

The Silent Cannon of Takapoto

Leendert Roggeveen
The Netherlands

In *RNJ* 8:79-80 I related Gerard Boon's story about the cannon found on the island Takapoto in the Tuamotus which could conceivably be cannon from the *Africaensche Galeij*.

The *Africaensche Galeij* was the smallest of the three ships with which Jacob Roggeveen set out on his voyage in search of the unknown Southland. After the discovery of Easter Island¹ on Easter Sunday April 5, 1722 he sailed on westwards and on May 19 the *Galeij* struck a reef to the east of Takapoto atoll where it sank.

Under the above title Dutch vicar the Rev. W.A. Poort of Hilvarenbeek in The Netherlands published an article in the *Zeeuws Tijdschrift* (1991-2). Poort is a retired minister cum anthropologist, well travelled in French Polynesia. During one of his peregrinations in the area he picked up the story about old corroded cannon found on Takapoto. His source, a Zealander living in Papeete, tells him about it and relates the shipwreck of the *Africaensche Galeij* in 1722. "On the beach one cannon lays half buried in the sand, totally corroded but intact, and another one farther down in the coral part. People say that the ship must lie here at a depth of some 100 meters, in shark infested water. It is supposed to have come from Easter Island"

Poort tells us about Jacques Moerenhout, a Belgian veteran from the Napoleonic wars, who became secretary to the Dutch consul in Chile in 1826 and who later settled in the Tuamotus to be involved in pearl diving and trade. Moerenhout visited Takaroa and the neighboring island of Takapoto. On the latter, people tell him about two cannon left from a ship that was wrecked off the east coast very long ago. "Moerenhout remembers that it was 'Hardy Byron, alias Foulweather Jack' who visited these islands in 1765, who named them 'King George Islands' and who found a piece of a sloop's rudder with the name of Roggeveen's ship on it." The last piece of information is hardly probable, says Poort.

This story was already known to Georg Forster, botanist during Cook's second voyage to the Pacific. Subsequently James Morrison, boatswain's mate on Bligh's *Bounty*, tells us that "...from this island [Takapoto] the first pieces of iron, without any doubt originating from this shipwreck, were brought to Tahiti. Indigenous people still alive say to remember this shipwreck of which they can have no other description than from people from Tapuhoe [the most important of the north-eastern group of islands, i.e. Takapoto]. I too did see a piece of oak wood on Tetiaroa that certainly came from that wreck."

The question is, according to Poort, what Dutch ship are we talking about and what was it doing here?

Roggeveen wasn't the first Dutchman to visit these parts of the Pacific. On April 14, 1616 Schouten and LeMaire arrived at Takaroa, the north-easternmost of the Tuamotus. As Takaroa is only a few miles to the southwest of Takapoto, the inhabitants of Takapoto cannot have remained unaware

of the visit of the tall ships of Schouten and LeMaire that could not anchor here. Whatever they may have left behind, they certainly did not miss any of their cannon when they sailed on.

Poort continues his story with the description of the shipwreck of the *Africaensche Galeij*, closely following the log of Bouman. According to him it is conceivable that the cannon of the *Galeij* may have been set overboard in order to lighten ship. Bouman's log mentions on May 23, 1722 that on returning to the island's shore they sighted the sloop that got turned over two days earlier. It was rudderless. It is well possible that the carved head of a Dutch longboat's rudder that Byron found on Takaora in 1765 came from the *Thienhoven's* sloop. Captain Roosendaal of the *Galeij* reports that he was forced to leave much of what was saved from his ship on the beach, among which were the *Galeij's* sails and other paraphernalia.

Poort writes: "The cannon, the silent cannon of Takapoto, have been seen only a few years ago, not far from the probable resting place of the *Africaensche Galeij*: a dark spot that can clearly be seen in calm weather".²

He expresses his hope that these cannon will get a worthy resting place: "preferably the *Musée de Tahiti et des Iles* on Fishermens's Point rather than Pointe Vénus in Mahina, where the two cannon lay which were taken from the reefs at Atoll Amanu and of which Robert Langdon would like us to believe are from the 'lost caravel' the *San Lesmes*."

