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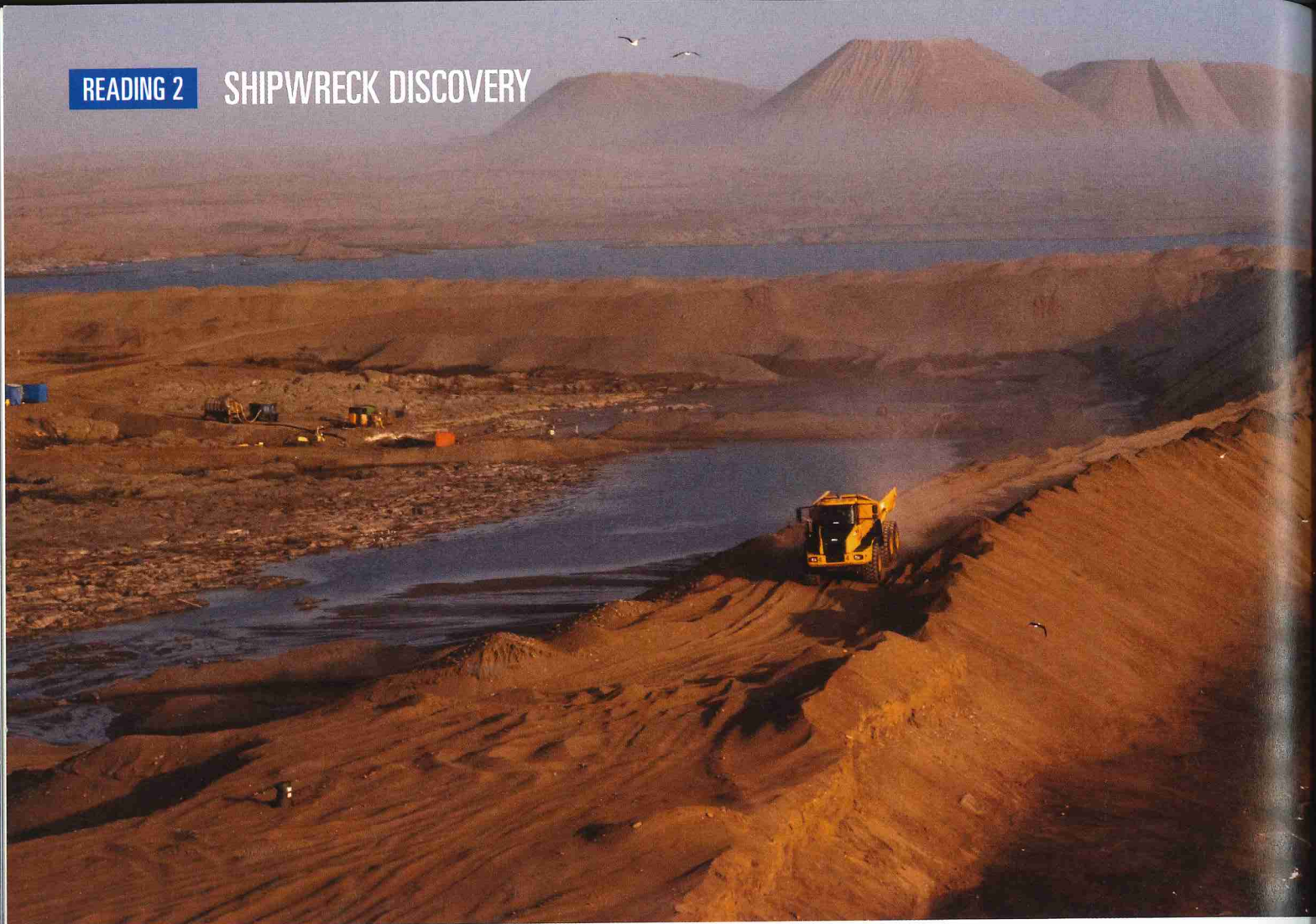
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*Off the coast of Namibia, a 16th century shipwreck is discovered in a present-day diamond mine. Where was the ship going, and what might have happened to the sailors on board?*



# Shipwreck



**A** 16th-century Portuguese trading vessel is headed for the coast of India. The sailors, with a fortune of gold and ivory to trade for spices, hope that this is the trip that will make them rich. However, the ship never reaches India. By a twist of fate, as they sail around Africa, a fierce storm blows them off course and the ship sinks off a mysterious coast sprinkled with diamonds.

