

Where Were the Bones?

by Thomas F. King, Ph.D., SOPA

Although TIGHAR's Executive Director Ric Gillespie attributes the differences between Emily's and Gallagher's descriptions of where the bones were found to a misimpression Emily may have had at the time (see "The Bones from the Plane," page 34), that is certainly not the only possible interpretation.

TIGHAR's Senior Archaeologist Dr. Tom King offers another view of what may have happened.

There are two major discrepancies between the 1940-41 correspondence surrounding the discovery of human remains on Nikumaroro, and the 1999 testimony of Emily Sikuli.

1. In the 1940-41 correspondence, on two separate occasions Gerald Gallagher says the discovery site was on the southeast end of the island. Mrs. Sikuli describes bones found on the northwest end.
2. Gallagher makes no mention of an airplane wreck; Mrs. Sikuli does.

There are three major ways I can think of to account for these discrepancies:

1. Gallagher was keeping things from his superiors, and deliberately misleading them as to the location of the discovery. Related possibilities include some sort of dyslexic confusion of northwest with southeast, and a collective effort by Gallagher and his colleagues to avoid recording the wreck or expunge references to it from the record.
2. Mrs. Sikuli is misremembering, or deliberately seeking to mislead.
3. The two accounts refer to two separate bones discoveries.

Let's look at each of these possibilities in turn:

Gallagher Isn't Telling the Truth.

It is difficult to imagine what motive Gallagher would have for keeping information about the discovery from his superiors, and if he did want to keep information from them, why keep only some of it? Why report the bones and cook up a fairy story about where they were found? Why not simply let the dead lie, and report nothing? Besides, the correspondence surrounding the bones and their transport to Fiji is so rich in detail, and so internally consistent, that it would have taken a considerable effort to construct it artificially, or to take it apart, remove pieces, and put it

back together in the seamless form we now find it to have. As for dyslexia, we have no evidence that Gallagher suffered from such a syndrome, which would, one would think, have been hard to miss in someone who traveled a good deal over the ocean and supervised the subdivision of land. The only piece of evidence suggesting that something might have been going on concerning the bones that is not represented in the documents is a reference by Isaac, the medical officer in Tarawa, to a "guillotine conversation" with Gallagher (see "The Tarawa File," *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol.

13, Nos. 1&2, page 30). At the time, Isaac had confiscated the bones and quarantined the Tarawa harbor; he was coming under a good deal of pressure from his superiors to change his stance, and one can imagine some reference to a guillotine in a conversation among the parties involved (“You are putting your head under the guillotine, Isaac.”). But how could Isaac and Gallagher have conversed, unless there was some means of communication other than the key-operated wireless, which

according to all accounts was the only radio link between Tarawa and Nikumaroro? We don’t know, but this small mystery would be a lot to build a whole conspiracy theory upon.

In short, based on current evidence there is no reasonable basis for thinking that the 1940–41 documents contain anything other than the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as understood at the time by the parties involved.

Mrs. Sikuli is Mis-remembering or Lying

Misremembering is certainly plausible. We all misremember from time to time, and it is particularly easy to misremember things that we don’t talk about often. Mrs. Sikuli says that she has not talked about the bones or the airplane with Mrs. O’Brian in all the years they have lived in Fiji, and it was apparent that she had not discussed them with Mr. Tofiga. Her daughter says that the bones/wreck story was not among those she recounted to her children when remembering Nikumaroro. But she is so positive in her assertions, and provides so much detail (found near the wreck by fishermen, turned over to Koata; the area restricted by Koata; the bones turned over to Gallagher; put in the box, etc.) that one has to conclude there is something real upon which her memory is based. As for a deliberate effort to mislead: Mrs. Sikuli has no known motive for doing so, and there was nothing in her

manner that suggested to any of us that she was being anything but entirely forthright in recounting her recollections. This is not proof, of course, but we have no reason to suspect the accuracy of her account – as an account of events as she remembers them.

Another reason for believing Mrs. Sikuli is the independent testimony, eight years earlier, by Bauro Tikana, Gallagher’s clerk. Mr. Tikana said he had been told by the laborers on the island about the discovery of bones near the wreck of the *Norwich City*.

In summary: it is certainly possible, even likely, that Mrs. Sikuli’s recollections aren’t entirely clear and accurate reflections of what really happened in 1940, but there is good reason to think that she is reliable in reporting the discovery of bones somewhere near the *Norwich City*.

The Stories are About Different Bones

In addition to the bones near the *Norwich City*, Mr. Tikana reported bones found on the southeast end of the island. Similarly, Rev. Aberaam Abera, who said he was born on Nikumaroro in 1940, reported that “the older people told a story about finding bones of white people – two white people – on Gardner,” going on to say that “some people said those bones were from people who had

been on the wrecked ship.” In the same set of interviews, Dr. Teinamati Mereki reported the discovery of skeletons of “white people wearing shoes,” and identified the discovery site as the lee ocean side of the island toward its southeast end. Thus there is reason to believe that there were two sets of bones found on the island – one near the *Norwich City*, the other somewhere on the southeast end.

But Mrs. Sikuli identified the Nutiran bones as those that were put into the kanawa wood box and given to Gallagher. How do we account for this, if the Nutiran bones are not the ones referred to in the 1940–41 documents?

