EDITORS FORUM

NEW LIGHT AND FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE GROUNDING OF THE CARAVEL *SAN LESMES*

by Robert Langdon

In 1975 when I published my book *The Lost Caravel* (Pacific Publications, Sydney), I had no specific details on one question of great interest to me personally, although it did not seem of much importance in the context of the book itself. The question was: how, precisely, were the two ancient iron cannons, which form the basis of the theory advanced in the book, recovered from the reef at Amanu Atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago? The two cannons have been on display at the entrance to the Musée, de la Découverte at Point Venus, Tahiti, since their recovery in early 1969. It was there that I first saw them, measured them and photographed them in July of that year. Later, a specialist in old ordnance informed me that they were of a type that went out of use in Europe about 1550.

During the last two or three years, inscribed plaques have been placed on the mounts of each cannon stating in both French and English that the cannons were "lost on the reef of Amanu in 1526 by J. S. Elcano, pilot of Magellan and first circumnavigator of the globe." The inscriptions are not entirely accurate; or, at least, they are accurate only in a figurative sense. Elcano was not the captain of the ship from which the cannons were lost, nor the commander of the expedition to which the ship belonged--only its second-in-command. But he was, undoubtedly, the key figure in the expedition, and he did have the honor of being the first man to sail round the world. So in these days when Tahiti relies for much of its revenue on tourist dollars, there is, perhaps, a justifiable excuse for stressing the cannons' link with such a celebrated personage as Elcano.

The facts of history are these. Elcano, a Basque, was the man who brought Magellan's ship *Victoria* home to Spain in 1522 after Magellan himself had been killed in the Philippines. On board the *Victoria* was a cargo of spices that Elcano had acquired in the East Indies. The value of the cargo was so great that it inspired the Spanish monarch to send out a new expedition for further cargoes, and Elcano was invited to play a prominent role in it. However, because the king apparently feared that Elcano might take unscrupulous advantage of him if placed in command, the expedition's top post was given to a landsman, Garcia Jofre de Loaisa.

The Loaisa expedition consisted of seven ships. Of these, four passed into the Pacific from the Strait of Magellan on 26 May 1526 bound for the East Indies. Six days later, they were separated in a storm and one

ship, the caravel *San Lesmes,* was never seen again by European eyes. At the time, the caravel probably had from fifty to seventy men on board. Many of them were almost certainly Basques--like Elcano, who had recruited them.

In 1929, just over four centuries after the caravel was last seen, François Hervé, the French administrator of the Tuamotu Archipelago, found four ancient iron cannons, heavily encrusted in coral, on the eastern reef of Amanu Atoll, some 500 miles east of Tahiti. One of the cannons was recovered at the time, taken to Tahiti and presented to the local museum. But some time later--probably during the turmoil of World War II--it disappeared without anyone having given much thought to what its provenance might have been. The two cannons now at Point Venus were recovered after I came across several brief reports on Hervé's discoveries and wrote about them in the *Pacific Islands Monthly* for January 1968 in an article entitled "Were Europeans living in the Eastern Pacific in the 16th century?" Details of some of the events leading up to the recovery of those cannons were sent to me in May 1970 by Captain Hervé Le Goaziou, a French naval officer who was stationed at Hao Atoll, Amanu's nearest neighbor, when the recovery operation took place. These details were published in *The Lost Caravel* (p. 19). However, all I then knew about the recovery operation itself was that the cannon had been "easily" retrieved by a friend of Le Goaziou, Captain (Claude) Maureau.

The gaps in my knowledge have since been filled in by Maureau himself, now a senior executive with a French aeronautical company. Having heard from Le Goaziou that I was interested in the cannons he took the trouble to seek me out during a recent visit to Canberra, and he told me of his role in the Amanu affair. He also gave me the photographs of the recovery operation reproduced on these pages. Two of the photographs, as is explained below, seem to me to constitute important new evidence in relation to the prehistory of Polynesia.

Maureau said that in 1968-69 he was the commander and senior flying officer of the French aero-naval base at Hao. He became interested in the possibility of making some interesting archaeological discoveries at Amanu when Le Goaziou showed him my article in the *Pacific Islands Monthly* referring to Hervé's discoveries in 1929. As there were several helicopters at the base, Maureau undertook to use one to make a systematic reconnaissance of Amanu's eastern reef in search of the three cannons that Hervé was presumed to have left there. The reconnaissance resulted in the sighting of two cannons near the atoll's northern tip. They were lying in shallow water about fifteen meters from the outer edge of the reef. But there was no sign of the third cannon, and what became of it after Hervé discovered it is still a mystery.

