

Archaeologist resurfaces stories from a sunken slave ship

June 10 2015, by Lauren Ingeno



Credit: Susanna Pershern/U.S. National Parks Service

A Portuguese ship carrying more than 400 enslaved people left Mozambique on Dec. 3, 1794, and set sail for Brazil, where the growing sugar economy demanded cheap labor. Shackled and packed like cargo

beneath the ship's deck, the slaves endured a cruel journey filled with sweat, blood and vomit.

An estimated 400,000 East Africans made the same trip between 1800 and 1865. But more than half of this ship's occupants would never reach their final destination.

Violent winds and treacherous swells rocked the vessel as it rounded the Cape of Good Hope off the coast of South Africa. The ship, called the *São José*, struck submerged rocks and wrecked between two reefs. A rescue attempt saved the captain, the crew and around 200 slaves. The remaining Mozambican captives sank to the bottom of the ocean.

For more than two centuries, this account of the wreckage from the ship's captain was the only evidence of the *São José*'s victims that prevailed above water. Now, a George Washington University professor and a team of archaeologists have brought their stories to the surface.

The researchers unveiled two artifacts from the shipwreck during a press conference in South Africa on Tuesday: an iron ballast used to weigh down the ship (since human cargo could die and tip the vessel off balance) and a wooden pulley block. Both items will be loaned to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture for an exhibit set to open next year called "Slavery and Freedom."

This is the first time archaeological evidence has been recovered from a slaving ship that went down with slaves aboard, according to the researchers. The *São José* is all the more significant, they say, because it represents one of the earliest experimental voyages that brought East Africans into the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

These findings will help to tell the slave trade narrative from a new

perspective, said Stephen Lubkemann, an associate professor of anthropology and international affairs at GW. Dr. Lubkemann is a maritime archaeologist and part of the international research team that uncovered the items.

"It is, in the most literal sense, as close as we will ever get to the experience of the Middle Passage," he said. "The slave trade is one of the most important stories in modern history. It's a social process that has had ramifying impacts across the globe."

The discovery is a result of the Slave Wrecks Project—an ongoing collaboration between GW, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Iziko Museums and a group of international partners. The project's mission is to locate, document and preserve artifacts from the global slave trade.

"They are disseminating knowledge that is really unparalleled," said Roy Richard Grinker, chair of the Department of Anthropology. "We can find objects that tell us about how people lived and what they ate. But this is a case where we're really getting a sense of this incredible, transformative experience—the hardships that these people faced, their strength and their endurance."

The project began in 2009 when new interest began developing around the São José. The ship had previously been identified as the wreck of a Dutch vessel that sank in 1756, but new archeological evidence suggested otherwise. Copper fastenings and sheathing found at the site was not commonly used until later in the 18th century.

Intrigued, [maritime archaeologist](#) Jaco Boshoff began searching through archival records hoping he might find clues about the true identity of the mysterious sunken ship. In 2011, he hit the jackpot, a captain's account of the 1794 São José wrecking. The detailed document led researchers to

Portugal, Brazil and South Africa where they poured through more archives.

"Those kind of references provide you with ways to narrow down the search," Dr. Lubkemann said. "But then as you start to work on the site, you start to find artifacts that confirm you are on the site that you think you are."

While diving in 2012, Dr. Boshoff and his colleagues uncovered the iron ballasts that had been buried in the ocean floor at the São José site. Further archival investigations and findings using CT scanning technology over the next three years affirmed the location of the São José wreck.

"Any one of those things by itself is not sufficient," he added. "But when you start to add six, seven, eight different lines of evidence, and they all are consistent, that's how an archaeologist narrows down a search, and our confidence increases."

Matching archival records with found treasures can be a long, sometimes tedious process. Recovering the objects from the depths of the ocean proved to be even more challenging.

The waters off the coast of Cape Town are cold and unpredictable. Dangerous storm surges leave trails of destruction in their paths. Currents from Antarctica can create waves that are three stories high. Sometimes four-week long archaeological expeditions are cut down to a single day due to heavy winds and low temperatures.

"It's like diving into a washing machine," Dr. Lubkemann said. "This is one of the hardest sites I've ever worked on."

But the payoff is well worth the effort, he said. While the Middle

Passage is a heavily studied area of scholarship, the voices of the slaves themselves often go unheard.

"The historical record tells a story of those who have the ability to write, which is usually people in power. And it's heavily managed. It certainly doesn't reflect the experience of those who didn't have a voice," said Dr. Lubkemann. "That's where archaeology steps in and provides a different perspective that may, in certain instances, be quite different from that of what's been written."

The story of the Mozambicans who sank onboard the São José remains unfinished. Dr. Lubkemann and his team will continue their work at this and other shipwreck sites for years to come, as they attempt to piece together a full picture of their horrific journeys and tragic ends.

In the meantime, Dr. Lubkemann hopes that the São José relics will give the public the opportunity to engage with history in a unique and meaningful way once the objects are on display at the Smithsonian museum next year.

"We speak about the [slave trade](#), and we often use numbers—10 million or 12 million, of whom 8 or 9 million survived on the ships," he said. "But seeing those artifacts in front of you is an enormously powerful experience. It brings home that this was real. It is not something simply in the history books."

Provided by George Washington University

Citation: Archaeologist resurfaces stories from a sunken slave ship (2015, June 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-06-archaeologist-resurfaces-stories-sunken-slave.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.