic History of the Sea*; Duffy, *Shipwreck & Empire*; Theal, *Records of South East Africa*.

It is important to consider the intent of the composition of the two relevant narratives compiled in the *História trágico-marítima*, in order to establish whether the authors wished to report as truly as they could in terms of accuracy and coverage. Theal's English translations were scrutinised for this purpose. The narratives under investigation are of the only two mid-sixteenth century Portuguese shipwrecks along the east coast of South Africa: the São João (1552) and São Bento (1554). The São Bento report is regarded as the key to the location of the São João wreck site for two reasons. Firstly, it was written by Manuel de Mesquita Perestrello, himself one of the survivors of the wreck of the São Bento who had good powers of observation and some knowledge of navigation and secondly, because the survivors of the São Bento walked up the coast for a few days and reported that they came upon the remains of the wreck of the São João.¹⁶ Perestrello was later commissioned by the King of Portugal to explore and describe the whole coastline and was regarded by later researchers, such as Theal and Derricourt, as a reliable and professional witness within the limits and the constraints of the journey.¹⁷

Historian A. Marwick, affirms Shafer's theories that using documentary evidence, requires knowledge of external criticism, which determines the authenticity of the evidence and internal criticism, which determines the credibility of evidence (as discussed on pages 20-21).¹⁸ One needs to consider what motivated or compelled the survivor and/or author of these narratives to commit their stories to paper. According to Ferreira reports written by the survivors were presented to the Portuguese government.¹⁹ In addition, it is believed, that these records served as memoirs because the survivors simply could not forget the trauma associated with being shipwrecked in a foreign land, such as Africa, of which they knew very little. Therefore these narratives are

¹⁶ Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João*, p. 173.

¹⁷ Derricourt, *Early European Travellers in the Transkei and Ciskei*. pp. 278-279.

¹⁸ A. Marwick, *The Nature of History*, London, 1993, p. 127.

¹⁹ Personal communication with Ferreira, November, 2003.

basically representations of humankind's struggle for survival and a need to share experiences with fellow individuals. These two narratives, in particular, are however not a couple of impartial case studies that may seem stylized and similar to each other. They are individualized experiences written down according to a formula of exposition: the voyage, the wreck and the aftermath. The journalistic style of the first narrative, about the São João, can be attributed to the fact that it was not one of the survivors who committed the tragedy to paper.

Ferreira also questioned the credibility of the survivor account, but according to him it is relatively trustworthy because the relater was not aware of any other survivors to prove his narration as inaccurate.²⁰ The logic behind this argument is not clear, but perhaps Ferreira implies that not knowing whether someone will be able to expose the author as a fraud, was inspiration for telling the truth.

Language discrepancies and the selective thought process of the author and/or survivor may be blamed for the exclusion of detail or exaggeration of events and must be taken into account to prove that any distortion that occurs in the narratives was not done intentionally. These include events that seemed either insignificant or traumatic to the author and/or survivor. A good example of an exaggeration is where the author of the narrative of the São João writes of “tigers” that the survivors encountered on their trek to Mozambique:

and not a day passed but one or two were left on the shore or in the thickets...and were afterwards devoured by tigers and serpents, which are numerous in those parts...²¹ It would seem journeying through the thicket, there can be no doubt that he was devoured by tigers and lions.²² ...and anyone lingering behind was devoured by lions and tigers.²³

²⁰ Ferreira, *Die Stranding van die São João*, p. 12.

²¹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p.136.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

The incredible reference to tigers in southern Africa could be attributed to either language discrepancies, since the narrative was written in Portuguese and translated into English, or the ignorance of the survivors. It is, however, hard to determine whether the mention of tigers was meant literally, and that the survivors were unfamiliar with the animals in Africa, or whether in order to stir up sympathy for the survivors, the author exaggerated his interpretation of the events. It is, however, not a unique occurrence. According to the recent publication by anthropologist Carmel Schrine entitled *Tigers in Africa: Stalking the past at the Cape of Good Hope*, “early travellers’ records, whether English, Dutch or Portuguese, are stuffed full of lions and tigers.”²⁴ Boxer states that these references to tigers “should be understood as leopards, no doubt because tigers are not native to Africa.”²⁵ The implication here is that the latter reason, namely ignorance, is to blame for the reference to tigers, suggesting that the survivors did not intentionally exaggerate their experiences.

In this case the reference to “tigers” can also be attributed to the author and/or survivor adopting a patriotic attitude when writing down his story as it is believed that some artistic licence was used to suite the taste of the Portuguese Royalty. Since seafaring stories formed a part of Portuguese culture from the very beginning, it stands to reason that these two stories included in the *História trágico-marítima*, were also told to demonstrate the bravery of the men and their ships that followed the route laid down by Vasco da Gama to India in 1497, in order to advance Portuguese influence in the East.

Anthropologist Derricourt, who also used the shipwreck accounts of seven Portuguese shipwrecks on the Natal coast as a means to study patterns of

²⁴ C. Schrire, *Tigers in Africa: Stalking the past at the Cape of Good Hope*, Cape Town, 2002, p.4. As reference she cites R. Raven-Hart, *Before Van Riebeeck: Callers at South Africa from 1488-1652*, Cape Town, 1967.

