INTRODUCTION: THE STEFANO ARCHIVE

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Ever since the 1997 discovery of the wreck presumed to be the barque Stefano there have been rumours questioning the wreck’s identification, although these have not been recorded in any publication.[1] The questioning of the wreck’s identification arises, in part, because there is little left of the original vessel on the wreck site and there was nothing found on it that definitively confirms it to be that of the Stefano.[2] In these circumstances, the identification process involves a leap of faith that requires contextual support for it to be compelling. While informed speculations of this kind are a feature of marine archaeology, it is generally necessary to account for any discrepancies that arise. This writing considers a number of documents that bring into question the identification of the wreck presumed to be the Stefano. These documents include (i) the wreck inspection report by Pemberton Walcott who discovered the Stefano wreckage in June 1876 (ii) the manuscript account of the two Stefano survivors, Miho Baccich and Ivan Jurich (iii) the correspondence of Charles Tuckey who rescued the two survivors, (iv) the writing of Tom Carter who lived in the vicinity of the shipwreck site for 13 years, along with (v) the documented contribution made by Indigenous Australians who were implicated in the shipwreck story. All of these sources place the shipwreck site in the vicinity of Black Rock at Point Cloates.

These accounts were not considered in any depth by the official museum report on the wreck presumed to be the Stefano or were inferred by the report in modified form from other sources.[3] When these excluded narratives are reinserted back in the analysis the identification of the wreck presumed to be the Stefano comes into question.

Part 1 presents Walcott’s report to Roebourne Government Resident R. J. Sholl in full. The report was completed on 20 & 21 June 1876 after Walcott returned from inspecting the wreckage at Point Cloates.[4] The wreck of the Stefano was positively identified by Walcott’s Aboriginal guide “Tony” who led him to the site, where Walcott also found the wreckage of 3-4 other vessels. He estimated one of these other wrecks to be around 1000-1500 tons. This is broadly comparable to the size of the Stefano which was registered as 857 ton barque but carrying 1300 tons of coal. His report includes a sketch of the locality which also makes it possible to affirm that the site he inspected was at Point Cloates.

Part 2 examines the 1988 writing on the Stefano by Graeme and Kandy-Jane Henderson in Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851-1880. The authors of this book review Walcott’s 1876 report and attempt to explain the mystery of the unknown wrecks he discovered at Point Cloates.[5] The Hendersons argue that Walcott probably did not discovered new wrecks but re-discovered pre-existing
wrecks uncovered by a cyclone on Christmas Day 1875. In their explanation, the large unknown vessel, described by Walcott, was the *Stefano* itself as this was the only large vessel known to have been shipwrecked at Point Cloates. As a result, the two *Stefano*-sized wrecks observed by Walcott were conflated into one – namely the *Stefano*. The Hendersons’ speculative projections were subsequently used by others as a default “authoritative” interpretation of Walcott’s report. This interpretation was implicitly used by the authors of the report on the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano*. The possibility that the wreck they found was not the *Stefano* but another *Stefano*-sized vessel was not considered by them, as this possibility was rendered invisible by the Hendersons’ interpretation.

This use of the Hendersons’ interpretation of Walcott’s original report by well-intending archaeologists invites all kind of questions regarding the status of archaeological evidence and how it can be masked with tentative pronouncements from specialist speakers. Accordingly, the official report on the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* provides a good example of discursive traps that come within imported references and can undercut a report’s scientific register.

Part 3 re-examines the Hendersons’ interpretation of Walcott’s report using information that was not readily available at that time when *Unfinished Voyages* was being written. In 1990s a very detailed 276-page manuscript *Stefano* shipwreck became available through a number of sources. This 1876 manuscript was authored primarily by the survivor Miho Baccich with the assistance of the scribe, Canon Stjepan Skurla from Dubrovnik, and the second survivor Ivan Jurich. The manuscript information negates the core assumption of the Hendersons’ “dislodgement” interpretation. Furthermore, in 2004 and 2009 and 2011 the museum divers discovered three new unknown wrecks at Point Cloates, two of which were discovered very near the spot inspected by Walcott in 1876. These discoveries add further credibility to Walcott’s report and affirm again the existence of the second large wreck other than the *Stefano*. Accordingly we are left with the question: if there are two *Stefano*-sized wrecks at Point Cloates did the museum divers discover the wreck of the unknown vessel or the wreck of the *Stefano*?

Part 4 reconsiders Walcott’s report using information from the *Stefano* shipwreck manuscript. The cross-referencing affirms the location of the *Stefano* shipwreck as being in the vicinity of Black Rock – about 4 miles north of the wreck discovered by the museum and presumed to be the *Stefano*. These accounts are consistent with the likely currents and the wind directions on the day of the shipwreck. They are also consistent with the cartography of the coast at Point Cloates and with direction of the line AB on the *Stefano* manuscript map (see over) that links the shipwreck site (A) and the camp site (B).

Part 5 recalls the documented accounts of the *Stefano* shipwreck site by:

(i) pearler Charles Tuckey who is frequently referenced in the *Stefano* shipwreck manuscript,
(ii) the ornithologist and pastoralist Tom Carter who lived at Point Cloates with Indigenous Australians for about 13 years, as well as
(iii) the Indigenous Australians implicated in the *Stefano* shipwreck story.
All these accounts support the proposition that:

(a) the *Stefano* was wrecked in the vicinity of Black Rock, and
(b) the Western Australian Maritime Museum (the Maritime Museum) staff did not discover the wreck of the *Stefano* in 1997 but most likely discovered the wreck of another large unknown vessel described by Pemberton Walcott in his 1876 report.

**Notes and References**

[1] Various elements of this publication were presented at *Calling Currents to Dreaming Conference*, Exmouth, 2010, *Discovering the Stefano Coast Colloquium*, Murdoch University, April 2015 and *Navigating Along the Stefano Trail Conference*, University of Dubrovnik, September 2015.

[2] The discovery was detailed by J. Green and M. McCarthy in the Wreck Inspection Report: *Stefano* (1873-1875) in the formal Report by Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Maritime Museum No: 132.


Only two copies of this 276 page handwritten document were made. One was given to Nikola Baccich – Miho’s uncle and the owner of the *Stefano*. The other copy remained with Miho’s family. The content of the manuscript remained unseen for the next sixty years and did not reach the general public until mid-1970s. The manuscript contains a map which is indispensable to the understanding of the shipwreck story. Various historical sources of the manuscript can be found on the same webpage in the paper entitled “Who is the Author of the 1876 Stefano Manuscript?”.


[9] The coordinates of Black Rock are 22 45' 32.5" S (22.7588S), 113 38' 52.3" (113.6479 E). The museum site of the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* is about 4 miles south of Black Rock at : 22°49.723’ S, 113° 43.167'E.