

Father Vidal's Letter, 1882
p40-41 in Pearl and Loiseau-Vorruft 2007
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In six years of work, then, he worked himself into the social fabric of A'asu, laying the social foundations for the church and, again, building a rapport with the chiefs and people there. He was able to convert the village to Catholicism, and gain permission to build a chapel on site. In the 1882 letter, Fr. Vidal recounts the story of his search for French remains. He is writing to Reverend Father Couloigner, the Prosecutor of Missions, in Lyons, making the first announcement to Europe that the remains of the lost French mariners have been discovered. It is clear from Vidal's choice of words that he was excited about the discovery, enthusiastic about the possibility of honoring the deceased, and furthermore, of establishing a church at A'asu. The full English translation of the 1882 letter is provided here:

To R.P. Couloignier (S.M.)

St. Denis-Laval

Ste. Croix de Leone, 5

October 1882

My dearest Reverend,

"I've come back from Massacre Bay, where I had to stay for several days in order to oversee work on our future chapel. We have already finished four batches of lime and stockpiled a few stones. Still, an incident occurred that stopped us, provoking in us very fervent emotions.

"You know, reverend Father, that the island of Tutuila is Maouna, otherwise known as the island of the Massacre, so lauded in the journals of Laperouse for its beauty, its fecundity, and the well-being of its light-hearted inhabitants. Yet, it is sadly more infamous for the massacre of Commander de Langle and his eleven companions by the inhabitants of A'asu, which is now known as Massacre Bay. It was towards the end of 1787. At that time, the entire island was pagan, and acts of cannibalism were still games in their view.

"The grandchildren of the killers have been Christian a decade only. The chief of the village, Leasiolagi (Sky Trumpet), has nothing terrible left in him but his name. He is one of our best and most zealous Catholics. Since the whole village converted, we decided to erect a chapel of both stone and coral. During the numerous visits I made to this bay during the course of six years, I tried many times to gather information on the killing of our French sailors; it was in vain, since they ignored all my attempts, or at least pretended to. I would have been happy to discover the place where their precious remains were buried; but Father Didier's and my own research were fruitless for quite a long time. An old man, an octogenarian who died last year, told me that he knew for certain that the strangers were not eaten, but were buried on the very spot of the massacre. Since then, I have hoped to find these remains and at least anoint them with holy water, and shelter them with a cross. Divine Providence has realized my dreams. As planned, I ordered the digging of lime ovens on the very spot where I thought the event took place, next to A'asu's stream. Even before we dug the fourth oven, an elder came to find me, saying "Father, it's under this red cedar (talie) that the strangers were heaped. We will no longer hide them from you, since we now know that you are a Man of God, and you do not seek to the bones of your compatriots for vengeance, but only with the intention to anoint them with holy water and erect a funeral monument to them." At the end his declaration, I hardily thanked the old Samoan, and asked the chief of Leone to erect a cross on the site of the desiccated red cedar. The chief authorized me to do as I desired. After having dug enough to reassure ourselves that this really was the long overlooked burial site of our poor sailors, we erected a small monument of masonry and an incorruptible wood cross was placed on that monument. Modest, yes, but the best

our hands could make. Laperouse's other cohorts have a monument with a commemorative plaque at Botany Bay and Vanikoro. I hope that one day the Ministry of the Navy will erect a more suitable monument for Mr. de Langle. His noble descendents, of which two are on the admiral lists, will surely be eager to honor the remains of their distinguished ancestor, for whom Laperouse wrote such a magnificent eulogy.

"With my little monument made and the cross planted, I said the holy mass for repose over the long forgotten remains. The ceremony was solemnly undertaken the day of the blessed Guardian Angels. And to perpetuate that memory, I plan to erect the village's chapel under the auspices of those Guardian Angels. In replaying the events of this disastrous moment in French Naval history in my mind, I remembered with relief that Commander de Langle and his companions had had an angel with them, in the form of Reverend Receveur, their chaplain. He, at least, was able to give the victims their last rights, at the very moment when the enigmatic savages stuck the fatal blows. May their invisible guardian angels have also helped and protected them!"

