

Chapter VI

The virtual campsite of the São João.

This chapter sets about recreating three possible locations for the survivor campsite of the São João. Based on historical, archaeological and additional campsite investigations, this chapter proposes a possible methodology to assist archaeologists in determining the location of not only survivor campsites, but any other archaeological sites which are not clearly identifiable. It shows how historical documentation and archaeological material of both primary and secondary nature, can be combined to create possible locations. This particular study sets out the information in the following format. Firstly, a geographic description of the location with details of position, landscape and environment of the particular site is given. This is followed by a justification of the specific site, using evidence of both a historical and archaeological nature. This is further divided into arguments, which both support and negate its viability. By identifying and creating these various scenarios of sites the researcher is able to determine the possibility of location more specifically, and thereby limit the range of options for possible future archaeological excavation.

In this scenario creation, the manner in which the camp was constructed is also considered. As a categorical mention is made of a fortification in the São João survivor camp, an attempt is also made to reconstruct a virtual image of this fortification, whereby it is possible to establish how many people were housed inside the fortification, and indicate the material it contained during the period of occupation.

The survivor camp of the São João represents the earliest temporary Portuguese settlement on the South African coast. But more than this, the São João survivor camp also presents proof of the wreck site of the São João since artefacts present underwater are extremely difficult to locate and document. Two other earlier wrecks recorded on the South African coast, which have not been located are the ‘Soares wreck’, believed to have foundered near Mosselbay in 1505 and the São

Jeronymo, that foundered on the Zululand coast, north of Richards Bay, in June 1552. Neither of these two wrecks apparently had any survivors.¹ Although the events surrounding the wrecking of the São João are not unique, the camp itself is, because of the vast number of people who camped there. The number as already indicated, is recorded as 500, including both Portuguese people and slaves, which is greater than any of the other Portuguese wrecks considered.

The research done over the last five decades has not thrown much light, if any, on the São João survivor camp. In the most recent work done by Ferreira, he uses the concept temporary camp when referring to the survivor camp of the São João and also just mentions that they built a temporary fortification of chests and barrels. He also refers to the incident where the blacks appeared on the separate hills. Ferreira does not attempt give any indication of where the camp might have been located.²

All the research done by Maggs on the São João did not include the survivor camp. Maggs did, however, confirm that fellow Natal archaeologist Stückenbergs searched for the survivor camp in the 1980's.³ No articles or reports on the survivor camp itself were published by Stückenbergs. Apparently he did do a survey of the area and identified a site where he believed the survivor camp might be situated. According to Stückenbergs, he did not continue with his research since the site was severely damaged by sugar plantations. He did, however, mention that the site he identified was away from "the wind and the waves".⁴

These three meagre allusions to the survivor camp are all that exist in the historiography on the São João. For the purpose of this study, certain criteria were developed to assist firstly in determining the position of the camp and secondly the appearance of the camp.

¹ Turner, *Shipwrecks and Salvage in South Africa*, pp. 179, 221.

² Ferreira, *Die Stranding van die São João*, pp. 28-30.

³ Personal communication with Dr. Maggs, November, 2001.

⁴ Personal communication with Dr. B. Stückenbergs, 2002

Portuguese campsite characteristics and geographic information supplied the following detail: the site under investigation had to be large enough to accommodate 500 people and not be further than 1km from the wreck site. Based on information supplied through personal discussion with other researchers such as Stückenberg, Maggs and Esterhuizen, the residents of the area and based on the above criteria, three possible sites were evaluated. Below follows a description of these respective areas, with both the evidence which substantiates their viability and evidence which detracts therefrom.

It is stated in the survivor account of the São João that they “...decided to remain on the shore where the galleon was lost...for here water was to be had”⁵ From this statement and the survivor accounts from other Portuguese shipwrecks, it is evident that drinking water was the greatest concern for the survivors from shipwrecks. Thus a geographical investigation of the defined area determined the locations of fresh water sources. An inspection of the geological survey of South Africa⁶, aerial photographs, the 1:50 000 map, reconnaissance and excavations in the area revealed only two perennial rivers found within walking distance of the wreck site, the Inhlanhlinhlu and the Kuboboyi.

⁵ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 135.

⁶ G.F. Birch, Quaternary sedimentation off the East Coast of Southern Africa (Cape Padrone to Cape Vidal). *Bulletin of the Geological survey of South Africa*, 1996. p. 118.