About three weeks after the two cannons were located, Maureau led a small salvage team to the site. It was low tide at the time, the water being about shin-deep, whereas it would have been about waist-deep at high tide. Three helicopters were used in the operation. One landed the salvage team on the reef; the others hovered overhead while the men broke the cannons from the coral with a hammer and placed rope nets under them so that they could be hauled aloft--one to each helicopter. The third helicopter then came down and plucked the men from the reef; and the men and their booty were whisked back to Hao after a mission lasting no more than ten minutes. Later, a team of divers plunged to a depth of about twenty meters along the outer edge of Amanu's reef in search of other, related wreckage. A search was also made of nearby *motu.* The searchers, however, found nothing.

The recovery of the two cannons, the dating of them to the early sixteenth century, and the nondiscovery at Amanu of any other relics of the same era provided me with the starting point for the theory advanced in *The Lost Caravel.* This is that the crew of the ship that left the four cannons seen by Hervé on the Amanu reef played a significant, but previously unsuspected role in Polynesian prehistory. It was argued that the cannons had undoubtedly belonged to the Spanish caravel *San Lesmes* as no other ship was known or was likely to have been lost in the eastern Pacific before such cannons went out of use in Europe about 1550. Also, as nothing other than the cannons themselves and a few stones--probably primitive cannonballs--had been found on the reef, this indicated that the *San Lesmes* had not been wrecked there. On the contrary, it suggested that the caravel had merely run aground, presumably in darkness; and that the crew had succeeded in extricating their ship from the reef by pushing their four heavy cannons overboard. There was thus an important problem to be elucidated: what had become of the caravel herself and the fifty to seventy men of her crew?

Using evidence of various kinds, I deduced that, from the scene of their mishap, the Spaniards had made their way to Hao Atoll, probably to see if their hull needed repairs; then to Ana‘a Atoll, some 250 miles westward, where some of the men left the ship; and, finally, to Ra‘iatea, in the Society Group. There, apparently because their ship had become unseaworthy, they established a base and set to work to build another in which to continue their voyage to the East Indies. Meanwhile, they took wives from among the local Polynesian population and began raising families of part-Polynesian children. When, after a long delay, their new ship was ready for sea, the men decided that there was no longer any point in proceeding to the East Indies as their companion vessels would long since have left to return to Spain. Many of the Spaniards therefore agreed to set

out for Spain themselves by what seemed the most practicable route. This was to sail southwestward to the latitude of the Cape of Good Hope, proceed along it until the Cape itself was reached, and then turn northward into the Atlantic. However, some of the men were apparently opposed to this idea, and when the new ship set sail, they remained behind on Ra'iatea.

The men who decided to stay put on Ra'iatea established chiefly Hispano-Polynesian dynasties whose influence eventually spread throughout the Society Islands and lasted down to Captain Cook's time. The same happened in the case of the men who had left the *San Lesmes* at Ana'a--their influence became widely spread in the Tuamotu Archipelago. Meanwhile, some people on Ra'iatea of Spanish or part-Spanish origin somehow reached Raivavae, in the Austral Group, whence Spanish genes and some notions of European culture were eventually carried to Easter Island. As for the Spaniards who set out with their Polynesian wives and part-Spanish families to try to return to Spain, they travelled only as far as New Zealand. There, for some reason, they abandoned their voyage and settled at Kawhia on the west coast of the North Island. Their arrival and subsequent activities, I suggested, were amply attested in the numerous traditions and genealogies relating to the Maori 'canoe' *Tainui.* In short, *The Lost Caravel* argued that the arrival of the *San Lesmes* in Tuamotuan waters had had far-reaching consequences in Polynesian prehistory: that her crew had left their mark, both genetically and culturally, on a number of Polynesian islands extending from Easter Island in the east to New Zealand in the west. *The Lost Caravel* also included a chapter on other Spanish ships that were lost in other parts of the Pacific in the sixteenth century, and it brought forward some evidence to suggest that those ships had left castaways on other islands with consequences similar to those postulated in the case of the *San Lesmes.*

I believe that the thesis advanced in *The Lost Caravel* can scarcely be said to be inherently improbable. The ships that I wrote of were real ships, manned in their time by real men; and given the tenacity with which human beings cling to life, it is highly unlikely, *a priori,* that all of their crews could have been swallowed up by the sea, leaving no trace. Yet, except in the case of Hawai'i, no writer before me had ever given any serious thought to the idea that sixteenth century Spanish castaways could have played any part whatever in Polynesian prehistory. So it was inevitable that, regardless of the evidence advanced to support it, my thesis would raise the hackles of anyone who was especially wedded to the notion that the pre-Cook inhabitants of Polynesia were simply Polynesians, uncontaminated for centuries by genes or ideas from the outside world.