²⁵ Boxer, *The Tragic History of The Sea, 1589-1622*, translators notes, p.26.

economy, material culture and trade, points out two characteristics that support the authenticity of the details found in these accounts. Firstly, the descriptions of indigenous communities encountered by the shipwrecked travellers are not exaggerated or inconsistent with knowledge gained from later research and other early explorers. The second substantiating point is the topographical detail that is often supplied by the authors. It is unlikely that these sometimes boring details were purposefully added, purely out of interest.

Or as Derricourt puts it

...it does not add to the literary style or appeal of the account and would only seem possible as an inaccurate addition if one were to credit the authors with the sophistication of a determined and dishonest wish to appear authoritative by a sprinkling of invented statistics and geographical data.²⁶

The references to geographic formations and locations have also been tested by Maggs and were found to be accurate.²⁷ A detailed discussion on Maggs' findings on the geography of the area will be dealt with as part of the critical evaluation of the survivor's accounts of both the São João and São Bento below.²⁸ Although some elements of exaggeration and distortion are evident in the two narratives, they are still viewed as the most valuable sources of information pertaining to the fate of the ships and location of the wreck sites. There appears to be no reason for the authors wanting to distort the account in terms of the events that led to the demise of these ships and their crew and the location of the wreck sites.

Thus for the purpose of this thesis the narratives of the São João and São Bento contained in the *História trágico-marítima* and translated into English by Theal, were viewed as a primary and most valuable source in locating the wreck site.

²⁶ Derricourt, *Early European Travellers in the Transkei and Ciskei*. p. 276.

²⁷ Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João* pp.183-185.

²⁸ Refer to section on the evidence as to the location of the wreck site contained in the account of the São João.

The account of the São João

Account of the very notable loss of the great galleon S. João. Wherein are told the great difficulties and pitiful events that befell Captain Manoel de Sepúlveda as well as the lamentable end that he, and his wife and his children, and all the other people met in the land of Natal, where they were cast away on the 24th of June of 1552.²⁹

The account of the wrecking of this sixteenth-century Galleon the São João with her cargo of Chinese porcelain, cotton piece goods, carpets, cornelian beads and precious stones, is regarded as the most famous of all Portuguese shipwrecks and in fact one of the much loved wreck stories in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe.³⁰

According to the *História trágico-marítima* and other historical sources, the São João left Cochin on the 3rd of February 1552 with a little more than half the amount of pepper the ship was able to carry.³¹ This was as a result of a war in Malabar that consequently resulted in Captain Manuel Manoel de Sepúlveda, an illustrious military hero in India, departing later than planned. According to the survivor account, the difference in cargo was made up with other merchandise which made her an exceptionally heavy laden ship when she left. This was a cause for concern with the crew not because *naos* and *galleons* often sailed out of port overloaded and so overcrowded with silks, spices and other precious cargo that no space remained for essential ship's supplies, but on account of being vulnerable to rough weather and piracy which they describe as the "the great risks to which heavily-laden ships are exposed."³²

At 32 degrees, on the 13th of April the coast of south-eastern Africa was first sighted. In the survivor account this is where the first mention is made of the

²⁹ Title directly translated from Portuguese in *História trágico-marítima*, I, pp. 1-38.

³⁰ Duffy, *Shipwreck and Empire*, p. 25.

³¹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p.129.

³² Ibid.

condition of the ship. Apparently their progress was also slow as a direct result of bad sails which is seen as one of the principal causes of the loss of the ship.

Sailing with favourable winds along the coast of Natal, the São João made it as far as 25 leagues³³ from the Cape of Good Hope. Here they encountered headwinds and it was decided by the Captain, the Master and the Pilot, because the ship was so large, long and heavily laden, to turn the ship around and sail with the wind.³⁴ Another consideration was the fact that the sails they had were torn and unreliable, but also the only sails that they had left. This change was made and they sailed along the coast until the Cape was 130 leagues away.³⁵ Again they encountered a head wind and were forced to turn the ship around again and sail before the wind.

It has been established that merchant ships travelling to and from South Asia were subject to a weather system, which determined their departure and arrival dates to and from Cochin and Goa. The monsoon weather system dominates the climate of a wide region, with seasonal reversals of direction. In South Asia this strong wind blows toward the sea in winter and toward the land in summer. Another weather system, the south-east trade winds that are the cause of great storms around the south-eastern coast of Africa, especially the Cape of Good Hope, blow during the winter months in the southern hemisphere and reach their peak in July. A comparison between figures 5 and 6 below shows how the ships pilots used these weather conditions to their advantage. For details on wind directions and trade routes followed by 16th century navigators (See Figures 5 & 6 on pages 30-31).

³³ 75 nautical miles or 120 kilometres.

³⁴ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 129.

³⁵ 390 nautical miles or 624 kilometres.