CAMP SITE PROPOSITION NO. 1: TRAGEDY HILL (PED 1)

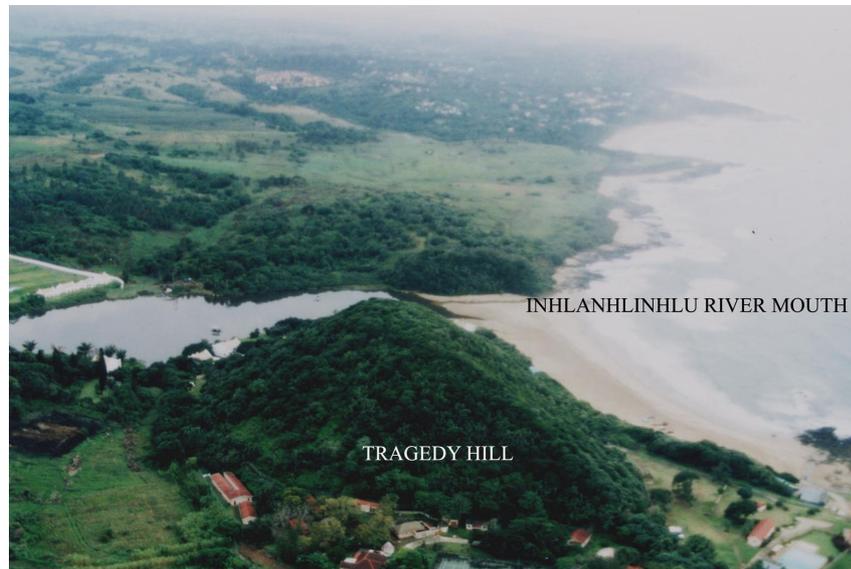


Figure 35: Aerial view of PED 1: Tragedy Hill
(Port Edward, September 2002)

Port Edward is located at the southern most point of Natal where the Mtamvuna River forms the border between South Africa and the former Transkei. This river is characterized by forested kranzes. From the bridge, the river mouth and beaches are clearly visible. Port Edward, named during the 1920's after the Prince of Wales, is dominated by the shadow of recorded history stretching back from the sixteenth century to the more recent tragic events of the nineteenth century. Tragedy Hill or Isandlundlu (Inhlanhlinhlu) in Zulu, with its bush covered slopes was rumoured to have been the site of a massacre in 1831, when Dingane allegedly caught and killed a party of settlers thought to be fleeing with royal cattle. Only fossil, not human, remains have been found here. Rumour also had it that treasure was buried on "North Sand Bluff", a spur of the hill overlooking the Sanlundlu (Inhlanhlinhlu) River.⁷ The main bathing beach in Port Edward located at the mouth of the Inhlanhlinhlu River (31°02'07"S and 30°13'08"E) is characterized by a hill of approximately 64m in height called Tragedy Hill.

⁷ AA Illustrated guide to the Southern African coast, personal interviews with the tourism buro in Port Shepstone.



Figure 36: Aerial view of PED 1: Tragedy Hill from the sea.
(Port Edward, September 2002)

The area around Tragedy Hill was identified as one of the possible locations of the survivor camp since it not only fits the description given in the survivor account, but also displays most of the characteristics mentioned. Firstly, the hill is within 500 m of the supposed wreck site. Secondly, the perennial river, the Inhlanhlinhlu, may have been a good water source for the survivors. Thirdly, the very high hill would not only have provided shelter from the weather and enemies, but also a good lookout of the surrounding inland area and the sea. The stretch of beach in the area of the hill is less rocky than the area directly north of it. According to local fishermen the hill is used even today as a beacon and is clearly visible far out to sea.⁸

This first proposition as to a possible survivor camp site is based the account of São Bento survivor Manuel De Mesquita Perestrello, together with the survivor accounts of the São João.

In the survivor's account of the São João it is stated that:

A boat was immediately got out with some men to search the shore for the best spot...a long time afterwards the boat returned with intelligence that there was a part of the shore close by where they

⁸ Personal communication with local residents in Port Edward, September 2002.

might disembark...but all the rest was sharp rock and great boulders which offered no hope of safety...the Captain and his company had no means of acquiring or manufacturing a craft to take some of the crew to Mozambique to find help. It was decided that they should remain on the shore where the galleon was lost, for a few days until the sick were convalescent. They made a sort of fortification with chests and barrels and remained at the site for twelve days⁹. In the surrounding area they encountered no people, only deserted straw huts. In several of the huts they found arrows and assegais¹⁰.

