



The Survey and Exploration of Shipwreck Site in Coastal Waters of Barotac Viejo, Iloilo

by Eduardo Ty Conese and Norman Nicolas

In reaction to various reports reaching the National Museum concerning a wreck site discovered on the coastal waters off Barotac Viejo, a team from the Underwater Archaeology Unit was dispatched to the area to investigate. From the reports and information sources gathered in the vicinity, it appeared that the ill-fated boat might have been a merchant vessel which sank in Guimaras Strait between 1902

Both authors are members of the underwater archaeology team of the National Museum, Philippines.

and 1914 bringing with it a sizeable load of tradegoods and other shipping materials. The discovery of the wreck site came about when the nets of the fishermen from Negros Occidental got entangled with the boat's remains. However, it could not be ascertained when this incident actually occurred. Soon looting and illegal salvage operations by local fishermen and other individuals ensued. This prompted the Police and the local Coast Guard authorities to secure the area in an effort to avert further loss of materials possibly of archaeological value.

Upon arrival in the area, the team established contact with concerned authorities who in turn extended their full cooperation.

First notified of the exploratory work to be done in Barotac Viejo was Lt. Col. Edmundo Laroza, provincial commander of the Philippine Constabulary, who facilitated our contacts with Lt. Pepito Palmares, Iloilo City station commander of the Philippine Coast Guard, and Mr. Romulo Barameda, Municipal Mayor of Barotac Viejo. The operation was facilitated through the untiring and valuable assistance of Mrs. Ana Huyong, Barangay Captain of San Juan, who was kind enough to offer her residence for the team's lodging.

The Locality

Barotac Viejo is a rustic muni-

unicipality located some 60 kilometers northeast of Iloilo City. According to a census of May 1, 1980, the place has a total population of 24, 095 people. Its land area, sprawled on rolling hills and plains, is covered with vast rice and sugar cane fields and dotted with fruit tree farms. Totalling 18, 121 hectares, its land area is bordered by the towns of Banate towards the southwest, Lemery up north, Guimaras strait in the south and northeastern portion.

During the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century, Barotac Viejo was already a thriving community of Malayan settlement called Gibuangan. Later the settlement was transformed into an "Alcaldia" government ruled by the **alcalde mayor** in the beginning of the 17th Century. From thence up to the present, the place slowly progressed into a municipality that boasts of bountiful harvests such as rice, sugar cane, mangoes and other agricultural commodities. In addition, the people also depended heavily on fishing to augment their income.

Activities Undertaken

As soon as the team had settled and established their station in the



A search technique uses ropes to establish a desired direction to be followed.

Barangay Captain's residence in Barangay San Juan, preparations were made to initiate the search for the sunken vessel. The plan was to find and hire local divers who shall assist the museum personnel in locating and surveying the wreck site. Hiring of the divers was imperative since this would reduce the amount of risks involved in diving in an unfamiliar area. Moreover, local divers who had been to the site were indispensable in the speedy location of the wrecksite.

