

Chapter V

The campsite: comparative analysis and geographic survey.

Although a multitude of artefacts apparently originating from the wreck of the São João have been discovered over the past century, the actual location of the campsite has not been indisputably determined. In order to assist in locating this illusive site, the descriptions and details of other Portuguese campsites were also investigated. In South Africa we are fortunate to have ten Portuguese shipwrecks dating to the same period, all wrecked along the south-east coast of South Africa. Information gathered from these other wrecks is of great value in that it gives an indication of the manner in which the Portuguese camps were constructed. In addition, survivors from the São João were unfortunate victims of some of these other earlier wrecks as well, and would have been forced to construct a camp yet again.

The comparative analysis and geographical survey of the São João survivor and other accounts, indicates three locations in the area of Tragedy Hill worthy of investigation. In other words, they are possible and the most likely locations of the São João survivor camp. The research for this thesis focuses specifically on the survivor camp of the São João and addresses an important aspect that forms the bases of this study, which is the collaboration of archaeological material and historical documentation to elucidate physical evidence. It will be illustrated how documentary evidence can contribute to the understanding of past events. More specifically, the study also attempts to indicate similarities between other such Portuguese settlements, again illustrating in what way documentary evidence can be used to locate such a site and provide future researchers with information regarding the types of material evidence that can be expected once a site is located. Thus, an attempt is made to reconstruct the position of possible sites, using both historical documentation and physical archaeological evidence. This will amount to the creation of a scenario of virtual sites indicating both the positive evidence, which supports the location, as well as the negative evidence, which detracts from the location.

To begin with, a comparative analysis of other Portuguese survivor camps provides possible clues to the position and general appearance of the São João survivor camp. Because the narrative of the São Bento (1554) is regarded as the key to locating the wreck site of the São João, it was again scrutinized to find information on how early survivor camps were constructed in general and how far they were from the wreck site. Seven Portuguese shipwreck accounts which refer to survivor camps are considered:

Table 4: Other Portuguese shipwrecks along the south-east coast of South Africa.

| SHIP | DATE | WRECK SITE |
|-------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|
| São Bento | 1554 | Msikaba River Mouth |
| São Thomé | 1589 | Unknown |
| Santo Alberto | 1593 | East London |
| São João Baptista | 1622 | Between Woody Cape & Kei River |
| São Gonçalo | 1630 | Plettenberg Bay |
| Nossa Senhora de Belém | 1635 | Port St. Johns |
| Nossa Senhora de Atalaia do Piheiro | 1647 | Cefane River |

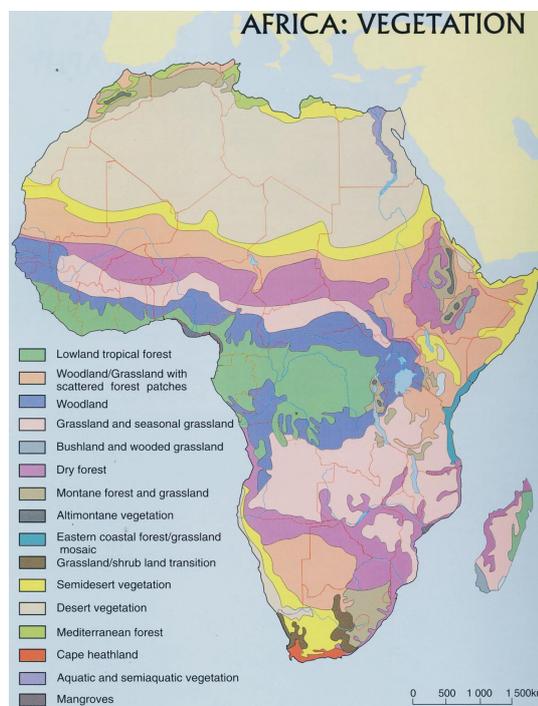


Figure 33: Map illustrating Africa’s Vegetation.