Manuel De Mesquita states that:

That day crossing the top of these summits, we came to a headland from which we could perceive the sea, and in our joy at the sight we made our day's journey longer than usual, and slept in a deserted village, where we found pieces of china and many other things in use among us, which we felt certain had remained from the shipwreck of Manuel de Sousa Sepulveda. The next day...we reached the sea at the very spot where the galleon came ashore, where we found the capstan and other pieces of timber thrown upon a rocky reef which stretches for many leagues along the coast¹¹.

From three kilometres upstream of its mouth the Umtavuna River runs in a steep forested gorge, 300m and more in depth and topped by sandstone cliffs. The sea is visible from many places on the eastern side of the gorge¹². The rocky reef runs to the north of the mouth of the Umtavuna except in the bay at Tragedy Hill where there is a stretch of beach where today fishing boats are launched. The Umtavuna River Mouth is approximately six kilometres from Tragedy Hill at the mouth of the Inhlanhlinhlu River, travelling on foot it would take about half a day's walk to reach Tragedy Hill.

In Welch's book he gives his own interpretation of the São João survivor account and adds some more detail that may provide clues as to the location of the survivor camp. According to Welch "they decided to stay near the river for twelve days"¹³. It is not clear whether this statement is based on a direct

⁹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, pp. 132-135

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, pp. 233-234.

¹² Maggs, *The Great Galleon São João*, p.185.

¹³ Welch, *South Africa under John III*, p. 329.

translation of the survivor account, and if it refers to the Umtavuna or the Inhlanhlinhlu River. The São Bento account, also, does not mention any other large rivers in the area.

According to Bell-Cross “it was custom to build the camp as close as possible to the wreck site, in order to be close by should anything come ashore”¹⁴. The camp site of the Portuguese ship the São Gonçalo was found 500m from where the ship came ashore¹⁵. The Inhlanhlinhlu River rather than the Umtavuna River is viewed as a possible location for the survivor camp of the São João for the following reasons, firstly Maggs indicates on an extrapolated map that the wreck site is located at the Inhlanhlinhlu River¹⁶. Secondly, most of the artefacts are found in the area near the Inhlanhlinhlu River. Thirdly, it is improbable that the survivors from the São João would camp further than 1km from the wreck site especially with the large amount of injured survivors. It is stated that “the capstan and other pieces of timber” were found “thrown upon a rocky reef” therefore this proposition is based upon the hypothesis that this rocky reef is the one stretching to the north of again the Inhlanhlinhlu River rather than the Umtavuna River.

Factors supporting Tragedy Hill as the location for the survivor camp.

Several reasons support the theory that the survivor camp is located near the Inhlanhlinhlu River mouth at the foot of Tragedy Hill. Firstly, the Inhlanhlinhlu River flows into a lagoon first and then into the sea which would make fresh drinkable water easily accessible. Also, it is separated by two high hills, which could be those mentioned in the survivor account of the São João and São Bento. At its mouth it forms a large stretch of beach with relatively few rocks. It is stated in the survivor account of the São João that “The captain, who disembarked the day before, went to and fro on the beach...helping all that he could to get to the fire he had made”¹⁷. Aerial photographs of the area show a platform visible on the higher of the two hills, which could indicate a site used as

¹⁴ Bell-Cross, Portuguese Shipwrecks and identification of their sites, p. 65.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Maggs, The Great Galleon São João, p.184.

¹⁷ Theal, *Records of South East Africa* I, p. 134

a lookout. Also, according to Ferreira the Portuguese had a tradition of building their settlements on top of hills which could have influenced the choice of the location for the camp.¹⁸ Lastly, the survivors would want to be sheltered from the elements and the higher of the two hills would give them exactly that.

The area has been developed and today a caravan park with some self-catering chalets is situated on the southern bank of the lagoon. Sue Brian, manager of the caravan park, reports that a lot of archaeological material was found when the caravan park was erected, including porcelain and cornelian beads.¹⁹ A bronze bracelet was found on top of Tragedy Hill many years ago and is now in possession of local potter Jo Arkel, who believes it may be of Chinese or Portuguese origin.²⁰ Similar bracelets, however, have been found among the Zulu, and considering the history of Tragedy Hill as discussed above, this particular bracelet may belong to the later history of Tragedy Hill rather than the events surrounding the São João.

Factors contradicting Tragedy Hill as the location for the survivor camp.

