

HOW THE WRECK OF THE BARQUE *STEFANO* WAS NOT DISCOVERED?

PART II

**UNFINISHED VOYAGES: THE WRECK PRESUMED TO BE THE
*STEFANO***

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In 1988, a new archaeological account of the *Stefano* shipwreck emerged with the publication of *Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851-1880*. [1] When writing about the *Stefano* shipwreck, the authors, Graeme and Kandy-Jane Henderson, made extensive use of Walcott's 1876 report including the sketch that Walcott drew during his inspection.[2] The Hendersons began by suggesting a possible location of the shipwreck:

In 1981, during a Museum excavation season on the wreck of the *Rapid* divers saw a trail of coal and wood fragments leading out to sea from beach were Walcott reported wreckage. It is very likely that the coal is from the *Stefano*. Baccich's account suggests that the *Stefano* struck Black Rock, a detached Rock further out to sea than the main reef, but the original wreck site, which should comprise anchors and perhaps coal and some structure, has not been found.[3]

The Hendersons were puzzled by the many wrecks Walcott discovered at Point Cloates as these did not fit any information known to them at that time. To resolve this quandary they commenced an inventive thread:

The beach where Walcott found wreckage acts as a collection point for flotsam coming over the reef up to 16 kilometres or so to the south of Point Cloates. [4]

They then compiled a list of vessels that have been lost near Point Cloates "collection point" over many years some of which, like the *Rapid*, had already been found. The list of the vessels likely to have been wrecked within 16 kilometres south of Point Cloates was:

1811	<i>Rapid</i>	366 ton	(found)
1816	<i>Correo d'Azia</i>		(not found)
1856	<i>Occator</i>	145 ton	(not found)
1867	<i>Emma</i>	116 ton	(not found)
1867	<i>Brothers</i>	16 ton	(not found)
1875	<i>Stefano</i>	857 ton	(found by Walcott)

The prevailing wind and current around Point Cloates are southerly, making the Hendersons' suggestion and subsequent list seem plausible. The hook-like topographic protrusion of Point Cloates makes the "collection point" explanation even more compelling. The Christmas day cyclone completes the picture. Identifying some of the wrecks also seemed straightforward. The *Stefano* was the only large vessel known to have been wrecked at Point Cloates at the time of writing of *Unfinished*

Voyages and, accordingly, the Hendersons argued that the large unknown wreck described by Walcott must be the *Stefano*:

He [Walcott] would certainly have seen wreckage from the *Stefano* and the *Rapid*, and this would explain his 1,000-ton wreck and the 300-500-ton wreck. The cyclone of December 1875 could have brought ashore, and would have exposed material from both of these wrecks, together perhaps with material from the Portuguese wreck.[5]

The one problem with the above description is that Walcott never intended the large wreck to be identified with the *Stefano* – he was quite specific about this as will be noted. For him there was the *Stefano* wreck and there was the wreck of another large vessel. Consequently the Hendersons’ “explanation” which conflates two large vessels into one – namely the *Stefano* – causes the other large 1,000-ton vessel to disappear from view. It no longer exists as documented evidence for readers that accept the Hendersons’ explanation of the large vessel as being the *Stefano*.

Any reservation one may have about the validity of this process is masked by the bigger mystery that the Hendersons were attempting to solve: namely the presence of 3-4 new wrecks, that no one had reported missing in over one hundred years. Trying to explain these wrecks by a known wreck seems a most reasonable course of action and in such circumstances it is easy to entertain the Hendersons’ explanation as valid.

The authors suggest yet another explanation for the amount of wreckage Walcott found at Point Cloates and on this occasion they again make it quite clear that they were speculating.

Some element of exaggeration may be seen in Walcott’s various account. For example, he describes his 1,000-tone wreck as ‘no less than 1500-tons, probably more’ in a letter written the previous day, and a week later, he told Sargent Vincent of the Police at Roebourne that one of the wrecks was of a 2,000-tone vessel.⁸ Revelation about large numbers of wrecks suited the popular argument in favour of the Government providing a vessel specifically to assist in search for shipwrecked sailors. In addition, Walcott needed an impressive report to justify the cost of his protracted voyage. The Government had chartered the *Victoria* at the rate of 4 pounds per day, assuming that the expedition would be of short duration,⁹ but Walcott had taken 35 days, costing the Government 140 pounds.[6]

The speculations of Walcott’s exaggeration are not without factual support. The cost of Walcott’s journey is documented and referenced in the notes and to that extent constitute a kind of evidence.

