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The Heritage of the Deep: Finding *s/s Stefano*

Baština iz morskih dubina: Kako je pronađen s/s Stefano

Summary

It has been long since been considered that the Black Rock, a dangerous, isolated reef near Point Cloates, Western Australia (WA) was the place where the barque Stefano (owned by the Baccic family from Dubrovnik, during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) was wrecked in 1875. There were only two survivors of 17 crew members (all Croatians from Dalmatia, majority from the region of Dubrovnik and bar one English boy).

The modern underwater scientific search for Stefano started at the beginning of the 1980s' under the leadership of Graeme Henderson then Curator of Maritime Archaeology at the WA Maritime Museum at Fremantle. He developed the Museum's colonial shipwrecks management programme and, together with his wife Kandy-Jane Henderson, who was an archivist in the State Archives of WA, published the book on shipwrecks in which the Stefano featured entitled Unfinished voyages 1851-1880. In 1988 Graeme Henderson won the Australian Heritage Award for an outstanding contribution to the preservation and promotion of Australian heritage and environment. While searching for the wreck of the Portuguese despatch vessel Correio d' Azia lost near Point Cloates in 1816, Henderson was also searching for evidence of the Stefano tragedy of October 27th 1875. His search of nearby Ningaloo Reef was without the expected result, however. Success was had almost at the end of the 1990s' by a four-member team led by Jeremy Green, a remote-sensing specialist and Head of the Department of Maritime Archaeology. With him on that occasion was Mike McCarthy, Bob Richards and senior technical officer Geoff Kimpton. It was he who, while being towed underwater, all of a sudden, spotted a davit, and later what appeared to be an anchor from Stefano. The discovery of the Stefano wreck extended the number of scientists and experts from different fields interested in the case.

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Sažetak

Odavno se pretpostavljalo kako je Black Rock, opasni, osamljeni greben blizu rta Point Cloates, u zapadnoj Australiji, bio mjesto gdje se 1875. dogodio brodolom barka Stefano (u vlasništvu obitelji Bačić iz Dubrovnika, za vrijeme Austro-Ugarske Monarhije). Od 17 članova posade jedino su dvojica pomoraca preživjela (svi su bili Hrvati iz Dalmacije, većina iz dubrovačke regije, dok je samo jedan dječak bio Englez).

Moderno podmorsko znanstveno istraživanje, radi pronalaženja barka Stefano, započelo je početkom 1980-ih, predvodio ga je Graeme Henderson, tadašnji kustos Zapadnoaustralskog pomorskog muzeja, Odjela za pomorsku arheologiju u Fremantleu. Svojim istraživačkim radom, Henderson je pridonio razvitku Programa menadžmenta Muzeja brodoloma iz kolonijalnog perioda, te je zajedno sa svojom suprugom Kandy-Jane Henderson, tada arhivisticom Državnog arhiva zapadne Australije, objavio knjigu o tim brodolomima, pod nazivom Nedovršena putovanja 1851-1880., gdje je prikazan i slučaj Stefano. Graeme Henderson je 1988. dobio Australsku nagradu na području baštine, the Australian Heritage Award, za izvanredan doprinos očuvanja i promocije australske baštine i okoline. Tražeći ostatke portugalskog brzog broda Correio D' Azia, koji je nestao 1816. u blizini rta Point Cloates, Henderson je usput tražio i dokaze za tragediju Stefano, koja se dogodila 27. listopada 1875. Međutim, istraživanje obližnjeg grebena Ningaloo nije dalo željene rezultate. Uspjeh je postigao gotovo pri kraju 1990-ih godina; četveročlana ekipa, vođena stručnjakom Jeremy Green, tada načelnikom Odjela pomorske arheologije. U toj stručno-znanstvenoj ekipi bili su i Mike McCarthy, Bob Richards i viši tehnički časnik Geoff Kimpton, koji je zaronivši iznenada ugledao željezno vitlo, za koje se poslije uspostavilo da pripada sidrenom uređaju s barka Stefano. Otkriće mjesta brodoloma Stefano proširilo je broj zainteresiranih za taj slučaj, kako raznih stručnjaka, tako i znanstvenika iz različitih područja znanosti.