The first contradicting factor is that the area is located quite a distance from where the wreck site is believed to be located. The water from the lagoon is brackish and today it is unsuitable for drinking. It is impossible of course to say whether this was the case 450 years ago. In the second instance, if the area was densely overgrown it would have been inaccessible, especially for 500 people most of whom were severely injured. The site lacks one of the characteristics of the other Portuguese camps: it is not situated on level ground and therefore unsuitable to accommodate a vast number of people.

Over the years, development and other activities in the area have uncovered some artefacts at Tragedy Hill, including jewellery, porcelain, cornelians and

¹⁸ Personal communication with Ferreira, November, 2003.

¹⁹ Personal communication from Sue Brian, 12 August 2001.

²⁰ Personal communication with Jo Arkel, September 2002.

cowrie shells but it also had its negative influence and it is possible that traces of any archaeological sites have already been destroyed

CAMP SITE PROPOSITION NO.2: KEISERS FARM (PED 2)



Figure 37: Aerial view of PED 2: Keisers Farm
(Port Edward, September 2002)

The area of interest is situated adjacent to the lagoon on Keisers farm in between the Inhlanhlinhlu and Kuboboyi Rivers, approximately 150m from the beach. Its geographical position is situated between 31°02'19.4"S and 30°13'53.3"E. Bounded by the Inhlanhlinhlu to the south the Kuboboyi to the north and the national road R61 to the west. The area is characterized by a range of hills and dunes covered by grass, lilies and coastal vegetation. The lower part of the farm is mostly marshland where the ground is muddy because of a reed marsh and a small stream flowing through the area. In the centre the ground is dry and sandy. It is easily accessible from two places along the beach where most of the artefacts were found.

Factors supporting the Keisers Farm site.

Walks in the field assisted in demarcating a promising area. Here the comparison between the area, the survivor account of the São João and the survivor accounts from other Portuguese ship wrecks with the geography of the area proved to be very valuable. Observations in the field immediately showed that fresh drinking

water was available, possibly from the Inhlanhlinhlu and Kuboboyi Rivers, as well as the stream running through the farm. The land is elevated above sea level by about 11m and the beach area clearly visible, yet far enough so that it is away from the “wind and waves”. It was also observed that the area is relatively flat surrounded by a number of hills visible to the north and west of the site.

One area in particular showed various characteristics which would have been favourable for establishing a camp site. A slight depression of approximately 200X200m in an area where vegetation has been disturbed was detected. This depression is large enough to contain a vast number of people together with rudimentary accommodation, for instance tents.

Scuba diver, Francoise van Rensburg, during personal meetings indicated on aerial photographs that some porcelain and cornelian beads were found at this site. He also pointed out where he had seen ships cannons underwater, which is not far from the site.²¹ The eastern side of the site is bounded by the sea, at present about 150m from the site.

Factors against the Keisers farm site.



Figure 38: View of PED 2 from the beach.
(Port Edward, September 2002)

²¹ Personal communication with van Rensburg, April 2001 and August 2002.

The beach in this area consists mostly of rock, though according to the geological survey of South Africa²² unconsolidated material has been detected off the coast of Port Edward, which may indicate that 450 years ago most of the rocky beach was covered by sand. Still, if one does not agree with this assumption, it would be very difficult for any survivors to come ashore in this area as is clear from the photograph. Moreover, upon diving in the area a strong undercurrent flowing away from the beach was also noted, making it considerably difficult for survivors to come ashore.

CAMP SITE PROPOSITION NO. 3: KUBOBOYI RIVER (PED 3)



Figure 39: View of PED 3: Kuboboyi Site.
(Port Edward, September 2002)

The investigated area is situated adjacent to the Kuboboyi River, approximately 230m from the beach, with an elevation of 42m. Its geographical position is situated between 31°02'06.6"S and 30°13'58.0"E. Bounded by a farm road leading to T.O. Strand camp site to the south, the Kuboboyi to the north, the national road R61 to the west and the T.O. Strand camp site to the east. A characteristic of the area is that it is situated on a hill covered by trees, khaki-bush, grass, and yellow wild flowers growing in abundance. The soil varies in that it was sandy in places and dark compacted soil in others. This site was

²² G.F. Birch, Quaternary sedimentation off the East Coast of Southern Africa (Cape Padrone to Cape Vidal). *Bulletin of the Geological survey of South Africa*. 118.

identified as a possibility as it displays anomalies associated with possible archaeological sites, such as disturbance in vegetation and soil