Overall, it is difficult to fault the Hendersons’ projections given the information they had at that time. But reasonable projections do not equate to valid reasoning. Arguments based on an absence of evidence are intrinsically flawed as the absent evidence may suddenly make an appearance. This is exactly what happened in 1997, 2004, 2009 and 2011 when four “unknown” wrecks were found at Point Cloates – two of these were very near the spot where Walcott found his unknown wrecks. [7]

These discoveries make it clear that the Hendersons' assumption of there being no new wrecks at Point Cloates in 1876 was wrong, as was their identifying these new wrecks as the old wrecks.

Gustave Rathe

The next major development in the *Stefano* story was in 1990 when Gustave Rathe, the grandson of the survivor Miho Baccich, published a book based on his grandfather's manuscript. Rathe's book *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano off the North West Coast of Australia* created a great deal of public interest in the *Stefano* shipwreck story both in Western Australia and internationally. The book also indicated that Black Rock was the most likely site of the shipwreck.[8]

Following the publication of Rathe's book a number of field expeditions were arranged by the Western Australia Maritime Museum to explore the vicinity of Black Rock. None of these found anything of significance.[9] However, not finding a wreck does not mean that the wreck is not there. A wooden wreck that has been lying in turbulent water rich with coral growth for over 115 years would not be easy to find, especially as not much would have survived the corrosive effect of time, salt, sand, waves and fast flowing reef water. The situation is even more complicated if the shipwreck takes place on a steep sea-floor gradient leading to deeper water.

Many old wrecks are found accidentally and are recognized as wrecks only once they are discovered. The wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* was found in such an accidental fashion. In April 1997 a number of Western Australian press outlets announced that the Maritime Museum divers had discovered the wreck of the barque *Stefano*. The discovery was made while the museum divers were looking for the wreck of Spanish dispatch ship *Correio da Azia*.

Somewhat surprisingly, the DGPS coordinates of the wreck discovered were not near Black Rock as expected but about 4 nautical miles further south at: 22°49.723' S, 113° 43.167'E. Nevertheless the latitude of the wreck was quite close to the latitude coordinates reported in the Baccich and Skurla manuscript, namely 22°48.0' S, 113°37'40" E.[10].

The official Maritime Museum Report entitled *Wreck Inspection Report: Stefano 1873-1875* followed soon afterwards.[11]



It is useful to recall the limited scope of this initial Report as well as the need to do more work on the wreck that the Report foreshadows. In the Report’s “Description of Site” the authors note that:

The site inspection was hurried, given the constraints on the team’s time, and as a result this report needs to be considered in that light. A more detailed inspection is clearly required. [12]

This official Report will be examined further below and in the context of the above comments. These observations are presented with considerable hindsight and are not intended to be a critique. Nor is it a criticism of the museum staff whose work and writing is discussed here. Judging from the subsequent work they carried out on the “unknown wrecks” at Point Cloates it may well be that they too are following a similar line of interrogation as is described in this writing. Nevertheless, it has been 20 years since the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* was discovered. After such a long time it may now be appropriate to reconsider its “presumed” status and consider the possibility that the wrecks may not be that of the *Stefano*.

While the primary focus of this writing is to review the existing documentation on the *Stefano* wreck, another major focus is to show how the expected objective discourse of marine archaeology can readily be skewed towards the discourse of fiction, and how archaeological evidence can be made to disappear under the influence of significant even if well-intentioned authorities.

Wreck Presumed to be the *Stefano*

In the official report the wreck was described as lying “bows to the south and spread 55 meters across a coral reef which varies in depth from around 5-10 meters deep”. Of the small number of artefacts that were recovered only one had an identifiable label:

The navigation light, which was later deconcreted in the laboratory, is a starboard light and possibly of British make, given that it was marked with the word STARBOARD. No other indications of the vessel's nationality or identity were found.[13]

The museum staff thought that these artefacts and some copper sheeting were consistent with the wreck of the *Stefano* which was refitted in London prior to its last voyage.[14]

The Maritime Museum Report was brief and to the point – at least it seemed so at first glance. However, on a closer examination it is possible to discern a range of discursive departures that raised a series of questions regarding the content of the report. Some of these departures are consequential and others are not so consequential, as detailed in the discursive reconnaissance below.