1. Introduction

Uvod

Point Cloates where the now-famous Stefano was lost is a ship trap. The deep Australian Continental Shelf and the shallow, dangerous Ningaloo Reef come closest to the shore at the Point and it is a place where currents set unsuspecting mariners in towards the land. The unbroken Indian Ocean swells can be horrendous there and adding to the dangers, Black Rock which everyone once thought was the reef that claimed *Stefano* ominously breaks, just a few miles out to sea, a solitary dangerous reef in the path of those passing by. It is also the place where whale sharks, the gentle giants of the deep come closest to shore, to mingle with their less friendly cousins, the tiger sharks and barracudas.

The Western Australian Museum's first reference to the loss of the barque *Stefano* in this beautiful and dangerous place is a letter dated 15 March 1982 from Dr Radojica Barbalic of Rijeka (Fiume) sending information on the newly-found SS *Zvir*, a large steamer from that same port. Carrying sugar, it was lost just north of Point Cloates in November 1902. After assisting us with details of the *Zvir* Dr Barbalic also noted that there was another of 'their' wrecks on this coast. This was the *Stefano.*

> Besides the accident to the accident of s/s "ZVIR" it has been noted in our seafaring historiography the tragical grounding and complete loss of the Bark named 'STEFANO" at Point Cloates on 27th October 1875. Some of the crew were drowned and some managed to swim to the land and latter [sic] were found exhausted in the desert' (SS Zvir file, 14/80)

There, in Dr Barbalic's use of the phrase 'our seafaring historiography', it was recognised from the outset that though it lay in Australian waters, and had a story so fundamental to our early European and late Aboriginal history, *Stefano* is part of a shared maritime heritage.

Sent to Dr Barbalic in return were historical notes on the first Australian search for *Stefano*. It was conducted in May 1876 soon after the meeting of the Brig *Alexandra* under Captain George Vinal with Charles Tuckey's pearling cutter *Jessie.* He had met the Aboriginal saviours of survivors from *Stefano* at the tip of North West Cape and as the two vessels approached, unable to come alongside in the rough seas, Tuckey's men held up a board with the message 'Barque *Stefano* wrecked on NW Cape. I have the only two survivors on board'. Vinal then performed a short search of the adjacent shores, but on approaching land they became concerned that Aborigines were trying to lure them ashore and so they left for Roebourne, then the administrative centre for Australia's north-west to break news of the wreck. The schooner *Victoria* was then chartered by the Government and on 7 June Pemberton Walcott landed in the bay under Point Cloates where he saw wreckage from four or five vessels including *Stefano* littering the shore.

Figure 1. Graeme Henderson in the front of the new WA Museum, Perth, Fremantle
Slika 1. Graeme Henderson ispred Zapadnoaustralskoga novoga muzeja u Perth-u, Fremantle

2. McCarthy about the modern *Stefano* search

McCarthy o novijim istraživanjima Stefano

While working on the wreck of the American China Trader *Rapid* (1811) in 1981 maritime archaeologist Graeme Henderson left the excavation and towed a number of divers including myself in search in area where coal had been found, thinking it had come from the *Stefano,* but to no avail. Black Rock was also briefly examined, again with no luck.

While normally waiting for wrecks to be found, in 1987 the Western Australian Museum decided to search for the wreck of the bullion-carrying Portuguese despatch vessel *Correo d' Azia* lost near Point Cloates in 1816 and at the same time to search for the *Stefano.* As a result in March and April of that year the first Museum search took place. Led by Graeme Henderson, then the curator of colonial-period wrecks and including Geoff Kimpton, our chief diver, Pat Baker our chief photographer and I, as the Museum's Inspector of Wrecks, we all took turns in being towed along and around the Ningaloo Reef in pairs, sometimes in threes, hour after hour, day after day, trailing 10 or so metres aft of the boat and just outside the surf zone.