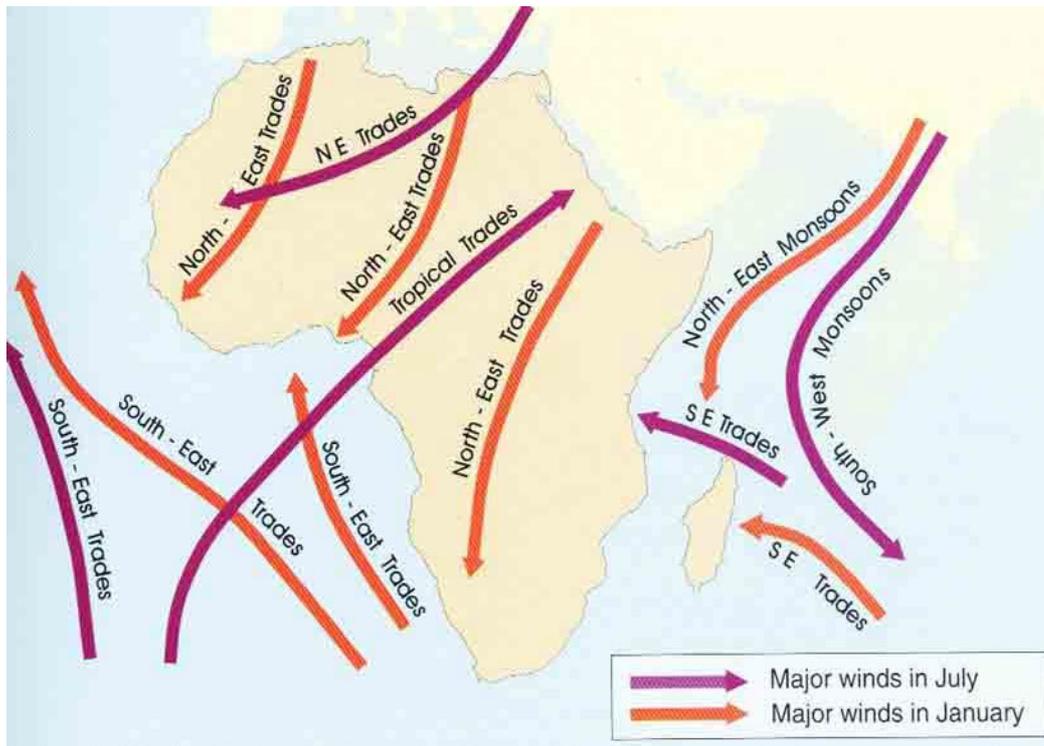


Figure 5: Africa: Major Winds.

From: C, Stuart & T, Stuart. *Africa a Natural History*. (Halfway House, 1995).

Numerous authors and researchers claimed that the Captain of the São João made a “belated departure” from Cochin. A reinvestigation of the departure date (February 3rd), established that leaving Cochin at this time was not uncommon. Instead of leaving at Christmastide or New Year, returning Indiamen often left India in February or even March and so rounded the Cape of Good Hope in May or June, when the winter storms had not yet reached their peak.

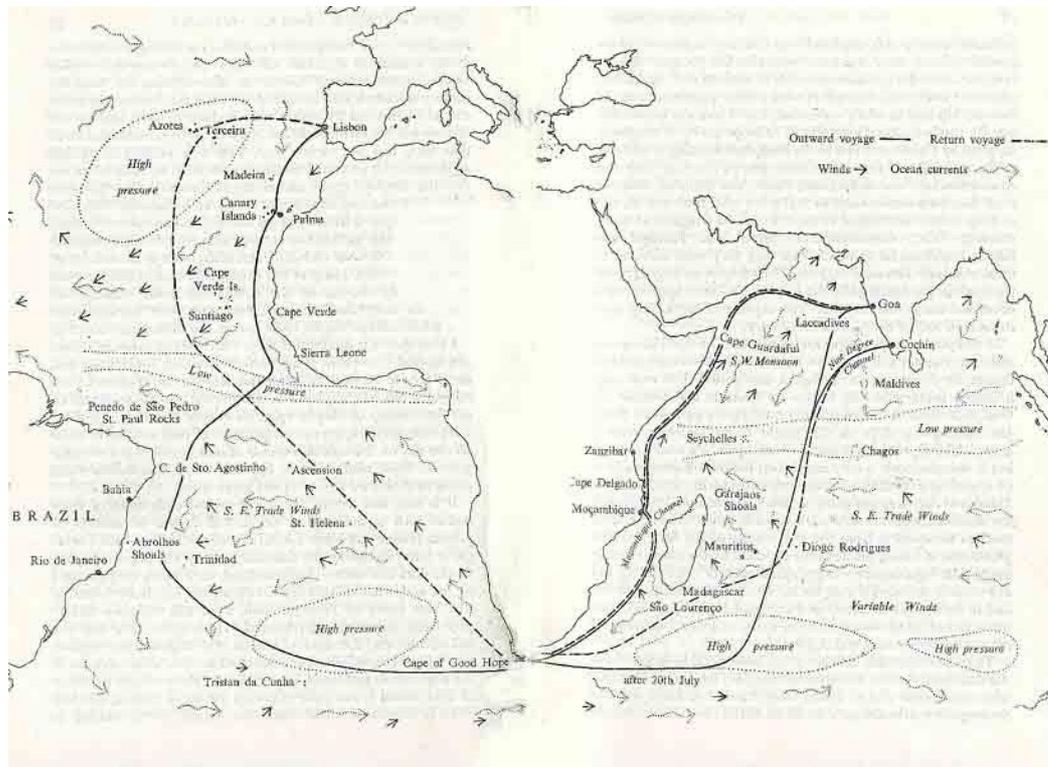


Figure 6: Major trade routes in the 16th century.

