

The Colonial Buildings of the Mangareva Islands, French Polynesia

James L. Flexner¹

ABSTRACT

Historical archaeology is an expanding field in the Pacific region. One of the key thematic areas is the investigation of missionary encounters during the 19th century. Francophone, Catholic missions have been studied less commonly than Anglophone, Protestant ones. A survey of the islands of Akamaru, Aukena, Mangareva, and Taravai in the Mangareva Islands (Îles Gambier) of French Polynesia recorded over 100 standing structures related to Catholic missionary activities beginning in the 1830s. These structures form a unique assemblage of surviving colonial buildings in a Polynesian archipelago. They also reflect broader themes of colonial interference in Pacific Islander social and religious structures, landscape transformation, accommodation of new practices, and local forms of resilience and adaptation.

Keywords: French Polynesia, Mangareva, Buildings Archaeology, Colonialism, Missions

INTRODUCTION

The archaeology of missionary encounters during the 19th and early 20th centuries has become a key thematic area in the historical archaeology of Oceania (e.g. Flexner 2016; Lydon 2009; Middleton 2008). Colonial incursions aimed at religious change threw into relief the great cultural differences between Pacific Islanders and European missionaries. Mission work involved not only changing religious beliefs and practices, but also aimed to transform the entire material worlds of Islanders. The introduction of Christianity to the Pacific had lasting effects, with most living people in the region continuing to identify with and worship according to Christian beliefs today (e.g. Tomlinson and McDougall, eds. 2012).

Conversion was, of course, an incomplete process as Islanders made their own interpretations of introduced belief systems (Keane 2007; Sissons 2014). The landscapes missionaries moved into often shaped the spatial layout of landscapes of conversion. Existing social, political, and religious forms shaped the ways that people chose to convert, as well as patterns of resistance and escape from the colonial order (e.g. Flexner 2016: 159–160; Middleton 2008: 39–70). Continuities in Islander lifeways were integral to overall processes of cultural change, in areas ranging from foodways to folk magic (Flexner 2016: 163–165). Further, people often created new forms of Christian modernity within Pacific societies long after the last missionaries

had left their islands (Flexner *et al.* 2020).

Mission archaeology in the Pacific has generally focused on Anglophone, Protestant encounters, from the settler societies of Australia (e.g. Lydon 2009) and New Zealand (e.g. Middleton 2008) to independent Pacific nations such as Vanuatu (Flexner 2016; Jones *et al.* 2020). Studies of Catholic missions have increased in recent years, including research into the early and sustained colonial encounters of Guam in the Marianas Islands (Monton-Subias *et al.* 2020). Francophone Catholic missions have begun to be studied, for example in the Loyalty Islands (Sand 1998: 215) and Île des Pins in New Caledonia (Lagarde 2022). More extensive surveys documented a Catholic village in Fakahina atoll in the Tuamotus (Lagarde *et al.* 2020; Nolet 2020). A recent survey of standing 19th century buildings in the Mangareva Islands of French Polynesia² offers a new contribution to this field, comprising a dense and varied assemblage of standing colonial buildings associated with missionary activity in the Pacific.

THE MANGAREVA ISLANDS: GEOGRAPHY AND SETTLEMENT HISTORY

The Mangareva Islands consist of ten relatively small volcanic islands enclosed within a fringing reef featuring several *motu* or coral outcrops (see Conte and Kirch, eds. 2004: 16–19). The islands are part of the Îles Gambier in

¹ Archaeology, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

*Corresponding author: James.flexner@sydney.edu.au
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² Mangareva is also the proper name of one of the islands in the group, so I will distinguish between the Mangareva Islands when referring to the archipelago, and Mangareva when referring to the specific island. The term Mangarevan is used to refer to the people and culture of the Mangareva Islands.

French Polynesia, which also include the large, currently unoccupied atoll of Temoe approximately 50 km to the southeast. The islands were initially discovered by Polynesian navigators circa 860 CE, with evidence for large-scale settlement appearing by the 11th century (Kirch *et al.* 2021). Polynesian settlement in the Mangareva Islands was constricted by relatively low agricultural productivity, a problem compounded by human and commensal impacts on seabird populations which resulted in soil degradation across the islands (Kirch *et al.* 2010, 2015, 2022; Swift *et al.* 2017). Nonetheless, there is extensive evidence for human occupation across the volcanic islands as well as many of the *motu* and neighbouring atolls (Conte and Kirch, eds. 2004; Emory 1939; Green and Weisler 2000; Molle *et al.* 2021). The Mangareva islands developed a distinctive version of an eastern Polynesian culture over a period of roughly 800 years (see Hiroa 1938; Laval 2013[1938] for ethnographic accounts). European encounters and the subsequent introduction of diseases began after contact with the *Duff* in 1797 (Wilson 1799).

