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Whispers of the deep: an exploration of the ‘unshackled history: the wreck of the slave ship São José, 1794’ exhibition

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Abstract

On 27th December 1794, the *São José Parquete d'Africa* wrecked just off the shores of Cape Town. Battling the rough winds, high swells and stuck between two reefs, the crew set about to rescue their most precious cargo - the 512 enslaved people held in the ship's hold. Despite the efforts of the crew and the people on the shore, 212 enslaved people succumbed as the ship broke into pieces. For over two centuries the story of the São José was no more than a footnote, as the ship and the objects on it began to erode on the seafloor. A discovery by researchers from the Slave Wrecks Project has shed light on this story and a part of South Africa's history that is not often discussed.

In December 2018, nearly 224 years after its wrecking, the Iziko Museums' Slave Lodge in Cape Town unveiled an exhibition dedicated to telling this part of South Africa's slave history, entitled 'Unshackled History: The Wreck of the Slave Ship São José, 1794'. This exhibition was made possible through the work of a global network of researchers, divers, maritime archaeologists, conservationists and curators. Together they dredged the São José from the murky and salty realm of the forgotten and the unremembered and created an interactive exhibition with tangible touch points to slavery, both locally and globally.

This research report explores the 'Unshackled History' exhibition, specifically the use and display of intangible and tangible heritage, the use of affect and aesthetic representations, as well as the presence of the ocean and water within the exhibition. To do this, I have employed a range of methods, including thinking of, with, and through the ocean, emotion networking, interviews with people involved in this exhibition and the São José from the Slave Wrecks Project and the Slave Lodge, and reading for water. The effect of this is a deep dive into the 'Unshackled History' exhibition, discussions on the production of heritage and the importance of feelings and emotions within memorywork.