We also re-examined the area around Black Rock in great detail but found no wreck on it or in the immediate vicinity. We had also learned from our earlier tow searches that there was no wreck on the line of long hard edged reefs that runs for kilometres north from Coral Bay (the nearest population centre) or in the large coral gardens in the passages between them. These had proved relatively easy to check by diver tow systems, albeit with the odd near miss for both divers and the boat in the swells, for we had to run as close as possible to the reefs in our search, sometimes even in lifting waves. In the ensuing days we continued our searches whenever we could, looking for heavy wreckage and that tell-tale plume of lighter material that normally is visible downstream of any wreck. We also learnt on our 40

nautical mile voyages to and from Coral Bay where we put the boat in for the trip up to the reef opposite Ningaloo Station, the most northerly point in our search that, though there were kilometres of long hard, unbroken reefs to examine, there were also thousands of individual coral heads each with deep water around. In some places hey were like a forest. We quickly realised that *Stefano* could have easily hit one, ending up on its beam-ends, only to wallow over it and into the maze behind before sinking. While we were able to track our course along the hard edged reefs that ran north-south, in those days we had no means of accurately plotting our courses in and around the maze of coral heads. GPS plotters were still to be invented and we could not 'fix' our position with any but sextant bearings and compass angles. The sheer magnitude of the problem was truly daunting and a lack of time and heavy seas and swells, conspired to beat us on many occasions. Twice we almost lost the boat in the swells and once we thought we would lose our photographer Pat Baker, who ever inquisitive, inadvertently prodded a jellyfish that he had seen being eaten by a turtle. Later we realised he had been stung and disabled by what was actually a relative of the highly venomous Box Jelly Fish.

Our spirits received a boost in 1990 when Gustave Rathe arrived at the museum on a tour promoting his new book *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano off the North-West Cape 1875*. This work added to the growing public interest in the *Stefano* wreck as did a beautifully-illustrated two page article in the West Australian entitled the *Epic Tale of the Barque Stefano Odyssey.* It served to alert the general readers about Gustave Rathe's new book and about the amazing story contained within. Around this same time Amadeo (Monte) Sala sent us news of his translation of the Skurla manuscript for Carnarvon-based historian Mr Bryan Clark. 'It shows the incredible respect the Aborigines had for human life' Sala added, and from a 'literary point of view the manuscript is a magnificent piece of writing'.

3. The *Stefano* team expands

Ekipa Stefano se povećava

Then, in 1992 Graeme Henderson, left the team and my colleague Jeremy Green joined, specifically to search for the *Correio Da Azia*. An Australian leader in remote sensing, a pioneer in the development of the magnetometer and other electronic devices and an expert with the then newly arrived navigation tool, the Global Positioning System (GPS), Green's arrival saw us abandon the sextants, transits and compasses that were up to that point a central feature of our shipwreck location work. Soon we were operating electronically with the then unheard-of accuracy of around 200 metres.

Then our volunteer wing, the Maritime Archaeology Association of Western Australia (MAAWA) joined the search for *Stefano*. They regularly reported on their research in their newsletter, as did Sala in the information sheets that he often published. One was entitled *Eco: del litorale Adriatico,* and its first edition No 1 of 1993 featuring the *Stefano* story as gleaned from continued research being then conducted in Rijeka by Dr Barbalich. In April 1993 he donated $2500 to the Museum for the *Stefano* search. Following Sala's presentation of a bi-lingual version of Scurla's *I naufragi del bark austro-ungarico "Stefano" alla costa Nord-Ovest dell Australia*, to the Museum and to the MAAWA, the first search led by their president Ian Warne took place in the Easter of 1993 and in July 1995, again led by Warne this time to follow in the survivor's footsteps and identify the locations referred to in their reminiscences and by Pemberton Walcott. They also deployed a magnetometer on land.

With interest in the site rising, in March the next year the *Gascoyne Gazette* in Carnarvon carried news that the Croatian community had erected a plaque onshore in the vicinity of the boy's first landing. In October 1995 Sala also produced a detailed account of the ship and of the Baccich family and in early 1996 the University of Western Australia's Associate Professor John Melville Jones's hosted an informal seminar on The *Stefano Castaways.* Key speakers were Monte Sala, the biologist and linguists, Drs Alan Dench and Kevin Kenneally, with Phillip Moncrieff providing an Indigenous perspective.