This tale would have been lost forever had it not been for an astonishing discovery on a part of the coast of Namibia whose name—*Sperrgebiet*—means “forbidden zone” in German. The *Sperrgebiet* is the site of a very rich and famously off-limits diamond mine. This is a joint venture, called *Namdeb*, between the diamond mining company De Beers and the Namibian government, on the southern part of Namibia’s Atlantic coast. One day, in April 2008, while

walking on the beach, a company geologist came across what looked at first like a perfectly round half sphere of rock. Curious, he picked it up. It turned out to be a copper ingot, the type traded for spices in the Indies in the first half of the 16th century.

The ingot was the first sign of what is by far the oldest shipwreck ever found on the coast of sub-Saharan Africa, and the richest. Archaeologists later found 22 tons of these ingots beneath the sand, as well as thousands of other artifacts—including swords, muskets,<sup>1</sup> chain mail,<sup>2</sup> and more than 2,000 beautiful, heavy coins—in the vicinity of the site. But the world’s archaeologists are even more excited about the ship itself: a Portuguese East Indiaman. The ship,

<sup>1</sup> *muskets*: long guns used in the 16th–18th centuries

<sup>2</sup> *chain mail*: armor made out of small links of metal sewn together



A seawall guards the shipwreck of a Portuguese trading vessel off the coast of Namibia.

A 16th-century Portuguese trading vessel is headed for the coast of India. The sailors, with a fortune of gold and ivory to trade for spices, hope that this is the trip that will make them rich. However, the ship never reaches India. By a twist of fate, as they sail around Africa, a fierce storm blows them off course and the ship sinks off a mysterious coast sprinkled with diamonds.

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with its extraordinary cargo of treasure and trade goods intact, had remained untouched in these sands for nearly 500 years.

“This is a priceless opportunity,” says Francisco Alves, head of nautical archaeology under the Portuguese Ministry of Culture and one of the many archaeologists who have come to study the shipwreck. “We know so little about these great old ships. This is only the second one ever excavated by archaeologists. All the others were plundered<sup>3</sup> by treasure hunters.” The artifacts will now be the property of Namdeb, and treasure hunters are never going to be a problem here. As luck would have it, the site of the shipwreck is on the sands of one of the world’s most jealously guarded diamond mines. Far from plundering, Namdeb agreed to suspend their operations around the wreck site and called

<sup>3</sup> *plundered*: robbed

in a team of archaeologists, and, for a few weeks, history was mined instead of diamonds.

The sunken ship rests only 20 feet (6 meters) below sea level, on the desert coast. The Atlantic Ocean is held back by a massive retaining wall that leaks a bit at its base. As researchers excavate the ship, cameras monitor their every move. These are a reminder that this is still a diamond mine; loose diamonds could be hidden in the sands that the archaeologists are brushing away. “If it hadn’t been for those copper ingots weighing everything down, there would be nothing left here to find,” says Bruno Werz, director of the Southern African Institute of Maritime Archaeology. “Five centuries of storms and waves would have washed everything away.” Werz and his team have been examining the wreckage by measuring, photographing, and scanning the site with a state-of-the-art laser scanner.

Historians have now pieced together enough information to tell the tale of a long-forgotten voyage. There were a number of Portuguese coins on the shipwreck that had the coat of arms<sup>4</sup> of King João III. These were minted<sup>5</sup> for only a few years, from 1525 to 1538. Finding so many of these coins is a strong indication that the ship was from Portugal and sailed during this 13-year time period. Moreover, the copper ingots suggest the ship was on its way to India to buy spices rather than transporting the spices back to Portugal.