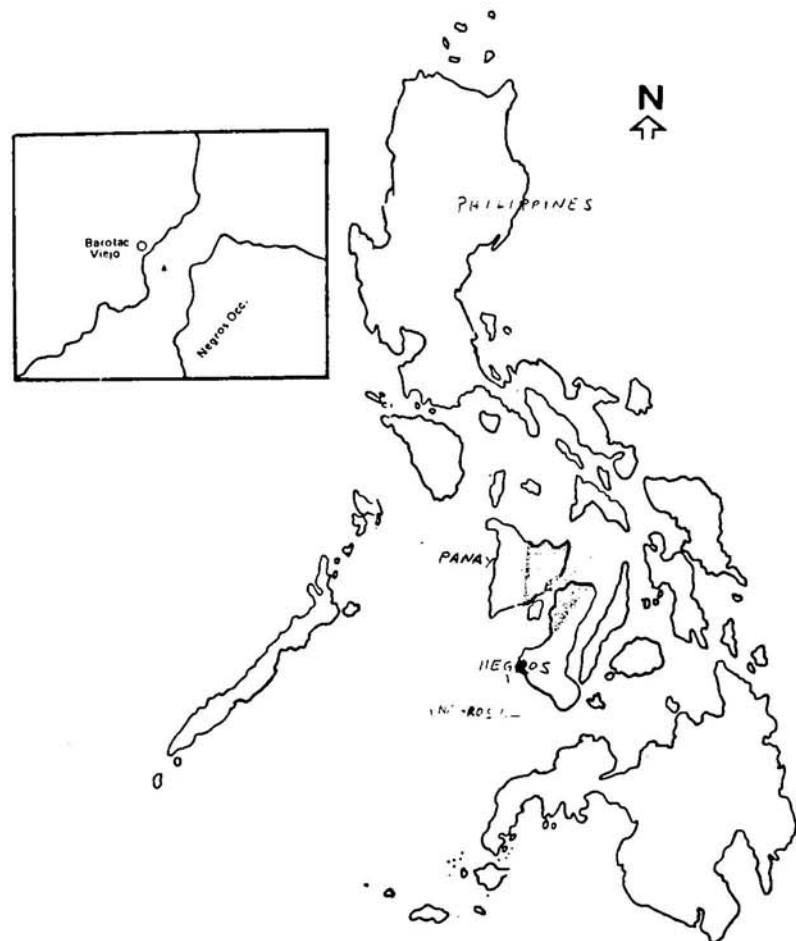
1. Barotac Viejo Annual, 1981

In travelling in an open water

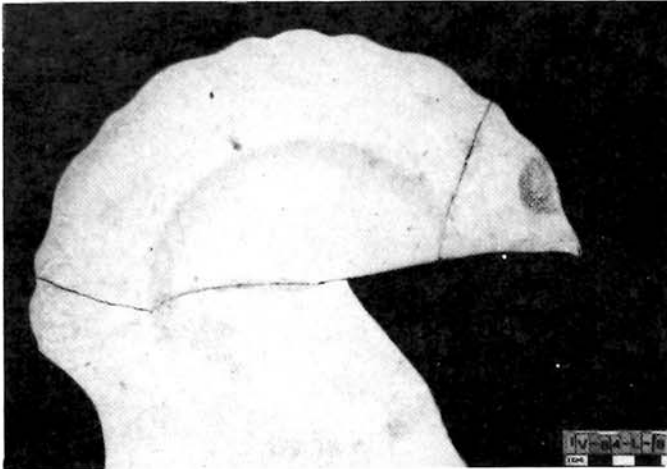
like that of Guimaras, it was a common practice for sea farers to utilize terrestrial navigational aids* for marking points or any particular area in the water. The first few attempts to locate the sunken vessel failed owing perhaps to the inefficiency of using such methods. Finally after several trips and dives in the area, the shipwreck was found.

With the visibility approaching zero level (3-5 ft.), survey of the wreck proceeded in a slow and

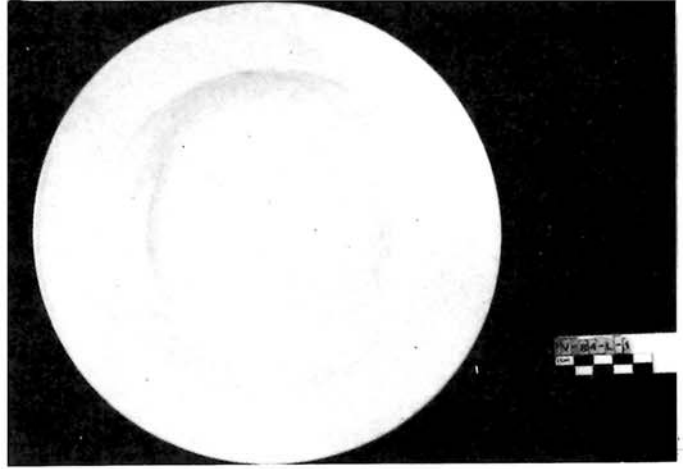
* Terrestrial navigational reckoning is a method used when no standard navigational facilities such as radars, maps and compasses are available.



