HOW THE WRECK OF THE BARQUE STEFANO WAS NOT DISCOVERED?

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Abstract

On 27 October 1875, the Austro-Hungarian wooden barque Stefano, with a crew of seventeen, became shipwrecked off Point Cloates on the North-West coast of Australia. Only two mariners, Miho Bacich and Ivan Jurich, survived the six-month ordeal by joining a group of helpful Aboriginal nomads. On 18 April 1876 they were discovered at Bundegi Beach by Charles Tuckey, on his cutter Jessie, and brought to Fremantle.

Seven weeks after the rescue of the two mariners, Pemberton Walcott visited the Stefano wreck site at Point Cloates, on the schooner Victoria, and documented what he found on the beach. His report to Roebourne’s Government Resident, R. J. Sholl, is the only documented confirmation of the Stefano shipwreck site from that period.

Walcott’s report describes the wreckage of the Stefano as well as of 3 to 4 other unknown vessels. One wreck was of a vessel comparable in size to the Stefano or bigger. The existence of two large wrecks creates a potential problem when identifying Stefano-sized wrecks at Point Cloates, as it is necessary to determine if the found wreck is that of the Stefano or of the other large unknown wreck described by Walcott.

In 1997 a large wreck was discovered at Point Cloates by Western Australian Maritime Museum divers. There was nothing about the wreck that conclusively identified it as being either the Stefano or the unknown large vessel described by Walcott. Surprisingly, the museum announced the wreck to be the Stefano without considering the possibility that it might be the wreck of the other large vessel described by Walcott in his report.

This publication examines a range of archival documents to ascertain if the wreck discovered by museum divers was that of the Stefano or of another unknown vessel. It concludes that in all likelihood the museum staff did not find the wreck of the Stefano but a wreck of an as yet unknown vessel most likely described by Pemberton Walcott in his 1876 report.

Why the existence of the unknown wreck was not considered by museum archaeologists when identifying the wreck presumed to be the Stefano raises all kinds of interesting questions regarding the status of archaeology as a discipline of science.