The first inkling I had of the wrath or displeasure my book would cause in some quarters came fifteen months before it was published, and long before I had even finished writing it. In March 1974, a well-known Honolulu man published a scathing attack on the book in the local press, based on what he had read of it in a publisher's prepublication blurb. My thesis was "so ludicrous," he said, that it would not be worthy of rebuttal were it not that "bizarre theories" seemed to have a way of winning speedy acceptance. The first postpublication review of the book was quite different. Its author, Olaf Ruhen, a well-known South Seas writer, said among other things:

> I was convinced while this book was only a rumour that it could not have respectable standing. That conviction I now retract, absolutely and ashamedly. I accept many of its arguments, though not all, against my former belief.

A fortnight later, Peter Corris, who had taken a Ph.D. degree in Pacific History at the Australian National University, claimed in *The Australian* that *The Lost Caravel* had an appeal like Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods:*

> A startling proposition is advanced, and, a wealth of apparently convincing but ultimately questionable evidence is advanced to support it . . . Langdon shares with Von Daniken a curious unwillingness to credit ancient and preliterate societies with their apparent cultural achievements . . .

The reviews by Ruhen and Corris were followed by nearly three dozen others. As time went on, I found that their authors could be grouped into three clearly defined categories. There were those who accepted all, many, or some of my theories. There were those who praised the book but refrained from committing themselves on the merits of its theories. And there were those who vehemently opposed virtually everything I said, claiming that I was obsessed with Spaniards, or that I was a racist who refused to give the Polynesians their proper due, or that my theories were simply too fantastic, or that I attributed far too much to small bodies of castaways. Among the reviewers in the first category were some, such as Oscar Spate and Hugh Laracy, who thought that the evidence I had marshalled to support my case was not uniformly strong, but that all was worthy of serious consideration. Spate, for example, wrote:

> There can be no question of simply writing the book off as too farfetched. Langdon amasses an enormous amount of evidence from diverse fields: accounts of voyages, genetics and linguistics, boat types and Oceanic myths. He has done his homework meticulously.

Laracy, for his part, said that my book was an attempt to account for "an accumulation of anomalies for which there does not appear to be an alternative explanation . . . It is now up to other scholars to disprove Langdon's conclusions if they do not like them."

Since the brouhaha over *The Lost Caravel* died down, several books have appeared on the prehistory of Polynesia whose authors might reasonably have been expected to take up the main problem discussed in my book, namely the archaeologically-attested arrival in Tuamotuan waters of a shipload of sixteenth century Spaniards. The books are: Peter Bellwood's *The Polynesians* (London, 1978); his much more ambitious, *Man's Conquest of the Pacific* (Auckland, 1978); M. P. K. Sorrenson's *Maori Origins and Migrations* (Auckland, 1979); and a volume edited by Jesse D. Jennings, *The Prehistory of Polynesia* (Canberra, 1980), with contributions by a dozen or so different authors. Of these books, only *The Polynesians* so much as mentions the problem of the *San Lesmes* and then only to dismiss it with the statement (p. 26) that my theory on the wide-ranging influence of her crew is "intriguing but insupportable."

Of course, Bellwood, Sorrenson, Jennings *et al.* are free to think whatever they like about the prehistory of Polynesia. But I doubt whether everyone would agree that they have adequately dealt with the Spanish problem by summarily dismissing it, ignoring it, or pretending it does not exist. The fifty to seventy Spaniards who manned the *San Lesmes* were not figments of my imagination. They were real-life sailors capable of pushing several cannons overboard weighing up to 1,300 pounds each. Those sailors were, indeed, among the hardiest and most skilful seamen of their time, having already battled more than half-way round the world when they reached Tuamotuan waters. Moreover, as the photographs now available clearly show, the spot where their caravel ran aground was by no means a forbidding one, especially when it is borne in mind that, at the time, it would have been mid-winter, the calmest and pleasantest time of the year . . .

Therefore, if Polynesia's prehistorians wish to retain their credibility, they must face up to the question of what became of the *San Lesmes* and her crew. It is not sufficient to wish, as Bellwood did in a review, that the Polynesians can somehow be "rescued from the ignominious fate of becoming cultural orphans of 16th century Spain." Nor is it sufficient to claim, without giving any reasons, that there is "every reason to believe" that the caravel's entire crew was eaten by Tuamotuan cannibals--a claim made by Bengt Danielsson in a recent book. *(Le Mémorial Polynésien, 1521-1833,* edited by Philippe Mazellier, Pape'ete: Hibiscus Editions, 1978) Wishes or unsubstantiated assertions are not enough. If the prehistorians can now demonstrate or produce plausible evidence to suggest

that all members of the *San Lesmes*' crew either died or were killed before doing any of the things that I have attributed to them, then we can all revert to the long-held notion that the inhabitants of eastern Polynesia lived in a sort of genetic and cultural vacuum until the arrival of Europeans just over two centuries ago. If, on the other hand, no such evidence is forthcoming, then--like it or not--those interested in Polynesian prehistory will have to come to terms with the kind of scenario that I have envisaged.

