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Ship's Surgeon R. Guthrie's Account of a Calling at Rapanui aboard H.M.S. Seringapatam on 6 March 1830

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By 1830 Rapanui had been visited by several exploratory and merchant vessels and by an unknown number of whalers.¹ Of these doubtless scores of visits, only few accounts have survived. The calling at Rapanui on 6 March 1830 of the British forty-six-gun man-of-war H.M.S. Seringapatam under the command of Captain William Waldgrave is exceptional, for two reasons. First, the Seringapatam certainly was the largest vessel that had yet fetched up off Rapanui, an event which would have left an indelible impression on the Rapanui people. Second, there exist three eyewitness accounts of this calling. I have published elsewhere those of Captain Waldegrave (1788-1859) and Midshipman John Orlebar (1810-1891).² However, at the time of publication I was unaware that there lay deposited at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England, the autograph journal of Ship's Surgeon R. Guthrie.³ Guthrie served aboard the Seringapatam for many years under Captain Waldegrave. On 6 March 1830, he also shared the Seringapatam's first Polynesian calling—Rapanui—and penned the very same day a detailed account of what he experienced there. His observations comprise a rare addition to the two other accounts of this historic visit. Guthrie's account has never been published.⁴

My special thanks go to Robert Langdon for having informed me in August 1993 at the Rapa Nui Rendezvous at Laramie, Wyoming, of the existence of Ship's Surgeon Guthrie's journal. Further, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the staff of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich for their kind attention during my research visit there in January 1994 and for their permission to publish the following extract.

I have maintained Guthrie's original orthography, but have edited the punctuation in some cases to facilitate reading.

[Entry for Friday, 5 March 1830:]

"Course N 87° W, Distance 179', Latitude 27° 17' S, Longitude 107° 11' W, Winds ENE, Thermometer 76°, 78°½, 78°. The same pleasant weather continues. Now we begin look out for land, all anxious to get a sight of the natives of these unknown Islands. Employed to day reading Johnson on the Effects of Tropical Climates. Sick List, which had been greater than since the Ship was Commissioned, begins again to be reduced to near the Original number. Easter Island at noon West 120 miles.⁵

"Saturday 6th [March 1830]. Anchored at Easter Island. Winds ESE, East, ENE, Thermometer 78, 79, 78. Hove the Ship too at 2 AM and at Daylight saw the East point of Easter or Davis' Island bearing West,⁶ bore up and made sail to within about five miles of it, when we stood along the South side.⁷ The coast is bold and may be approached near; the island itself is a pleasant variety of Hill and plain—with numerous Volcanic mounts, the sides of which and other parts of the plain are cultivated from appearance, and agreeable to Captain Cook's report, with Sugar Cane, Potatoes (sweet), Banana trees etc. As we Sailed along the East Coast we observed the Statues,⁸ Square buildings⁹ and collections of Stones (the upper One white of the latter) as mentioned by Cook. These latter extend along the whole coast and at a distance have somewhat the appearance of persons sitting with white Caps on their heads.¹⁰ The island is perfectly free from wood, if we except a few stunted Shrubs and the Banana tree. And the high ground is covered with a green Sward which the natives cut for turf, having little else for fuel.

"After rounding the South point¹¹ we saw two Canoes with two people in each, quite naked—and afterwards three more, similarly manned, fishing; but observing us, they pulled in for the shore. Standing into the Bay which Captain Cook points out as the only Anchorage,¹² we observed groups of people congregating on the beach. And what surprised us more were their all being covered with a piece of cloth made fast around the neck and hanging over the back, half way down the thighs.¹³ As we had understood, they were all naked. The cloth was mostly white, but some had stained it with red clay, and was made of the Otaheite cloth plant.¹⁴ The soil seems to consist of this red clay, and many Stain their faces with it.

