HOW THE WRECK OF THE BARQUE STEFANO WAS NOT DISCOVERED?

PART III

UNMASKING THE EVIDENCE

Josko Petkovic

On 7 June 1876, Pemberton Walcott, sailing on the schooner Victoria, arrived at Point Cloates on the north west coast of Australia. On the nearby beach he discovered the wreck of the barque Stefano and 3 to 4 other wrecks that no one knew anything about. Walcott documented his find in a formal report to Roebourne Government Resident R.J. Sholl, and included a sketch he drew of the wreck site.[1] Some 112 years later, the authors of Unfinished Voyages, Graeme and Kaye-Jane Henderson, reviewed Walcott’s report when writing on the Stefano shipwreck.[2] Their writing offered an explanation for the wrecks Walcott observed – an explanation that was based on a number of interconnected propositions summarised below:

(a) **Dislodgement**: The 1875 Christmas Day cyclone dislodged many old wrecks and deposited these on a beach at Point Cloates.

(b) **Collection Point**: Point Cloates was a collection point for wrecks as far as 16 km south.

(c) **Old wrecks**: Walcott’s “new” wrecks were in fact “old” wrecks from around Point Cloates as far as 16 km south.

(d) **Exaggeration**: Walcott may have exaggerated the extent of the wreckage to justify the expense of the long search.

(e) **The large vessel was the Stefano**: The Stefano was the largest vessel known to have been wrecked at Point Coates prior to June 1876. For the Hendersons the Stefano was most likely the large wreck described by Walcott.

All the above positions are based on reasonable arguments but all are likely to be inapplicable or incorrect as described in what follows.

(a) **Dislodgement**

According to the Hendersons the powerful 1975 Christmas Day cyclone dislodged wrecks from “16 kilometres or so to the south of Point Cloates” and delivered these to the beach where Walcott found them on 7 June 1876.[3] The Hendersons wrote this at the time when the full details of the Stefano shipwreck manuscript were not available to them. [4] The manuscript describes a number of visits to the wreck site by Stefano mariners following the 1875 Christmas Day cyclone. None of these visitors saw the wreckage that the cyclone was supposed to have dislodged, as suggested by the Hendersons. These visits are noted below.
New wrecks were not evident in January 1876 after the Christmas Day cyclone

In early January 1876, two Stefano mariners, Lovrinovich and Brajevich, visited the original campsite site after the cyclone hoping to find some provisions that had been washed ashore after the shipwreck. [5] If any wrecks were dislodged at Point Cloates by the 1875 Christmas Day cyclone these wrecks would have been visible from the campsite. None are mentioned in the manuscript.

No new wrecks were evident at Point Cloates on 12 March 1876

On 12 March 1876, two and a half months after the Christmas Day cyclone, the two survivors of the Stefano shipwreck, Baccich and Jurich, returned to the campsite at Point Cloates. They did not see any wreckage that the Christmas Day cyclone was supposed to have uncovered. Rather, everything was just as it had been left.

[180] ... (...) ... The sight of this camp, abandoned about four months, was torture to the souls of the last two survivors of the ill-fated Stefano. It brought back in vivid pictures the harrowing fate of the others. No longer able to control their feelings, they wept tears of sorrow for their friends, and of despair for themselves.

The tenting of lumber was all there, just as it had been left, but the provisions and other articles buried were all gone, unearthed by the Aborigines. [6]

The return to the campsite was a significant moment for the two survivors that would not have been forgotten. Baccich found some needles among the Stefano wreckage which he used to barter for food with Aborigines. [7] The whole group then moved northwards and passed the beach that, later in 1876, Walcott would find covered with wreckage. When they met Walcott upon his return to Cossack on 20 June 1876, the two Stefano survivors were surprised when he told them about the other wrecks. They recorded their surprise in the Stefano manuscript, attributing the discovery of the wrecks solely to Walcott:

[249] ...(…)... Skirting the coast, they [Walcott on the Victoria] located the torn and abandoned wrecks of seven other vessels. [8]

Accordingly we can conclude that Walcott’s report was correct and that on the beach of Point Cloates he found wrecks of 3-4 vessels, one that was as big as the Stefano. From the chronology of the visit we can also conclude that the wrecking took place during the three-month period between 13 March and 7 June 1876.