Outline map of the Philippines showing the location of Barotac Viejo Underwater Archaeological Site.



Fragments of white shallow plate showing a wave-like design on the lip and a scroll with dashes on the inner lip.



Restored white shallow porcelain plate retrieved from the wreck site.

deliberate pace. The biggest problem was the lack of divers. Complicating this was the minimal air supply (air filling station was in Iloilo City) and at a depth of 95 ft. divers can only stay for 15 minutes to avoid going through decompression.

Found in the wreck site in different spots were pieces of porcelain and stoneware fragments. Most of the specimens came from an area which seemed to be the main deck of the sunken vessel. Other pieces were recovered from the muddy bottom. An on-the-spot examination of the specimens, position and condition indicated that the site had been previously visited or disturbed by man. Some of the freshly broken pieces were found inserted between one of the metal wheel locks and the hatch situated in the midsection of the vessel. The divers also observed that the hatch bore marks possibly obtained from looters who might have attempted to open it.

The vessel which was lying in an upright position with the hull half buried in the sand was examined and found to be almost entirely made of steel. An account of the specific structure of the ship's different sections could not be ascertained because of the limited

visibility and time allowance for the divers. However, the divers were able to examine an exterior chamber of the ship midsection. The steel dome-shaped chamber was estimated to measure (4) four feet wide, (5) five feet in length and about 4½ feet high. It had a wheel locking system which the divers failed to open. Towards the section, divers also noticed another similar structure having a large steel hood about 1 inch thick.

Other Information on Survey Area

The wreck site is located about 5 kilometers southeast of Barangay

San Juan, Barotoc Viejo under 95 feet of water (low tide) in Guimaras strait. By motor boat on calm seas, it takes about 30 minutes to reach the area where the island of Negros can be seen situated in the southern direction. Surrounding sea bed is composed generally of mud, silt and sand with very minimal marine growth and with some fish feeding on planktons and corals. The shipwreck can be seen lying upright but half buried and slightly tilted on its portside.

Specimens Collected

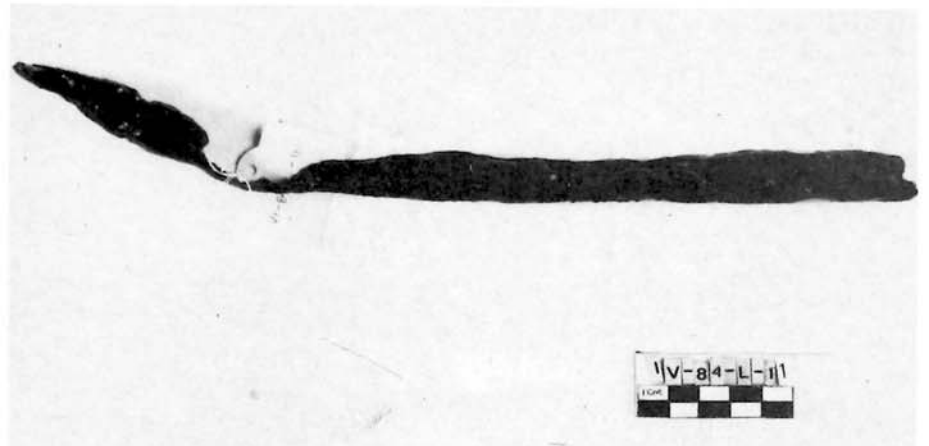
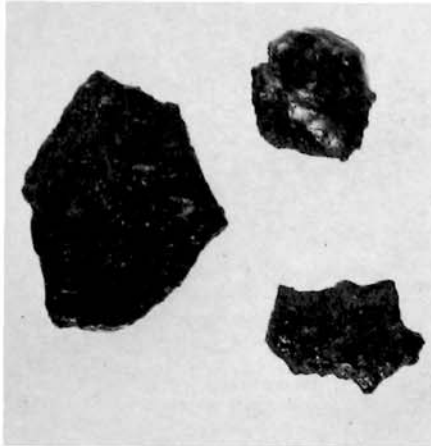
- 25 pcs. of white glaze porcelain plate
- 2 pcs. of green glaze porcelain plate
- 4 pcs. of iron samples
- 31 pcs. — Total

