

Searching for *Haarlem* (1647 CE): a ship that made history

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In 1647 CE, the United Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship *Haarlem* wrecked in Table Bay. The events that followed had far-reaching consequences, and this incident can be regarded as the catalyst that laid the basis for the modern multi racial South Africa. Since 1989, a project is underway to search for *Haarlem*. The present article provides a brief overview of work undertaken to date. This has resulted in the location of a site that, based on currently available evidence, probably contains the wreck.

Keywords: Cape Town, *Haarlem*, salt pans, Table Bay, United Dutch East India Company.

Introduction

ON Sunday 25 March 1647 CE, shortly after 5 p.m., the VOC ship *Haarlem* wrecked in Table Bay, South Africa. The events that followed had far reaching consequences for the history of this country. Fifty eight members of the crew were repatriated by the accompanying ships, but 62 men were left behind to try and salvage as much of the cargo as possible. They found refuge in a makeshift camp, Fort *Zandenburch*, where they lived for about one year. During their stay the men from *Haarlem* came into contact with indigenous people. Upon returning to the Dutch Republic, these men reported favourably of their experiences. As a result VOC management decided to establish the much-needed stopover for their ships. This station, that became known as the ‘Tavern of the Seas’, later developed into the city of Cape Town. The wrecking of *Haarlem* can thus be regarded as the catalyst that created one of the roots of current multiracial and multicultural South African society (Figure 1)^{1–5}.

Since 1989, a research project is underway to search for the shipwreck and survivor camp. This involves archival, literature, geological and geophysical surveys as well as test excavations. The objective is not only to locate both the shipwreck and its associated survivor camp, but also excavate these historical sites to meet the highest standards. Permission for the project has been obtained from the relevant authorities and the project is

entirely supported by sponsors and volunteers. This article provides a brief overview of the work undertaken to date, with an emphasis on recent archaeological field work. This has resulted in the location of a site that based on the currently available evidence, in all likelihood contains the wreck of *Haarlem*. This site is situated offshore, 1 to 2 m underwater and at a depth of about 3 to 4 m below the seabed, to the south-west of the Dolphin Beach Hotel at Table View, Cape Town.

Previous work

Based on archival, geographical and geological data, a strip of beach between the Cape Town suburbs of Table View and Milnerton was demarcated as the most likely location where *Haarlem* foundered. This area is bordered by the sea to the west and the greater part of the eastern section by the current Rietvlei lake. Results of previous investigations are also given here (Figure 2)⁶. Archival records have provided clues for the approximate location of the wreck. In a contemporary copy of a letter, VOC junior merchant Leendert Jansz who sailed with the ship refers to the place of stranding as: ‘...on a sandy beach, 1.5 (Dutch) mile south–southwest from the Table Bay...’⁷. The phrase, ‘...south–southwest from the Table Bay...’, is incorrect and is probably due to erroneous copying of the original document at the time. A previous report, dated 29 August 1647 CE and compiled by officers from the VOC ships *Tijger*, *Henriette Louise* and *Noord Munster* who visited the wreck and camp during a stopover, states: ‘...*Haerlem* (sic) (...) stranded at the north side of this bay’⁸. This location is confirmed by several references to the mouth of the nearby Salt River in the surviving part of the journal of *Leendert Jansz* that covers the period from 25 March to 14 September 1647 CE (ref. 9).

Another reference is provided by Jodocus Hondius III (1622–1655 CE) who in 1652 CE stated: ‘...the bight that is called the bight of Sardanje, which is the east side of Table Bay. In the year 1647, the ship “*Haarlem*” beached in this bight (...) past and to the north of the Salt River’¹⁰. The accompanying map indicates the Bogt van Sardanje at the eastern side of Table Bay, north of the Salt River, to the south-east of Robben Island and to the south of the rock outcrops near present-day Blaauwberg.

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Additional evidence as to the approximate place of foundering is provided by cartographic material that is lodged in the Dutch national archives in The Hague. The first of these documents is a fair sheet that contains a sketch of the Table Bay area¹¹. On this document, the approximate location where the wreck occurred is indicated by a description near the north-east coastline of Table Bay: ‘Approximately at this place the ship *Haerlem* stayed’. As the curve of the eastern coastline on this document is exaggerated – as a result of the location from where the observation was made – an electronic copy was manipulated to obtain a best fit to coincide with the actual situation. The results of this indicate a position for the wreck close to or on shore, to the southeast of Robben Island.

Two other contemporary images also provide some indications for the situation during the 1650s¹². The



Figure 1. Painting representing the situation at the place of wrecking of *Haarlem* on 27 March 1647 CE or very soon thereafter. Oil on panel, attributed to either Bonaventura (*1614–1652) or Gillis (*1612–1653) Peeters the Elder. Both brothers were leading marine artists in the Low Countries during the 17th century CE. (Reproduced with kind permission of Mr Joseph Guttman, New York.)



