

Flinders finds clues to early Dutch postal system

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Ancient maritime inscriptions dating back to the early 1600s have been found on the coast of Madagascar by Flinders University researchers.

Dr. Wendy van Duivenvoorde (pictured), a lecturer in maritime archaeology, returned from the world's fourth largest island last month with evidence of more than 40 inscriptions from Dutch sailing ships that once traversed the region en-route to South East Asia.

The team of researchers, including Flinders archaeology research associate Mark Polzer and Jane Fyfe, a PhD candidate and rock art specialist from the University of Western Australia, discovered the

messages carved into rock outcrops and boulders on an island in the Bay of Antongil, on the northeast corner of Madagascar.

While some of the inscriptions were originally found in the 1920s, researchers have always believed there were no more than a dozen “postal stones”.

Dr. van Duivenvoorde said the inscriptions, which were carved into the rocks between 1601 and 1657, offered important insights into early Dutch seafaring to the Indies, and were a unique example of Dutch cultural heritage overseas.

“In the 1500s, the Portuguese were the only Europeans who knew the route to South East Asia so they supplied all the spices and exotica to the Netherlands,” Dr. van Duivenvoorde said.

“The Dutch made their way to Batavia, which is modern day Jakarta, for the first time in 1595 but they didn’t have any systems in place to communicate via other Dutch ships to send messages back home and relay their last port of call,” she said.

“From the first voyage on, they went to a small beach in the Antongil Bay because they knew from the Portuguese that they could get fresh water there and that it was the only place in the bay where they could anchor safely to ride out a storm or repair a ship.

“They started using the beach as a communications area by inscribing messages on the rock faces and frequently leaving letters for other ships to pick up.

“Basically it was like an early postal system.”

Dr. van Duivenvoorde said the messages – left by at least 13 different

ships – included official communications that recorded the names of ships and the times and dates of their arrivals, as well as unofficial messages left by higher-ranked seamen, who chiselled their names into the stone.

“One inscription reveals that the ship Middelburg reached the bay after a cyclone in 1625, without masts, and was anchored there for a good seven months while it was being repaired,” she said.

“It’s quite amazing to think that they managed to ‘sail’ into the bay without masts and sails.”

While the team is still in the process of transcribing and studying the inscriptions, Dr. van Duivenvoorde said she hoped to return to Madagascar in 2013 to create a 3D rendering and to lobby relevant authorities for cultural heritage protection.

“It’s definitely under threat from sea erosion, cyclones and rain, as well as from jungle vegetation and moss growing on the rocks which have faded the inscriptions over time.

“I’m also hoping our discovery will reinvigorate interest in the stones and lead to better education for local tourist guides – these inscriptions have been forgotten for decades and even specialists who study postal stones from this period do not mention them in their books.”

Provided by Flinders University

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