The Mangareva Islands were the first group to be settled by French Catholic Pères des Sacrés Cœurs de Jésus et de Marie (hereafter Pères des Sacrés Cœurs, also called the ‘Picpus’ Fathers). Missionary activities began in 1834 with the arrival of Pères Laval and Caret (Laval 1968). The priests were joined by a cadre of *frères bâtisseurs*, a type of skilled lay brother responsible for constructing the new mission in the islands (Delbos 2011). The high chief Mapu-

teoa was declared ‘king’ after his conversion to Christianity in 1836, an act possibly motivated by familial political rivalry with another senior chief, Matua, who was also Maputeoa’s uncle (Laval 1968: CXXXVIII–CXXXIX). The conversion process followed the overthrow of the ‘idols’ and *marae* or temple sites (Laval 1968: LXXXI). Traditional gods and places of worship were largely replaced by Catholic faith and church buildings. Economic activities shifted to focusing on the production of *nacre* (mother of pearl). Manioc largely replaced the traditional cultivars of yam, taro, and sweet potato in local gardens and cooking pots. Over a period of almost 40 years, the missionaries and Mangarevan converts set about building a Europeanised landscape of churches, schools, and dozens of stone cottages for both missionaries and Mangarevan people (Laval 1968: LXXXI–LXXXIV; CIX–CXXXIII). The Francophone missionaries largely departed towards the end of the 19th century, leaving behind a Polynesian-Catholic kingdom in the Îles Gambier.

COLONIAL BUILDINGS OF THE MANGAREVA ISLANDS

French missionary construction in the Mangareva Islands focused on the four largest in the group: Mangareva (14 km²), Taravai (5 km²), Akamaru (2 km²) and Aukena (1.5 km²; see Figure 1). Many of the other islands in the group show evidence for Polynesian occupation prior to

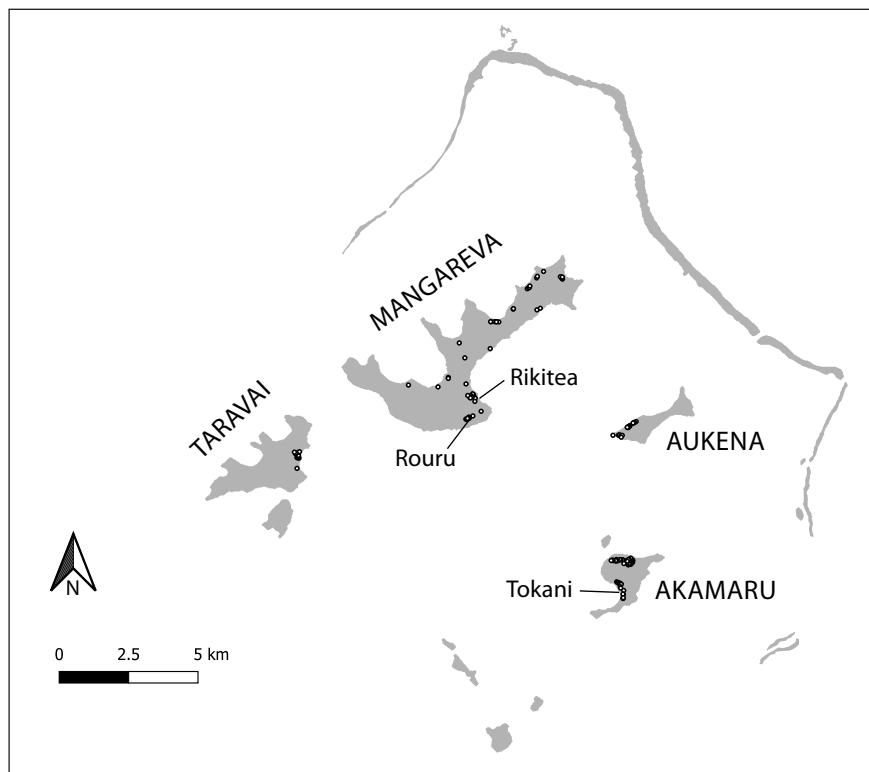


Figure 1. Map of the Mangareva Islands, showing the four largest islands labelled in all caps, and other locations mentioned in the text. The white dots represent the spatial distribution of 19th century features.

