

## The Search for Father Bachelot: First Catholic Missionary to the Hawaiian Islands (1827–1837)\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The main objective of this study is to determine if the remains of Father Bachelot, leader of the first Catholic missionary group to the Hawaiian Islands, can be identified among the commingled human skeletal remains brought back from Pohnpei, Caroline Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, in 1977. An osteological/forensic examination of these remains, a review of the literature, interviews with leaders of the expedition, and ancillary considerations suggest that, in all probability, none of the skeletal remains from Pohnpei are those of Father Bachelot.

Father Alexis Bachelot, born in France, in 1796, was leader of the first Catholic missionary group to the Hawaiian Islands. He died in 1837, after being exiled from the Hawaiian Kingdom. His remains were buried on the small islet of Na, off the coast of Pohnpei, the same year. An expedition to Pohnpei in 1977, to recover the remains of Father Bachelot, resulted in the recovery of several sets of commingled remains which are the subject of this study.

A detailed osteological/forensic study of these remains indicates the presence of at least ten individuals, including two subadults, two adult females, and six adult males. Stature estimates, the presence of osseous changes suggestive of treponemal disease, and other cranial, dental, and skeletal features are more consistent with Pohnpeian than European ancestry. The presence of shell beads and other mortuary features strengthens this assertion. Recommendations for any future attempts to recover the remains of this famous personage are made.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, forensic anthropology, Pohnpei, Micronesia, Catholic missionary, treponemal disease

### *First Catholic Mission to the Hawaiian Islands*

Jean Augustin Bachelot was born on 22 Feb. 1796, in Saint Cyr-la-Rosier, in western Normandy, France. He assumed the name, Alexis, upon pronouncing his vows at the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in Paris, on 2 Feb. 1813. Seven years later, he was ordained a Catholic priest (1). When Pope Leo XII extended the mission of the Hawaiian Islands to the Sacred Hearts Congregation in 1825, Father Bachelot was appointed Prefect Apostolic of the new mission. Bachelot and two other priests and brothers, left France aboard the ship, *La Comete*, on 20 Nov. 1826, and arrived in Honolulu on 7 July 1827.

<sup>1</sup>Professor of anthropology and highest honors graduate, respectively, Department of Anthropology, University of Hawai'i-at-Mānoa, Honolulu, HI.

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Because American Protestantism had already gained a substantial foothold in Hawai'i, the first Catholic missionaries were prohibited from coming ashore. One of the members of the missionary group, however, succeeded in being allowed to rent a piece of land, where a mission would eventually be built, and where the Our Lady of Peace Cathedral in Honolulu now stands. Father Bachelot and the other priests were finally allowed to remain and begin a mission. Their initial stay was short lived as four years later, in 1831, the priests were banished from the Hawaiian Islands. After spending six years working with Franciscan missionaries in California, Father Bachelot, believing conditions in Hawai'i had improved, set sail in May, 1837, from Santa Barbara aboard the *Clementine*. On this occasion, he, and another priest, Father Short, managed to come ashore unnoticed. Once the King was informed of the priests' presence, however, they were again ordered to leave the islands on the first available ship. At first refusing to leave, Father Bachelot, along with another Catholic priest, Father Maigret, were finally persuaded to leave Hawai'i on the *Notre Dame de Paix* (Our Lady of Peace), which left Honolulu on 23 Nov. 1837. Already in ill health, Father Bachelot's condition rapidly deteriorated until he died at two o'clock in the morning of 5 Dec. 1837 at age 41.

The ship, carrying the body of Father Bachelot, docked in Pohnpei, in the eastern Caroline Islands, on 13 Dec. 1837 (Fig. 1). There, Father Maigret made arrangements with the King to bury Bachelot on the small sandy islet of Na, 2800 m southeast of Matip Peninsula, Pohnpei. Father Maigret remained on Na until July of the following year (1838) where, with the assistance of native Pohnpeians, a cross 16 ft tall and a small chapel were built near Bachelot's grave site.

### *1977 Catholic Expedition to Pohnpei*

In late January of 1977, 150 years since his death, two priests, Fathers Louis H. Yim and Joseph Matheis of the Catholic Diocese of Honolulu, led an expedition to Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, to recover the remains of Father Alexis Bachelot for reburial at Our Lady of Peace Cathedral in Honolulu. Although the large cross and small chapel constructed by Maigret near Bachelot's grave had been destroyed by typhoons in the first decades of the twentieth century (2), the organizers of the expedition felt reasonably confident that they would be able to locate Bachelot's remains. The islet of Na measures only two miles in length and several hundred yards in width. The island has not been lived on for a considerable period of time, probably not since the previously mentioned typhoons. Coconut trees and other thick vegetation now cover much of the island.

