

The cannibals of Tematangi



Apparently, Tematangi was not a stopover for ships visiting the Tuamotus to load copra for food and consumer goods. Ditto for mother-of-pearl: at the time, there were no diving campaigns which would have allowed the inhabitants to earn money and to stock up normally.

Tahiti, December 31, 2020 - 1857, the story of the disappearance of the schooner *Sarah Ann* , in the Tuamotus, was one of the biggest news items of the beginning of the French protectorate in Tahiti. What remains of the wreckage of the boat rests, nowadays, in a little more than fifteen meters of water in front of the reef of the atoll of Tematangi and two cannons were removed a few years ago, ultimate witnesses of a horrible drama which ended in spite of everything in the leniency of the judges in the face of what remains a terrifying case of cannibalism in the Tuamotus.

In March 1856, the *Sarah Ann* , a small schooner, left the port of Valparaiso, Chile, to return to Tahiti. She had on board a total of 17 people, including Captain Krayser, his wife, a 22-month-old child, Ms. Krayser's Tahitian maid, a supercargo, a trader from Tahiti returning after a trip to Valparaiso on business, the two children the Tahitian Captain Stevens, whom their mother was impatiently awaiting in Tahiti, and nine crew.

Sarah Ann disappears



What to do on an atoll forgotten by the world? The inhabitants of Tematangi lived there in a way all the more precarious because they were not Paumotu, but people whose parents had been exiled from Tahiti following a local war.

The *Sarah Ann* arrives Gambier in April, and found, in the harbor of Mangareva, War Commander *Teal*, commanded by lieutenant Ferré. The crews meet, just like the captains, everyone sympathizes and meets in Tahiti, the corvette having to arrive a few days ahead of the *Sarah Ann*, which is slower, and which should load, what is more, a cargo of mother-of-pearl to supplement its freight.

But from April 1856 to June 1857, there was no further news of the *Sarah Ann*, who was reported missing, no doubt a victim, it was thought then, of one of those tropical storms which arrive without warning.

We would have stayed there if, in 1857 precisely, the schooner protectorate, the *Julia*, house property Hort Brothers in Tahiti, was not passed on 1st June off Atoll Tematangi then called island Bligh (and mostly mistakenly spelled Blight Island, with a “t” at the end of the word).

Captain Dunham said he saw natives from the sea wearing European clothes and stuffs hanging from trees, textiles that immediately made one think of *Sarah Ann* . He had also identified the remains of a wreck which he supposed to be precisely the *Sarah Ann* , but despite two attempts to get closer to the inhabitants of the island, he failed. Dunham had decided not to use force, but despite his peaceful efforts to establish contact, nothing helped and in the end, the frank hostility of the Paumotu armed with spears and slings had decided him to continue on his way to signal his discovered on his return to Tahiti to the authorities of the protectorate.

A bombardment for nothing!



Apart from fish and seabird eggs, the inhabitants of Tematangi apparently had very few resources for food.

Informed of these facts, the governor ordered to immediately send on the spot a steamer, the *Milan* , warship, so as to see if the castaways could still be saved, even if that seemed very improbable. With the steamer, two other armed boats made the trip, because the business was important.

Arrived on the coasts of Tematangi, the men of *Milan* disembark and immediately discover a small village; there is fresh fish hanging from a branch, the mats are still warm, it is clear that the population was here even a very short time ago.

A drive is then organized on this atoll poor in coconut palms but very rich in pandanus bush, where progress is slow and difficult. No matter how much men search, they find no one. The captain of *Milan* then decides to resort to great means and uses his howitzers to get the inhabitants out of the bush, in vain.

After this violent bombardment, for the sake of a job well done, failing to bring back survivors or suspects, it was decided to set fire to the huts, canoes and rare trees before returning. The mission had lasted ten days, for absolutely no result!

Hidden under coral



One of the reasons for Tematangi's isolation lies in the lack of a pass in its outer reef, which made the island a real prison.

The return to Tahiti was inglorious and, inconsolable, Mrs. Stevens, who had lost her two children in the tragedy, refused to resolve to stop there; the army had done nothing, never mind, it would arm another schooner, the *Julia*, from its own funds, for the very high price at the time of 1,500 piastres, in July 1857. The boat returned to Tematangi, with the mission of putting an end to this strange mystery of a populated atoll when we followed the barrier reef and deserted when we approached it.