the 19th century but it is likely that with population collapse during that time (Laval 1968: CXXXIX–CXLII) Mangarevan people concentrated settlement on these larger islands, a matter for further research. The current population is mostly located on the island of Mangareva, with a few scattered households in Taravai, Akamaru, and Aukena. The Cathedral of St. Michel in the main town of Rikitea on Mangareva Island is the location of daily services and Sunday mass throughout the year. During Catholic religious festivals and other events people travel between islands to celebrate in the churches elsewhere on Mangareva, and in Taravai, Akamaru, and Aukena. Most of the smaller islets and *motu* are uninhabited but many are visited regularly for fishing trips and picnics.

While Mangareva has the largest assemblage of 19th century buildings, the highest density relative to island size is found on Akamaru. The most common building form is the house, or stone cottage built both for Europeans and Mangarevan converts (Table 1). Buildings are generally made of both volcanic and coral stonework sealed with lime mortar. Most of the buildings exist in a state of ruination, ranging from structures that have been broken down by cultural and natural processes to the level of the footings, to relatively intact but abandoned buildings in secondary forest growth (primarily *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, known locally as *purao*) as well as currently occupied areas. The main churches in Mangareva, Taravai, and Akamaru remain in use and are subject to periodic renovations. A couple of the houses are sites of ‘adaptive reuse,’ restored and lived in by Mangarevan families in the present.

The missionaries provided some documentation of locations and architectural drawings of religious buildings and constructions for the royal family (Laval 1968: CXI–CXXI). However, many of the stone cottages and overall settlement patterns were not mapped in the same detail, hence the need for systematic archaeological recording.

An earlier survey carried out in 1980–1981 by the *Cadastre* office of French Polynesia documented many of the remaining pre-20th century structures at that time, including a number of colonial buildings in Rikitea that are no longer present on the landscape, destroyed by urban growth (Fenelon 1981). My more comprehensive recent survey used a combination of handheld and high-precision GPS, photography, handheld 3d scanning, and standardised recording forms to document extant colonial buildings. Survey work was carried out both with guidance from knowledgeable Mangarevan informants who directed me to known areas with standing buildings and provided reliable local historical knowledge, and independently where I had permission to access sites, particularly in Mangareva and Aukena. I am confident we recorded almost all of the 19th century structures across four islands though additional fieldwork might turn up a few more stone cottages (as noted below for Tokani Bay). This report does not include a comprehensive description of each of the colonial buildings in the Mangareva Islands. Rather, the goal is to provide an initial overview of colonial buildings on each of the four islands that were surveyed to demonstrate the diversity and richness of this unique colonial archaeological landscape in Oceania.

Akamaru

The Catholic missionaries’ first settlement dating to the 1830s was located in the Bay of Tokani on the west side of Akamaru (Laval 1968: 11–12). The colonisers found the location to be too exposed to strong currents from the open ocean, and occasional severe storms. Nonetheless there remained a small settlement consisting of a cluster of stone cottages facing the sea. The locations of two such houses were identified in 2022 fieldwork, but local informants remembered two more that we were unable to relocate

Table 1. Distribution of architectural features by island and type of structure (note the ‘traditional’ category is for pre-European building forms that were integrated into colonial architecture or otherwise re-used or repurposed during the 19th century).

Structure Type	Akamaru	Aukena	Mangareva	Taravai	Total
Archway			2	1	3
Cathedral			1		1
Church/Chapel	1	1	4	2	8
Cooking (e.g. Bread Oven)	3	1	2	1	7
House	27	4	19	4	54
Other	1	2	4		7
Outbuilding	1		1		2
School	1	1	2		4
Shrine/Grotto			3		3
Tower		1	3		4
Traditional (e.g. Marae)	1		4		5
Well	1	1	2	1	5
Total	36	11	47	9	103

in the dense secondary forest (see also Green and Weisler 2000:10). A stone foundation for a *marae* or other traditional structure is located in between the two extant houses. This kind of traditional architecture is well known from Tokani. Emory mapped *marae* and other features in the bay in his pioneering archaeological survey (1939: 32). An extensive plan of stone structures in Tokani was produced by Green and Weisler (2000:10, 37–39), who considered the area to be one of the only remaining landscapes that demonstrates the traditional Mangarevan settlement pattern at the time of European contact, even if it also integrates missionary additions from the 1830s and 1840s.