Figure 2. Overview of the search area with five principal targets (A–E) for test excavation, as well as the location of the wreck that was excavated in 1996 (Plan by Billy Steenkamp. ©AIMURE/Bruno Werz).

location of the wreck of *Haarlem* is indicated in the north-eastern section of Table Bay, as being either on or very close to the beach and opposite an area inland with salt pans (Figure 3). This is confirmed by the first commander of the VOC settlement at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, when describing the wreck and salt pans. In an entry in his journal made on Monday, 20 May 1652 CE, he states: Paid a visit to the wreck of the ship *Haerlem* (*sic*) which we saw still buried in the sand. (...) fetching salt, which we found in fair abundance in that vicinity...¹³. Nearly seven years later, his journal reports that on Wednesday 29 January 1659: ‘...large salt-pans above the wreck of the *Harlem* (*sic*)’¹⁴. These salt pans are also mentioned in *Hondius’ Klare besgryving*. The area that contained these salt pans is indicated on a map of Table Bay and the adjacent east coast by Joannes van Keulen II (1704–1755 CE)¹⁵. The map dates to 1753 CE and is very accurate, as was proven by overlaying it with a modern chart of Table Bay. The overlay also made it possible to project the seventeenth and eighteenth northern and southern perimeters of the salt pans on the current situation. From this reconstruction it can be concluded that substantial parts of the old salt pans are currently covered by the Rietvlei lake (Figure 4).

As was already mentioned, the place of foundering was recorded at a distance of: ‘1.5 (Dutch) mile (...) from Table Bay’. It may be assumed that ‘Table Bay’ in this context refers to the old roadstead or the adjacent landing place, close to the location where the first official Dutch fort was constructed in 1652 CE. At the time, 15 geographical Dutch miles equalled one degree of longitude on the equator. The measurement grew as the circumference of the earth was estimated to a better precision, but around the mid-seventeenth century the Dutch mile was approximately 7157 m. Nevertheless, as the distance stated was most probably an estimation based on visual

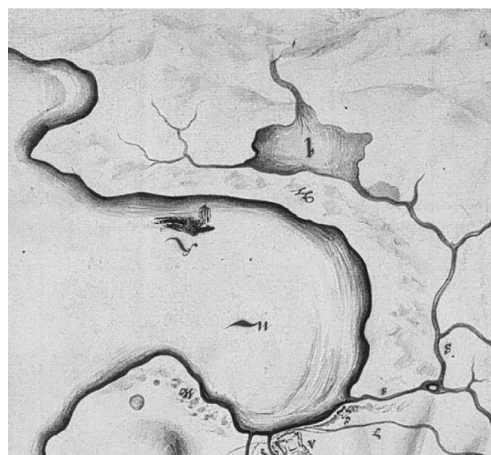


Figure 3. Detail from a manuscript map dating to the mid-17th century CE showing the wreck of *Haarlem* on the beach bordering the current Rietvlei area. (Atlas of Mutual Heritage, <http://www.atlasof-mutualheritage.nl> VEL 0803.)

observation, a standard of 7408 m for 1 Dutch mile was maintained for another reconstruction. Taking the approximate location of Van Riebeeck's fort as a base, a distance of 11,112 m was plotted in a straight line across Table Bay. The end point of this line touched the coast at Dolphin Beach, opposite Rietvlei. Using the same starting point, another line with a distance of 11,112 m was projected following the old coastline as close as possible. This ended slightly to the south of this point, close to the southern perimeter of the salt pans.

Geophysical surveys that were undertaken in 2017 and 2018 revealed a number of magnetic anomalies that were checked by test excavations that started in January 2018. In area A1–A2 a historical wreck was located, but was provisionally dated to the late 18th or 19th centuries CE, based on its appearance. As on most locations, wood and metal samples were collected and these are currently being analysed at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. Areas B–C, further to the north, were investigated on 7 November 2018. Site B contained a pipe line and C, a marine engine block. The southernmost area, D contains a wreck that was partly exposed in 2003 but, based on the presence of copper hull sheathing, could be dated as post 1780s CE. The same applies to a wreck that was uncovered in 1996, between areas A and C and about 100 m north of the Dolphin Beach Hotel. This wreck was excavated at the time by the author and was therefore not included in the 2018 test excavations. Area E, north of D, revealed modern materials such as fence poles, that are probably associated with sand dredging activities undertaken during the 1970s (Figure 5)³.

Most interesting artefacts were, however, found in area's F1–F5, just west-south-west of the Dolphin Beach Hotel on 8 and 9 September 2018. Although the results of

material analyses that can possibly reveal more of their provenance are still pending, the items resemble those from VOC wrecks^{16–19}. They include lead patches and sheets, fishing line sinkers as well as hand-forged nails in varying sizes, made from iron, brass and copper. A composite metal plate fragment, consisting of a copper sheet with lead lining was found in F1. Archival sources indicate that the stern, as well as the rudder of VOC vessels were (often) sheathed with lead-lined copper plates. The greater part of the hull was, however, covered with iron nails that, once corroded, created a protective ferrous layer against marine borers²⁰. Also the fact that no copper hull sheathing was found resembling the plates that were applied to ships' hulls from about the 1780 CE onwards – as proven by the sheathing that was found previously in area D, and the wreck that was located in 1996 between A and C makes area F of special interest at present.