From: C.R. Boxer. *The Tragic History of the Sea*. (Hakluyt Society 1959).

Departures as late as in April and even May were not unknown.³⁶ The author of the narrative of the *São João*, mentioned that the pilot had great difficulty in manoeuvring the galleon.³⁷ The reason for this may be that while the French, English and Dutch attempted to build ships that were more stable in the water with a longer keel, a lower poop and forecastle and more effective artillery, the Portuguese, however, were consumed by greed and hence they continued to build ships that were larger and less manoeuvrable in the water.

³⁶ Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, p. 206.

³⁷ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 130.

The crew were concerned because other Portuguese ships, for example the São Bento, Aguia, Garça, São Paulo, Santiago, São Thomé, Santo Alberto and São Francisco, to name but a few, often sailed late, rotten, overloaded and inadequately stocked with the barest necessities and equipment.³⁸

The vessel apparently laboured in the rough seas, the reason given for this was that she was “heavily laden with boxes and other merchandise.”³⁹ They had no spare sails and those in use were torn and untrustworthy. And one of the reasons why they had not yet sailed around Cape Point was the time they took in unbending the sails to sew them. The shrouds and backstays were broken by large waves striking the ship abeam, meaning the waves hit the ship from the side and were so large they washed right through. For twenty seven days successive storms damaged the ship even further, as they lost the mast, topsail, mainsail, more shrouds and most important of all, the rudder. At this point Manuel de Sepúlveda and his officers decided to make a rudder as best they could and made some substitute sails from cloth from the merchandise. The rudder proved to be useless as it was too short and it was impossible to steer the ship with it.⁴⁰

It is clear from the above paragraph that the São João was not an easy vessel to handle. The reason for this may be that it was not intended to function as a merchant ship, but rather a war ship. Galleons were built longer and narrower than the actual cargo ships, used by the Carreira da India, called *Náos*. Galleons were fitted with moderate superstructures and were heavily gunned. Boxer points out, that galleons were frequently pressed into service as merchant ships and as previously stated, the tendency existed, amongst the Portuguese, to make the ships larger and larger.⁴¹ It is also apparent that the São João was one of the ships

³⁸ Duffy, *Shipwreck and Empire*, p. 51.

³⁹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 129.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴¹ Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, p. 207.

that left India overloaded and lacking the barest necessities of equipment, since they could not make a proper rudder replacement.

On the 8th of June they were in sight of the Natal coast and having no other choice, with the ship leaking badly, having no rudder, masts and only a few dilapidated sails, the Captain and his officers decided to let the ship drift with the current until they reached a depth of ten fathoms. On approaching the shore one of the ship's boats was launched to find a safe place to beach. A suitable area was located and the Captain attempted to steer the galleon to the selected area. They agreed that when the ship was anchored and after those on board had disembarked, as much provisions and arms as could be taken from the galleon would be taken ashore in the two boats. But, to save any other merchandise from the ship would only be to their detriment, for they feared that the indigenous people would rob them.⁴²

The date in June indicates the approximate time when the south-eastern trade winds start blowing and this would explain the successive storms that drove the galleon back to the Natal coast. The survivors' accounts were compared and were found to be in keeping with the Port Edward geography. The boat that was sent out returned and reported that only one suitable place, close by, could be found and that the rest of the coast consisted of 'sharp rock and great boulders which offered no hope of safety'.⁴³ On reinvestigating the Port Edward site it was found to be in keeping with Maggs' findings⁴⁴, that there is only one suitable landing place immediately north of the town of Port Edward. Today this place is used for launching fishing boats. North and south of this, the coast is endlessly rocky and thus inaccessible.

⁴² Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 132.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João* p. 183.

In seven fathoms the ship was anchored by one anchor and another that was carried to shore, which was “two crossbow shots away.”⁴⁵ According to the author of the *História trágico-marítima*, the Captain, his wife and children were put ashore with some twenty men to guard them against possible hostile inhabitants. The boat made several successful trips from ship to shore before it was destroyed in the surf. The São João was driven ashore with the remainder of the ship’s crew and passengers still on board. The galleon split in two pieces amidships and within an hour these broke into a further four pieces. This breaking up caused the merchandise and boxes to float to the surface and those crew members who still remained on the ship tried to get ashore using these as floats. More than a hundred passengers, slaves and crew were lost⁴⁶.

The loss of life was catastrophic, together with the cargo which was described by the survivors in the following manner: “...the merchandise in the ship, belonging to the king and others, was worth a million in gold, for a vessel so richly laden had not left India since it was discovered.”⁴⁷

There was no means by which the survivors could build a craft to take them to Mozambique as the São João was broken up completely by the waves. According to the survivor account: “In four hours there was not a piece of the galleon as large as a man’s arm remaining.”⁴⁸ Also according to Ferreira, they could not find any timber or other useful material to build a caravel.⁴⁹ The survivors formed a company of some five hundred, including Manoel de Sepúlveda, his wife and children, eighty other Portuguese and their slaves, André Vas the pilot, the master of the galleon, seamen and female slaves, Pantaleão de Sà and the rest of the slaves. The company remained on the shore at the wreck site for twelve

⁴⁵ Axelson, *Diaz and his Successors*. p. 51.