What happened to the five deserters? Someone with an aptitude for Polynesian languages assured Poort: "I was struck by the fact that in the Reko Tumu, the language of the Tuamotus, there appear a number of words of obvious Dutch origin, and may have to do with the so-called 'wanton lust' of those left-behind sailors."

This concludes the summary of the Rev. W.A. Poort's article published in 1991. It appears that he approached the *Musée de Tahiti et des Iles* in regard to the cannon found on Takapoto and that he stressed their historical importance. As a result Napoleon Spitz, Mayor of Takapoto, was requested to take measures to safeguard the cannon.

Later, Robert Vercella of the *Groupe de Recherche en Archéologie Navale* (G.R.A.N.) visited the island and did preliminary research in May 1993. I received an unpublished report on his findings from both the Rev. Poort and from Capitaine de Vaisseau Max Guérout, Vice-President of G.R.A.N.

From this report I quote: "The shipwreck must have taken place at the east coast of the atoll, at the extreme northern end of the principal *motu*, which is the district of 'Orapa'. This spot is characterized by a spit of land. In April/May the coast is exposed to wind from the east; in October/November the '*Toherau*' blows from the north and generally the site is calm. The waves break at 60 to 70 meters

from the beach on a level area covered by water 1 meter deep. The beach of coral stones is covering the actual ground approx. 2 meters deeper, but this situation is changing due to the exploitation of the coral."

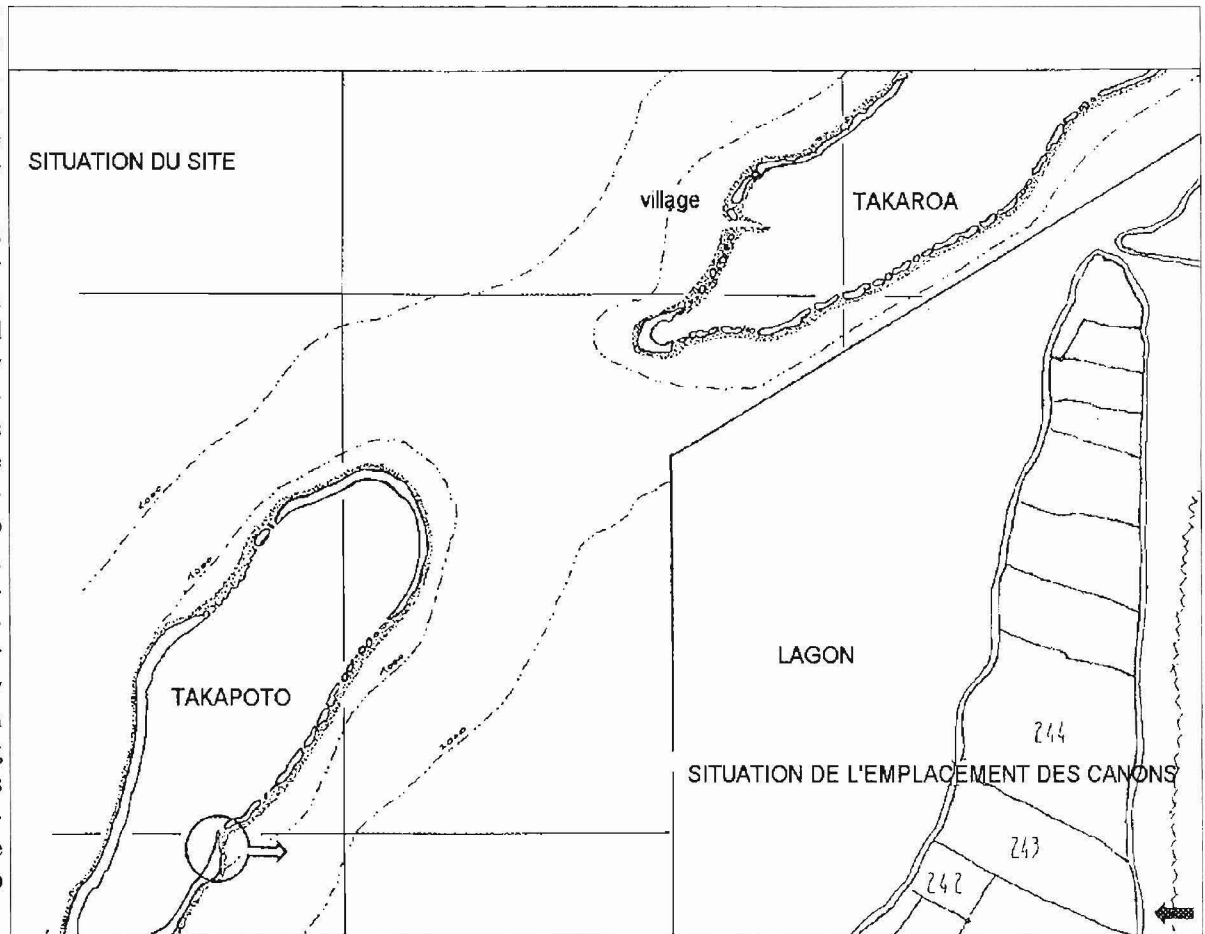
And about the cannon: Until 1990, two cannon, known by all the islanders, were laying on the level plateau directly opposite plot no. 243 (see map) called 'Tikaruga'. At the time the owner of the land decided to get them out to have them at his own place. As a result of the intervention of the Mayor and the gendarmerie the cannon are now deposited in the municipal depot. They are regularly sprinkled with oil.

