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# A Question That Counts in French West Indies Maritime Archaeology: Linking Historical and Archaeological Sources

Jean-Sébastien Guibert

*This paper presents part of the results of historical research for a PhD thesis focusing on seafaring and maritime activity in Guadeloupe, French West Indies (FWI). Additionally, it discusses the possible identification of five shipwreck sites that appear to date to the 19th century: Anse à la Barque, Pointe-à-Pitre, Baie des Saintes, Sainte-Anne and Le Moule shipwrecks.*

## Introduction

This paper provides an overview of part of the results of a PhD thesis in history (Guibert 2013) focusing on seafaring and maritime risks in the French West Indies, especially in Guadeloupe during the colonial period, from the mid-17th century to the mid-19th century. The examination of wrecking events and vessel losses in the colonial period gives an opportunity to study the history of maritime activity in Guadeloupe. However, historical sources concerning maritime accidents are also important for studying shipwrecks. As a result, these sources were used as part of this project to study the relationship between history and maritime archaeology in terms of wreck site identification, site formation processes and heritage assessment.

This paper focuses on the use of historical research in order to identify and understand underwater archaeological shipwreck sites. After presenting the methods used in this research, underwater archaeological sites are discussed in relation to historical sources, background information and maritime activity periods. This overview of underwater archaeological sites in Guadeloupe is proposed in reverse chronology, beginning with the end of the 19th century, and going backwards in time.

## Methods and Results

The lack of a reliable shipwreck database for the French West Indies except for Moreau's (Moreau 1988), created the opportunity to build a new one as part of this project. This task involved archival research in a multitude of centers conserving for the West Indies in Guadeloupe (*Archives départementales de Guadeloupe*). Archives in Paris (*Centre d'accueil et de Recherche des Archives nationales*), Aix (*Archives nationales d'outre-mer*), and London (Public Records Office) as well as the main Atlantic ports papers (*Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique, de Gironde et de Seine-Maritime*) were

consulted. Archival research focused on records from the 17th century through to the end of the mid-19th century, and research is still ongoing for records dating through the end of 19th century. Historical research identified around 550 ships that wrecked between the mid-17th century and the mid 19th century. This data is compiled in a database detailing shipwreck events, travel information, ships characteristics, previous salvage operations and source references (Guibert 2013).

In order to estimate the potential for finding underwater cultural heritage in Guadeloupe, available historical sources were analyzed and a new method called the Archaeological Potential Rate (APR) was developed. This method combines three observations: type of loss, seabed nature, and evidence of salvage operations. The method was used to estimate the potential for finding underwater heritage in the Pointe-à-Pitre area (Guadeloupe) and was presented in a previous publication (Guibert 2012). Using this method, it is estimated that nearly 50 losses occurred between 1650 and 1850 in Guadeloupe, with a high potential for discovery. It permitted the evaluation of high potential zones due to the availability of reliable positioning information.

As far as underwater archaeological investigations are concerned, Guadeloupe is mostly untouched. The development of underwater archaeology is in its early stages in the French West Indies, and the first research efforts focused on ancient wrecks. Ancient wrecks are defined here as those vessels dating before the end of the 19th century and consisting of hull structures, ballast, and artifacts. Isolated artifacts as anchors have not been considered because they are difficult to match with historical sources.

To date, no remote sensing surveys have been conducted in Guadeloupe. Several diver surveys took place in the past with varying levels of success (Moreau 1985; Vicens 2010). Two sites have been studied by two non-profit organizations: the Anse à la Barque's site and the Pointe-à-Pitre Narrows site. This article will present

results of investigation at those sites, but will also provide observations of other sites known by local divers. At the time of this writing, 20 historic shipwreck sites have been discovered in Guadeloupe (Figure 1) and recorded by the French Department of Underwater Archaeology (*Département des Recherches Archéologiques Subaquatiques et Sous-Marines, DRASSM*).

Comparisons will be proposed between the first archaeological observations made of the five shipwreck sites as well as the analysis of historical sources conducted for the current project. In addition, possible identification of the five sites will be discussed based on previous research and information gathered from archival repositories.

### Late-19th Century Underwater Archaeological Sites

Two sites around Grande-Terre dating from the end of 19th century are presented in this section, namely Le Moule wreck and Sainte-Anne wreck.