⁴⁶ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 134.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ferreira, *Stranding van die São João*. p. 28.

days to salvage anything useful thrown up on the beaches and to give the injured time to recover.⁵⁰ Of the total number, 180 were Portuguese. They had access to drinkable water and built a sort of fortification with chests and barrels and, unlike some other shipwreck victims, were apparently not disturbed or confronted by blacks from the surrounding area⁵¹.

Mention is, however, made of an incident where some local inhabitants appeared on a hill leading a cow. By making various signs the Portuguese encouraged them to come down and the Captain and four men tried to speak with them.⁵² According to anthropologist P.E.H. Hair who specializes in Afro-European relations, sign language was commonly used in the sixteenth century.⁵³ It was understood that the locals wanted iron and were willing to trade the cow for this. The Captain showed them some iron nails which appear to have delighted them and they came nearer to make the transaction. Just as they were about to do this, some five other local inhabitants appeared on the same hill and shouted at them in their language apparently indicating that they should not exchange the cow for nails. They withdrew taking the cow with them, without any explanation. The local inhabitants are described as “*cafres*” and according to Derricourt this is an indication that they were Nguni not only because of the appellation, but also because the Nguni and not the traditional San, possessed cattle.⁵⁴ Further south, other travellers and traditions suggest that the vicinity was only occupied by significant numbers of Xhosa people.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 134.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵³ Hair, Portuguese Contacts with the Bantu Languages of the Transkei, Natal and Southern Mozambique 1497-1650” in P.E.H. Hair. *Africa Encountered*. X, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Derricourt, *Early European Travellers in the Transkei and Ciskei*. p. 279.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

After twelve days of camping on the shore, the Captain called the people to a council, to consider what was to be done. They came to the decision to walk along the coast as far they could to reach the river discovered by Lorenzo Marques and the Portuguese outpost in Mozambique.⁵⁶ This journey took them as long as five and a half months to complete. On the 7th of July 1552 they set out from 31° and suffered greatly during their journey, with only twenty-five of the original five hundred that survived the wreck, eventually making it to Mozambique.⁵⁷

Historical evidence contained in the survivor account of the São João is sketchy, but it broadly points to the location of their land fall as somewhere near the coast of the Transkei just south of 31°. This conclusion was arrived at if one takes the distance stated⁵⁸ the period of the journey given⁵⁹ and an average realistic travelling distance of 20km per day into account. During the first month they estimated that a distance of about 100 leagues (592 km) was covered. This included deviations they made to cross over the larger rivers. They reported that no other people were met during this journey and the only food they had was a bit of rice taken from the ship and wild fruit they found in the thickets. They first lost twelve people of the company, including an illegitimate son of Manuel de Sepúlveda and the slave who was carrying him. They were left behind because they were too weak as a result of hunger to continue with the journey. When the Captain learned that his son was left behind he was devastated and offered two men five hundred cruzados to return and find him, but no one would accept the offer for they feared for their lives. The Captain was therefore forced to abandon his beloved son. And the author says here: “By this we may see the sufferings

⁵⁶ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 136.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Over 300 leagues or 1080 km including deviations along the coast to the river discovered by Lorenzo Marques the Limpopo.

⁵⁹ Five and a half months.

endured by that gentleman before his death.”⁶⁰ After this, the first mention is made of skirmishes between the survivor party and the black inhabitants they encountered. It is recorded that they had fought several times and that more of the company lost their courage everyday and were left behind.

After about three months they were said to have met with a black king who was the head of two kraals. It is recorded that he promised not to harm them because of his previous acquaintances with the Portuguese through Lorenzo Marques as well as Antonio Caldeira who had been there. He also warned them not to carry on with their journey for he was at war with another chief in the area who would rob them and also he needed their help.⁶¹ According to Hair the survivors of Portuguese shipwrecks in general, comprised of Portuguese-speaking natives of India as well as Asian and African sailors and servants who spoke varying amounts of Portuguese. The language that was used for communication within parties was, as far as can be ascertained, Portuguese. According to various sources, some blacks living near Delagoa Bay spoke Portuguese very well.⁶² Thus it is reasonable to assume that the black chief that is mentioned in the survivor account of the São João was capable of speaking some Portuguese.

They remained with this black king for approximately twelve days and in this time Manuel de Sepúlveda ordered his brother-in-law, Pantaleão de Sá to go with twenty men to assist the king in a military campaign against a nearby rebellious chief. De Sá, did so and after their return they asked the king to let them go on their way in search of the river of Lorenzo Marques, not knowing that they had already reached it.

⁶⁰ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 137.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶² Hair, *Portuguese Contacts with the Bantu Languages of the Transkei, Natal and Southern Mozambique*, pp. 19-20.