Discursive Reconnaissance

Spectacularly the Report included an appendix with a photograph of “THE BARK STEFANO”. This came as a big surprised to many as there were no known photographs of the *Stefano* in existence at that time. But there it was with an unambiguous caption in large capitalised letters:

THE BARK STEFANO MOORED IN THE PORT OF FIUME

Unfortunately for those of us that thought we were beholding a *Stefano* discovery there was a catch. Further on in the text of the appendix we discover another headline in large capitalized letters:

DETAILS OF OBJECT AT THE PROW OF BARK PRESUMED TO BE THE *STEFANO*

So it seems that the photograph of the *Stefano* is not a photograph of *Stefano* after all but only a vessel that may have been the *Stefano*. The first response to this sleight of hand is to be taken aback. Surely this must be an editing error. One does not put a caption to the photography in an official report only to negate it in the text that follows it afterwards. This is the type of strategy one normally finds in tabloid newspapers and weavers of fantasy and not in an “objective” reports.

It is also possible to make too much of this. Odd attachments are often included in appendices and can be quaint. In all likelihood this was an editing error arising from overflowing enthusiasm and a rush to announce the discovery. Even so, sentiments of this kind are usually kept well in check and kept away from the official reports. Hence “the picture that is not a picture” puts us on guard... one reads the report’s text in a different register.

Indeed, it turns out that the Appendix was not written by the authors of the report. Nevertheless, it presents itself as authoritative text that comes with the title:

“... Excerpts from an analysis of the antecedents of the Barque *Stefano*”.

The contributor of the appendix, who was born in Trieste, could have done with some editorial help; the ‘Bark’ in one title becomes ‘Barque’ in another. The names of Dalmatian towns are misspelt: ‘Sebenic’ instead of ‘Sibenik’, ‘Kurcola’ instead of ‘Korcula’; these small errors only add to the anxiety as to the source of this appendix as well as the veracity of the report.

With hindsight, it is difficult to comprehend how the presumed photograph and misspelt Dalmatian towns constitute “Excerpts from an analysis of the antecedents of the Barque *Stefano*” and one may well be puzzled why this compromised material was included in what is expected to be an objective and professional report. And yet the barque that isn’t the real barque but only presumed to be the “bark” is a very appropriate metaphor for the “dance of truth” associated with bad as well as good archaeology – after all, the photograph of bark *Stefano* may turn out to be the photograph of real *Stefano* even if we don’t know it for sure. Likewise the presumed wreck of the *Stefano* could turn out to be the wreck of the *Stefano* even if we are not certain of it.

The problems with the appendix is a minor one. It is inconsistent with the register of the report and can thus be readily dismissed. The same can be said of the errors imbedded in the report’s preamble. For example, we discover that the contributor of the appendix with the photograph of “presumed Stefano” attributes the authorship of the manuscript to Canon Scurla (Skurla) rather Miho Baccich, even though the good scribe made it clear at the start of the manuscript that it was an exposition dictated to him by the two survivors.[15] This questionable transfer of authorship from the *Stefano* survivors to the scribe Skurla is a typical power-in-discourse event. The shift of authorship relegates the manuscript to a “second-hand account” by a canon who had never been to Australia and thus diminishes its value in the museum’s discursive chain of “authorities”. One consequences of this shift of authority is that the person responsible for the appendix is positioned as a spokesperson on the “analysis of the antecedents of the Barque *Stefano* and its crew”.

A book could be written on discursive slippages imbedded in the preamble of this report. Similarly a book could be written on how these discursive slippages relate to the authority to speak on the wreck, although it is likely that such writing would be of more interest to those interested in the archaeology of knowledge than to those interested in craft-based archaeology of the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano*.

But what is of most interest about this report is to observe how the content of some historical documents was rendered invisible by discursive means such as by authoritative inclusions, repetitions (of previous references) or by selective exclusions of information.

We could describe these narrative features as the art of archaeology.

References in the Report

The Maritime Museum Report on the wreck presumed to be the *Stefano* invokes a range of contextual references. Most of these are noted in passing and are used largely as a review of relevant literature. The referencing of Walcott's 1876 is oblique and inconsequential, consisting of a single sentence under the title "Other indication of wreckage":

Wreck material was recorded on the beach immediately south of Point Cloates in 1876 (Walcott, 1876) [16]

Walcott's sketch of Point Cloates wrecks is used in the Report with the title "Excerpt from Walcott's chart of 1876". This is the same sketch used by the Hendersons who are credited in parenthesis (From Henderson 1988:179). However, Walcott's description of the large vessel he inspected is not mentioned. One can only assume that the museum authors accepted the Hendersons' explanation which identifies the large wreck as being that of the *Stefano*. Within this perspective, it is no longer necessary to explain the presence of the large unknown vessel as we have it on good authority that it was the *Stefano*. This is the unfortunate consequence of the Hendersons' "authoritative" explanation. It shifts attention away from evidence – Walcott's report – to the Henderson's own speculative interpretation of this report.