### Le Moule Wreck

The wreck at Le Moule (LM 1, Figure 1) also known as the Passe Hastings wreck is an example of an unidentified shipwreck site (Guibert 2013:536–537). The site lies in 18 m of water and measures 40 m in length. The orientation of the wreckage indicates that the ship was probably coming into the harbor when it was lost. This site has not yet been studied or excavated. Artifacts observed on the surface include two admiralty-type anchors, located near the middle of the vessel, and the presence of coal. Fasteners, frames, and sheeting, which do not appear to be copper, may be observed as well. The hull structure is in good condition and may date to the end of the 19th century (Figure 2).

It is difficult to identify the name of this vessel due to the lack of an archaeological investigation, but several candidates are possible. One strong candidate is *George-et-Marie*, a three-masted French vessel loaded with coal, when wrecked at the entrance of the harbor in 1878 (Archives départementales de Guadeloupe [ADG]: 3K 70 5/4/1878, 39, 26/4/1878).

One thing that is certain is that the wreck is linked with the history of Le Moule. The port of Le Moule developed in the 19th century due to the rapid expansion

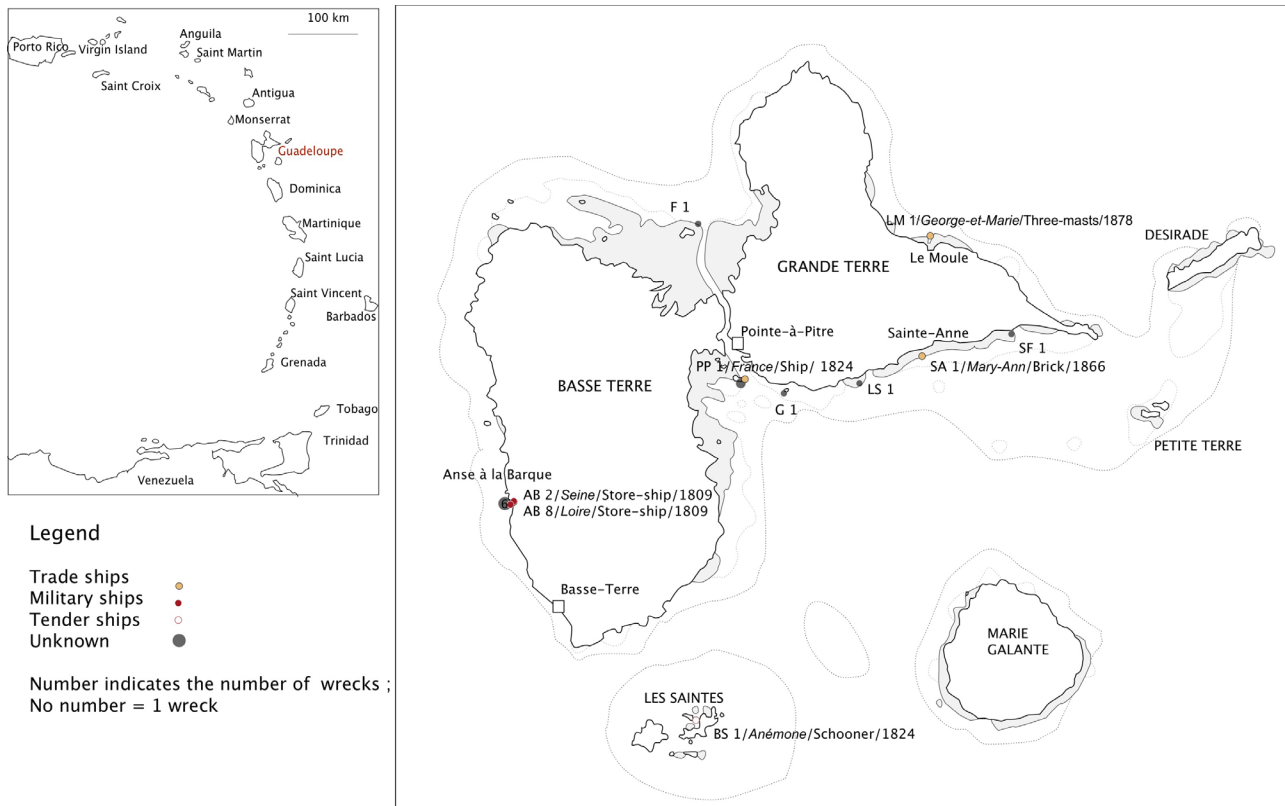


FIGURE 1. MAP OF GUADELOUPE AND SITES DISCUSSED IN THE ARTICLE (MAP BY AUTHOR, 2014).

of the sugar industry in Grande-Terre. But this wreck is also interesting because it reveals two important characteristics about the port in the 19th century: difficult access and bad mooring. Twenty-five ship-related accidents occurred in the area of Le Moule Harbor since the end of 18th century.