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

These seven were chosen because they all occurred within a century of the wrecking of the São João and occurred on the south east coast of South Africa stretching from Port Edward in the north to Natures Valley in the south. These seven wrecks, and consequently their survivor camps, share an area characterized by more or less the same vegetation and rainfall as seen in figure 33 on page 86. It is therefore argued then that the camps will have similar characteristics.

It is stated that the survivors from the São Bento took shelter in a wood that was close to the wreck, where they slept under the trees the first night. Here, they also had access to a river with fresh water. The next day they returned to the shore where they gathered “what was necessary” and returned to the spot where they slept the previous night and here they constructed “a superb lodging” with “rich carpets, pieces of gold cloth and silk.”¹ It is mentioned that a number of boxes also washed ashore and it is possible that these were used in the construction of the shelter. Later on it is indicated that “each one returned to his own place of shelter” thus, it is possible that the shelter consisted of smaller or individual units.² It is stated that when they started out for Mozambique they left the shelter as it was. As far as can be gathered from the survivor account they did not organize themselves according to social standing. Rather, they arranged themselves in marching order which consisted of the following: the boatswain and seamen were in front, the captain followed right at the back together with the passengers, the injured walked or were carried in the middle. It is noteworthy that it does not appear as if the slaves were separated from the Portuguese passengers.³

The survivors from the São Thomé (1589) only camped for a couple of days and passed the night among some sand hills.⁴ No further details are given with regards to the construction of their shelters. The survivors from the Santo Alberto (1593), however, wrecked under similar circumstances as those of the São Bento

¹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 223.

² Ibid., p. 224.

³ Ibid., p.227.

⁴ Bell-Cross, *Portuguese Shipwrecks and identification of their sites*, p. 56.

and São Thomé, but more detail is given with regard to the appearance of their camp. It is stated that they entrenched themselves and also made tents of the valuable carpets of Cambaya and Odiaz they had onboard. They also used rich quilts, gunjoens, chests, and mats from the Maldiv Islands in the construction of their shelters.⁵ Captain Julião de Faria divided the camp into three main parts, namely: the vanguard, main body and the rearguard, furthermore he divided the soldiers into three companies. He also divided the seamen into three bands, with the pilot, the master and Custodio Gonçalves, the boatswain, as captains.⁶ Again, as far as can be determined, the slaves were not separated from the Portuguese and formed part of the main body.

The survivor account of the São João Baptista (1622) states that the survivors built “shacks” to give them shelter from the cold and entrenched themselves on the shore, again close to the wreck site. Here they stayed for one month and six days. During this time they constructed a church on the shore covered with canvas and inside hung gold-embroidered Chinese coverlets.⁷ Unfortunately there are no other clues as to their survivor camp.

The survivors from the São Gonçalo (1630) fared much better than their predecessors. Apart from growing their own fruit and vegetables such as melons, pumpkins, cucumbers, onions and coriander, they were also able to establish an effective barter trade with the local friendly Khoi tribesmen.⁸ They built “habitations of wood” and also a kind of a church⁹. Disappointingly, no detailed description is given of what the camp looked like or what the social organization was set up like, despite the fact that they stayed there for eight months.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., pp. 283-290.

⁶ Ibid., p.295.

⁷ Boxer, *The Tragic History of the Sea*, pp. 190-199.

⁸ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 418

⁹ Ibid., p. 417-419

¹⁰ Ibid. Andrew B. Smith, Excavations at Plettenberg Bay, South Africa of the camp-site of the survivors of the wreck of the São Gonçalo, 1630. *The International Journal of Nautical and Underwater Exploration*. 1986, pp. 53-63.