With the assistance of local Jesuit priests, native guides, and students from the Pohnpei Agriculture and Trade School, the two

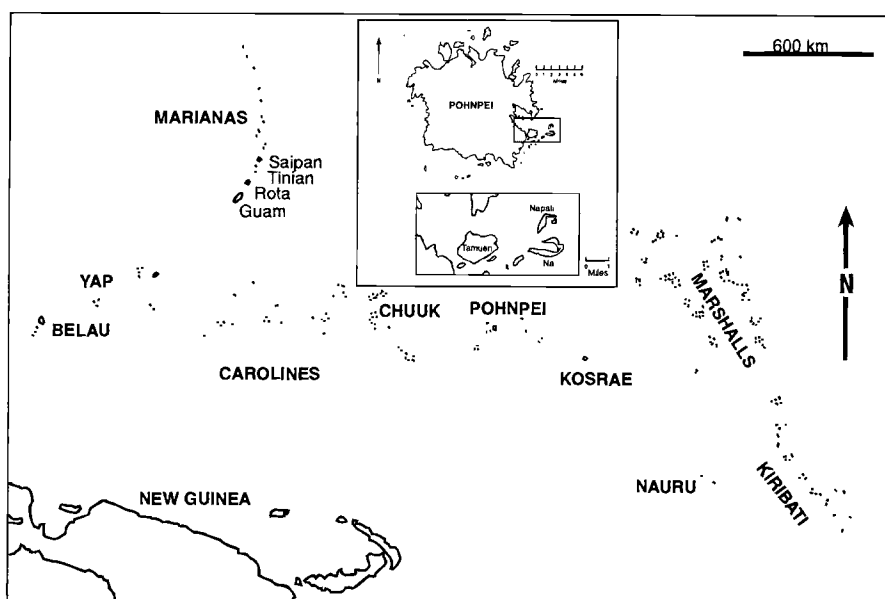


FIG. 1—Map of Micronesia showing the island of Pohnpei and Na Islet.

Honolulu priests, over the course of several days, exhumed six sets of human remains, near the center of the island. Records kept during the progress of these exhumations indicated that five of the individuals apparently had been buried in a row at a depth of 1–1 and 1/2 ft, and that the sixth set of remains came from a slightly deeper depth of 2–2 and 1/2 ft. With the exception of some rocks and other surface rubble, there were no readily discernible above surface indications of a grave site. A number of shell beads, apparently of native manufacture, were found with some of the remains. The maximum surface area from which the burials were removed is reported to have measured approximately 5 yd. Because none of the individuals involved in these excavations were trained in standard archaeological techniques, there is little other information on the provenience of these remains. It is more than likely that the remains had been disturbed by natural agents including climate, weather, and animal activity. No traces of the cross, chapel, or any other indication of a grave were identified at the time the remains were removed.

With the permission of the local authorities on Pohnpei, the six sets of remains were brought back to Hawai'i for forensic examination. Initially, the remains were taken to the United States Army's Central Identification Laboratory (CIL-HI) in Honolulu. Later, they were transferred to the University of Hawai'i for a more detailed analysis and study.

#### Previous Work

Previous osteological work with these remains at the University of Hawai'i included cleaning, reconstruction of postmortem damage, cataloguing, and some anatomical sorting. Because the remains were found to be commingled, an initial concern was to segregate (sort) the remains into individuals. The first attempts at segregation proved only partly successful because each of six sets of remains was treated separately. The results were then totaled for the six sets of remains giving a minimum number of individuals of 18. No attempt was made to determine the minimum number of individuals irrespective of their initial assignment to one of the six sets of remains. Further, although this previous work had

identified the presence of subadults, no accurate determination of the age, sex, and ancestry of these remains was undertaken.

#### Objectives of Present Study

The main objective of the present study is to determine if any of the remains exhumed from Pohnpei, in 1977, are those of Father Bachelot, the first Catholic missionary to the Hawaiian Islands. More specifically, do any of the remains match the description of an adult male of French ancestry whose known age-at-death was 41 years of age? Alternatively, are the morphological and forensic characteristics of these skeletal remains consistent with those associated with native Pohnpeians? Much of the factual information presented in this study is based on a B.A. honors thesis written by Willacker (Willacker LM. A forensic analysis of human skeletal remains from Na Islet, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia: The search for Father Bachelot. B.A. honors thesis, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1995).