Inspired, Ms. Stevens hired 25 people to facilitate the search, under the leadership of Chef Teina, all of the hires being both motivated and paid to be so.

The boat made its way without wasting time and the men disembarked, deciding to organize a beat with two groups which were to meet in the middle of the coral island, each starting from one side. Not a square meter was forgotten, not a tree, not a bush that was not scrutinized, but we had to face the facts, the island was deserted, even if, once again, the huts seemed to have been inhabited a very short time ago.

Teina, during this fight, was left alone in the village, waiting for the return of his two teams. He did not understand either where this population could be hiding; but suddenly his attention was caught by the sound of a small pebble falling. From a small pile of coral blocks, it was not long before a hand appeared, which released other small blocks of madrepores. Teina couldn't believe her eyes: the whole population was there, almost under her feet, hidden in a crevice in the coral substrate of the atoll; convinced that the crew members had left (they no longer heard any noise), the inhabitants had decided to cautiously resurface, without thinking that a man, alone and silent, had remained two steps from their hiding place.

Macabre discoveries

ANTHROPOPHAGES DE L'ILE BLIGHT
(ARCHIPEL DES POMOTU).



D'après une photographie de M. Gilbert CUZENT.

1. *Mapuhia*, père du roi.
2. *Kahieroa*, roi de l'île Blight, 16 ans environ.
3. *Turoa*, mort à l'hôpital de Papeete, deux jours après avoir posé.

4. *Temahaea*, vieillard à cheveux roux, d'origine Taïtienne, mort à l'hôpital de Papeete, quinze jours après son arrivée.
5. *Marake*.

6. *Hohaia*, mère du roi.
7. *Tokahira*.
8. *Tahuroa-Vahine* (femme).
9. *Temahu-Vahine* (femme).

From a photo by Gilbert Cuzent, here are the cannibalistic adults of Tematangi, as they appear in publications where the drama is mentioned, notably the *Polynesian Memorial*.

Teina immediately alerted her troop, which ran to surround the cave and enter it. In the cavity, they found sixteen people, including four children. But they also made much more macabre discoveries: debris of human bones, blond hair that must have belonged to the captain's wife, a child's half withered and hung as a fetish or a trophy on a stick, and skulls with openings cut in the shape of a triangle, skulls whose brains had been extracted to eat.

All the cannibals were of course arrested on the spot, including the women and children, and a number of the grisly trophies were brought back to serve as evidence in court.

La *Julia* anchored in the harbor of Papeete on August 5, 1857, the cannibals, three of whom had died during the journey, were immediately taken to the prison, while a very dense crowd had gathered on the shore to see these people still quite savage to the point of eating other human beings, behavior which scandalized the Tahitians who were very hostile to these backward and cruel Paumotu.

At the time, a photographer was commissioned to take pictures of them, but there was not enough light in the prison and it was agreed to transfer the murderers to the garden of the photographer's house. Obviously, a procession of Tahitians followed this transfer, but the terrible cannibals were actually more pity than fear, especially since they believed that they were taken to the gallows after their brief stay in prison.

Wrecks covered in vermin

A young Tahitian was moved to see three almost naked women among these prisoners and, finding the scene indecent, she went to her home to find three dresses that she offered them. This was the signal that triggered a vast movement of solidarity towards these miserable

beings; the Tahitians scattered around Papeete and returned with cooked *fei* , oranges, coconuts, fish, which put a little balm in the hearts of Paumotu finally reassured. No, they weren't going to be killed or eaten. On the contrary, they were able to eat as much as they wanted, probably more than ever in their lives, to the great satisfaction of the Tahitians, to whom these cannibals had decidedly more pity. It must be said that they were not proud warriors: their hair swarmed with vermin; thin, they were covered with pimples, with dry, scaly and ulcerated skin, not to mention the festering wounds they bore. They were more wrecks themselves than human beings. Without resources in Tematangi, they had the greatest difficulty to survive and according to what their eldest, Temaheva declared, they came from a rich ground, with trees, fruits, animals; their precise origin was a village named by them Afaïti, name uncertain in their memory; they had once been driven out, in the days of their fathers, by others from Hitia'a. That's all they knew about their past.

Faced with this double human drama, that of the seventeen people on board the *Sarah Ann* and that of these few malnourished survivors, the French authorities decided to show clemency and to spare the lives of all the cannibals, who thus escaped hanging. But on the other hand, given the *Sarah Ann* tragedy and the poverty of Tematangi Atoll, it was decided that the prisoners would not be returned there. They therefore remained in Tahiti, their children being entrusted to foster families ...

