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# A 19TH CENTURY EXCAVATION OF A BURIAL MOUND ON PENRHYN (TONGAREVA), COOK ISLANDS

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## Introduction

One of the more illustrious characters roaming the Pacific in the 1860s and 1870s was Handley Bathurst Sterndale, born 1829 as second (?) son of a British indigo planter in India. He seems to have lived a travelling life in Central America and the Pacific. Sterndale is on record as having lived for several months on Suwarrow in 1867/68 and to have been shipwrecked with the even more illustrious William Henry "Bully" Hayes on Manihiki. In 1869 and 1870 Sterndale seems to have spent some time on Penrhyn, involved in a pearl fishing venture. Later, he persuaded the Auckland trading firm Henderson & Macfarlane to let him set up a trading station on Suwarrow—a venture that eventually failed due to disagreements. Sterndale left for San Francisco, where he died Christmas day 1878 (Spennemann and Downing 1999; in press).

Interested in 'cyclopean ruins,' Sterndale not only published a semi-scholarly treatise on the topic in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* (Spennemann & Downing 1998), but also seems to have engaged in some amateur archaeology. This is the focus of this brief paper.

## The Report

During his time of residence in the South Pacific Handley B. Sterndale seems to have kept a diary of sorts. A total of seventeen notebooks are reported (Sterndale 1890), the current whereabouts of which are unknown (cf. Langdon 1969). His brother Robert Armitage Sterndale could draw on these notebooks in the 1890s and published several of Handley Bathurst's observations in the *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* (Sterndale 1890; 1891). The description of Samoan ruins attracted wider interest and subsequently found republication

under Handley Bathurst's name in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Sterndale 1892).

One of the paper published by Robert A. Sterndale contains the following description of an excavation of a burial mound on Penrhyn (Tongareva):

“Here is an account of a tumulus (one of three, and all alike) which I lately opened at *Fararanga* (Penrhyn's Island). Within a large conical mound of gravel overgrown with grass and appearing very ancient, was a stone cist, formed of four great smooth slabs of hard coral, perfectly square and about a foot thick, with a similar large overlying slab for a cover. Within the cist was a layer of fine white pebbles containing the skull and bones of a man. Beneath the skull lay a pearl oyster, very large, and hollow like a bowl; beside the bones lay an axe, seemingly of basalt. The cist was placed exactly east and west; the feet of the skeleton westward. In this interment the pearl shell under the head was a peculiar feature; the same has been noticed in the case of skeletons found at Pitcairn's Island. The axe of basalt was remarkable on a coral atoll, but not unaccountable. I have dug up such axes upon several coral motus in this latitude. I imagine them to have been the property of savages who had wandered away from the islands near the equator (in fact, local traditions bear witness to their having done so), where basaltic stones are obtained from the drift wood, attached to the roots of great trees which are carried thither by the equatorial current” (Sterndale 1890, p. 346-347).

### Comments

Coral slab-lined burial chambers are better known from islands in Western Polynesia, such as Tonga (cf. Spennemann 1988: 1992). They are, however, also on record for Borabora in the Society Islands (Emory 1933: 162-163) and the Cooks.

Trotter (1974: 113-116) describes two coral slab lined burial sites on Atiu, Southern Cooks, which he dates at the prehistoric-missionary period interface, but which could well be older with a period of later (or continued) use. He also mentions a burial mound on Atiu, doubling up as a navigational marker (Trotter 1974: 116).

House sites and marae had been mentioned for *Tongareva* by Lamont (1867) and were archaeologically described by Buck (1932) and Bellwood (1978), who conducted surveys of the islets of *Tongareva*. Both Buck (1932: 182-185) and Bellwood (1978: 183) mention slab faced graves at site TON27 on Mongorongaro Islet, placed on a house platform. Here is no mention of a covering or roof slab. It is possible though, that these were removed in the more recent (Christian) past and used as construction material.

Basalt adzes are on record as burial goods in the Southern Cooks, such as on Atiu (Trotter 1974: 102-104). The pearl shell under the head is most probably a pearl shell breast plate, well documented for the northern Cooks (Buck 1927: 362-363).

Sterndale most probably extracted the reference to Pitcairn from Moerenhout. He mentions that the Bounty mutineers settling on Pitcairn had found human remains, among them was a burial with a head placed on a pearl shell not local to the island (Moerenhout 1837, vol. 1: 53-54, quoted after Heyerdahl & Skjølsvold 1965: 4).

## Conclusion

Elsewhere it has been argued that Handley Bathurst Sterndale's published record needs to be read with a great deal of caution, as he mixes up places and events for maximum effect (Spennemann & Downing 1998; in press). For example, he claimed to have been on Pohnpei and Kosrae, which apparently he was not. Yet his treatise on the ruins in the Carolines is—for his time—an excellent scholarly compilation of the published, but dispersed knowledge presented in a broad sweep never attempted before.

The description of the excavation on *Tongareva* reported here, however, was never published during his life time and is derived from notebook material. If authentic, as I believe it to be, then Handley Bathurst Sterndale's work has to be included in the annals of antiquarian research not only of Micronesia (Spennemann and Downing 1998) but also of the Eastern Pacific.

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