

São José Paquete de Africa: Ship of Enslavement Discovered



Site of the São José ship wreck near the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa (photo by Susanna Pershern, U.S. National Parks Service, May 29, 2015).

Objects from a ship of enslavement of African people that sank off the coast of Cape Town in 1794 will be on long-term loan to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. The discovery of the ship marks a milestone in the study of the trans-Atlantic crime against humanity and showcases the results of the *Slave Wrecks Project* (established with funding from the Ford Foundation), a unique global partnership among museums and research institutions, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC (scheduled for completion in fall 2016, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture broke ground in February 2012 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The 400,000-square-foot building is being built on a five-acre tract adjacent to the Washington Monument at a cost of \$540 million), and six partners in the U.S. and Africa.

Objects from the shipwreck—iron ballast to weigh down the ship and its human cargo and a wooden pulley block—were retrieved from the wreck site of the São José-Paquete de Africa, a Portuguese ship of enslavement that sank off the coast of Cape Town on its way to Brazil while carrying more than 400 enslaved Africans from Mozambique.



Iron ballast recovered from the São José ship wreck, used to weigh down the ship and its human cargo (courtesy of Iziko Museums). On April 27, 1794, the São José, owned by Antonio Perreira and captained by his brother, Manuel Joao Perreira left Lisbon for Mozambique with more than 1,500 iron ballast bars in its cargo, seeking new markets, as one of the first attempts by European slave operators to bring east Africa into the broader trans-Atlantic holocaust of enslavement.

The São José's voyage was one of the earliest in the trans-Atlantic enslavement scheme from East Africa to the Americas, which continued well into the 19th century. More than 400,000 African people are estimated to have made the Mozambique-to-Brazil journey between 1800 and 1865 (shackled and packed like cargo beneath the ship's deck, the enslaved endured a cruel journey filled with sweat, blood, vomit, and death), and thus, they served as a significant source of labor on Brazilian sugar plantations.

The ship's crew and some of the more than 500 enslaved on board were rescued after the ship ran into submerged rocks about 100 meters (328 feet) from shore. Tragically, more than half of the enslaved people perished in the violent waves, and the remainder were resold into slavery in the Western Cape in South Africa.

The São José wreck site is located between two reefs, a location that creates a difficult environment to work in because it is prone to strong swells creating challenging conditions for the archaeologists. To date, only a small percentage of the site has been excavated; fully exploring the site will take time.

The São José was discovered by treasure hunters in the 1980s and mistakenly identified as an earlier Dutch vessel. But in 2011, Iziko Maritime Archaeologist, Jaco Boshoff discovered the São José captain's account of the shipwreck, which sparked new interest in the vessel.

As the result of a unique global partnership among museums and research institutions, objects from the ship will be on long-term loan to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. The discovery of the ship marks a milestone in the study of the trans-Atlantic holocaust of enslavement and showcases the results of the *Slave Wrecks Project* (founded, 2008) partnership with George Washington University, Iziko Museums of South Africa (a declared national heritage institution established as a flagship museum bringing together 11 museums under a single governance and leadership structure, its core mission is to manage and promote the unique combination of South Africa's heritage collections, sites and services for the benefit of present and future generations), the South African Heritage Resource Agency, the U.S. National Park Service, Diving With a Purpose (a project of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers), Eduardo Modlane University, St. George's Cathedral, Syracuse University, Brown University, University of Western Cape, Cape Family Research Forum, the African Center for Heritage Activities, and others.

Some of the first artifacts of this project were brought above water through a targeted retrieval process using CT scan technology because of the fragility of the site, and thus, the *Slave Wrecks Project* has identified the remains of shackles on the wreck site, a difficult undertaking because of extreme iron corrosion. And additionally, archival research locates a document in which an enslaved person is noted as being sold by a local sheikh to the São José's captain before its departure, definitively identifying Mozambique Island as the port of departure for the holocaustic voyage. Archival and archaeological prospecting work was recently launched in Mozambique and Brazil in order to identify sites related to the São José story for future research.



Copper fastenings recovered from the São José ship wreck held the structure of the ship together. Copper sheathing provided exterior protection (courtesy of Iziko Museums).



Iziko Museums of South Africa marine archaeologist Jaco Jacques Boshoff (co-originator of the *Slave Wrecks Project* and principal archaeological investigator on the São José shipwreck excavation) displays the encrusted shackles and ballast found in the remains of the São José ship of enslavement wreck. Boshoff found a document from the inquest of the captain of the São José, thus, giving more detail on what exactly happened on the day the ship sank. The record mentions about 1500 iron bars being transported on the ship which proved to be the most valuable reference for the group that discovered the São José-Paquete de Africa.