"About 10 AM¹⁵ we came to an anchor (After making several Short tacks) in thirty-two fathoms water,¹⁶ one mile and a half off Shore;¹⁷ the bank is very steep, as the Ship had 42 fathoms water under her with only 100 fathoms of Cable out, and a little beyond this we had no bottom with 70 fathoms. The Anchor was scarcely down when we Observed the natives Swimming off and by noon we had upwards of 150 men and women on board, and as many along side Swimming and on the Side of the ship which we would not admit on board.¹⁸ The Women were anxious to bestow favors upon us, and their men tried to induce us to comply, both using the most Significant gestures.¹⁹ The men are Copper colored, Athletic, tall and well made. I saw none under five feet eight, and I measured one who was six feet three. 5 feet 10 inches is the medium size.²⁰ In this respect we found them to differ much from Cook's description. The women and a few [of] the men are of a much lighter color. Their bodies are longer and the Pelvis narrower than those of England, or indeed in Civilized Europe; but their limbs, feet, hands, Eyes and teeth are handsome and beautiful. The men have all good teeth also, but I observed many to have one of the upper front teeth deficient.²¹ From the waist downwards, both before and
behind, the women are most tastefully and beautifully tattooed: A line along each lip, and the forehead extending to the ears, close the hairs, has a pretty tattooed border. Many of the old men are extensively marked in the same way on the fore part of the thighs and lower part of the body. The young have little or none, except on the lips, and they are universally black. The Women have all the lobe of the Ear cut, the circumference of the hole being from an inch to an inch and a half. How it is formed originally I am at a loss to account, unless by boring with a piece of bone or hard wood, which they point with a piece of Lava. In this hole they wear pieces of plantain leaf rolled up, which looks very well. The men wear their hair short and their beards long, though I saw a few exceptions to the latter. The Women wear their's long and appear to hold it in great Veneration, for One who went on Shore and Sat next me in the boat, though very Amorous with me, would not allow me to cut a lock off, and it was only by Stealth I procured One. It was about a foot long and black, but had became of a tawney color at the ends. When this, and another One, Saw that we were about to return to the Ship, they dived overboard into the briny deep, and seemed more in their element than when with us. Both sexes that came off were entirely naked, if we except a piece of plantain leaf which the women used as a fig leaf. Many of the men besmear their faces with a red clay, which added to their black tattooed lips and darting eyes, giving them a most ferocious appearance. Their words are uttered with great force and quickness, and their gestures are equally descriptive of impatience. Over their loins they tie a well made bag of Straw matting about a foot Square, in which they bring off Sweet potatoes and Bananas for barter. These fruits, a few times under the boat, eluding the grasp of the crew, and the shore, when a boat was sent after her. She dived several times under the boat, eluding the grasp of the crew, and ultimately managed to pass it to one of her friends so that it was lost. Several lost handkerchiefs and my neckcloth was once nearly lost, as was my hat.

"South side of Easter Island"--An original watercolor by A. Mathews, painted at 11 a.m. on March 6, 1830, on board HMS Seringapatam some six miles south of Rano Kau. (Original in the possession of the Earl and Countess Waldegrave).

Captain Waldegrave did not think them worth the risking a man's life, Who did not know that thieving was a Crime. A woman took the Cap off a Corporal's head who was attending the side, with which she leapt overboard and was making for the shore, when a boat was sent after her. She dived several times under the boat, eluding the grasp of the crew, and ultimately managed to pass it to one of her friends so that it was lost. Several lost handkerchiefs and my neckcloth was once nearly lost, as was my hat.

"When anything was given to the women, they immediately went to the gangway and gave it to one of their friends and came back begging for more; fortunately, they confined themselves to that side of the Ship which was next the Shore and saved us a great deal of trouble. We had a good deal in getting them out of the Ship, which was only effected by main force. But when once away, they never returned. A good looking athletic fellow who got aboard first and who kept aloof from all the others by getting on the top of the
two PM therefore we pulled in Shore and had a better view, when the natives to the number of 7 or 800 came down to the beech [sic], and hollowed and made every effort to get us on Shore; but a hard Squall with heavy rain from SW obliged us to return and we got on board at three, perfectly drenched. About 4 PM, the first and 4th Lieuts., the naturalist and myself made another attempt to Land, by this time the natives had all left the beach and lighted their fires by the side of their huts, but they no sooner saw the boat leave the Ship than they again flocked to the Sea Side, and a great many swam off to us, the greater half women. Only a few of the men had Potatoes and Bananas to Barter. We made a few of the prettiest of the women presents of beads, cloth, and Old clothes, with which they were much pleased. It was at this time our friend who used his authority in our favor as already described left us. One of the Officers got the figure of an Alligator or Lizard made of the same hard wood as the other figures we saw on board: the eyes of all of them are made of Vitrified Lava incircled with bone.