The Maritime Museum Report's omission of the actual evidence documented by Walcott is a good example of how archaeological gaze can be skewed away from the evidence by an authoritative shift of textual emphasis.

It is now timely to re-focus this analysis towards the Hendersons' interpretation of Walcott's report and test this interpretation's presuppositions and its validity.

Notes and References

- [1] Henderson, G., and Henderson K-J., *Unfinished Voyages: Western Australian Shipwrecks 1851–1880*, Nedlands, UWA Press, 1988, pp. 175–183.
- [2] Walcott, P. correspondence to Sholl, R. J., 20 & 21 June, 1876, CSR 844 folio 104,105, 107A, Battye Library, Perth, West Australia.
- [3] Henderson & Henderson, *Op. cit.*, p.182. The Hendersons used information on the *Stefano* shipwreck from a number of sources apart from Walcott.

In 1961 John Honniball invoked the *Stefano* story when writing about his great grandfather Charles Tuckey in “The Tuckeys of Mandurah”. Honniball quotes Tuckey who describes the *Stefano* shipwreck as having taken place about 2 mile south west of Point Cloates, which is in proximity of Black Rock. See Honniball, J.H.M., 1961, “The Tuckeys of Mandurah”. In *Early Days, RWAHS*, 5, 8: pp. 21-25.

Around 1977, Neven Smoje arranged for an English translation of the original Baccich & Skurla manuscript which he then used as the basis for his paper *Shipwrecked on the North-West Coast: The Ordeal of the Survivors of the Stefano*. The paper was first presented in 1978 by John Honniball on behalf of Smoje to the Royal Western Australian Historical Society. Smoje, following Honniball, placed the shipwreck in the proximity of Black Rock. See Smoje, N., 1978, “Shipwrecked on the North-West coast: The ordeal of the survivors of the *Stefano*”. In *Early Days, RWAHSJ*, 8,2: 34-37.

The Hendersons quoted both of the above sources and similarly identified Black Rock as the likely site of the shipwreck.

- [4] *Ibid.* p. 181.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] See Green, J.N., “Report on the 2011 Jane Bay wreck site investigations August–September 2011”, Report—Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Maritime Museum No. 279.
- [8] Rathe, G., *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano off the North West Coast of Australia* (Carlisle, Hesperian Press, 1990. The Black Rock location of the shipwreck is most likely derived from John Honniball’s 1961 publication *The Tuckeys of Mandurah* which describes the shipwreck site as being 2 miles south-west of Point Cloates which is near Black Rock. Rathe collaborated with John Honniball and Neven Smoje when writing his book. See Honniball, J.H.M., 1961, *Op.cit.* pp. 21-25, and Smoje, N., *Op. cit.* p. 36.
- [9] The published accounts of these explorations include:
- Green, J. *The Coral Bay to Exmouth wreck inspection trip, 5–13 September 1992*, Report Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Maritime Museum No. 60.

Varne, I., *The Search for the Stefano*, Department of Maritime Archaeology, W.A. Maritime Museum No: 79, 1994.

Cockram, C., 1996, *The search for Stefano, The Stefano expedition July, 1995*. The Maritime Archaeological Association of W A.

Green, J.N. (ed.), 2011, *Shipwrecks of the Ningaloo Reef: maritime archaeological projects from 1978–2009*. Australian National Centre of Excellence for Maritime Archaeology, Special Publication No. 1.

- [10] For coordinates of the shipwreck in the manuscript see Baccich, M. and Skurla, S., *The Wreck of the Austro-Hungarian Barque Stefano Off the North West Coast of Australian in 1875*, translated Angelina Baccich, IM: Interactive Media e-journal, Issue 3, May 2007, p. 39, Accessed April 2017, <http://imjournal.murdoch.edu.au/im-issue-3-2007/> Coordinates of Black Rock are 22 45' 32.5" S (22.7588S), 113 38' 52.3" (113.6479 E).
- [11] Green J. and McCarthy M., *Wreck Inspection Report: Stefano (1873–1875)*, Report by Department of Maritime Archaeology, W.A. Maritime Museum No: 132.
- [12] *Ibid.*
- [13] Green, J. and McCarthy M., *Op. cit.*
- [14] *Stefano* was surveyed and yellow-metalled in London in June 1875. See Henderson and Henderson, *Op. cit.*, p.182.
- [15] The authorship of the manuscript is addressed in Petkovic, J., “Who Is The Author Of The 1876 *Stefano* Manuscript?”, IM: *Interactive Media* refereed e-journal, Issue 3, May 2007, <http://imjournal.murdoch.edu.au/im-issue-3-2007/>
- [16] Green J. and McCarthy M., *Op. cit.*