"The chapel that I have proposed to erect will be a monument to atonement. If the families of the massacred sailors wish to have a commemorative plaque in the chapel or on the tomb, I will endeavor to realize those desires. If I receive funds on their behalf, I will attempt to erect an edifice as beautiful as those resources will allow. In any case, I will be happy to dedicate my work and sweat to it. Isn't the blood of one of these generous victims that cried out to the sky in their defense, and He worth the grace of conversion? Yes, French blood is eminently Catholic and everywhere where it is shed or spilt, it thrives! And I am I happy to tell you, most reverend Father, that the French Navy remains Christian, and we are happy to recognize that on occasion that we are visited by battleships. Would you be so kind as to inform de Langle's family, if you deem it an opportune time? If you know the parentage of M. de Lamanon, who was also killed, you could inform them as well. It will be a relief for them to know that the islanders saved the corpses of their victims, and that a French missionary found these precious remains, blessed them with great emotion, and honored them with the sacred signs of the Redemption. He was also able to offer them the holy mass on the very spot where their blood once ran. May their souls repose close to God, as their mortal remains rest here next to His cross.

"I have the honor of being, most reverend father,

Your most humble and devoted servant and brother in Mary,

J. Vidal
Sm (Tutuila mission)"

Word soon spread that French remains had been found, and Father Vidal wrote a second letter in early 1883, echoing the contents of the first, directly to one of de Langle's descendants, Rear Admiral Fleuriot de Langle. That second letter was published that same year in the *Bulletin de la Société Géographie*, and became the first official public announcement that the remains had been discovered. Meanwhile, the 1882 letter, with its more detailed account of the search, discovery, and consequences, remained out of the public domain in the Marist archives. In 1923, Monfat published a partial translation of the document in *Les Premiers Missionnaires des Samoa*. Vidal designed a bronze marker to memorialize the 11 French nationals, and one Chinese sailor that were lost at A'asu, but when the marker was delivered it contained only the names of the 11 French mariners (Theroux, 1981). The bronze marker was installed in 1884 (although the marker

Father Julien Vidal and the Social Transformation of a Small Polynesian Village (1787–1930): Historical Archaeology at Massacre Bay, American Samoa

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The site of A'asu, American Samoa, is infamous in the annals of history as the site of a tragic encounter, in 1787, between French explorers and Samoans, that left 42 or more dead and wounded. Beginning in 1876, an investigation of A'asu was independently conducted by a French missionary priest, Father Julien Vidal (SM). His letters document his search for answers at A'asu, and to find the resting places for the men left behind by the French fleet. Archaeological investigations at A'asu carried out in 2001 and 2002 yielded evidence that contribute to our understanding of the social transformations taking place in Tutuila during the late 18th to early 20th century.

KEY WORDS Samoa; Catholicism in Oceania; La Pérouse; Julien Vidal; Society of Mary.

INTRODUCTION

The late eighteenth century was a period of rapid European colonial expansion into the Pacific. The English explorer Captain James Cook had brought the Pacific to the forefront of scientific exploration with his voyages of 1768 through 1779. By commission of King Louis XVI, Jean François Galaup de la Pérouse sailed with two ships, *L' Astrolabe* and *La Boussole*, from Brest in 1785 in an effort to establish French economic interests in the Pacific. La Pérouse sailed to Hawaii, Asia, and the west coast of North America, among other places, prior to heading for the Samoa group in late 1787.

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Lettre du P. Vidal au P. P. Procureur des Mémoires.

Saint-Cyr de Seine (Seine) le 5 Octobre 1882

Mon Révérend et bien cher Père,

Je viens de la Saie du Massacre, on s'en dit
parler plusieurs fois pour les travaux de notre
future chapelle. Nous avons déjà fait quatre
journeis de chaux et même quelques pierres.

Mais un incident est venu suspendre nos
travaux et produire en nos cœurs les sentiments les
plus vives.

Dans saes, mon P. Père, que l'île subside est
cette fameuse Harmonie, tristement célèbre par le
magnère du commandant De Sangle et de ses
orges compagnons qui furent frappés le 11 décembre
1787. par les habitants de la Saie d'été, depuis
comme sous le nom de Saie du Massacre. Cette
choque, l'île antique était faimée, et les terres
de cannibalisme étaient pour eux de véritables
pauvre. Depuis une dizaine d'années, les habitants
gels de ces magnères sont devenus chrétiens.

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Vidal
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Le chef du village, Leathragi (la femme du ciel)
n'a plus de famille que le nom: c'est un de nos
meilleurs et plus gèles catholiques. Comme tout le
village est converti, nous avons voulu d'y établir une
chapelle en pierres et en corail.