The survivor account of the Nossa Senhora de Belém (1635) provides details about the location, structure and organization of a typical survivor camp. The survivor's stated "When we got to the other side of the river, we found a good place within site of the sea, where we decided until we should have better council, to make our dwelling place."¹¹ Bell-Cross lists several reasons why the survivors possibly chose this site. One of the most significant reasons for the purposes of the search for the São João survivor camp is where Bell-Cross explains that the terrain on the west bank was not only protected from westerly winds, but is also more level and therefore more suitable for a camp site needed to house nearly 300 people.¹² It is also mentioned that "the place where we were posted with our backs to a thicket which served as a defence against the cold and them (natives) in case they should attack us."¹³ They buried the dead "in a spot which we selected for the purpose."¹⁴ They had access to drinking water, because it is stated "water from a river which was not far off..."¹⁵

As regards the layout of the camp, it is evident that the Captain was separated from the main body as he "chose a site for [his] dwelling on a little hillock".¹⁶ This was possibly so that he could keep a lookout. They also built a church and a house. The house was built in the centre of the camp for the purpose of keeping the provisions safe. The Captain divided the main body into "parties, each building their straw hut where they thought best within the limits which [he] set them."¹⁷

The survivor Bento Teyxeyra Feyo, from the Nossa Senhora Da Atalaia do Piheiro (1647), stated that they made their camp in the bushes to get away from the sand on the beach. It is apparent from this account then that at least 200 survivors camped there for 11 days before starting the trek to Mozambique. The Captain divided the survivors into three squadrons (possibly 180 people in each).

¹¹ Bell-Cross, Portuguese Shipwrecks and identification of their sites, pp. 70-71.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 206.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 204.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The passengers were separated into the one group with the Captain, the seamen and ship boys were divided among the officers. Again, all provisions were brought into the camp, put together and guarded.¹⁸ It is stated that they made “shelters as good as canvas tents.”¹⁹ This survivor camp was found soon after the wreck site was identified in 1980. Excavations at the site by Simon Hall, archaeologist at the Albany Museum, yielded the following: eight fragments of blue-and-white porcelain that can be referred to the traditional Ming period, eight pieces of Blanc de Chine, three stoneware fragments and eleven pieces of flint. They also found a single piece of carved marble, 25 fragments of highly rusted iron, a small cog-like ornamental piece of bronze, a piece of bronze sheet with gold plating, a small hemispherical piece of silver, a thin sliver of bronze, two pieces of lead, 498 fragments of bone, and two lengths of mother of pearl.²⁰

From these several examples of early Portuguese survivor camps the following ten significant and similar characteristics can be identified. In the first instance, the sites were never further than 1 km from the actual wreck site. In some cases, the campsite was in sight of the wreck. Secondly, it was established as close as possible to fresh drinking water. Thirdly, the survivors sought shelter from wind and weather in the colder months of June, July and August, such as in the case with the Nossa Senhora de Belém and São João Bapista. The shelters were most often strategically placed close to a wood, trees or thicket to provide protection against weather as well as possible enemies. Fourthly, in two cases the São Thomé and the São João Baptista, the survivors entrenched themselves. Fifthly, in most cases the camps were erected on flat areas as they had to accommodate large numbers of people, like in the case of the Nossa Senhora de Belém and Nossa Senhora Da Atalaya. Sixthly, most survivors mentioned that they erected tents, wooden structures, shacks or houses with the merchandise they had salvaged from the ship. Seventhly, the camps often consisted of smaller units or tents, built within the limits set by the Captain, as in the case of the São Bento,

¹⁸ Ibid. p., 306.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bell-Cross, Portuguese Shipwrecks and identification of their sites, p. 77; S. L. Hall, *Test Excavations at the Atalaya Camp Site*, Grahamstown, 1978, pp.1-6.

São João Baptista, Nossa Senhora de Belem and Nossa Senhora Da Atalaya. Eighthly, provisions were brought and placed in the centre of the camp where they were guarded. Ninthly, from the different accounts it is evident that the survivors were divided into groups, squadrons or parties. In nearly all of the cases the main body was divided into three of these groups, where the passengers were separated from the seamen and soldiers. The captain stayed with the passengers, though in some cases was separated to keep watch. Lastly, in only one case burials are mentioned despite the fact that there were always fatalities and the only information gathered from this is that they selected a specific location for the dead. The organization of a typical Portuguese survivor, reflecting all the common characteristics is illustrated by figure 34 on page 93.