#### Pohnpean Mortuary Behavior and Archaeology

Pohnpei possessed one of the most complex sociopolitical organizations of central Micronesia (3). A centralized sociopolitical hierarchy is often reflected in the differential treatment of the deceased in the mortuary customs of the culture. Typically, high status deceased individuals are afforded more elaborate burial facilities and the grave artifacts associated with these individuals are of greater value than those of lesser ranked individuals. Pohnpei would seem to be no exception to this general pattern with elaborate platform and vaulted stone structures being reserved for the highest ranking deceased (4). The monumental stone and coral architectural remains of Nan Madol is indicative of the social complexity of Pohnpei. Some earlier information on the artifacts associated with the burials from Nan Madol has described rose pink beads, fish hooks, shell axes, shell bracelets, shell needles, and large circular shells (5). To this list Hambruch (6) has added shell necklace spacers, stone adzes, and pearl-shell lure shanks.

Unfortunately, there is little information available for describing the mortuary behavior associated with unranked (or commoner),

individuals of Pohnpei. Very likely, they were given simple internments with relatively few artifacts. Although a brief archaeological reconnaissance for a portion of Na Islet by Saxe et al. (Saxe AA, Allenson R, and Loughridge SR. The Nan Madol area of Ponape: Researches into bounding and stabilizing an ancient administrative center. Final Report Submitted to the Historic Preservation Office, Trust Territory of the Pacific, Saipan, Marianas Islands, 1980) resulted in the recording of one stone tomb, *lolong*, no other systematic survey has been done for this small islet. Stone tomb structures, such as these, were generally reserved for the burial of the highest ranking clan members in Pohnpei. Most of the archeological evidence suggests that the remains from Na Islet probably represent common Pohnpeans.

## Methods

Because the remains brought back from Pohnpei were commingled, a new determination of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) was undertaken, one which considers all the remains irrespective of their initial assignment.

Standard osteological and forensic techniques were used to determine sex, age-at-death, ancestry, stature, paleopathology, and other aspects of metric and nonmetric variation in the skeletal remains from Pohnpei. Morphological features of the pelvis and skull were used to determine sex of the adult remains when these regions were present (7,8). Age determination relied principally on methods involving the symphysis pubis (9,10,11,12), auricular surface of the ilium (13), sternal end of the fourth rib (14,15) and ectocranial suture closure (16). When needed, these methods were augmented with observations of dental attrition and degenerative changes in the skeleton. Metric and nonmetric morphological features of the skull and infracranial skeleton were used to determine ancestry. Estimates of stature were based on regression formulae of Houghton et al. (17), Trotter (18), and Steele (19).

### *A Forensic Portrait of Father Bachelot and Pohnpeans*

The only established facts regarding Father Bachelot's physiognomy are that he was of French ancestry and that he was 41 years old at the time of his death. Although described as having been ill before his death, the exact cause of death or what illness he suffered is unknown. All other information upon which to base a forensic identification is indirect. Among the skeletal features attributable to French ancestry are broad heads, average stature (166 cm), and somewhat short, thick but generally light body builds (20,21,22). Infracranial indices attributable to French ancestry include rounded proximal femoral shafts and minimal pilastic development.

In comparison with European skeletal features, Pohnpean skulls are long (23) and the average stature for Pohnpean males is approximately 162 cm (24). The femora of Pohnpean males are flattened (platymeric) and in possession of a strong pilaster as reported in Pietrusewsky and Douglas (Pietrusewsky M and Douglas MT Report on human skeletal material recovered from Nan Madol. Unpublished manuscript, University of Hawai'i. 1985). On average, the physical build of male Pohnpeans is more robust than that observed for Frenchmen. Excessive dental attrition and the presence of treponemal (yaws) infection, a disease which leaves a mark in bone, are common in the skeletal and dental remains from this part of Micronesia.

## Results

*Minimum Number of Individuals*—Using the most numerous skeletal element (or bone), and size and age differences of these remains, it was determined that the minimum number of individuals represented is 10 (Fig. 2).