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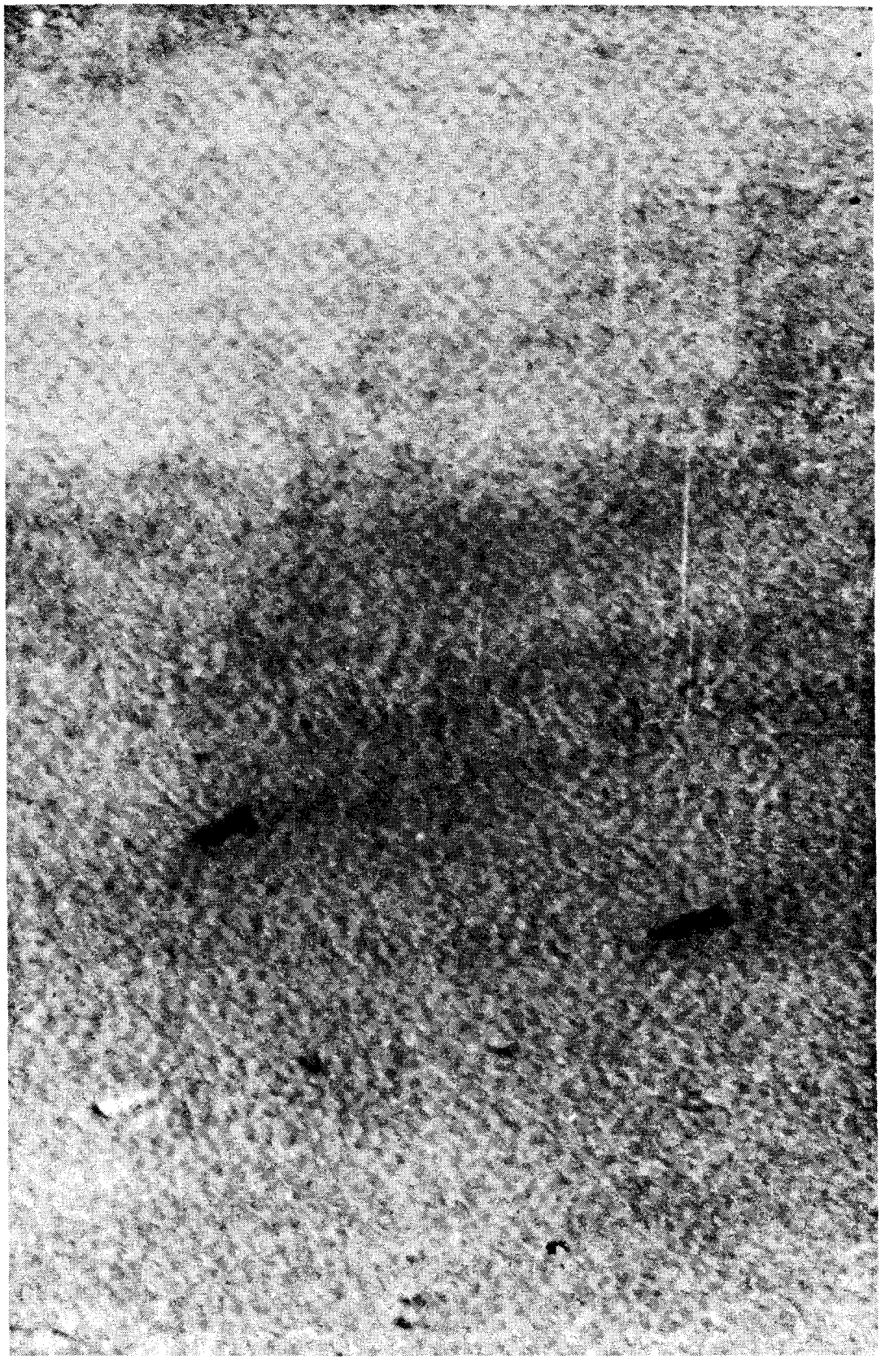

Fig. 1. An aerial view of the two cannons just before their recovery.

Fig. 2. Members of the salvage team try to move one of the cannons after Captain Maureau (with hammer) had freed it from the coral. The coral heads in the background indicate the shallowness of the northern part of the Amanu's lagoon.

Fig. 3. A rope net is placed under one of the cannons so that a helicopter may hoist it aloft. The line of surf marks the outer edge of the reef.

Fig. 4. One of the three helicopters flies off from Amanu at the end of its mission.