“Memory,” says ethnohistorian Jan Vansina, “reorganizes the data it contains,” going on to note that “in the reordering of topics accounts from a later period are placed with those of earlier times and vice versa.” Vansina’s focus is on long-developing oral tradition—though he alludes to one case in which “a major personage in Lugbara creation (traditions) is a British District Officer from the tern of the century” —but we have all probably experienced the compression of multiple memories into one, and its converse. In reviewing my own field notes from the 1989 expedition to Nikumaroro, I’ve been surprised at the number of times that events I recall as being more or less coincident were substantially separated in time, and at the number of events I had thought were quite separate that in fact happened almost coincidentally. Who can recall on precisely which Christmas they received a particular gift?

So what may have happened on Nikumaroro? —and I confess that I’m attracted to this hypothesis because it accounts for so many things.

1. The laborers find the first skull somewhere on the southeast end of the island. They bury the skull, and Koata takes the Benedictine bottle. Gallagher arrives and Koata sails for Tarawa. Gallagher learns about the skull and bottle, telegraphs Tarawa to get the latter back from Koata, and searches the site, finding the rest of the bones, the sextant box, and the shoe parts, but of course not finding the airplane wreck because it’s not there. He has the box built and the bones shipped to Fiji. By this time Koata has returned from hospital (indeed, it may be that Gallagher’s delay in exhuming the skull resulted from the need to await Koata’s return; perhaps Koata, as

a traditional elder and leader of the group, had taken it upon himself to bury the skull in some safe place known only to him).

2. Gallagher goes to Fiji. While he is away, fishermen find more bones, on Nutiran near a pile of wreckage on the reef. They report this to Koata. Having learned from Gallagher about Earhart’s flight, Koata associates the wreckage with the airplane, declares the area off limits, and holds the bones somewhere pending Gallagher’s return.
3. Gallagher returns and promptly dies. Koata and his colleagues, for whatever reason (one can imagine several) don’t report the bones to anybody else, and quietly dispose of them.
4. Mrs. Sikuli, remembering all this almost sixty years later, compresses the two discoveries into one.

This proposition has advantages. It resolves the conflict between Mrs. Sikuli’s and Gallagher’s accounts, and it accounts for Gallagher’s failure to say anything about the airplane wreck. It is consistent with the reports of two bones discoveries. It doesn’t require anybody to be lying, and it is plausible in the context of the way memory tends to work. It is, of course, also entirely hypothetical.

It also leaves some questions unanswered. Were the bones on Nutiran those of *Norwich City* casualties, or those of somebody else? In her interview with Barb Norris, Kris Tague and me, Mrs. Sikuli seemed pretty clearly to indicate that there were two different sets of bones on Nutiran — one group of perhaps ten people on the shore, and one set in the water near the airplane wreck. In her interview with Ric and his colleagues, she had much less to say about the on-shore bones; it was almost as if she had further consulted her memory and concluded that she wasn’t so sure about them. But in any event, we know that people died in the water around the *Norwich City*, that some were buried, and that others may have washed up on shore. The shipwreck seems the

most plausible source for the bones found near the plane wreck, though clearly this was not what Mrs. Sikuli – and presumably the adults who told her about them – thought. We don't know why they thought the bones were from someone other than a *Norwich City* casualty, except for their putative association with the plane wreck. But this association is suspect; it is very difficult to imagine human bones surviving in the active environment of the reef edge.

Going through this exercise also highlights another issue: was what Mrs. Sikuli saw on the reef really the remains of an airplane wreck? If the “just so” story I've posited above is anything like accurate, then it would have been Koata – or perhaps other colonists – who identified the pieces of metal as parts of an airplane. It would not have been anyone with extensive knowledge of what an airplane wreck might look like. So was the wreckage really that of an airplane, or was it something off the shipwreck that was misinterpreted by the colonists, who perhaps were feeling a little sensitive about having failed to report the first bones discovery to Gallagher?

As usual, all this hypothecating leads me around in a circle, but it does point to a couple of lines of research – one of which we're already pursuing, the other one that we haven't seriously considered in the past.

Clearly Koata is an important player in whatever happened with bones in 1940–41. Koata is dead, but as of the 1950s he had a

son, Teunaia, who probably would have been around ten at the time of the bones discovery. If we can find Teunaia, he may have something to tell us. An ethnographer in Norway, Dr. Sidsel Roalkvam, worked with Teunaia in the 1950s; TIGHAR's resident in Norway, Lonnie Schorer, is looking up Dr. Roalkvam.

Another person who might have been able to discriminate between airplane and *Norwich City* wreckage would have been Emily Sikuli's uncle, Jack Kima Petro, a skilled mechanic and builder with wide experience throughout the area. One of Mr. Petro's sons is a senior elected official in the government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands; we tried to contact him some years ago, but not with any great urgency since we had no reason to think that Mr. Petro was a particularly key figure in the Earhart story. He may not be; we do not know whether he was even on the island when the bones discovery (or either of the bones discoveries) was made. But we need to look further into this, and we need to try harder to contact his son.

References

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- Op cit*, p. 9.
- Jan Vansina: *Oral Tradition as History*. University of Wisconsin Press 1985, pp. 176-7.
- Ibid*.