Comment from Cuzent, the pharmacist of Papeete about the fact that the cannibals escaped the gallows: “ *This is an act of high humanity which honors the Protectorate of France* ”.

Who were these cannibals?

Gilbert Cuzent, the pharmacist from Tahiti, was also a photographer and he took a picture of the nine adults brought back from Tematangi.

He also carefully collected their name: Mapuhia, father of the king; Kahiveroa, the king; Turoa, an adult male who died two days later in hospital; Temaheva, an old man with red hair who

claimed to be from Tahiti (he died a fortnight later in the hospital); Marake, Hohaia, mother of the king; an adult male, Tokahia; two women, Tahuroa Vahine and Temahu Vahine. Of course, the term “king” attributed to the one who was the head of this small community must be put into perspective since he never reigned over a handful of hungry and miserable subjects, on an atoll which barely offered them enough to survive. .

Gilbert Cuzent tells

Gilbert Cuzent, a well-known pharmacist in Papeete in the middle of the 19th century, left a testimony about what the sailors of the *Julia* discovered on Tematangi atoll: “ *Arrived at Tematangi, the natives entered the middle of the pandanus thickets. and, going around the island, they met without finding anything. Meanwhile, Chief Teina, left alone because he had let go in front of the scouts, was getting ready to join his companions, when the sound of a rolling pebble caught his attention; He then saw between the piled up blocks of coral a hand which was working to push them aside to clear the entrance to an underground cavity. The natives of Tematangi heard no more noise, believed in the departure of strangers and were about to come out of their hiding place.*

At Teina's rallying cry, all her companions came running and helped her make her way into the cavity. There were sixteen people, including four children, who were brought aboard the Julia. Debris of human bones, blond hair believed to have belonged to the captain's wife, half of a child dried out in the sun and planted on top of a stick to serve as a fetish, teeth and knuckles were found in the island. The skulls had been cut triangularly to extract the brain. Much of this debris and the blond hair were taken to Tahiti. The Julia anchored in the harbor of Papeete, having only 13 prisoners on board, three having died in the crossing, but bringing the sad certainty of the disaster of the Sarah Ann . ”

Milan turns white



Exiled from Tahiti a few decades before the drama of the “Sarah Ann”, the inhabitants of Tematangi were more castaways themselves than robust Paumotu capable of adapting to their environment.

The first ship sent to Tematangi was the *Milan* whose auxiliary ensign Xavier Caillet will lead the exploration of the atoll. He did not find anyone and on his return drew up a report from which here are some extracts:

“ I had under my command the whaling boat and the major boat armed at war; these two boats, in addition to the ordinary personnel, contained a supplement of twelve Canaques. In order not to frighten the inhabitants of Tematangi, as your orders prescribed, all the men, except three in the whaling boat, and ten in the major boat, were lying with their oars at the bottom of the canoes.

We saw on the left point of the pass, in a place without vegetation, two tents whose white muslin curtains were torn in bands, a little further on, the almost smoking remains of two huts formed by the debris of a boat. . Everything was in a great mess and indicated that a terrible drama must have happened on this tongue of land, soiled and torn European effects lay jumbled on the ground, I even picked up hair that probably belonged to the victims cannibals ”.

“I even made them offer biscuits”

Caillet manages to cross the reef and enter the lagoon with his boats:

“Immediately in the lake, I set off for the canoes and huts that we had seen the day before; this route allowed me to follow the coast 70 m from the shore and at a depth of 5 fathoms of water. Arriving near the huts, according to your orders, Commander, I made the Paumotu of this part shout in Kanak that I wanted to have friendly relations with them, that I had come to ask them for various information. I even offered them a cookie if they wanted to come talk to me. Having obtained no answer, I went ashore, accompanied by Mr. Wichmann and two Canaques armed with sabers and pistols. I recommended to the boss of the whaling boat to stay at length but without fail, arms ready. We first saw a small canoe, or rather an outrigger whale-boat. This canoe made with thick planks, sewn on top of each other, could have about 1m 30 hollow, 5 meters long and at most 60 cm wide. A few steps away in the pandanus, Mr. Wichmann saw a boat of the same shape as the canoe but on a much larger model, it was not yet completed, despite this, its length was 9 meters, its width of 1 meter and its hollow of 1m 50. This canoe was built with ship's planks, part of the hull was well lined in copper and the nailing as well as the work in general announced a practiced hand, it was not the work of 'a Canaque paumotu. There too we found pieces of muslin shirt, but unbranded, barrels, tin cans, and plenty of caret wire. sewn on top of each other, could have about 1m 30 hollow, 5 meters long and at most 60 cm wide. A few steps away in the pandanus, Mr. Wichmann saw a boat of the same shape as the canoe but on a much larger model, it was not yet completed, despite this, its length was 9 meters, its width of 1 meter and its hollow of 1m 50. This canoe was built with ship's planks, part of the hull was well lined in copper and the nailing as well as the work in general announced a practiced hand, it was not the work of 'a Canaque paumotu. There too we found pieces of muslin shirt, but unbranded, barrels, tin cans, and plenty of caret wire. sewn on top of each other, could have about 1m 30 hollow, 5 meters long and at most 60 cm wide. A few steps away in the pandanus, Mr. Wichmann saw a boat of the same shape as the canoe but on a much larger model, it was not yet completed, despite this, its length was 9 meters, its width of 1 meter and its hollow of 1m 50. This canoe was built with ship's planks, part of the hull was well lined in copper and the nailing as well as the work in general announced a practiced hand, it was not the work of 'a Canaque paumotu. There too we found pieces of muslin shirt, but unbranded, barrels, tin cans, and plenty of caret wire. 5 meters long and at most 60 cm wide. A few steps away in the pandanus, Mr. Wichmann saw a boat of the same shape as the canoe but

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I wanted to continue my research, but the day was fading and the rallying flag called us back on board, we re-embarked without burning anything to try to gain the confidence of the inhabitants who were probably following our movements at a short distance ”.

Burnt huts and canoes

After three days of unsuccessful searches, there is no lack of proof of the passage of the castaways: “At daybreak I went ashore. Mr. Wichmann, who had also taken this expedition to heart, pointed out to me the footprints on the shore. The Paumotus had watched us during the night. The hut from the day before had disappeared. I took every possible precaution so as not

to be surprised during our work of destruction. Worried birds showed us that we were being watched closely by the locals. I had the same summons issued as the day before, and no answer having been given, I had the large tent destroyed and burned, three canoes, the mistletoe, several fishing nets, a sailor's chest, several barrels, torn effects of women and children, a box made from pieces of boats. I had plaited hair, a box of cords put in the whalebone, a young man's shoe, a child's stocking, a table knife, carpenter's tools, a sailor's chest and another's lock, a compass bowl, a double-barreled shotgun, etc. Mr. Wichmann discovered sheets of German maritime code, a Canaque brought me a spool of white thread". Caillet, despite his relentlessness, found no trace of life and burned a dozen more *fare* and canoes before returning to the *Milan* , while having left a written warning to the inhabitants of Tematangi, a one-page document; it remains to be seen whether they were able to read and understand it, since it threatened, among other things, to send a French warship in the event of a new attack on a boat.

Caillet concludes his report by being naive enough to believe that the Paumotu of the atoll had certainly massacred the adults who were shipwrecked aboard the *Sarah Ann*, but he thought that the children had been adopted: “ *one day at last, the captain and his family will have been surprised and probably massacred with the exception of the children the Paumotus have adopted* ”. Alas, the children were also killed and devoured ...

Tematangi today



Located at 21 ° South and 140 ° West, Tematangi Atoll is attached to the municipality of Tureia. The small island measures 7.7 km² of land surface and is home to about sixty people gathered in the small village of Tuihana.

The Tematangi atoll was discovered on July 11, 1767 by Philippe Carteret (who named it “Island of the Bishop of Osnabrück”); the famous Captain Bligh visited it on April 5, 1792, on his return to Tahiti after the Bounty mutiny in 1789 (he too gave it a name: “Bligh's Lagoon Island”).

The atoll does not have an aerodrome or pass allowing freighters to enter the lagoon. It is located 121 km west of Moruroa and 985 km from Tahiti.

Triangular in shape, the atoll measures 11.5 km in its greatest length and 7 km in width. The basalt of the volcano at the origin of Tematangi is now 625 m deep (volcano formed about 45 million years ago).

Particularity of Tematangi, a few nautical miles away, it is located at the antipodes of the Ka'aba, the sacred stone of Mecca ...


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