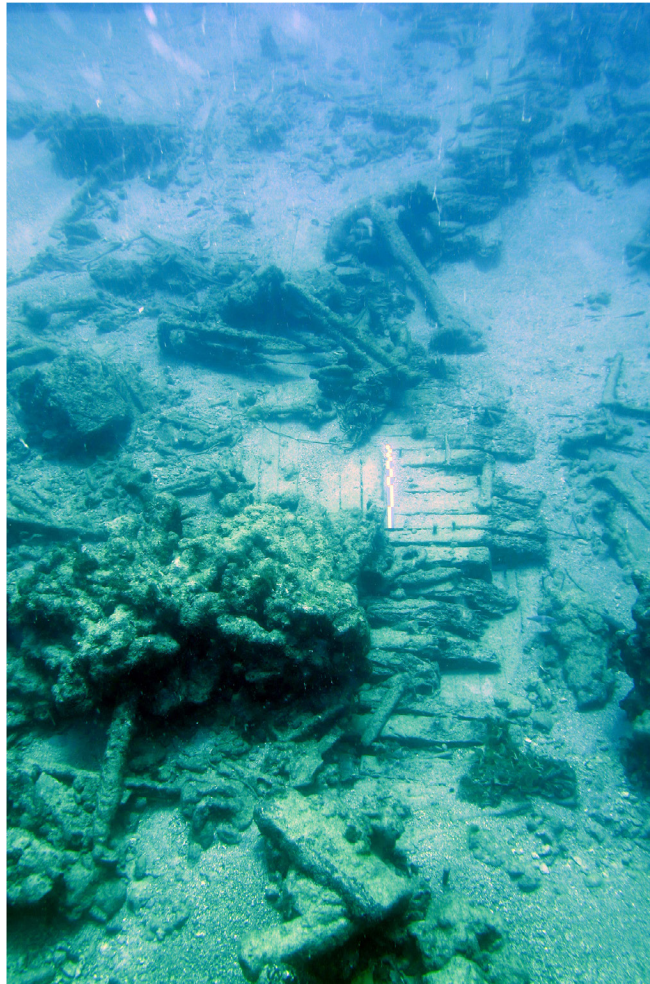


FIGURE 2. GENERAL VIEW OF LE MOULE WRECK SITE (LM 1) WITH TWO ADMIRALTY ANCHORS (PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2012).

### **Sainte-Anne Wreck**

The Sainte-Anne wreck (SA 1, Figure 1) site is located in 8-10 m of water at the bottom of a coral reef near the entrance of the little mooring of Sainte-Anne. Archaeologists have yet to investigate this site. Based on the existing remains, the ship likely broke apart during the wrecking event, as indicated by the different orientation of the two ends of the hull. However, the height of the stern and presence of several gudgeons of rudder indicates that a good part of the remains are relatively well preserved. The location of the wreck may correspond with the loss of the English ship *Mary-Ann* from Shields,

lost in June 1866 (Guibert 2013:532–533). The ship was lost after leaving its last port of call in Sainte-Anne, on its way from Newcastle to Trinidad. The official incident report indicates a navigation error.

In the morning of the 7th of June the English brick *Mary-Ann* from Newcastle, moored at Sainte-Anne and sent on ballast to Trinidad, drifted and touched her stern in going out by her own in the narrow. She stayed in this position until the arrival of a steamship from Pointe-à-Pitre in order to tow her. But during this movement the main cable broke and *Mary-Ann* was cast on coral reef (...) with no hope to save the ship (ADG 3K58, 48, 15/6/1866).

The distribution of structural remains on the seafloor indicates the violence of the wrecking event. This site has been selected for an upcoming project that will examine the maritime activity of the French West Indies through an historical archaeological point of view.

There are other known wrecks around Guadeloupe that likely date to this period, but information about them has not been found in the historical records to date. These wrecks include Grand Cul-de-Sac wreck (F 1) and Salines wreck, where more than 20 cannon have been recorded in position indicating the cannon were stored as cargo (S 1). These sites dating from the late 19th century are quite well preserved. Their level of preservation is likely the result of different factors such as water depth, bottom topography, and relatively recent dates of loss.

### **Early-19th Century Underwater Archaeological Sites**

Two sites dating to the year 1824 are very different than the ones previously mentioned, but can offer much information about Guadeloupe's maritime history. The first wreck may be the remains of *Anémone*, a state schooner used as a tender ship in Guadeloupe. The second is the wreck of a merchant ship from Bordeaux called *France*.