After leaving the kraal of the king they crossed a large river that flowed into the bay of 'Boa Paz' (Delagoa Bay).⁶³ The author mentions that they found a red ornament that was a sign that the Portuguese had been there before, but according to him "their fortune blinded them" and they insisted on going ahead. No matter how the king insisted they stay, they would not listen and because he meant them no harm he allowed them to go and also assisted them in crossing the first river by canoe. The author recalls that by this time the Captain's mind was adversely affected by the constant watching and the many hardships and trying experiences he had been through.⁶⁴

A day later, a group of blacks crossed the river by canoe and told them that a ship had come there with men like themselves, but had left again. De Sepúlveda, not heeding the warnings of the king that showed them kindness, was still determined to press on and on arrival at the kraal of the next king, Da Sousa was persuaded to deposit his firearms with the king. Being weak with hunger and thirst they surrendered their weapons and allowed themselves to be split up amongst many villages where they waited for the next Portuguese ship to arrive. They were then systematically robbed of all their possessions. Manoel de Sepúlveda's wife, Dona Leonor, was stripped of all her clothing, and feeling severely ashamed dug a hole in the sand and buried herself waist deep.⁶⁵ The pilot, André Vãs, and the others were forced to leave the Captain and his wife behind and carry on with their journey. Manuel de Sepúlveda was reduced to foraging for fruit in the thicket to try and sustain his family. Dona Leonor, her two children and several slaves died shortly thereafter as a result of hunger and exhaustion. The bereaved Manoel de Sepúlveda apparently wandered into the thicket and was never seen again. A rescue vessel delivered the twenty-five remaining survivors of the wreck of the São João to Mozambique Island of Ilha

⁶³ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 140.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 147.

de Moçambique on the 25th of May 1553.⁶⁶ The narrative of the wrecking of the São João gained the status of an anthology within Portuguese, Italian, French and Spanish culture, because of the tragic events that befell the Captain Manoel de Sepúlveda and his wife Leonor de Sá. The above mentioned incident, involving the Captain and his wife, is a simple but tragic one. Their scandalous affair and marriage was viewed within these religious cultures as the reason why they were cast ashore on the African coast when the São João, (the richest and finest Indies vessel in half a century) was destroyed on the South East coast of South Africa. After enduring endless hardships and losing his bastard son, the once selfish arrogant Captain was reduced to a pitiful madman. There is nothing inspirational about his character. His wife, however, still clinging to the little dignity she had left in the end may be viewed as the heroic figure in this tragedy. Although one may detect evidence of neglect and greed in this story, it is still regarded as an example of national heroism and of Portuguese faith and valour,⁶⁷ and remains a key to the unravelling of this past event.

Evidence as to the location of the wreck site contained in the account of the São João.

In the account of the São João presented in the *História trágico-marítima*, there are various details that provide clues as to the possible location of the wreck site. First it was stated that the crew of the São João sighted land on the eighth of June.⁶⁸ According to Welch, the coastland they saw was the north bank of the Umtavuna River.⁶⁹ The crew made for that part of the shore, which offered them a chance of landing safely, so the galleon was anchored in seven fathoms of

⁶⁶ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 149; Welch, *South Africa under John III, 1521-1557*. pp. 325-343; Ferreira, *Stranding van die São João*. pp. 31-49.

⁶⁷ Duffy, *Shipwreck and Empire*. p. 46.

⁶⁸ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 132.

⁶⁹ Welch, *South Africa under John III*, p. 326.

water.⁷⁰ Welch believes since the galleon was no longer seaworthy the intention was to run her aground and use the timber to build a caravel to take the survivors to Mozambique. As far as the various sources reveal, there was enough cloth left on board to make functional sails. One of the wise precautions of the royal government of Portugal, according to Welch, was to send with their trading vessels a number of skilled artisans to deal with emergencies of this nature.⁷¹ This plan would not be realised, since the galleon broke loose from her insecure anchorage and was carried onto the rocks. The survivor reports that all the merchandise floated to the surface and as a result of the rough seas was all broken up into very small bits.

Immediately north of the landing beach the coast becomes rocky and this stretches on for about one kilometre. All the artefacts (porcelain, cowries and cornelian beads) suspected to originate from the wreck are found within this one kilometre stretch. According to Maggs, the cannon fragment that was found by Harris came from the southern end of these rocks. According to the survivor account the company stayed close to the wreck site and near the river⁷² for twelve days to give the injured time to recuperate and salvage merchandise that was washed up by the sea. They mention two hills upon which blacks appeared.

⁷⁰ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 136.

⁷¹ Welch, *South Africa under John III*, p. 327.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 329.