Arguments supporting the Kuboboyi site



Figure 40: View from PED 3: Kuboboyi Site.
(Port Edward, September 2002)

Walks in the field assisted in demarcating three promising areas within the site. Again the comparison between the area and the survivor account of the São João with the geography of the area proved to be helpful. Observations in the field immediately showed that fresh drinking water was available possibly from the Kuboboyi. This site poses a good vantage point since the surrounding area as well as the beach stretching from Port Edward all the way north to Leisure Bay is clearly visible as seen in figure 40 on page 106. By building a fortification with chests and barrels as it is stated, they would have had a clear view of hills to the north-west. The area is accessible, flat on top and large enough to accommodate a vast number of injured survivors.

Arguments against the Kuboboyi site

No mention is made of this river by either the São João or the São Bento survivors. Again the beach in this area consists mostly of rock which would make it very difficult for any survivors to come ashore in this area.

Beach Excavations (PED 4)

The beach excavations are also an important element within the investigation of the wreck site and survivor camp of the São João. The hypothesis of this thesis states that the porcelain, cowrie shell and cornelian beads washed onto the beach in the area of Port Edward must belong to a specific wreck, the São João. Thus the need existed for a proper evaluation of these archaeological finds and an organized effort to identify them and place them within context. Physical associations of cultural remains in the archaeological record are affected by factors that intervene from the moment of deposition to the recording of those associations by archaeologists.²³ British maritime archaeologist Keith Muckelroy has identified two major factors that alter the context of archaeological finds: scrambling devices and extracting filters. Scramblers are processes that operate to cause mixture of materials in such a way as to alter the physical associations at the site. Strong surge and wave action for example drive the porcelain, cowrie shells and beads away from the São João wreck and onto the beach²⁴. In the case of this investigation the scrambling process may be utilized to track and plot where the artefacts wash out. Filters are processes that affect the archaeological context by removing or obliterating materials from the physical associations at a site. Some of these processes include decomposition and destruction by marine organisms, flotation and salvage activities resulting in the removal of materials from the site.²⁵

By plotting the occurrence of artefacts on the beach and entering data into a database it may be possible to pinpoint the origin of the artefacts, and hence the

²³ J.P. Delgado, *The British Museum Encyclopaedia of Underwater and Maritime Archaeology*, London, 1997, p.108; K. Muckelroy, *Maritime Archaeology. New Studies in Archaeology*, London, 1978.

²⁴ Delgado, *The British Museum Encyclopaedia of Underwater and Maritime Archaeology*, p.109.

²⁵ Ibid.

actual wreck site. Since survivor camps, as far as can be determined, were never further than 1km from the wreck site this may in turn assist in locating the survivor camp. This process will take place over a long period of time to get an accurate reading. Some of the residents of Port Edward who have been picking up porcelain and beads over the years have kept record of when and where they collected the artefacts. Entering this data will help speed up the process.²⁶

The excavations on the beach were systematic and due to the time constraint only covered the stretch of beach closest to where the wreck site is believed to be located, 1km from the mouth of the Inhlahlinhlu River mouth. The greatest concentrations of artefacts were found below the high water mark to the middle of this beach opposite the inland site PED 2.

Seen in context, these artefacts indicate in the first instance a shipwreck in the area of Port Edward. In the second instance, after proper identification and analysis they reveal that the shipwreck is of Portuguese origin dating to the sixteenth century and not an Arab dhow as some believed in the past. The greatest concentrations of artefacts are found in the area adjacent to PED 2, where the peppercorns were found, confirming the theory that the survivor camp may most likely be located in the vicinity of PED 2. This theory is reinforced by the various Portuguese campsite characteristics that are comparable with this particular site.²⁷

Table 6: Portuguese campsite characteristics comparable with PED sites.

Portuguese campsite characteristics comparable with sites	PED 1	PED 2	PED 3
Not further than 1 km from wreck site		✓	✓
Near water supply	✓	✓	✓
Area suitable for the erection of structures i.e. flat		✓	✓
Availability of material from the area for shelters.	✓	✓	✓
Traces of provisions that may indicate survivor camp.		✓	

²⁶ Personal communication with computer programmer Bothma van Tonder, September 2002.

²⁷ Refer to the in depth discussion of Keisers Farm site on page 106.

Artefacts found close to site.		✓	
Traces of a burial site.			
Easily accessed from the beach/wreck site.	✓	✓	