Eventually the missionaries shifted their focus to the coastal plain in the northern part of Akamaru. The extensive remains of Père Laval's village on Akamaru are organised around a cruciform layout, with the houses spread along the longer, east-west axis. The shorter north-south axis aligns the 19th century wharf (still in use) with the pathway that leads up the hill to the first Catholic cemetery. The grand Church of Notre Dame de la Paix, which dates to 1844 (Laval 1968:LXXXII), lies at the crux between the two axes. The west-facing façade features two steeples, each with its own bell, a central entrance leading into the nave with the altar at the east end. The church is surrounded by a pavement of smooth coral cobbles embedded in the ground. Adjacent to the north of the church there is a compound comprising the associated 19th century structures:

a *presbytère* (presbytery or priest's house); kitchen and adjacent below-ground spring; toilet block; and a bread oven constructed of two volcanic boulders, the lower one flattened to form a horizontal baking surface and the upper hollowed into a hemispherical dome with a small hole providing a chimney (Figure 2). The cemetery located uphill from the church complex features a large number of headstones dating as far back as the 1840s. Systematic survey of this site will be a subject of investigation during future field seasons.

Along the east-west boulevard of the village, there are a total of 24 houses with variable forms. Most of the houses face the main boulevard, and feature a single doorway with one window on each side. There was one example with two doors, possibly a split structure for two individuals or families, though there wasn't clear evidence for internal division. Many of the doorways feature masonry embellishments such as faux pillars, carved lintels, or archways. The preservation of the stone cottages varies, with some having basically intact masonry walls while in other cases the building footings are all that remain (Figure 3). In addition to the stone cottages the survey team documented one grid of stone piers that would have provided the foundation for a timber structure dating to after the 1870s, which was still inhabited within living memory. An extremely large but apparently unfinished building, said to be for Père Laval (or Maputeoa in another local account) has been renovated