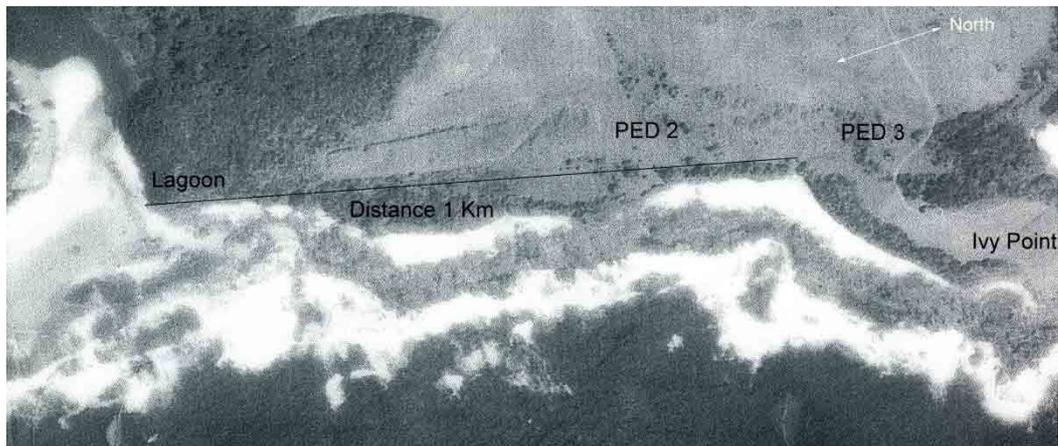


Figure 7: Aerial photograph of Keisers Farm. From the mouth of the Inhlanhlinhlu on the left to Ivy point on the right is a distance of 1km.

From: Surveyor General, Pretoria, 2001.

There are two hills, north and south of the landing beach, separated by a lagoon (see figure 7 on page 41). However, these hills are densely overgrown and very high and it is unlikely that these are the hills that are mentioned by the survivor. Just north of these two hills and adjacent to the stretch of coast where the artefacts are found on the farm called Inhlanhlinhlu (Keisers Farm) is enough space to accommodate a large number of people, away from wind and sea, and this area is surrounded by smaller hills. The water from the stream feeding the lagoon is brackish, but the water from the larger river, the KuBoboyi, is not. This is a perennial river that flows 1km north of the town of Port Edward and close to where the wreck site is believed to be located. These factors make it the most possible site for the survivor camp. Moreover, the survivors give the latitude of the wreck as 31° . The latitude of the site at Port Edward is $31^{\circ}02'59''S$. This particular account in the *História trágico-marítima*, however, contains no further geographic information to be used in determining the location of the wreck site.

The account of the São Bento

Since the account of the wreck of the São Bento contains more specific geographic information than that of the São João, it is important to analyse parts of this ship's survivor's account. For the purpose of this study, the São Bento account includes relevant information regarding the location of the wreck of the São João. What is therefore important for the São João research is the account of the events following the wrecking of the São Bento on the coast of the Transkei on the 22nd of April 1554.

According to Manuel de Mesquita Perestrello the crew of the São Bento:

steered for the nearest land, which was a wide expanse of sandy shore in latitude thirty-two degrees and a third, at the mouth of the river Infante... she drifted upon a rocky islet which lies within gunshot of the mouth of the river, on the side towards the Cape... if we had gone ashore where we intended, the sea being now almost at low tide, there was left a band of rocky shore, over which the sea burst in foam all along the coast, so that none could have escaped; but the shore of the rocky island was so steep that we were within a crossbow shot of it in seven fathoms of water.⁷³

It was established by Auret and Maggs that the wreck site of the São Bento is located at the Msikaba Island on the Transkei coast. According to this, Maggs reconstructed the journey that the survivors followed, to the place where they encountered the wreck of the São João. Maggs divides the journey of the São Bento survivors into a possible five stages.⁷⁴

During the first part of the journey the survivors of the São Bento travelled from the wreck site inland in a north-easterly direction. The going was slow and it was not until the third day after climbing down a very steep, rocky valley that they

⁷³ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, pp. 218-285.

⁷⁴ C. Auret and T. Maggs, The Great Ship São Bento: remains from a mid-sixteenth century Portuguese wreck on the Pondoland coast. *Annals of the Natal Museum*. 25 (1) pp. 1-39.

reached the next river. As they were unable to cross it, they spent the night there. The next two days they retraced their steps in an attempt to find a suitable place to cross the river safely. On the fifth day they gathered enough courage to attempt a crossing. It took them all day and they spent that night on the other side close to a kraal where they were able to barter some food.⁷⁵

The second part comprised of a journey that took about three days, still travelling in a north-easterly direction. This brought them to a third river they called “the River of Saint Christopher, which lay right across our path and the water swarming with sea horses.” Again they were unable to cross the river. The night was spent in the hills and it was decided that they must head towards the coast in search of a suitable crossing and food.⁷⁶

During the third stage they followed the third river down to the coast and early the next morning they reached the Saint Christopher River again, near its mouth. The river gorge is described as steep, with impenetrable thicket and topped by a cliff on either side. They were completely discouraged by the size of the river but were, however, able to find a suitable place to cross.⁷⁷

The fourth phase entailed them climbing for two days to the other side from where they could see the sea. Here they slept in a deserted village in which they found Chinese porcelain shards and other familiar objects, which they felt sure, were from the wreck of the São João.⁷⁸ The last phase which followed was when they reached the shore at the very spot where the galleon São João had been wrecked, “capstan and timbers still being visible.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João*, pp. 183-185; Axelson, *Diaz and his Successors*. p. 54; Welch, *South Africa under John III*, p. 353.