However, as will be argued below, the most pertinent observation that can be made at this stage is that the Henderson’ dislodgement hypothesis was always questionable and should not have been accepted so readily as the writing below will argue.

Documented Indigenous account

According to Walcott’s Aboriginal guide, “Tony”, the new wrecks were not there when he had last visited Point Cloates. Tony’s account, in turn, was also affirmed
by the two Stefano survivors when they met Walcott. Walcott mentions them all in his report:

The native Tony who had camped with the survivors of the Stefano immediately after their wreck seemed very much surprised to see so many other wrecks and declared they were not there at the time he was last there and this has since been verified by statement of the two survivors on the Stefano in the Rosette who informed me that no wrecks were visible when they left. [9]

There is yet another argument that works against the dislodgement hypothesis.

- **The 1875 Christmas Day cyclone did not dislodge old wrecks but buried them**

Dislodgement and reburying of wreckage on a beach over a period of time is likely to be a complex process. In the case of the Stefano wreck, the Christmas Day cyclone seems to have buried the wreckage rather than uncovering or dislodging it as speculated by the Henderson. Walcott observed that:

…(…) the remains of "Stefano" appears to us the oldest wreck on the beach – as far as amount of damage sustained, and more buried in sand seaweed etc., but at same time, the paint work appeared brighter and fresher, probably having been newly painted, … [10]

**(b) Collection Point?**

In *Unfinished Voyages* the Hendersons reason that Point Cloates was a collection point for wrecks 16 kilometres or so to the south of it.[12] On first reflection this seems like a workable hypothesis as the main current near Point Cloates is the cool north-flowing Ningaloo current that is driven along by the prevailing southerly winds. Such a current is able to drive flotsam northwards until it is obstructed by the westward protruding Point Cloates.

There is also a prevailing westerly and a south-westerly swell that is channelled by the Black Rock Passage. In these circumstances, the whole area where Walcott found the wreckage in 1876 would be expected to have been covered with layers of seagrass and other flotsam, including many floating wrecks.

This explanation, however, does not reflect the conditions found along Jane Bay beaches. At these beaches, some accumulation of seaweed just opposite the Black Rock Passage entrance can be found, but the accumulation seems quite small. Point Cloates itself is quite clean of seaweed and without major accumulation of flotsam of any kind – as at nearby beaches – negating the suggesting that this is a catchment area.
Clean beaches along Point Cloates seem odd and counterintuitive if the main current is the northward flowing Ningaloo current driven by prevailing southerly winds.

The solution for this puzzle is found once all currents that flow around the reefs at Point Cloates are considered in all circumstances. It is especially necessary to account for strong intermittent currents that arise when the swell is driven over the reef by the wind and waves. During a storm, the ocean waves flow over the reef and result in flows along the lagoon in a northerly and southerly direction. The general case for reef currents at Ningaloo has been made by Hearn et al.: 

Water circulation on fringing reefs has been extensively studied in Guam (Marsh et al. 1981). Under normal conditions, water entering the lagoon over the reef finds its way to adjacent gaps where it flows back out to the ocean. The flow in the gaps only reverses in conditions of a strong rising tide. Observations at Ningaloo show a similar current system (Hearn et al. 1986). [13]

An important feature of Point Cloates is the dense coral growth on the northern side of Black Rock Passage as depicted on the map below.
Coral reef at Point Cloates

The waves that hit the reef at this point cannot return back to the ocean but must flow along the lagoon either northwards or eastwards and ultimately southwards. This lagoon current is especially pronounced on stormy days, and the stronger the storm the stronger is this lagoon-flowing current. Such south-flowing currents may explain the large accumulation of seaweed at the south end of Jane Bay rather than at the north end as postulated by the Hendersons.
This existence of these complicated currents can also explain the south-east drift of the shipwrecked sailors after they abandoned the *Stefano*.