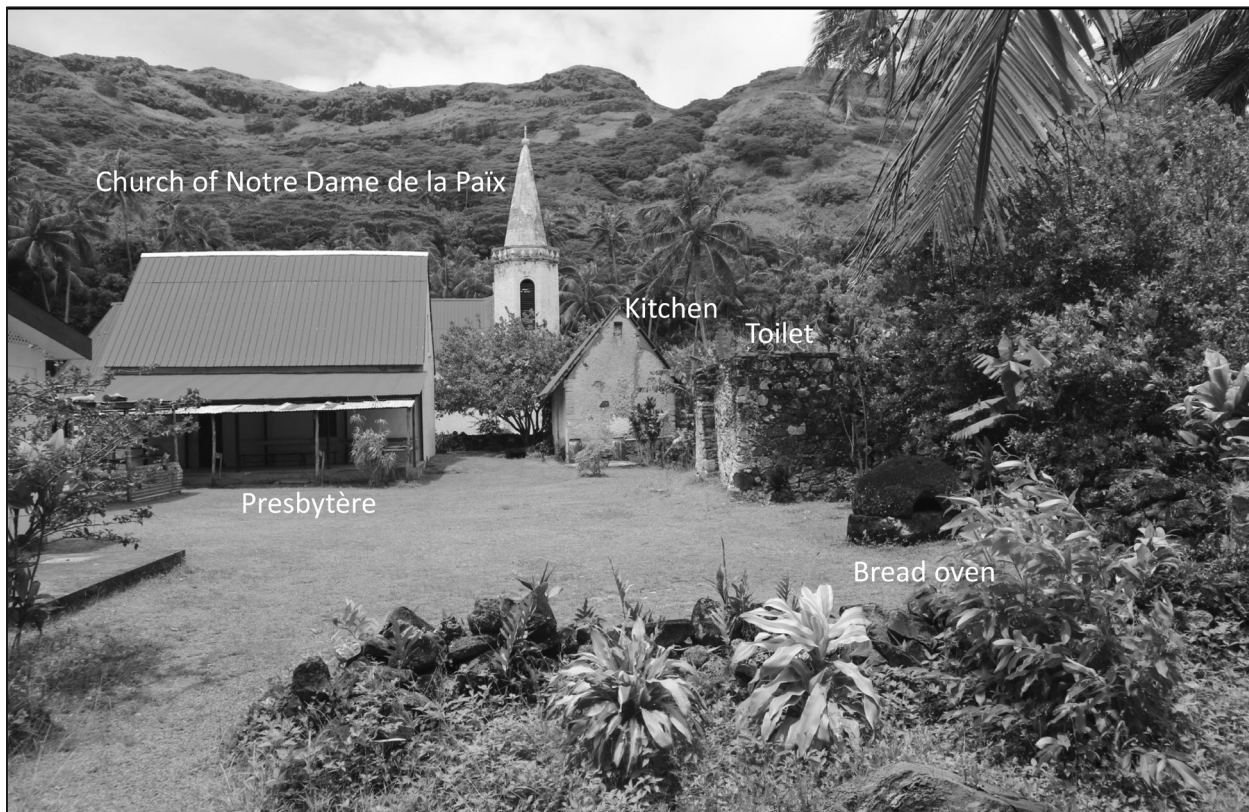


Figure 2. The Church of Notre Dame de la Paix (background) and associated mission buildings (labelled on figure).



Figure 3. A selection of houses from Akamaru, demonstrating variability in state of preservation as well as architectural form.

and is currently inhabited by a Mangarevan family.

Aukena

Aukena was the smallest island where the Catholic *frères bâtisseurs* practiced their craft extensively. One of the iconic constructions is a stone tower placed on a rocky outcrop in the southwest of Aukena, looking across to the neighbouring islands (Figure 4). It was said to be built to watch for passing ships, but may also have served a surveillance role, as the teachers from the boys' school on Aukena could have used this location to watch the comings and goings of their Mangarevan students.

The boys' school is a two-storey building located along the south coast of Aukena (Figure 5). It features a central hallway with doors on each end. On the righthand (west) side if entering from the north, there are scars from a now decomposed timber stairway that provided the only access to the upper storey, presumably where the dormitory was located. Off of the central hallway there is a large north-south oriented room to the west, and two smaller rooms to the east. The northern of these two rooms features scars in the wall representing where cabinetry or shelving was located, and may have functioned as an office. The southern room may have served as a small chapel or teachers' room. The rooms flanking the central space in the school are accessed separately through doorways in the northern

wall. These are interpreted as classrooms. Further research, including excavations, will help to clarify the functional arrangement of space at the school and potentially also identify change through time.

Near the school are structures that represent a landscape of industry, which would have been an integral part of boys' learning alongside literacy and prayer (*cf.* Smith 2014). Just north of the school is a massive stone furnace, used in the large-scale production of lime mortar. The mortar would have been in high demand in the growing mission. To the west of this are a series of pits, possibly related to the lime kiln. Further west is a kitchen complex, comprising a basalt bread oven, a basalt boulder with a rectangular groove for grinding seeds and grains for flour or oil, and the associated limestone grinding wheel (Figure 6). Along Aukena's northern coastline, which faces Mangareva, there is an additional missionary settlement, centred on the Church of St. Raphaël, completed in 1839 (Laval 1968: LXXXI). This church is a relatively simple rectangular structure with a gabled roof, resting on a stepped stone and earth terrace. To the southwest of the church is another *presbytère*, this one built on top of a stone *marae* foundation, consisting of stacked basalt boulders covering an area of approximately 24 m × 12 m. Future excavations should provide dates and further information for both the missionary building and the pre-European foundation it rests on. There are two additional houses nearby as well as



Figure 4. The watchtower at Mata-kuiti point (cf. Emory 1939: 20–21) with the islands of Mangareva and Taravai visible on the horizon.



Figure 5. North exterior elevation of the boys' school at Aukena. The diagonal scar in the main hallway is visible on the right hand side, while some of the cabinetry scars in the possible office space are visible in the lefthand ground floor window. The classrooms on the wings are not visible in this photograph.



Figure 6. Stone bread oven (above), basalt grinding stone (bottom left), limestone milling stone (bottom right).

alignments, stone terraces, and small stone circles said to have ensconced torches lighting the pathway between village and school at night. One additional house was located roughly 250 m northeast from St. Raphaël's Church. This structure was notable for having the rear (inland-facing) windows blocked in with stone masonry, with some evidence that landslides had partially covered the wall's exterior with sediment (mass wasting is a known problem in the Mangarevan environment that caused challenges during the pre-European past as well; see Kirch *et al.* 2022).