### **The Baie des Saintes Wreck**

The Baie des Saintes wreck site (BS 1, Figure 1) was discovered by Claude Edouard in 1995. The wreck is located in 25 m of water in the middle of Saintes Bay. It was excavated in the 1990s by a team of local divers without archaeological oversight. It may be interesting to investigate this site in order to document and identify it more precisely. The hypothesis of this being the wreck site of the French schooner *Anémone* is strong.

The first archaeological assessment, conducted by Michel L'Hour and Jean-Luc Massy during a DRASSM



project in 2001, dated the site to before 1840, due to the presence of ‘Creil and Montereau’ stamps on separate ceramic artifacts: respectively a saucer and an octagonal plate (L’Hour and Massy 2002). In addition, copper sheathing and cast iron ballast were observed on the site. Based on the little information existing to date, the wreck may be associated with the French schooner *Anémone*. The vessel was built in Bayonne in 1823 and sent to the West Indies after its involvement in the Spanish Expedition ended. In Guadeloupe, the vessel was used as a tender ship, actively engaged in the struggle against the ongoing slave trade. Though the slave trade had been officially forbidden in the French colonies since 1817, the illegal trade continued until the 1830s. *Anémone* sunk during the 1824 hurricane (Lacour 1855 4:355) just after being sent to Saintes Bay for protection. All of the crew and officers were killed during the loss. Governor Jacob’s report indicated:

*Nowhere else the hurricane had been more violent than in those islands. (...) It was impossible to raise the king schooner Anémone sunk on her anchors during the tempest. Her masts were snatched from their foot taking of all sails and rigging. ... Mr Guillotin’s body has been found a few days after the wreck and successively 18 men of his crew. (ANOM SG/GUA/CORR/68 25/3/1825)*

An additional archaeological investigation of the site should be performed to fully document it and try to determine the vessel’s identity. If the wreck is indeed the remains of *Anémone*, the site would be culturally and historically important for several reasons: *Anémone* was a type of ship documented by Jean Boudriot in one of his monographs (Boudriot 1989), it was used as a tender ship, and also, it housed a cargo of well-preserved artifacts. Additionally, this wreck would also be significant as one of the only known underwater archaeological sites linked with the fight against the slave trade.

### ***The Pointe-à-Pitre Narrow Wreck***

The discovery of the Pointe-à-Pitre Narrow site (PP1, Figure 1) is the result of historical and archaeological research conducted during a previous project (Guibert 2010b). The high potential for underwater cultural heritage in the area of the Narrow may be explained by the frequency of maritime activity

in Pointe-à-Pitre harbor since the beginning of the 18th century, the dangers of the harbor entrance, and because the area has never been dredged.

Several wrecks have been found in the area, although archaeologists have only studied one so far. During a July 2013 project, archaeologists documented the partial remains of the hull and cargo of a shipwreck. The wreck has been tentatively identified as the trade ship *France*, lost in June 1824 while sailing out of the harbor bound for Savannah, Georgia in the United States. The captain used the anchor buoys in order to leave Pointe-à-Pitre harbor, and to get underway, but the last one broke due to a strong gale. The ship was cast ashore on the other side of the Narrow where it was abandoned after a failed attempt to save it (Guibert 2013:526–527).

The record of the ship’s loss mentioned that “she was estimated to the sum of 160 £, her lower masts with top hold by tackles, rudder, windlass, capstan and all that have been submerged as 150 brasses of stones of Barsac, 7000 tiles, spares and supplies (ANOM 4/10/1824, SG/GEN/340/2135). Archaeologists noted the remains of cargo on the site consisting of raw material cut stones identified as a type of Barsac stones from Gironde, and 20 cm square ceramic tiles (Figures 3–4). Other archaeological evidence such as the vessel’s construction details and ceramic types support the hypothesis that the wreck is the remains of *France* (Guibert and Bigot 2013). For example, French coarse stoneware bottle fragments (Figure 4) found on site are similar to those found on



FIGURE 3. CUT STONES CARGO IDENTIFIED AS A TYPE OF BARSAC STONES (GIRONDE) ON POINTE-À-PITRE WRECK SITE PP1 (PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2013).



FIGURE 4. PHOTOMONTAGE EXCERPT FROM *FRANCE* LOSS REPORT, AND ARTIFACTS FROM PP 1 WRECK: TILES, CUT STONE IDENTIFIED AS BARSAC STONE, AND STONWARE BOTTLE FROM NORMANDY OR BEAUVAISIS WORKSHOPS (PHOTOS BY DANIEL NERETTI, 2013).

the early-19th-century Kerjouanno wreck, located in Bretagne, France (L'Hour and Veyrat 2005:182–183).