1997 came around after another MAAWA search and our becoming even more high-tech as Green married GPS plots of the workboat's previous paths to the existing charts and much more-importantly to modern aerial photography. With this new system the boat skipper—with divers or equipment trailed out behind—keeping an eye on the reefs ahead, the assistant watching divers— responded to directions shouted by Green whose eyes were glued to the computer screen in a blacked-out and covered-in 'electronics box'. This system contained a myriad of position fixing devices, linked to magnetometer read-outs, all presented in 'real time', i.e., we knew where we were and what was going on around us immediately in both a visual (via the boat skipper and look-outs) and in an electronic sense, (via Green). Divers could see what was on the seabed—looking for the tell-tale green of copper, the unnatural angles, curves and the straight lines of anchors, machinery and other unnatural features—and the magnetometer 'fish' streaming further behind could pick up invisible ferro-magnetic indicators. In essence the electronic record produced was a forerunner to the modern, and now quite commonplace systems people use shipboard and elsewhere with GPS, GIS and electronic charts. Though standard practice today, at the time it was all quite revolutionary in such a little workboat and for such a small and low-budget outfit as the WA Museum.

Then differential GPS (DGPS) became available, allowing us to remove a 'fudge factor' applied to the civilian versions by the US military to prevent it being used against them. This deliberate 'error' required adjusting for, and to do this Green obtained the assistance of Perth-based remote sensing company Fugro Survey. They were a constant source of assistance, advice and expertise, and remain so to this day. Together with Green they helped develop simple, compact, systems that allowed us to work on our tiny boat, to give us an accuracy then unheard of outside the

military or oil company applications of the time, not in tens of metres, but a little as 3 to 5. Green also brought side scan sonar to the search, courtesy of the Australian Centre of Excellence in Maritime Archaeology and Conservation, which he headed. We had become really 'high tech' in our 'remote-sensing' and position-fixing.

Figure 2. Corioli Souther on Stefano
***Slika 2.* Corioli Souther na Stefanu**

4. *The Stefano* is found

Stefano je pronađen

Our first foray out to the reef with all this gadgetry was on April 1 1997, an inauspicious date, one reflecting an absolutely disastrous start. The weather had turned against us, rendering any reef unapproachable even at a distance and we headed first for an area of clear calmer water containing hundreds of steep sided coral heads (bombies) that came to within a few metres (and less) of the surface so that we could become familiar with them and the surrounding terrain at their base. Like a submerged forest they proved difficult to contend with, for we soon learned that a towed search using divers and/or any towed instruments was impossible as the boat weaved in and out of the bombies, stopping, starting, backing up, and as lines and wires inevitably crossed the reefs and divers often had to take evasive action as a vertical wall loomed out of the blue directly in front, or as the boat stopped to begin reversing back down on them. On many occasions we were forced to use one of the simplest of tools, a glass bottom fitted into the hull of the boat. Visual navigation was also especially difficult in these 'underwater forests' when the sun was low, requiring us to carefully plan each day to suit and, wherever possible to be heading on long traverses west in the morning and east in the afternoon.

Figure 5. Jeremy Green with light
Slika 5. Jeremy Green sa svjetlom

Figure 3. Bob Richards with Bell
Slika 3. Bob Richards sa zvonom

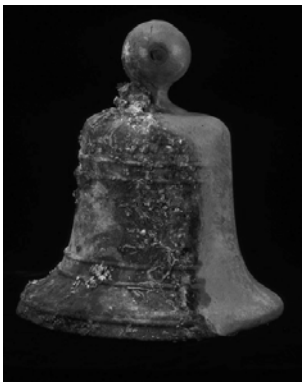

Figure 4. The Bell
Slika 4. Zvono

My Daybook for the afternoon of 2 April read 'Towed search checking for possible wreckage plumes from *Rapid* and *SS Perth* (a coal-fired steamer wrecked in 1887). Finding none we moved across to the wreck of the *Benan* which had been wrecked at Point Cloates 1888 and more importantly was carrying c. a thousand tons of coal like *Stefano*—a disappointing result, for we found absolutely none! It appears that coal, with a relatively low specific gravity is especially light for its size when submerged and quickly rolls downstream off a wreck. It would also be gradually abraded as it travelled over the bottom.