It is likely that on certain days the south-bearing lagoon current balances the prevailing northward flowing current. The convergence of such opposing currents could explain the following “two miles” reference in the Walcott 1876 report:

but it was remarkable that all wreckage had come ashore within a distance of two miles — and literally nothing was seen beyond. [14]

Likewise, the winds at Point Cloates are somewhat complicated and warrant an elaboration.

- **The wind change towards the south-east**

The prevailing winds at Point Cloates are southerly and south-westerly. However, with the onset of a storm the wind direction often changes and begins to blow from a north-westerly direction as depicted by the “Low” pressure system in the weather map below.

As the “Low” system moves eastward the direction of the wind moves around from being north-westerly to being south-westerly. This is what most likely happened immediately after the *Stefano* became wrecked.

For the *Stefano* sailors who were drifting in water after the shipwreck, it is likely that for a while both the current and the wind were driving them in the same south-easterly direction from the shipwreck location – especially during the early hours of the storm and before the wind began to turn to north easterly and northerly direction.

There is some indirect evidence of this wind change in the *Stefano* manuscript. Perancich was one of the first sailors to fall into the water shortly after the onset of the storm, at the time when the south-easterly direction of the storm wind was likely to
have been at its most pronounced. With both wind and current pushing him in the southerly and south-easterly direction he was washed ashore some ten miles further south than the other sailors who found themselves in the water a little later when the wind was not blowing as much in the south-easterly direction:

[77] Perančić told them as follows: As he was trying to loosen one of the Stefano’s life boats from its moorings, a heavy wave swept over him carrying him into the ocean. The boat was, of course, smashed to pieces but the drifting boards were seized by the drowning man who clung to them with the strength of wild despair. This greatly uneven battle of life against death lasted the whole day when towards evening he was cast ashore at a point about ten miles south of the spot where his other companions had been [subsequently] thrown. [15]

This description is consistent with a change of wind direction during the storm – from a north-westerly direction at the storm’s outset, followed by a gradual shift to a westerly and south-westerly direction as the storm front passed.

(c) Old wrecks are not new wrecks

The following table summarizes the wrecks that Pemberton Walcott inspected at Point Cloates on 7 and 8 June 1876.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Wrecked</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Tons</th>
<th>Remarks Wreckage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stefano</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>51.9 m</td>
<td>875/1300</td>
<td>oldest but freshly painted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown 1</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>300-500</td>
<td>vessel softwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown 2</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>300-500</td>
<td>one/ two vessels softwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown 3</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>1000-1500</td>
<td>vessel softwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown 4</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td></td>
<td>large vessel teak-like wood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total tonnage of wreck vessels according to Walcott is in the range of 2475–3800 tons at least.

In Unfinished Voyages the Hendersons reason that Walcott’s “new” shipwrecks could in fact be “old” shipwrecks as tabulated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vessel</th>
<th>Wrecked</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Tons</th>
<th>Remarks Wreckage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rapid</td>
<td>1811</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>wreck burned then sunk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correo da Azia</td>
<td>1816</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occator</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>1867</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefano</td>
<td>1875</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>freshly painted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A cursory comparison of these two tables indicates that the Hendersons’ explanation is somewhat short on tonnage, which is why they need Walcott to be exaggerating. It is also questionable if the 245 ton brigantine Occator should be included in the
Hendersons’ list, as the reported wreck coordinates are likely to be much further north near Carbaddaman Passage – hence the northward current that scoops material “16 kilometres or so to the south of Point Cloates” no longer applies. The *Emma* and the *Brothers*, which disappeared in 1867, were comparatively small crafts.

There is yet another reason why the Hendersons’ explanation of dislodgement does not ring true. The wreckage described by Walcott is quite different from the wreckage described by the Hendersons. For example, none of the Hendersons’ wrecks fit the description of “lately wrecked” which Walcott reiterat ed time and time again in his report.