Durant les nombreuses visites que j'ai fait
dans cette baie, pendant dix années entières, j'avais
plusieurs fois essayé d'obtenir quelques enseignements
sur le mariage de nos illustres marins Français,
mais c'était en vain, on ignorait tout, on du-
moins on faisait semblant de tout ignorer. Les
anciêtres, me disaient-ou, ont emporté leur secret
avec eux dans la tombe. Mes recherches, ainsi
que celles du P. Didiet furent toujours infructueuses.
Un vieillard, au moins octogénaire, qui est mort
l'année dernière, m'avait cependant raconté qu'il
tenait de source certaine que les Français n'avaient
pas été mangés, mais qu'ils avaient été enterrés
au lieu même du mariage. Depuis j'ai mis plus
d'effort qu'un autre se pourrait voir, ces restes
peut-être de la divine Providence a voulu m'en
délivrer. J'ai fait creuser à l'extrémité de la baie
chaque à l'endroit même du mariage. J'ai
trouvé l'os de l'homme, et avant que nous n'ayons

« crudi. Le praticien fait, un vieillard est venu me
monstrer, et m'a dit: "Pau, c'est sous ce roche (c'est
" rouge) que les étrangers furent enterrés: nous ne
de le cachons plus; car nous savons maintenant
" que tu es un homme de Dieu, et que tu es
" recherché par ces roches de tes compatriotes dans
" un but de vengeance, mais seulement avec
" l'intention de les adoucir d'eau douce et de
" leur céder un monument funéraire. »

Je remerciai vivement ce vieux Saméen, et le
demandai au chef d'élever une croix à la
place du cheir rouge, d'y faire déposer: Le chef
m'autorisa à faire tout ce que je désirais. Puis
nous éte aperçus par des sentinelles que c'était
vraiment bien à cet endroit que se trouvait
le tombeau si longtemps ignoré de nos illustres
maîtres (ils y avaient été enterrés dans une fosse
commune au pied du roche), nous chaperâmes un
petit monument en maçonnerie, et une croix de
bois incassable fut placée sur ce monument,
avec modestie, et tel visa, mais avec beau que
notre maître ont pu le faire.
La cérémonie de la bénédiction du tombeau
et de la plantation de la croix se fit

solemnellement le 2 Octobre, fête des saints
anges Gardiens. Ce jour-là, je célébrai la sainte
messe pour le repos de l'âme de nos chers
compatriotes au milieu de mes neophytes
vivement impressionnés et profondément
recueillis. En repasant alors dans ma mémoire
le souvenir de la scène séparée du 11 décembre
1887, je me rappelais avec bonheur que le
commandant de l'Anglo et ses compagnons
avaient avec eux un ange visible le soir
Recevant, leur aumône. Il put au moins
donner une dernière absolution aux victimes
au moment où les cadavres des sacrés furent
demandant le coup de mort. Que leurs anges
gardiens invisibles les aient aussi assistés et
protégés!

Et maintenant la chapelle que je me
proposais d'élever à la gloire du Marquis pour
le service ordinaire du culte, va devenir un
monument capital que les descendants
des missionnaires, devenus chrétiens, élèveront
à la mémoire des glorieux victimes de la
barbarie de leurs ancêtres. Non, dernière étape
mettre la chapelle sur le socle des saints

anges gardiens. L'édifice sera autre lieu
que mes restes pourront le permettre; (1) en
tout cas. Je t'ai tenue d'y consacrer mes
braves et mes braves. N'est ce pas le
sang de quelqu'une de ces génériques victimes
qui a eue vers le ciel en faveur de mon
peuple et qui lui a valu sa grâce de sa
conversion? Oui, le sang français est un
sang éminemment chrétien, et partout où il
est versé, il purifie.

Quelle cette bonne nouvelle parvenit aux
familles encore existantes des maîtres français
dans la baie d'Alte! Ce sera pour elles une
consolation de savoir que les dévotés ont
échangé les restes de leurs richesses, et que,
ces jours derniers, un millionnaire français
a retrouvé ces précieux restes, les a remis avec

(1) Nous exprimons avec bonheur que le Gouvernement français
ait à honorer la mémoire de De Sangle et de ses compagnons.
Le vicar de St. Siquier, habit de Chelmsbury en
l'ouest de l'Angleterre, a écrit à l'abbé de Chelmsbury en
1797, que commémorant en langue avec une inscription
relatant le fait du 11 décembre 1797.

emotions. Les a embrogés du signe sacré de notre
salut, et a offert pour eux le saint sacrifice de
sa messe a l'endroit où a coulé leur sang. Puissent
leurs âmes se porter auprès de Dieu, comme leurs
dépouilles mortelles reposent maintenant auprès
de sa croix.

J. Vidal. S.M.

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