

The Castaway of Gardner Island

Gallagher's description of where he found the bones and artifacts makes it clear that his discovery was made on the same part of the island where TIGHAR found some of the same items he describes (parts of a woman's shoe and a campfire). Unless this part of the island was once a Girl Scout campground, it would appear logical to conclude that Gallagher and TIGHAR recovered items from the same site. If this is a valid conclusion, then we can combine the information provided by Gallagher with the firsthand discoveries we have made and reconstruct the scene with considerable accuracy.

The illustration below is speculative only in the exact placement of the various elements. The most ardent skeptic of the notion that Earhart and Noonan were ever on Nikumaroro must accept that something really happened on the island prior to 1940 that left this scene behind.

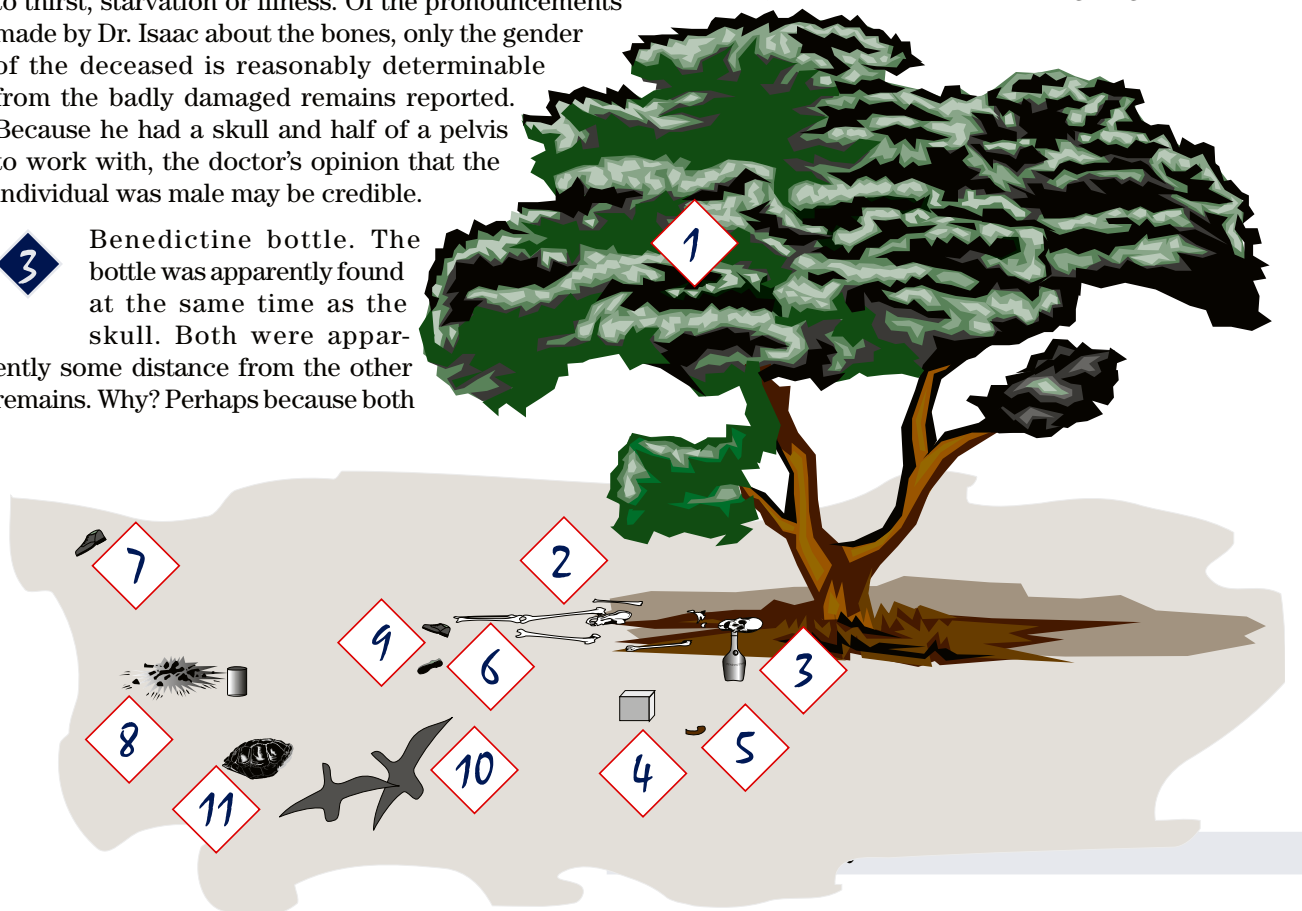
1 The "ren" tree. *Ren* is the Gilbertese name for *Tournefortia argenta*, a scrub tree still prevalent on Nikumaroro.

2 The bones. Although only a partial skeleton was still present when discovered, it would appear that the hapless individual expired in the shade of the ren tree. This suggests a lingering end due to thirst, starvation or illness. Of the pronouncements made by Dr. Isaac about the bones, only the gender of the deceased is reasonably determinable from the badly damaged remains reported. Because he had a skull and half of a pelvis to work with, the doctor's opinion that the individual was male may be credible.