Both the *Rapid* and the *Correio da Azia* had been in the water for around 60–65 years and probably had been through a number of cyclones previously. In addition the *Rapid* was torched by its crew before they left it. None of these details are evident in any of Walcott’s descriptions. It is doubtful that the “dislodged” wrecks could have been mistaken for vessels wrecked in the three months prior to Walcott’s visit. Simply wanting to change a description of new wrecks into old wrecks some 110 years after the event is not compelling. In contrast, Walcott’s description of what he saw is described in most unambiguous terms.

In his brief report Walcott used the term “new” wrecks five times. The first of these can be found in a short note that Walcott wrote to Sholl as soon as he got to Roebourne. [16] In this note he describes the wreck he saw when he first landed on the beach at Point Cloates:

> ...(…)... accompanied by natives we found wrecks of “Stefano” and 3 or 4 other vessels – wrecked since.

Four more references to new wrecks are found in the report Walcott gave to Sholl the next day, on 21 June:

> ...(…)... we landed amid a mass of wrecks – walked about a mile along the beach, and came to the conclusion that several vessels had been lately wrecked –

> ...(…)... I came to the conclusion that no less than 4 and probably 5 Vessels of considerable tonnage had been wrecked within 7 or 8 months –

In his report Walcott claims that of the wrecks the *Stefano* wreck is the oldest:

> ...(…)... The wreck, since verified beyond a doubt as the remains of “Stefano” appears to us the oldest wreck on the beach – as far as amount of damage sustained, and more buried in the seaweed etc., but at the same time, the paintwork appeared brighter and fresher probably having been freshly painted, …

Walcott’s position is confirmed by Tony, the Aboriginal Australian, and separately by the two survivors in the *Stefano* manuscript.

(d) Exaggeration

The suggestion that Walcott may have exaggerated the extent of the wreckage to justify the expense of the long search, also does not ring true. There is little evidence
to support this position. Walcott’s report presents a person who is of careful and pedantic nature and has an eye for detail. His attention to detail was also exhibited some 50 years earlier on Grey’s expedition when he collected one of the first word lists from North West Aborigines.[17] The Hendersons draw attention to the incremental changes of Walcott’s estimates, when describing the large wreck over a number reports, from a vessel of 1000 to 1500 and then to 2000 tons. [18] But should we be so judgmental of Walcott’s estimates? The variation of estimate does not seem to be so unreasonable given the condition of the evidence he found on the beach. One would expect that the margin of error when estimating tonnage from masts, spars and such would be quite large. For example what tonnage can one attach to a vessel that is 51.9 meters long? Perhaps 1000, or 1500 or 2000 tons? The Stefano was 51.9 meters long and was registered as a 857 ton vessel but was carrying 1300 tons of coal. How different would this tonnage be if the length was 55 meters long. The wreck found by the museum and presumed to be the Stefano was spread over 55 meters on the seafloor. Could this be the wreck of a 1000, 1500 or a 2000 ton vessel?

We should also remember that Walcott’s report was not made in a vacuum. It caused several vessels from Roebourne to go to Jane Bay and salvage the timber from the wrecks on the beach. If Walcott was exaggerating he would have been found out. [19]

All of this information was available to discoverers of the wreck presumed to be the Stefano. All of it supports the accuracy of Walcott’s report and affirms that between 12 March and 7 June 1876, Point Cloates became littered with the wreckage of 3-4 vessels, and that this took place in the absence of any catastrophic meteorological events.

All of this affirms that there were two Stefano-sized wrecks at Point Cloates in June 1876.