The geography of the area was investigated to determine any changes with regards to the sea level, climate, shifting sand dunes and flora in the area. According to research done by oceanographer Martin Grundlingh, the climate in the area has not changed over the 450-year period. Fluctuations in the sea level would not have had a great influence on the coastline itself since this stretch of coastline represents the steepest underwater topography along the east coast of South Africa. The current dominating this part of the coast is the same as it was 450 years ago. In the Port Edward area it is the Agulhas current that flows close to the shore in a southerly direction. The rate of flow in the area is on average 1.5m/s, individual measurements have sometimes indicated even greater rates.²¹ The vegetation of the area is characterized by what is called “Dry Forest”. This would explain the references by various survivors to woods, thickets and trees.²²

A major problem in reconstructing the survivor camp of the São João is the limited availability of historical information on the São João survivor camp. The documentary survivor evidence on the São João merely indicates that the camp was erected using chests and barrels, close to the wreck site and drinking water. This complies with three of the ten characteristics of the other Portuguese

²¹ Personal communication with Martin Grundlingh, June 4th, 2002.

²² C. T. Stuart, *Africa. A Natural History*, Halfway House, 1995. p.4.

wrecks. The São João description contains further brief detail on the geography and mentions two hills on which some of the blacks from the area appeared.

Before the virtual graphic interpretation was created the size of the site was considered. Based on the statement in the survivor account that 500 hundred people camped in the area after the wrecking, it was calculated that the camp had a possible size of a 1000² m or more. It might not have been possible to fortify this entire area with the chests and barrels, thus the researcher believes that only a portion of the camp was fortified. The camp was strategically placed in a wooded area, this together with the fortification served to protect the company in the event of an attack. It is believed that the fortified section of the camp possibly only housed the passengers (especially women and children) the captain and his family. Also, the provisions were viewed as very valuable obviously as a means to survival, and it is known from the other Portuguese survivor accounts that they were placed under guard in the centre of the camp, thus in the virtual reconstruction it is also included within the fortification. The soldiers (if any) and seamen make up the rest of the company. They possibly camped with the rest of the company but not inside the fortified area. Since the captain of the São João was in the military one might assume that he would have set up lookout points around the camp. For hygienic reasons the graves would not have been within the boundaries of the camp but since no graves have been found to date this cannot be confirmed.

