The Sad Case of the ss Maori

John Gribble
Wessex Archaeology, United Kingdom
(Formerly Maritime Archaeologist,
South African Heritage Resources Agency)

The impact of human agents on underwater cultural heritage is but one of a host of problems that beset the management of this fragile resource. In particular, the degradation of wrecks popular as good dive sites is an area of great concern to the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), and is perhaps epitomised in South Africa by the case of the ss Maori.

The Maori was owned by the Shaw, Saville and Albion Company and was a typical cargo vessel of the early 1890’s. She was a steel screw steamer with a registered tonnage of 5,317 tons and was built during the latter part of 1893 by the firm C.S. Swan and Hunter at Wallsend-on-Tyne near Newcastle in the United Kingdom. She was a little over 402 feet long, 48 feet wide, and 29 feet deep, with two decks. Her triple expansion engine was built at the Central Marine Engineering Works in West Hartlepool and had a nominal 461 horsepower.

The vessel was originally square-rigged on her foremast – carrying working masts and rigging on a steamship was still found to be useful by some steamship owners in case of a breakdown of the engines — and as a result she had taller masts than were the norm on many other steamers of the period.

The Loss of the Maori

At about one o’clock on the morning of Thursday 5 August 1909 the Maori went ashore in dense fog and sank near Duiker Point on the Cape Peninsula, about 20km south of central Cape Town.

She had left Table Bay shortly before midnight after recoaling, and sailed into drizzle and thickening fog as she headed south towards Cape Point. Forty minutes later, with her engines going at full speed, the Maori struck a rock, which according to those aboard, seemed to stand well out of the water. Shrouded in dense fog the vessel had come very close inshore and had unknowingly entered the bay north of Duiker Point. The first intimation of danger was the lookout’s warning cry, but by then the vessel was only about thirty yards from the rock, and although her master, Captain G Nichole, immediately ordered the wheel hard-a-port, the Maori ran up on to the rock (Fig 1).

Badly holed, the vessel started sinking by the bow, and the crew were ordered into the boats. It was assumed that the entire complement had boarded the three lifeboats, but it later became apparent that fifteen crewmen had been left behind. The lifeboat commanded by the Chief Officer and carrying fourteen others was the first to land at eight that morning and raise the alarm.

Ultimately 32 of the crew of 53 were lost, including Captain Nichole and all the navigating officers. The vessel was a complete loss.

The Maori Today

Today the Maori is one of the most popular recreational dive sites on the Cape Peninsula. Its location on the western, Atlantic seaboard of the Cape Peninsula means that during the South African summer months diving conditions on the site are often optimal, with very cold, but very clean water. The sheltered nature of the bay in which the wreck lies means
that it retains a remarkable degree of structural integrity, with large portions of the vessel surviving relatively intact. When Jacques Cousteau dived on the wreck of the Maori in the 1960s he declared that it was the best preserved wreck of its type that he had seen. An added attraction and one of the reasons for its currently degraded state is the fact that much of the Maori’s cargo remained substantially intact, packed in her holds until relatively recently.

On a violent coast, where most wrecks break up rapidly, the Maori is thus something of a rarity, both as an archaeological and diving site, and it!is hardly surprising that with the growth in sport-diving during the last 40 years, the Maori has become a site favoured by divers.

Sadly, this popularity has not been without price. Although never salvaged on a commercial basis after her loss, the Maori has been the victim of years of souvenir hunting by thousands of divers, and is now a shadow of her former self. At one stage during the 1970s divers used dynamite on the wreck to blast their way into the hull in search of non-ferrous metal. Today her holds are virtually empty and her structure has been further damaged by scores of irresponsibly placed anchors.

This problem is not limited to the Maori and manifests itself on many other shipwreck sites along the South African coast. Although underwater heritage has enjoyed blanket legislative protection since 1986 (under the terms of the National Heritage Resources Act any wreck older than 60 years of age is protected) a long tradition of salvage dating back to the early 18th century left a widely held perception that the contents of shipwrecks are there for the taking. However, two decades of legislative protection and a huge amount of work done by the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the IZIKO Maritime Museum and others to publicise the protected status of shipwrecks has slowly borne fruit. There is now a general awareness and grudging acceptance, particularly within the diving community, of the protected status of shipwrecks.