(e) Two Stefano-sized wrecks were discovered by Walcott at Point Cloates

Walcott described the two Stefano-sized wrecks in both parts of his report. He did this after he talked with the two Stefano survivors in Roebourne, so there is no reason to assume that he mistook the second large wreck to be the Stefano. The two Stefano survivors would have told him that the Stefano was registered as a 857 ton vessel even though it was carrying 1300 tons of coal. They said as much to the Harbour Master as soon as they landed at Fremantle a few months earlier on 5 May 1876. [20] In his report Walcott recalls the conversation with the two survivors and immediately notes that the other vessel was a larger vessel of 1500 tons – 200 tons more than Stefano’s 1300 tons of coal. Accordingly we have a good reason to assume that in the following passage Pemberton was not referring to the Stefano:

I have reason to believe from statements made me by "Survivors in Rosette" — one of these vessels must have been registered not less than 1500 tons, probably more — [21]

In his reports Walcott clearly distinguishes the wreck of the Stefano, which he names and identifies as the oldest wreck on the beach because of the cover of sand etc. as described earlier.
The wreck of *Stefano* was pointed out by natives and the camp of survivors, where sundry articles belonging to her were found such as boards with written particulars — torn charts, stools etc etc. This wreck, since verified beyond a doubt as the remains of *Stefano* appeared to us the oldest wreck on the beach, as far as amount of damage sustained, and more buried in sand, seaweed etc. But at same time, the paint work appeared brighter and fresher, probably having been newly painted. [22]

After he describes the wreck of the *Stefano*, Walcott describes a number of smaller (300-500 tons) vessels on the beach before observing the wreck of another “very large vessel”. He described this latter wreck in considerable detail, in fact, half of Walcott’s “minute examination” is devoted to the wreck of this large vessel:

a little further south westerly on the beach, just awash was the side of a very large vessel — apparently lately wrecked hard wood — (very like teak) copper fastened & coppered, the copper sheathing, being but only slightly torn in a few places and quite bright without any barnacles, or other indications of having been any considerable time afloat. I counted (13) thirteen planks 9 inches wide between her copper and coaming boards, the wreck appeared to consist of nearly the whole length of a vessel broadside, but a number of the lower planks had been torn from her timbers, there were 13 rows of sheathing left on her, and by comparison I am of the opinion she must have had about the same number below. 4/5 of the side (being end on) was under water at an angle of about 7° or 8° degrees — the extreme end not being visible — I should judge her to be a vessel about 1000 tons. I noticed the other side of apparently some vessel afloat about 1/4 mile from the beach. I noticed (3) three built masts of very large size — not less than three feet diameter, a bowsprit I measured was 41 ft long & 2 ft 9" dia., and a main or fore yard, a small portion of which had been broken off measured 71 feet — hundreds of other spars were strewed along the beach but it was remarkable that all wreckage had come ashore within a distance of two miles — and literally nothing was seen beyond. The native "Tony" who had camped with the survivors of the "Stefano" immediately after her wreck — seemed very much surprised to see so many other wrecks & declared they were not there at the time he was last there and this has since been verified by statement of the 2 survivors of Stefano, in the "Gazette" who informed me that no wrecks were visible when they left, the native also informed me that about 2 winters ago “a very large steamer” had been wrecked down at his country (Cape Cuvier) and all hands lost including a woman — he also has informed me here that the rest of "Stefano's" survivors had died a long way South. [23]

The existence of two wrecks of two large vessels (*Stefano*-sized or bigger) was not only documented in Walcott’s report but was reported by the local press, in a way that also clearly distinguished the *Stefano* wreck from other wrecks including the very large wreck. On 14 July 1876, *The Western Australian Times* described “Scene Of The Wreck Of the ‘Stefano’” as follows:

Most of the “Stefano's spars and part of her cabin poop have been washed on to the beach. There are remains along the coast of other wrecks of ships of very large tonnage. These are chiefly in the vicinity of Point Cloates. There is a main yard, eighty one feet long, bowsprit seventy one feet long and several large packed (or mand) masts between three and four feet through. There are also two sides of a large craft apparently about two thousand tons in fact the beach is said to be one mass of wreck and the spars lay one on the top of each other in heaps. [24]
All available documents supported Walcott’s description of two Stefano-sized wrecks on the beach of Point Cloates in June 1876. When the possibility of two Stefano-sized wrecks is accepted as valid it is difficult to immediately conclude that the wreck discovered by the museum divers was the Stefano.