One object that stands out was found in area F2 on 8 September 2018. It is most likely a necklace and made from a thin rod of hand-drawn copper. It has been recorded that the men from *Haarlem* bartered copper with indigenous people³. The journals of Jan van Riebeeck are full of references to this practice and state that locals fashioned jewellery from copper obtained in lieu of livestock. On 18 December 1652 CE, he writes that: '...they had already received much copper from us which they were busy making into bracelets and chains for

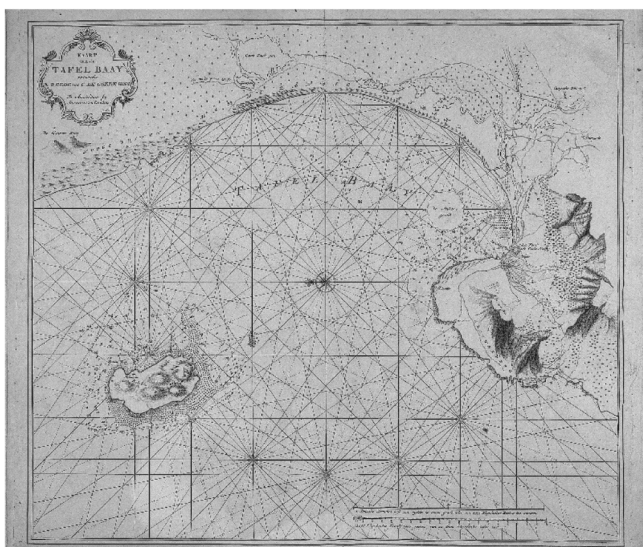


Figure 4. Map of Table Bay and the adjacent coast by Joannes van Keulen, Amsterdam 1753 CE. Large salt pans are clearly indicated near the north-east section of the coast.

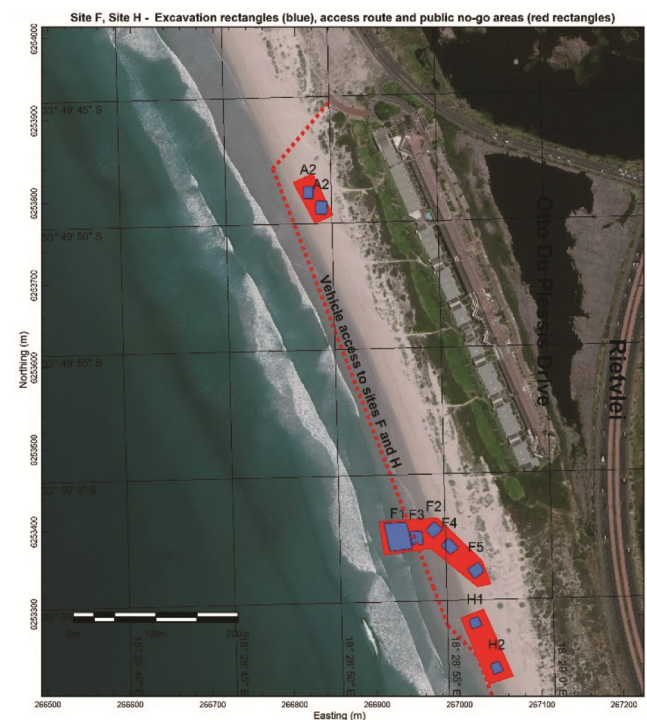


Figure 5. Overview of part of the search area with principal targets A and F–H, close to the Dolphin Beach Hotel in Table Bay (Plan by Billy Steenkamp. ©AIMURE/Bruno Werz).

ornaments'¹³. Some weeks later, on 14 January 1653, Van Riebeeck reports: 'Meanwhile, when we discussed with our interpreter Harry, as we have often done before, what the Saldanhars did with the copper, he gave us to understand, in broken English, that they made from it the bracelets and chains which we have seen them wearing. These they again bartered with certain other tribes far inland for cattle, and then obtained more copper from the Dutch and English ships every year...'¹³. This seemingly inconspicuous object may thus symbolize interaction between indigenes and those from overseas.

Conclusion

The shipwreck of *Haarlem* in Table Bay in 1647 CE was an event that had far-reaching consequences for South Africa. Both the city of Cape Town as well as current multicultural and multiracial South African society were in part a direct result of this incident. Very few shipping disasters world-wide had ever such an impact on the history of a whole nation. It is evident that this historic event thus needs to be studied in more detail, as it has been ignored for too long. The wrecking of *Haarlem* is also tightly knit to Asian and western European history. The Dutch 'connection' is obvious, as *Haarlem* was a vessel that operated under the mightiest international trading organization that the world had ever seen. Besides Asians, the VOC also employed many Germans, Scandinavians, British, French and other Europeans and had commercial interests in these respective regions.

Since 1989, a research project is going on with the aim to collect, study and interpret as much information on the shipwreck and its aftermath as possible. Relatively recent work has focussed on test excavations in area F where the wreck is expected. The results of test excavations are promising, and it is reasonable to assume that conclusive evidence may be uncovered soon. However, material samples from this and other locations first need to be analysed before any definite statements can be made.

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