⁷⁶ Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João*, pp. 183-185.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

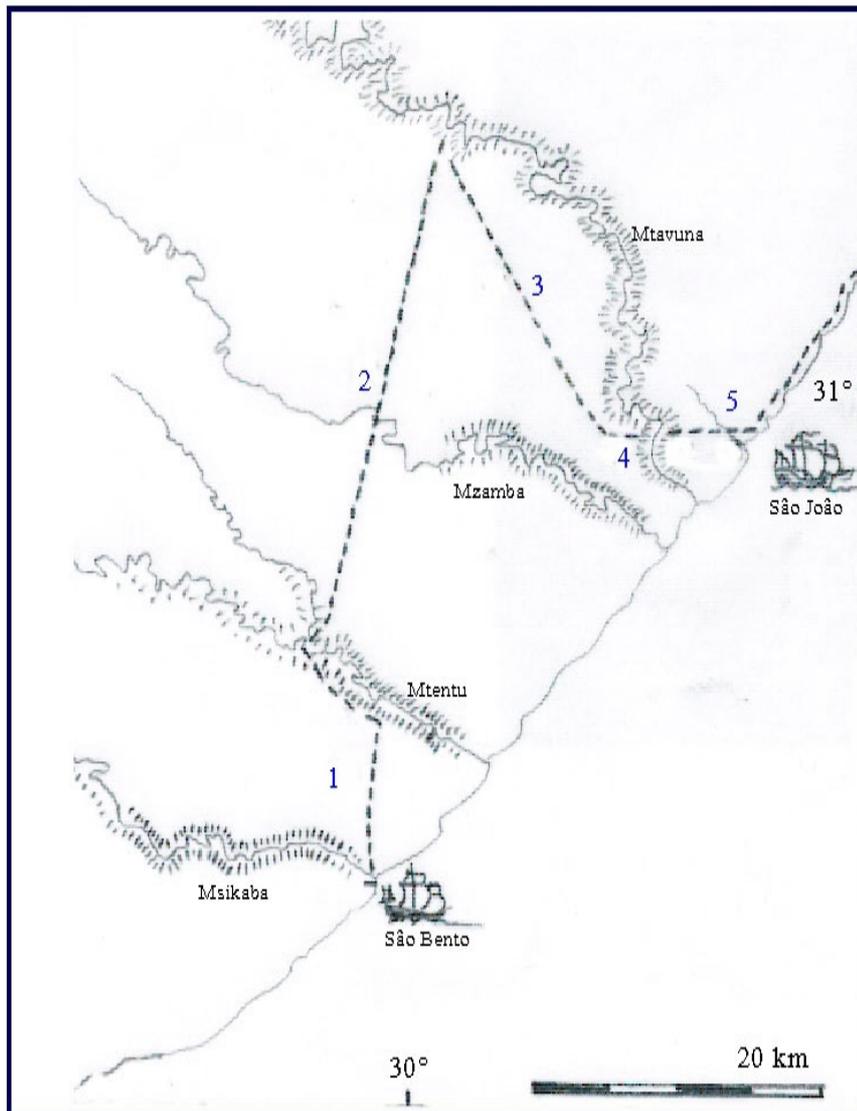


Figure 8: Route followed by the São Bento survivors as discussed in the text.

From: Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João*, 1984, p.185.

The five phases identified by Maggs regarding the São Bento are of great relevance to determining the location of the São João. (See Fig. 8. on p. 44) Of significance is that the São Bento report gives more detailed geographic information. Moreover, since the survivors of the São Bento state that they came

across the wreck of the São João it is assumed that if the steps of the São Bento survivors can be retraced, it will give an indication of the location of the wreck of the São João.

If these five phases are compared with the local geography in the area then the first phase, the very steep, rocky valley with a big river they were unable to cross must be the Mtentu that lies approximately 15 km north of the Msikaba River mouth. According to Maggs the river runs in a very deep gorge, about 300m deep.⁸⁰

In the second phase, the São Bento survivors state that they were travelling in a north-easterly direction. Doing so would bring them to the Mtamvuna River, also flowing in a steep valley. On a 1:50 000 map of the area it is clear that the other rivers in the area flow eastwards at right angles towards the coast, except the Mtamvuna, which flows in a southerly direction.

It is stated that they followed the third river down to the coast, the river flowing in a southerly direction would explain why they met up with it again early the next morning. According to Maggs, from 3km upstream the river flows in a steep forested gorge 300m or more in depth and is topped by sandstone cliffs. The sea is visible from many places on the eastern side of the gorge as described by the survivors in phase four.⁸¹ The presumed wreck site of the São João is about 6km from the mouth of the Mtamvuna River. There are some lower hills there and standing on them would have given them a good view of the stretch of coastline where the São João was wrecked.

In a period of over one hundred years, from when Theal first wrote about the São João in the 1900's to the recent publication by Ferreira in 2002, 450 years after its foundering, the story of the São João remains thus incomplete. While

⁸⁰ Auret and Maggs, *The Great Ship São Bento*, pp. 1-39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

numerous researchers continue to speculate about its final resting place, there are many other questions that remain unanswered. The available historical documentary evidence has been interrogated, now the archaeological material requires further scientific analysis. Moreover, the campsite, which was inhabited for a period of twelve days by the initial 500 survivors of the wreck, still remains undetected. These are the issues primarily addressed by the next three chapters.