- **The Length of the Vessel?**
  The length of the Stefano is recorded in Registre Veritas as 51.9 meter. [25] The wreck presumed to be the Stefano is reported to lie bows to the south and spread lengthwise 55 meters across a coral reef that varies in depth from 5-10 meters. From the report it is not clear if the spread of the wreck across 55 meters reflects the length of the vessel or if it also includes some scatter of the wrecked parts. If the integrity of the structure has been preserved on the wreck site then the length of 55 meters is somewhat longer than expected and may be an indication that it is a wreck of an “unknown” vessel a little larger than the Stefano. Future archaeological work on the site could illuminate this important question. It may well be the crucial test that can decide if the wreck is that of the Stefano … or not.

- **Orientation**
  Rathe describes the orientation of the Stefano after the shipwreck as southward, as does Angelina Baccich in her original translation of her grandfather, shipwreck survivor Miho Baccich’s, account.[26] The authors of the report on the wreck presumed to be the Stefano see this as confirmation that the wreck was indeed that of the Stefano as this wreck is also orientated in a southerly direction. However, the orientation of the wreck offers only provisional support that it may be the Stefano as many vessels that travel north generally travel southward as well. Similarly the specific location of the shipwreck on the reef itself may have a bearing on the final resting position of the wrecked vessels and this may not thus be an arbitrary direction, but one that may hold true for many vessels.

- **Artefacts**
  The artefacts found on the wreck site are similarly inconclusive. The size of the anchor, rudder gudgeons and copper alloy fastenings found on the site are consistent with a late nineteenth century vessel as large as the Stefano or larger. There were also some wood and coal fragments imbedded in the artefacts. These too add a degree of support to the identification of the Stefano …. or a similar-sized nineteenth century vessel. [27]

In these circumstances the wreck discovered by the museum divers at Point Cloates in 1997 could be either the Stefano or one of the other large vessels described by Walcott in June 1876. The identification of the wreck as the Stefano was unfortunate as it excludes the consideration of the other large vessel. Without strong contextual information this omission may even seem perplexing given that Walcott’s report is the first detailed record of the Point Cloates wreck site.

**New Found wrecks**
If there was any residual doubt about the accuracy of Walcott’s 1876 report these can be dispelled by recent archaeological discoveries at Jane Bay. Three more “unknown” wrecks have been discovered at Points Cloates since the 1997 discovery
of wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* – bringing the total to four wrecks that may all be wrecks reported by Walcott.

The WA Maritime Museum database lists these four vessels as follows [28]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discovered</th>
<th>Wreck Name</th>
<th>Latitude S</th>
<th>Longitude E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997/04/09</td>
<td>Presumed <em>Stefano</em></td>
<td>-22.826883333</td>
<td>113.721183333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004/04/28</td>
<td>Point Cloates Unknown</td>
<td>-22.863433333</td>
<td>113.750666667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/05/14</td>
<td>Jane Bay Unknown 1</td>
<td>-22.732317</td>
<td>113.73212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/08/31</td>
<td>Jane Bay Unknown 2</td>
<td>-22.73785</td>
<td>113.739983</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two wrecks discovered in 2009 and 2011, Jane Bay Unidentified 1 and 2, seem very close to the location of the wreckage described by Walcott and as depicted on the maps below. [29]
The Maritime Museum estimates the “Jane Bay Unidentified 1 (Unknown)” wreck discovered in 2009 to be of a 400–500 ton vessel. This wreck does not correspond to any wrecks invoked by the Hendersons in 1988 but is consistent with the unknown wrecks described by Walcott. The most likely explanation is that the wreck is of one of the two 300-500 ton mystery vessels that Walcott described finding on the beach in his 1876 report.

Similarly, the “Jane Bay Unidentified 2 (Unknown)” wreck discovered in 2011 does not correspond to any wrecks invoked by the Hendersons in 1988. The Maritime Museum estimates this wreck to be of another 400–500 ton vessel – consistent with Walcott’s original description.