3 Benedictine bottle. The bottle was apparently found at the same time as the skull. Both were apparently some distance from the other remains. Why? Perhaps because both

roll and each might be mistaken for a coconut by an industrious crab. Kilts' original anecdotal rendition of the story has the bottle containing "fresh water ... for drinking" but Gallagher says there was "no indication of contents." Kilts' informant seems to have been one of the discoverers, while Gallagher only saw the bottle several months later, so perhaps the bottle did contain water. It's an important point because a person with a bottle of water doesn't die from thirst. But how can a bottle roll and not spill the water? Of course, it can be stoppered, but a Benedictine bottle, because of its distinctive shape, can be almost half full and roll without spilling. (Try it. The liqueur is not bad either.)

4 Sextant box. Gallagher doesn't tell us why he thinks the sextant the box once contained was "old fashioned and probably painted over with black enamel" but if he is right, this is certainly not the Pioneer Bubble Octant Serial #12-36 that we think was aboard the Electra. Sextant expert Peter Ifland (TIGHAR #2058), who recently donated his large collection to the Mariner's Museum in Newport News, Virginia, has determined that the numbers reported as being on the box do not match the style used by any of the known manufacturers of aeronautical instruments. There is, however, another intriguing possibility.



Noonan was a famous aerial navigator before he signed on with Earhart. In a letter describing his techniques (reproduced in *Air Navigation*, a textbook by P.V.H. Weems) he says that he uses a Pioneer Bubble Octant as his primary instrument, but always carries a conventional nautical sextant as a “preventer.” Is Gallagher’s “old fashioned” sextant, in fact, Noonan’s preventer? The stencilled 3500 implies a large organization while the 1542 may be the serial number of the particular instrument. Noonan is said to have served in the British Merchant Marine during WWI. Could there be a connection? Research continues.

5 Inverting eyepiece. According to Peter Ifland, an inverting eyepiece is an attachment to a sextant that is often useful in taking sightings from an aircraft.

6 Woman’s shoes. We know much more about the shoes at the site than Gallagher did. We found more pieces and had access to better research information than he did. He says they’re about a size 10. Kilts said they were size nine narrow. Our measurement comes out to roughly 8½ or 9. We know that they were the same style and size worn by Earhart on her final flight, and that the replacement heel they featured was manufactured in the United States in the mid-1930s. If Irish had had that information he might not have been so quick to accept Isaac’s offhand dismissal of the bones.

7 The other shoes. We also found a heel from a different pair of shoes, slightly larger. We have no way of knowing whether it was a woman’s shoe or a man’s shoe. Several possibilities are apparent. Perhaps we have two pair of woman’s shoes and the bones are those of Imelda Marcos, or perhaps we have one pair of women’s shoes and one pair of men’s shoes, implying the presence of a man and a woman.

8 The campfire. This is a very important feature because, unlike everything else at the site, campfires can’t be moved around by crabs. It’s an excellent indicator that we have found the same site Gallagher found. An analysis of the charcoal from the fire shows that the wood that was burned was a dicot (like *ren*) and not a monocot (like coconut) which suggests that the fire predates the coconut planting that was done in that area in 1941. The presence of a fire also lends a character of residence to the site.

9 The can. We know there was a can because we found a fragment of its label at the edge of the fire. The label has legible writing which includes the words ...ROWER PRODUCE (Something Grower Produce?). The use of the

word “produce” as a noun to mean vegetables is an Americanism. There is also a representation of some kind of green, tropical-looking leaves at the top of the label. We presently have one expert opinion that the leaves are banana leaves. The inventory of the Earhart aircraft taken after the March 20, 1937 wreck in Hawaii contains this entry, “Item No. 54, 1 each, Waterproof zippered bag containing 4–1/2 lb Nestle chocolate bars, 1 pkg. sipping straws, 6 cans malted milk tablets, 3–1 lb. pkg. raisins, 1 pkg. dried apricots, 1 pkg. dried prunes, 2 cans ripe banana, 3 cans tomato juice, 3 dish towels.”

10 Dead birds. Birds, especially the Red-tailed Tropic Bird, are ridiculously easy to catch on Nikumaroro. Anyone trying to survive on the island should have no trouble catching birds to eat. Palatability is another issue.

11 Turtle. Gallagher doesn’t mention how big the turtle was. Turtles are not uncommon in the lagoon and periodically come ashore to lay eggs on the ocean beach. A 200 pound turtle is not a rarity. The biggest problem would be getting it home.

So what conclusions can be reasonably drawn about this rather amazing scene? If we accept Dr. Isaac’s judgement that this was an elderly Polynesian male who has been dead at least twenty years in 1940, we have to explain how it is that he has women’s shoes with a replacement heel that is less than ten years old.

If, on the other hand, we take the evidence at face value, we have two people (two pair of shoes), possibly a man and a woman (a woman’s shoe but probably a man’s bones), who arrived here just a few years before 1940 (heel dates from the mid-1930s). They are probably American (the shoe heel is certainly American and the can label appears to be) and they have very limited survival assets which seem to include an “old fashioned” nautical sextant with an inverting eyepiece (Fred’s “preventer?”), a liqueur bottle (are the rumors about Fred true?), and a can of banana (as inventoried on the Electra). Only one set of bones was found indicating that the remains of one of the people, probably the woman, are elsewhere. The presence of her shoes suggest that she didn’t just leave but may have died and been buried by the man.

A thousand questions remain and ten thousand guesses couldn’t answer them. Further archaeological work might. Let’s go back and see what more we can find.