Mangareva

Mangareva, the largest island in the group, features almost half of the structures documented in this survey (47/103). While many of the structures cluster in Rikitea, there are other 19th century buildings spread throughout Mangareva. Within Rikitea, the missionary landscape centres on a massive Cathedral of St. Michel, measuring 58 m × 19 m. According to local oral tradition, the cathedral was built on the site of a *maison des idoles* (house of idols) illustrated by Laplante (Dumont D'Urville 1846, pl. 43).

The cathedral's underground crypt, which could not be accessed during the 2022 survey, may integrate features from this structure or another Polynesian sacred site, another matter for future research. After the *maison des idoles* was destroyed, the missionaries built a church in local materials that was eventually replaced by the cathedral in 1841–1842 (Laval 1968: LXXXII). The cathedral façade features a central, arched entryway between two square belltowers. The heritage-listed building was renovated and reopened in 2011, with works uncovering a previous paint scheme and other features that have been re-established. Directly adjacent to the west of the cathedral is a row of three houses. The southernmost is a two-storey *évêché* (bishop's house), the middle a single-storey *presbytère*, and the house in the northwest of the complex was built for Maputeoa's one-time political rival and uncle, Matua. These houses rest on a raised, stone-lined terrace and are surrounded by garden paths and stone walls. To the east of the cathedral is a long, two-storey structure that was the home and workshop of *frères tisserands* (weaver brothers), tasked with providing not only religious vestments but also lay people's clothing for the mission.

South of the cathedral there is a megalithic pit measuring approximately 6 m across and 2.5 m deep (Figure 7). These types of pits were used to produce *popoe*, a fermented paste usually made from breadfruit (*mā*) that was a staple in traditional Mangarevan diets. Given its location this particular pit served the royal household of Maputeoa. Maputeoa's palatial house compound was located downhill from the cathedral and adjacent to the sea. Unfortunately most of the complex has been destroyed by construction of the primary school in Rikitea during the second half of the 20th century. However, several features remain including the stone canoe harbour and fishpond complex stretching into the sea towards the east; an archway that served as the seaside entrance to the compound; and three stone towers built for the royal family, two round and one square in cross-section. Elsewhere in Rikitea there are two additional chapels, and a stone house ruin. The remains of the colonial prison are currently occupied by local businesses, mostly pearl shops.

To the south of Rikitea in the district of Rouru there is an assemblage of stone buildings known locally as '*le couvent*' (the convent), in fact the 19th century Catholic girls' school. My interpretation of buildings in the area differs from local received wisdom, as the structure commonly assumed to be the chapel bears several features, not least the scars and soot from a massive fireplace, that suggest

a kitchen and dining room. One of the more remarkable features in Mangarevan missionary architecture is a mural framing the fireplace scar, consisting of four Ionic columns topped with Classical amphorae (Figure 8). This kind of material reference to an 'ancient' European heritage is common to the 'civilising' approach to mission work in the Pacific (see Flexner 2016: 47, 87–92). The mural room is the northern one in a two room masonry structure. The other room may have served as a chapel or dormitory. Alternatively one of these functions, along with classroom, may have been located in another large rectangular masonry structure to the west. Future excavations can help to refine these interpretations of academic mission space.

In addition to the two main buildings, the girls' school complex in Rouru contains two stone-lined *popoe* pits, one in the very centre of the complex. These are slightly smaller than the one near the royal complex but still would have provided ample traditional food for the school and possibly neighbouring communities. Next to the possible school or chapel to the west is also a stone-lined well. Moving north-east from the main structure with the classical mural, there is a masonry archway that both provides the main entrance, and leads to a stone-lined road that connected Rouru and Rikitea. Along this path there is a hollowed out basin in a volcanic boulder that holds water, said to be where high-ranking people's bodies were left to decay before secondary



Figure 7. Megalithic pit for making *popoe* (fermented breadfruit paste) to supply the royal household of Maputeoa.