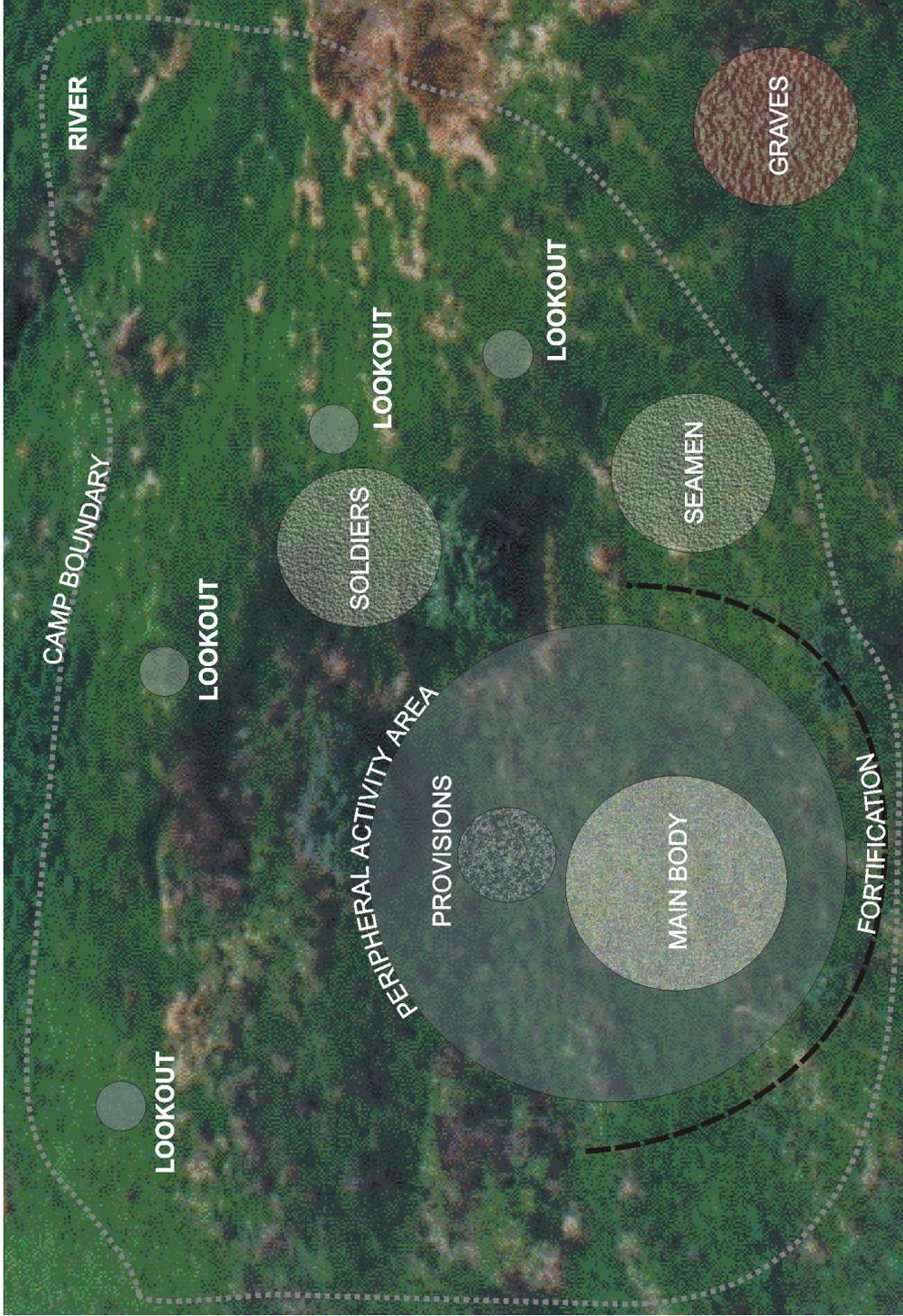


Figure 34: Diagram of the possible structure of the survivor campsite of the São João.
From: Burger, E. (Pretoria, September 2002)

The more detailed historical information of other Portuguese survivor camps on the east coast of South Africa greatly assisted in building a matrix (See Table 5 below) based on survivor camp characteristics. This information was used to identify certain distinctive features of Portuguese survival camps and aided in creating a virtual image of what the survivor camp of the São João might have looked like. The comparison provided useful information on construction material, methods, structure and positions of camps in general. From this it was possible to construct a virtual picture (See Figure 34 on page 93) of the survivor camp by comparing the survivor’s account and the known characteristics of Portuguese survivor camps with the artefacts found and geography of the Port Edward area.

Table 5: Matrix based on survivor camp characteristics.

| Known about Portuguese survivor camps. | Unknown about Portuguese survivor camps. |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Never further than 1km from wreck. ➤ Near water supply. ➤ Survivors sought shelter. ➤ Defensive structures were erected on flat area. ➤ Used material from wreck to build shelters. ➤ Camp was divided into units. ➤ Provisions were placed in the centre of the camp. ➤ Survivors were divided into groups (in most cases into three groups). ➤ Passengers were separated from the seamen. ➤ A specific location was selected to bury the dead. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shape of the camps (square/round etc.). ➤ The exact appearance of these camps. |
| Known about São João Camp | Unknown about São João camp |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The camp was erected close to the wreck site. ➤ They had access to fresh water. ➤ It accommodated 500 people. ➤ A fortification was built with chests and barrels. ➤ Two hills were visible from the camp. ➤ They stayed at the site for twelve days. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Shape of the São João camp ➤ Exact location of the camp. ➤ The size of the “fortification”- did it include the whole camp or only the captain, his family and the provisions? ➤ Location of the burial site. |