“Landing was very practicable at two places, but such numbers were in the water round the boat so as to prevent the crew using their oars, and if we had got on Shore we might have received such treatment from them as to induce us to use force, and such force could only consist in the use of firearms or swords by which many lives might have been lost. They all appeared frantic with joy at the idea of our landing, and shewed themselves much disappointed when they saw us pull towards the Ship. We got on board at Sunset, hoisted in the boats, weighed the Anchor, and made Sail.

Footnotes

1See Hoorebeek (1979:79-99) and McCall (1990:165-225).
2Fischer 1993, which includes the details of the voyage of the Seringapatam.
3Footnotes internal to the text have been moved to the end.}

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thing for iron or for clothes...."

31Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "As barter failed - not having any thing else to offer they had recourse to stealing. Every thing they saw was invaluable, the island not producing metal or timber.

32Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "A cap was snatched from the head of the corporal on the gangway, the thief jumped overboard and managed to throw it from one to another till as a last resort it was thrown to a woman who, upon being persuaded [sic], let it sink."

33Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75): "... the corporal of marines lost his cap off his head, and the thief was only discovered, by the splash of water he made, as he dashed overboard, and he eluded all our endeavours to catch him, by dexterously diving, when our boat came up to him, and among the multitudes around we found it impossible to discern the thief."

34Guthrie would have had access to the 18th-century Tahitian word lists, particularly those of the three Cook voyages. Tahitian mate is listed as 'killed, dead' and 'murdered, killed' in the 1773-1774 Forster/Anderson word list of Admiralty 55/108 (Public Record Office), pp. 271-98. In Old Rapanui, mate meant 'die'; its metaphorical extensions included 'faint, fall unconscious, have a strong longing for, be overcome with pain (physically and/or mentally).' In other words, their Rapanui guest was telling them, to use the terminology of 1830, 'I am mortified.'

35Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "About three o'clock we compelled the natives to leave the ship. We rowed towards the beach, where were assembled near three hundred persons." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "Captain Waldegrave made two attempts to land, but could not succeed from the heavy surf running on the rocky beach...."

36Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "About five o'clock another party attempted to land but were prevented by the very high surf as the boat approached the shore.

37The lighting of the fires suggests that this occurred about three in the afternoon when the daily 'umu 'earth oven' was lit; it had to cook for some two hours before opening. See Métraux 1940:162 and Pollock 1993:154.

38Doubtless this was a mo'ai tangata moko 'stylized lizard-man carving' made of Sophora toromiro, with obsidian pupils surrounded by bone. This is a particularly rare description of the acquisition of such an artefact. See Métraux (1940:264-6); Seaver 1993:196 and fig. 113; Forment 1993:208 and fig. 125; and Arredondo 1993:219.

39Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "The huts were long low arches resembling a waggon tilt a door at one end."

40Perhaps the Rapanui were only demonstrating for the Britons that these were virtuals, since all starvy foods were normally cooked before consumption in order to lessen their acridity (Pollock 1993:154).

41This is the ancient Rapanui pora 'float' of bulrush mats, used by both men and women for swimming and surf-riding; see Métraux 1940:208.

42Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "They ate pudding and meat, but refused grog, bread and biscuit."

43Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "We saw no trees, no animals or poultry."

44Here Guthrie is using his native Scots English "no" for Standard English "not".

45This is no wonder, since the Rapanui, who were used to seeing mainly small whalers, were now afloat the largest vessel that hitherto had called at the island, the forty-six-gun man-of-war H.M.S. Seringapatam.

46Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "Of children they appeared very fond. A woman would select a boy of fair complexion, sit by him, coax him in the most endearing manner, making presents of whatever they possessed."

47Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "A little boy of seven years old was eagerly caught and in the way to be carried on shore when stopped."

References