Figure 8. The ‘Classical’ mural in the probable kitchen/dining room of the girls’ school at Rouru, represented in line drawing (left), photograph (middle), and detail of top right corner enhanced using DStretch (right, courtesy Tristen Jones).

burial while their spirit left for a sacred point near Taravai. Later this was reimagined as the *‘baignoire de la princesse’* (princess’ bathtub), though whether it was ever used by female members of the royal family for such a purpose is unclear at this point. Further along the road between Rouru and Rikitea, which has subsequently been interrupted by modern construction but exists in fragments, is a rectangular chapel built around the Royal Tomb of Maputeoa, who was buried there after his death in 1857.

An additional 15 stone cottages are located outside of Rikitea. Most are scattered across the rugged, and currently sparsely inhabited, northern half of Mangareva. As on Akamaru the house forms and levels of preservation vary. One of the best preserved examples, which still retains a small amount of the original red paint around the windows, also features an adjacent bread oven. There are three discrete clusters of three to four cottages, one centred on the Church of St. Joseph, as well as lone structures.

Taravai

Taravai has the smallest, if still significant, collection of missionary buildings ($N=9$) scattered along the coast of the east-facing main bay. The island is home to the ornate Church of St. Benoît, which is currently undergoing renovations. Adjacent to the church is a relatively complex *presbytère*, which features a unique sliding and folding central entrance door. There was a kitchen nearby though it is currently a pile of rubble. Next to the 19th century

wharf, the Pères des Sacrés Cœurs built a monumental archway, which features the eponymous sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary in relief above the arch itself. To the north of the church there are several stone cottages, the nearest of which was recently renovated and is currently inhabited. The others are ruined. The northernmost house also features a nearby bread oven, represented only by a small stone foundation. Inland from these features are the ruins of the first mission church, which featured quite high and thick stone walls, now mostly collapsed. Uphill from the church is the earliest Catholic cemetery, which has a central masonry cross but no visible headstones. An additional cemetery, more recent and featuring intact 19th century headstones, is located at the southernmost extent of the missionary settlement in Taravai.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH POTENTIAL

The approximately 100 standing 19th century buildings in the Mangareva Islands comprise an extensive and diverse remnant of a colonial landscape in the Pacific region. They represent a process of widespread transformation of social space accompanied by fundamental changes to Polynesian religious life and the socio-political order during a period of roughly four decades. At the same time, these landscapes contain elements of cultural continuity, particularly relating to food as represented by the megalithic breadfruit pits, but also in other areas. Cultural knowledge was retained, as roughly 100 years after the initial arrival

of Catholicism in Mangareva, Hiroa (1938: 238–239) was able to collect detailed information about the form of traditional houses in the islands despite the fact that this type of architecture had been entirely replaced by stone (1840s–1870s) and eventually timber (after 1870s) cottages (see Laval 1968: LXXXIV). Mangarevans were not simply the passive recipients of missionary knowledge and technology. They adapted the new building forms and techniques for their own purposes, eventually becoming renowned within Polynesia as master masons in their own right. For example, in 1856 a group of 60 Mangarevans was sent by the mission on a voyage of over 1600 km to construct the Catholic Cathedral in Tahiti (Laval 1968: LXXXIII), which is still standing today. Further, the forms of colonial architecture developed in the Mangareva Islands connect with other landscapes of Catholicism in neighbouring areas such as in the Tuamotus (Lagarde *et al.* 2020).

The goal of this paper was to provide a preliminary overview of colonial building remains, but much research remains to be done in the Mangareva Islands. The initial survey is part of a longer-term research project focusing on built landscapes and material culture in the islands, and cultural collections from overseas. Future research will include more detailed mapping of particular structures alongside a program of excavations to better understand internal divisions and activity areas within the buildings, and a greater sampling of artefacts from the colonial era (currently represented by a handful of plain and sponge-stamped whiteware or *faience* sherds found on the ground surface across the islands and 19th century olive bottle glass, found in the largest concentration around the boys' school at Aukena). While the documentary record often provides a detailed chronology for religious buildings, the houses are largely undated. Excavations should shed light not only on construction dates but also periods of abandonment, which likely vary from structure to structure as well as between different islands. Ultimately, this type of research contributes to a better integration of colonial heritage, which is often poorly documented and minimally conserved in the Pacific, into the broader cultural heritage environment of eastern Polynesia. With better fundamental understanding of what exists, approaches to ongoing conservation, interpretation, and access to these sites can be further developed in conversation with communities in the Mangareva Islands, among other stakeholders.

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