From this report it is clear that the cannon are in such a bad state that they cannot be positively identified as to belong to the *Africaensche Galei*. According to Captain Guérout, in October 1994 his French research group for naval archeology will make an attempt at finding metal artefacts that could possibly link the cannon to a ship of Dutch origin.

'Bounty'. Paris, 1966.

Mulert, F.E. Baron - Scheepsjournaal, gehouden op het schip Thienhoven tijdens de ontdekkingsreis van mr. Jacob Roggeveen, 1721-1722 (In *Mededeelingen Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen*, Middelburg, 1911).

Rowe, Newton A. - *Voyage to the amorous islands. The discovery of Tahiti*. London, 1955.



References cited by W.A. Poort:

- Beslu, Christian - Mururoa 1767-1964. *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Océaniques* No. 232, tome IXI. Papeete, 1985.
- Bree, L.W. - *Jacob Roggeveen en zijn reis naar het Zuidland 1721-1722*. Amsterdam, 1942.
- Buck, Peter H. - *Explorers of the Pacific*. Honolulu, 1953.
- Byron, John - *Voyage autour du monde*, 1764.
- Chazine, Jean-Michel - *Prospections archéologiques à Takapoto*, in *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, tome 33, Paris 1977.
- Cook, James - *Reize rondom de waereld*. Leyden, Amsterdam, 's Haage 1795 (deel 1)
- Driessen, H.A.H. - *Personnages nimbés de gloire et pirogues sans balancier*. *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Océaniques*, No. 226, Papeete, 1984.
- Engelbrecht, W.A. - en van Leeuwen, Dr. P.J. - *De ontdekkingsreis van Jacob LeMaire en Willem Cornelisz Schouten in de jaren 1615 -1 1617*. 's Gravenhage, 1945.
- Moerenhout, J.A. - *Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan*, 1837.
- Morrison, James - *Le Journal de - second maître à bord de la*

- 1 For obvious reasons I reject Steven Fischer's suggestion to do away with the Roggeveen legacy of naming the island "Paaseiland", "Isla de Pascua" and all the other translations (RNJ 7:73). If we were to follow his reasoning it would necessarily change a lot of world topography, including New Zealand, also a Dutch legacy.
- 2 It would appear from these texts that Poort is Gerald Boon's source, although he fails to acknowledge it.