Conclusion

From the evidence gathered, the wreck site in the water off Guimaras strait seems to be a merchant vessel trading in the nearby island of Negros, Guimaras and along the coastal areas of Panay. Most of the specimens collected bore trademarks showing that they were manufactured in Holland as well as in England. Other specimens of stoneware material can be associated with late swatow type. Other specimens re-



The enlarged trademark at the back of the white shallow plate fragments retrieved at Barotoc Viejo wreck site.



Pieces of metal slags, (left) and a piece of iron slag, (right) retrieved at the wrecked steel ship in Barotac Viejo.

ported from the wreck include porcelain and stoneware plates, bowls and jars. Others were drinking glasses and a lamp made of bluish crystalline materials.

According to an old folk who resides near the team's camp, his father had once told him that this wreck had sunk sometime in 1914,

the cause of which he could only speculate on. He added that the ship was carrying cargo including carabaos, plates, match boxes, and other trade wares. He also mentioned during the interview that he was told that the vessel's name was "San Francisco".

As far as this investigation is

concerned, it would have been more complete/accurate if more divers were available and the air supply was sufficient. But since this wreck is in all probability very recent/modern, this project has to wait until additional funds are made available.

Postscript. . . from page 11

In conversation, the *Kepala Desa* of Koto Kandis suggested that there might be other ancient sites in the lower Batang Hari region. He mentioned specifically Parit Culam, a village on the Sungei Dendam, a tributary of the Batang Hari which it joins between Koto Kandis and Muara Sabak and at Koto Aur between Simpang and Suak Kandis. One would anticipate also, that a settlement existed formerly at Simpang (Lama), a strategic location which commands both branches of the lower Batang Hari and thus the access to all settlements upstream.

The remarks of Lt. S.C. Crooke, the first European to remark upon the antiquities of the Jambi area³, are of interest in this connection. He observed:

"Kampung Simpang, 7 houses on the right, immediately above the separation of the Kwalla Saddoo (Kuala Berbak) and the Kwalla Niur, and 51 miles from Jambi. The Dutch had formerly on this spot a factory, defended by a field work, the traces of which are still visible near the village. The situation commands the navigation of the whole river but the ground is scarcely 6 feet above the greatest fall of the river, and is at its swelling subject to inundation. The site of an English factory is unknown" (Anderson 1971, 398).

The *Encyclopaedie van Nederlands Indie* indicates, however, that the Dutch factory was at Muara Kumpeh (Suak Kandis), not Simpang. Was the earthwork seen by Crooke actually that of the English factory or some earlier defence work? Here again, it would seem that a survey of the area might well be rewarding. Crooke also remarked:

"The banks of the Kwalla Niur throughout are un hospitable from their lowness, and present one uniform character of wooded and impenetrable loneliness"

We now know that these apparently "uninhabitable" banks had been

abandoned for something like four hundred years prior to his arrival in the Batang Hari in 1820.

Footnotes

1. Kuala Tungkal or Tungkal, Kecamatan Batang Hari. 0 49' S., 103 28' E.
See: Schnitger, F.M. *Archaeology of Hindoo Sumatra* Leiden: Brill (1987) Plate XI. See also: Suleiman, Satyawati, *Sculptures of Ancient Sumatra*, Jakarta: Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional (1981) p. 10.
2. Information from Drs Bambang Budi Utomo, following comment by Professor Boechari of Universitas Indonesia.
3. For a full account of Lt. Crooke's visit to Jambi in 1820, see: Anderson, Hohn, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra in 1823*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints (1971). Appendix pp. 389-405.
Judging from Crooke's report, it took his vessel some eight days to ascend the river from the mouth of the Kuala Niur to Jambi and six days to descend again to the sea, allowing for soundings and observations. A sketch map of the lower Batang Hari is included. There were no settlements between the mouth of the Kuala Niur and Simpang at that time.