On Friday 4 the spare magnetometer also failed, but on repairing the first we preceded down to the search area, only to be beset with a thunderstorm, the lightning rendering the magnetometer useless. The next day, with a heavy swell precluding any work on any of the reefs we circled the deeper water off Black Rock with the magnetometer, to see if one of the wrecks had struck it only to slide off and travel much further on before sinking, to no avail. Sunday saw those offshore thunderstorms rolling in above us, and though we proceeded to sea to continue the search for a number of hours we were soon forced back to camp. The next day with the magnetometer useless as lightning continued to spark across the horizon and occasionally down towards the sea, we left Green plotting up and repairing gear and set out again doing a towed search as the seas abated and the visibility improved. Hours upon hours were spent being towed and all of the next day Tuesday, was no exception, though my day book (McCarthy's) read 'Most disappointed after many hours of searching though as a

consolation we all agreed that it was the best diving country any of us had ever seen'.

We awoke to Wednesday 9 April, the last day allotted time to the expedition finding the swell down, with the wind in the SW, but light. In order to provide the reader with an 'as-it-happened' account of how *Stefano* was found the daybook entry is reproduced below.

> 9-ish began work to the south of the pinnacle looking for the country indicated in the C Da A [Correio da Azia] A/c [account], with Stefano the 'wild card'. GK [Geoff Kimpton] & JNG in the water. After about 1 hour GK found wreckage, a davit, iron bar, mast ring & plate iron. 10.15 Searched to the S[outh] and around for 30m finally finding anchors which were moored above. Then the inspection began 11-12.15. . . Eventually it was realised the wreck lay SW-NE, RAJ [Bob Richards] located bell, GK site planning, JNG scouting, MMcC [Mike McCarthy] in boat.
>
> DGPS 22°49.723., 113°43.167.
>
> MMcC then dived replacing RAJ. It became evident that the first strike was the stern and that we were very lucky to strike it given the nature of the search. The wreck was measured at 50m (+c. 5m), apparently canted to seawards & rudder pintles to seaward of the bow at 7m., indications of the wreck trapping the rudder under the hull. The bow anchors are c. 3m by 1.80-90 across the flukes, the [iron] knees considerable with little other than heavy metallic material visible under the coral. JNG found a nav[igation] light at 27m from the bow. JNG advises [the] search distance [we travelled was] 150NM not including travel to and from the site.
>
> Back for 1.00PM as planned. Bought the boat ashore. . RAJ showed the bell to Billie and Jane [owners of Ningaloo Station] . . . rest of the day packing up. Beers with Billie and Jane . . . [later that night] Ran out of grog. Packing and writing up.
>
> Though Stefano was 50m+ it is interesting how much was gone., i.e the hull had totally disintegrated, leaving only iron frames to indicate its former position.

Monte Sala later sent his congratulations and soon Gustave Rathe was in contact, congratulating the team, and responding positively to our invitation to come and view the artefacts. Then the museum team were invited to a Parliamentary dinner after being introduced us to the members in the House.

The *Hansard* of the Day reads:

> The SPEAKER: Before we proceed to the business of the House I have pleasure in welcoming to the Speaker's Gallery today the four discoverers of the Stefano which sank at Point Cloates, south of Ningaloo Reef in 1875, and which is the latest of the historic or ancient shipwrecks to be discovered off this coast. **The discoverers present today are Jeremy Green, Mike McCarthy, Geoff Kimpton and Bob Richards** (Hansard. Legislative Assembly, 7/5/97: 2494).

After the ceremonies, we then got about the more mundane business of ensuring that the *Stefano* wreck report was completed (Green and McCarthy, 1997) and that the site was declared historic, and thereby protected under the 1976 *Historic Shipwrecks Act.* Monte Sala and I also discussed the need to erect a suitable memorial to the Aboriginal people who saved and nurtured the two boys on the North West Cape, hopefully where Charlie Tuckey met the survivors and the indigenous saviours. This still needs be done.

The find excited such interest that in 1997, the Attorney General, the Hon. Jim McGinty, an avid diver and reader of maritime history published an account in the Sunday Times newspaper. Then in November 1998 Gustave Rathe and his son Paul came to Fremantle at the invitation of the Korcula-Fremantle Chapter of Friendship Committee, formed in recognition of the links between Fremantle and the Island of Korcula, the island of origin of one of the surviving boys (Miho Baccic). They viewed the *Stefano* bell and other relics in their treatment solutions.