A study of the Portuguese nautical records shows that 21 ships were lost on the way to India between 1525 and 1600. The *Bom Jesus* (*Good Jesus*), which sailed in 1533, was the only one of these that went down anywhere near Namibia. A rare 16th-century book offers a glimpse of the *Bom Jesus*. Issued as a commemorative volume, it contains illustrations of all the fleets that sailed for India each year after 1497. Among the pictures for 1533 is one of a ship disappearing into the waves and the words *Bom Jesus* together with one word: *perdido*—“lost.”

The journey of *Bom Jesus* began on Friday, the seventh of March 1533, when a fleet of ships,

<sup>4</sup> *coat of arms*: symbol of a particular noble family

<sup>5</sup> *minted*: physically created money

including the *Bom Jesus*, left Lisbon and sailed out into the Atlantic. These ships were the pride of Portugal, the space shuttles of their day, off on a 15-month journey to bring back a fortune in spices from distant shores. Four months or so after its departure from Lisbon, the fleet was struck by a storm. The *Bom Jesus* disappeared, carrying approximately 300 men, sailors, soldiers, merchants, priests, nobles, and slaves. While there is no record of the shipwreck, this is a likely scenario: Strong winds drove the ship northward along the coast for hundreds of miles. When the ship hit a rock about 150 yards from shore, a large piece of the stern<sup>6</sup> broke off and the *Bom Jesus* was sent to its grave.

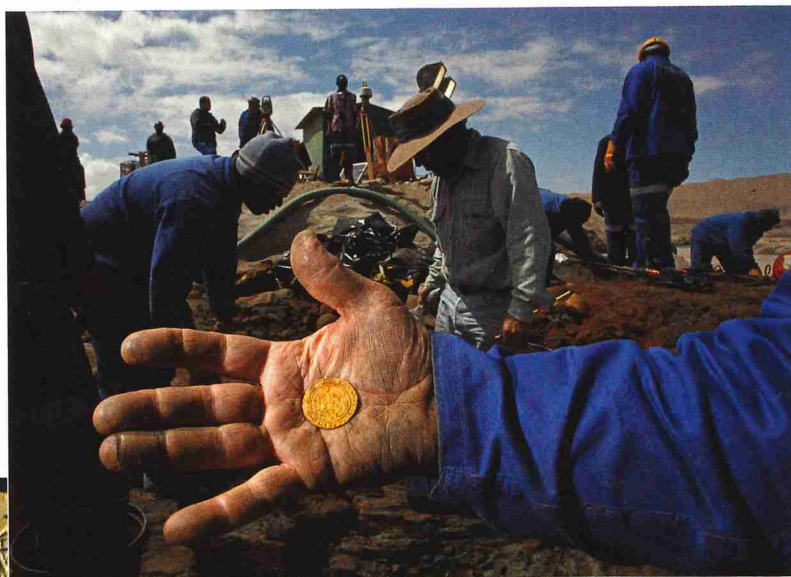
Few personal possessions were found among the artifacts. This has led archaeologists to believe that, despite the wreck, many, if not most, sailors made it to land. But then what? This is one of the most inhospitable places on Earth, an uninhabited area of sand and low bushes, stretching for hundreds of miles. It was winter. They most likely had escaped by the skin of their teeth and were cold, wet, and exhausted. There was no hope of a rescue party; nobody in the outside

world knew they were alive, let alone where to start looking. Nor was any ship likely to pass this way by chance because the storm had pushed the ship away from the trade routes. The sailors were as lost as if they had been shipwrecked on Mars.

“A winter storm along this coast is no joke,” says Dieter Noli, the mine’s resident archaeologist. All the same, things didn’t necessarily end badly, he says. There would have been plenty of food such as shellfish, seabird eggs, and desert snails. The Portuguese could have met local survival experts—hunter-gatherers known today as *Bushmen*. Winter was the season when Bushmen traveled north along this coast in the hope of finding the carcasses of whales that occasionally washed ashore.

How the Portuguese fared in these encounters would have been up to them. Noli says that they

<sup>6</sup> *stern*: the back of a boat



Coins from the wreck of Portuguese ship found off the Namibian coast