1. Underwater Cultural Heritage in South Africa

1.1 South Africa’s maritime history

South Africa has a rich and varied store of underwater cultural heritage (UCH) that possibly goes back to the dawn of humankind. This includes not only shipwrecks, but also early hominid remains, palaeontological material and submerged cultural sites. The African continent is the birth place of hominids and modern Homo sapiens, and during the evolutionary process our ancestors reached the southern tip of the continent. Over more than three million years this has left a fabulously rich and varied palaeontological and archaeological record, which includes skeletal remains, stone tools and rock art.
While not as yet discovered, there are tantalising hints that such remains may lie submerged off the coast given the rise and fall of the oceans over time.

There is presently no evidence to suggest that water craft or boats were built by the early indigenous peoples of South Africa, and even if such craft had been built the likelihood of finding their remains is slim given local sea conditions. It is thought that the earliest vessels to pass along the southern African coastline may have been those of a group of Phoenicians sailing under the instruction of the Egyptian pharaoh Necho as long ago as 600 B.C., though no remains have been discovered. It is also possible that vessels of Indian Ocean origin, such as those encountered trading the length of the East African coast by the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century, may have sailed the South African coast, but as yet no firm evidence for this has been found. It is in the European ‘Age of Discovery’ that records of losses of ships wrecked off the southern African coastline begin. The coast of South Africa stretches for 2,954 km, and is, for the most part, potentially treacherous; buffeted by high winds and exposed to heavy surf. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the earliest record of a shipwreck occurred in 1505, a mere seven years after Vasco de Gama charted a route to the east around the southern tip of the continent. Unfortunately no trace of this Portuguese sailing vessel – the so-called ‘Soares’ Wreck – has been found. Portugal’s dominance of this trading route to the east was to last for almost 100 years, during which time a number of Portuguese vessels foundered on the southern African coast. England and Holland, however, entered this route in 1591 and 1595 respectively, and would come to dominate the route and the Eastern trade after the incorporation of the English East India Company in 1601 and the Dutch East India Company in 1602. With the establishment of a permanent Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, the number of Dutch vessels passing along this route increased dramatically, with a corresponding loss of ships and lives. The first recorded Dutch wreck, the Eiland Mauritius, occurred in Table Bay in 1644. Many more followed, a number of which have been subsequently discovered and excavated, revealing important archaeological and historical information. With the permanent occupation of the Cape by Britain in 1806, the number of English vessels wrecked increased, though Dutch, Portuguese and other European vessels from Sweden, France, Denmark and a number of other nations, also foundered. Vessels of at least 38 nations have been lost on the South African coast.


3 Turner, supra note 1, at p. 11.

4 This included the São João de Bescoinho (1551), São Jeronymo and São João (1552), São Bento (1554) and Santo Alberto (1593).

5 This includes the Oosterland (1697), Merestein (1702), Bennebroek (1713), Reigersdaal (1747) and the Middleburg (1781).

6 Turner, supra note 1, at pp. 121–135.