Yet another wreck discovered in 2005 does not correspond to any wrecks invoked by the Hendersons but is consistent with the unknown wrecks described by Walcott. This wreck is south of the wreck presumed to be the Stefano and near to what is thought to be the wreck of Correo da Azia. The encrusted condition of the wreck makes it difficult to say anything definitive about it. The museum consider it likely to be a nineteenth century vessel and it was given a provisional designation by the Museum archaeologist as “Point Cloates Unknown”. [30]

For the purpose of this writing, the wreck discovered by the Maritime Museum (WAMM) in 1997 and presumed to be the Stefano should also be considered to be an unknown and unidentified “large” wreck.

All these four vessels that do not correspond to any wrecks invoked by the Hendersons but are consistent with the unknown wrecks described by Walcott in 1876.
Finding all these new “unknown” wrecks near the spot described by Walcott in 1876 seems to have prompted Maritime Museum staff to reconsider the veracity of Walcott’s report. In *Report on the 2011 Jane Bay wreck site investigations August–September 2011* the author concludes by observing that “it is now becoming clear that the report by Walcott in 1876 and his map showing four wreck sites on the beach is in fact correct.” [25]

It is now necessary for the Maritime Museum archaeologists to consider the full implications of their newfound perspective. An informed reading of Walcott’s account supports the propositions that there were at least two wrecks of large (*Stefano*-sized or larger) vessels at Point Cloates. The possibility that the wreck found by the museum staff and presumed to be the *Stefano* is not the *Stefano* but the other *Stefano*-sized “unknown” vessel described by Walcott in his 1876 report has not been raised publicly as yet and it should be.

**Discursive Hindsight**
The Hendersons’ interpretation of Walcott’s inspection was always tentative and provisional. With hindsight that interpretation should have kept its tentative status.
But this is not how discourse works. In the Hendersons’ narrative we have two significant and authoritative figures thinking aloud with us and sharing reasonable albeit speculative projections. What is surprising is how effective such discursive engagements are in derailing our critical gaze. Often, all that is needed to deflect our attention from evidence is for an authority to invoke a collection of reasonable assumptions, projections and references. The Hendersons’ review of Walcott’s report establishes such a reasonable narrative. The large wreck had to be the Stefano because the Hendersons accounted for all wrecks reported by Walcott at Point Cloates.

Using language in this way has much in common with ‘spin’, although producing spin is intentional and self-conscious distortion. In contrast, projecting reasonable assumptions, references and speculative suggestions from limited evidence is almost a defining characteristic of archaeology. Nevertheless the result can be the same. By shifting attention away from evidence – in this case from Walcott’s to that of the Hendersons – we quickly lose sight of Walcott’s evidence. The result is the logical traps often encountered in archaeology, which almost by definition begins with an absence of evidence or at most partial evidence.

The Maritime Museum report on the wreck presumed to be the Stefano is a good example of how such deflection from evidence can perpetuate itself. The Hendersons’ speculations seemed to have been accepted as valid by discoverers of the wreck presumed to be the Stefano.

Another unfortunate consequence of such discursive sleight of hand is that alternative accounts of the shipwreck can also be derailed and rendered invisible or irrelevant. In the case of the Maritime Museum report, these excluded narratives include the accounts of the two survivors described in the Stefano manuscript itself. The report also excluded accounts by pearler Charles Tuckey (who picked up the two survivors of the Stefano shipwreck in his cutter Jessie at Bundegi Beach) and the ornithologist and pastoralist Tom Carter (who lived at Point Cloates with Indigenous Australians for about 13 years), that have much to contribute to our understanding of the shipwreck site. The same can be said of contribution by Indigenous Australians who indirectly contributed to the unfolding of this story.

These excluded narratives need to be reconsidered again if we are to decide which of the two larger wrecks at Point Cloates is the Stefano.
Notes and References


[5] Ibid., p. 108. The two mariners visited the site between 5-11 January.

[6] Ibid., p. 180

[7] Ibid., pp. 181, 182

[8] Ibid., p. 249


[10] Ibid.