But legislation cannot stand alone. Of equal importance to the protection of underwater cultural heritage is an understanding by those using the resource and the wider South African public of what underwater cultural heritage is, and why it is worth preserving. Without winning over hearts and minds legislation can never truly succeed.

For a few years SAHRA, in conjunction with the IZIKO Maritime Museum, has been developing a pilot Cape Peninsula Shipwreck Route. The route aims to introduce Capetonians and visitors to the city to the hundreds of wrecks that lie in the waters of the Peninsula and thereby increase general public awareness of the importance and fragility of our underwater heritage, while at the same time formalising access to a number of popular, threatened wreck sites.

Land-based information boards are planned for a number of sites on the route around the Cape Peninsula, and the first of these has been installed adjacent to the slipway at the popular harbour of Hout Bay, from which divers access the Maori (Fig 2). An accompanying pamphlet has been produced. In addition, underwater information plinths will be installed at the sites often visited by divers, such as the Maori. These plinths will not only provide information about the history of the particular wreck and layout of the site, but will also carry a strong conservation message, stressing the legal protection that such sites enjoy, and the responsibilities of divers when visiting them.

While this approach to managing threatened underwater sites is in some senses post hoc, if it proves successful in managing risk on a heavily utilised site such as the Maori, SAHRA envisages its useful extension to other threatened, or potentially threatened sites, in the future. It is hoped that an increased awareness amongst visitors of the archaeological potential of a well preserved wreck like the Maori, will ensure the long term survival of the site.
At about one o’clock on the morning of 5 August 1909, the Shaw Savill steamship, Maori, went aground and sank near Duiker Point south of Llandudno.

The Maori was a typical cargo vessel of the time. She was a 6877 ton steel screw steamer 225 metres (740 feet) long, powered by a 481 horse power triple expansion engine, and was built in England in 1908. She traded between England and New Zealand and when she was wrecked was bound for Port Chalmers in New Zealand with a cargo which included 23,800 tons of railway tracks, explosives, English machinery, and cases of mineral champagne.

The Maori put to Table Bay to take on bunker coal and departing at 11.45 p.m. on 4 August she steamed into thick fog off Cape Point. Forty minutes later, travelling at full steam, she ran aground near the shore at what is now known as Blouberg.

The vessel was discovered later in the day by local fishermen who managed to get a line across to the wreck. Survivors managed to get ashore on the line, but two others drowned in the attempt. The remaining crew had to wait another twenty-four hours before a rescue was apparent and set up on the rocks adjacent to the wreck, and they waited they received assistance.

THE WRECK

The Maori lay perpendicular to the coast with her stern surrounded by grass bushes, and her bow facing out to sea, about 15 metres offshore. When depth on the wreck was found to be 7 metres on her stern, to 22 metres on her bow.

Because of the position of the wreck in the relative shelter of Blouberg, she is remarkably well preserved, and a structural large intact. The overstripping in the Cape’s extremely rough weather conditions for 76 years, the heavy weathering in her rim, her superstructure and many vessels on her perpolar deck, are all prominent. Sections of her hull painting, and many of her supporting frames, are still visible on the seaward side of the wreck.

The discovery of this wreck has always been a fact that the ship’s cargo remained in the hull after she sank. Today, pools of oil break over the stone of the wreck, long after pipes run from the wreck near her bow, and inside come areas of the hull, the remnants of the cases of mineral champagne she was carrying, still visible.

WRECK DO’S AND DON’TS

The Maori was a very important ship, and this is underlining the structural integrity of the wreck, the archaeological potential, and its appeal as a dive site. To ensure that you do not have a negative impact on the special wreck, do these few simple things:

- Don’t touch or remove anything from the wreck without a permit. It is not only illegal, it destroys the value of the site but those who will follow after you.
- Don’t fish or catch fish and take them out of the wreck. It破坏s the wreck and its contents.
- Remember that although it is possible to swim under the hull and ships, this is certainly frowned upon by the locals of the wreck and has advanced effects.