This site reveals an aspect of maritime activity that has not been well documented—the transport of raw material from Europe to America. The cargo of tiles and stones to be exported to the United States according to the captain's report was also usual in the French West Indies and French Guyana. This kind of material, used as ballast during the first part of the voyage, has been used in several houses in Basse-Terre or in Pointe-à-Pitre (Desmoulin 2006:168–169; Pérotin-Dumon 2000:453), but also in official buildings such as Cayenne's customs building (Casagrande 2011) in the late 18th and in the early 19th century. Until now, this is the only known site with a cargo of raw materials in the French West Indies.

### Underwater Archaeological Sites Dating to the Revolutionary and Imperial Period (1789-1815)

#### *The Case of the Anse à la Barque Site*

The case of the Anse à la Barque site is very interesting. The site's potential for underwater vestiges from First Empire has been described by Jean-Pierre Moreau (1988:136–137). The site was discovered by Daniel Cabarus and investigations have been undertaken by Bernard Vicens since 2001 (Vicens 2003, 2008).

This cove on the west coast of Guadeloupe contains eight recorded wrecks (AB 1-8, Figure 1). Among them, two store ships were scuttled in 1809 during the blockade of Guadeloupe. This site was discussed as a secondary mooring location for the port of Basse-Terre because of its location, topography, and maritime activity (Guibert 2010a). However, the identification of the remains has to be revised based on a recent discovery.

Initially, the two wrecks believed to be the store ships from the First Empire (1804-1815) were identified as AB 1 and AB 2, although AB 1 needs to be re-examined. The presence of multiple wrecks on the AB 1 wreck prevented archaeologists from analyzing the

hull structure of each ship initially thought to be the store ships. The bilge pump and main mast step have been studied on AB 2 but not on AB 1 (Guibert 2010a). Moreover, the recent discovery of another wreck in the middle of the cove, which could instead be one of the two store ships, necessitates that archaeologists re-evaluate the hypothesis that AB 1 and AB 2 are the store ships. The interpretation of the site came partly from a captain's report, which detailed the location of the two store ships. "Seine was sunk presenting starboard to the shore, the keel showing on the seabed ... bowsprit on Loire's stern" (SHD Marine, BB4 292 fol. 133–135). Thus, the AB 2 wreck initially identified as Loire may in fact be Seine. The AB 1 wreck may actually be one of those 17 ships mentioned in the archives as lost in the area during this period (Guibert 2013:525).

This case demonstrates the limitations of interpreting underwater archaeological sites by depending primarily on archival sources. Their interpretation and identification should be based not only on historical sources but on complete archaeological evidence as well. There are several other shipwrecks in the Anse à la Barque area, which have not yet been examined; therefore, careful analysis of these sites must be completed before each site can be identified with certainty. The Anse à la Barque site promises to yield much more information about maritime activity in the French West Indies. A future

project has been proposed to study the isolated wreck designated as AB 6.

### Underwater Archaeological Sites Dating Prior to the Revolutionary and Imperial Period (Before 1789)

The lack of sites older than those presented in this article is an interesting phenomenon. The maritime activity of the French West Indies was prolific and history provides examples of hurricane or battles that may have caused numerous shipwrecks. The search for the Marquis de Montecarlos fleet destroyed in 1603 southwest of Basse-Terre by Jean-Pierre Moreau in the 1980s yielded no results (Moreau 1985). Another event in Guadeloupe's history that would be interesting to investigate is the total loss of the English fleet in the Saintes in 1666. After an English victory over the French, the loss of the entire fleet was caused by a violent hurricane (Guibert 2013:225–226). To date, no remains have been found in the Saintes that relate to this event.

Others wreck sites such as the Gosier (G 1) or Saint-François (SF 1) wrecks are perhaps older, but hull remains are gone. Moreover, there is a lack of historical sources to inform us about those sites. Additionally, we must consider that construction projects in the 1970s and 1980s did not attempt to protect nearby underwater cultural heritage. Several sites, such as the *Didon* wreck lost in the Pointe-à-Pitre area in 1792, may have been destroyed because of dredging.

### Conclusion

The French West Indies context represents both a subject at its very beginning and a necessity for the research of maritime history in order to develop underwater archaeological projects. Both historical research and archaeological investigations must be as thorough as possible in order to yield good results. Guadeloupe also provides a very interesting laboratory to test methods of historical archaeology. This article proposes identifications for several wreck sites in Guadeloupe. These hypothesized identities give a good background in order to undertake the next step of research, which should consist of further archaeological investigations to confirm or refute those identities.

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