5. The wreck as artistic inspiration

Brodolom kao umjetnička inspiracija

The New WA Maritime Museum highlightis the maritime traditions and cultures, not just of Australia, but of all world nations involved in the history of this region. In 2002 Graeme Henderson, by then the Director of The New WA Maritime Museum, proudly hosted a celebratory symposium of the *Stefano* in the newly-opened Museum on Victoria Quay. It was conceived and arranged by Dr Josko Petkovich of Murdoch University. There all delighted at the unveiling of the original votive painting, depicting Tuckey's *Jessie*, and his boat being rowed towards the boys and their Aboriginal saviours on the shore at North West Cape. It had been escorted by Father Capuchin Nikola Novak, from the Church Our Lady of Mercy in Dubrovnik where it hung for well over a century in the Gallery of Capuchin Monastery—his presence and the picture a real highlight to those involved in modern *Stefano* story. Dr Petkovich has since produced a website containing a translation of the Scurla account while the late Monte Sala, John Melville Jones, Alan Dench, Kevin Kenneally and others have collaborating to produce an account of the wreck and its aftermath in book form.

The original event of *the Stefano* story was recorded in every detail in a manuscript from 1876, completed by Miho Baccich, with the assistance of Canon Stjepan Skurla from Dubrovnik and the second survivor Ivan Jurich. The manuscript was written in Italian, *the lingua franca* of the period (Austro-Hungarian Monarchy). It was not until 1920, when it was translated into English by Miho Baccich's wife, Angelina Baccich. Not earlier than

Gustave's book was published in 1990, the wider public came to know of this private manuscript.

As *the Stefano* wreck itself, so Rathe's book has inspired many scientists and artists, creating stories, films, plays, paintings and other different works of art. Thus Dr Joško Petkovic, from Korčula by origin, was impressed with the event and involved in the establishment of the Charter of Friendship between the city of Fremantle and Korčula, in the late 1990's. Having met and interviewed Rathe several times, Petković has been inspired to create his video production on *the Stefano* wreck, completed in 2001 in a form of a three-screen-video-triptych, entitles *The Resurrection of the Barque Stefano.* He has made a special study of *the Stefano* because one of the sailors who died had lived next to his grandmother in Croatia.

6. Conclusion

Zaključak

Wrecked sailing ships had used stars and the sun to chart their course, while nowadays improved technology plotted the work-boat's course and the deep blue ocean search still offering hidden secrets and danger, as in the past. This has been proved by the recent *Stefano* search when the team of skilful scientists and underwater experts from the WA Maritime museum endangered themselves only to find the truth and please the science.

Graeme Henderson was the first who started the modern search for *the Stefano* tragedy site in the 1980's. But his search of nearby Ningaloo Reef was without the expected result. Success was achieved almost at the end of the 1990s' by a four-member team: Jeremy Green, Mike McCarthy, Bob Richards and Geoff Kimpton .

The *Stefano* wreck site had been detected by the magnetometer on the first day of the search. Due to thunderstorm activity and other factors, the signal was discarded in favour of towing human detectors. Jeremy Green, the leader of the team did not underestimate the difficulty of finding a wreck site, even with most sophisticated technology at hand, saying that the technology can only help to make the search for shipwrecks more precise.

And what was the result of working in the remote dangerous area of WA, full of extensive coral formations and exposed reefs with big sharks eye-balling and jelly-fish embracing? In crystal clear waters with high sun levels, a towed visual search offered 10-metre visibility either side of the centre-line of the boat. By the end of the search, the divers had been towed more than 200 km. About 40 m from the stern lay a pile of anchors and in-between was a line of iron knees which once supported the deck and the sides of the ship. Lying in only 10 m of water on an exposed reef, the vessel's wooden hull had disintegrated, but finds included a brass lantern, rudder gudgeons and ship's bell.

Hidden amongst the coral was a huge mound of chain. But it was the big anchor and type of iron knees that identified the wreckage as that of the 52-metre long, 858-ton wooden barque *Stefano*, which had run onto the Point Cloates reef in the early hours of the morning of October 27 th 1875. (Green, 1998. pp.20-22) Nobody expected that the event would cause such a fierce storm of different inspirations, attitudes and opinions around the world in the 21st century!

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