*Forensic Examination*—A summary of the major results of a detailed forensic and osteological examination of each of the 10 individuals is presented in Table 1. Two sets of remains (Burials 4A and 6A) represent children. Burials 3A and 6 were determined to be those of females. The tibia, (Fig. 3), fibula and clavicle bones of Burial 6 further exhibit lesions whose differential diagnosis includes treponemal (yaws) infection. Thus, these four burials could be eliminated as representing the remains of Father Bachelot. Of the remaining burials, two (Burials 3 and 4) are too young and one, Burial 5, is too old. Although they could not be eliminated on the basis of sex and age-at-death, the remains of three male burials (Burials 1, 2, and 3B) each possessed skeletal features which were more consistent with Pohnpean than Caucasian ancestry. The estimated stature ( $162.8 \pm 2$  cm) and the platymeric index for Burial 1, a young to middle-aged male, are consistent with Pohnpean ancestry. Further, the right clavicle of this same individual has skeletal changes suggestive of treponemal (yaws) infection. Further, dental paleopathological changes, including moderate attrition, dental enamel hypoplasia, and periodontal disease, observed in this same individual, are more consistent with Pohnpean than Caucasian ancestry.

Similarly, Burial 2 has features (e.g., pilastic and platynemic indices) which are more consistent with Pohnpean than European ancestry. An oval-shaped external auditory meatus, considered by some (25) to be characteristic of Mongoloid and Pacific Island populations, robust zygomatic bones, and prominent nuchal cresting, all observed in this individual, are consistent with Pohnpean ancestry. Burial 3B, although very incomplete, was found to be commingled with the remains of an adult male (Burial 3) and an adult female (Burial 3A) which were associated with shell beads. The association of these artifacts, which appear to be of native manufacture, is further indicative of native mortuary behavior. Large zygomatic bones and pronounced nuchal development observed in the cranial remains of this same individual are further consistent with Pohnpean ancestry.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, a detailed forensic examination of the human remains retrieved by two Catholic priests in 1977 from Pohnpei,



FIG. 2—An overview of the ten sets of remains that were segregated from the commingled remains brought back from Pohnpei in 1977.

TABLE 1—Summary of major forensic osteology results.

Burial #	Sex*	Age†	Stature (in cm)	Paleopathology	Critical Features	Ancestry‡
1	M	Y–M	162.8	Dental enamel hypoplasia, yaws? (clavicle)	Platymetric index = 75	Micro
2	M	Y–M	—	Osteoarthritis; dental attrition	Pilastric index = 128; Platycnemic = 69	Micro
3	M	Y	161.2	Dental enamel hypoplasia; possible healed fractures in cranial vault and fibula	Platymetric index = 80.6; squatting facets; shell beads	Micro
3a	F	A	—	Yaws? (R. humerus)	Shell beads	Micro
3b	M	A	—	—	Rugged cranial morphology; shell beads	Micro
4	M	Y	172.4	Cranial vault thickened		Micro?
4a	?	2–4	—			
5	M	M–O	—	Dental attrition; periodontal disease; yaws (frontal bone)	Platymetric index = 69.2	Micro
6	F	Y	162.8	Tibia, fibula, and clavicular yaws?		Micro
6a	?	3–5	—	Osteoporosis in frontal and R. tibia		

\*M = male; F = female, ? = unknown sex.

†A = Adult; Y = young adult; M = middle-aged adult; O = old adult.

‡Micro = Micronesian.

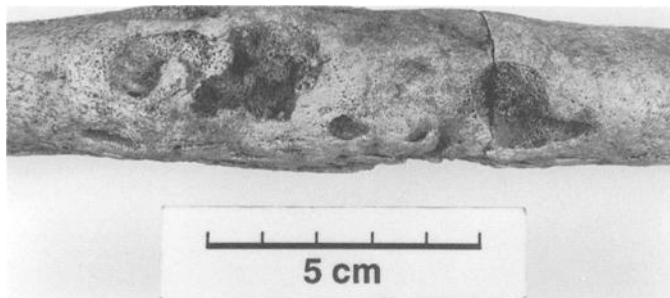


FIG. 3—A closeup of a mid-shaft section of the right tibia of Burial #6 showing lesions attributable to treponemal infection (scale in cm).

in the central Caroline Islands, provides a basis for evaluating the paper's central premise: Can any of these remains be those of Father Alexis Bachelot, the leader of the first Catholic missionary group to the Hawaiian Islands in 1827? Determination of the sex, age-at-death, stature, ancestry, and paleopathology of each of the ten individuals has led to the rejection of the hypothesis that these remains are those of Bachelot. Alternatively, a relatively strong case can be made that most of the remains have features which are consistent with Pohnpean ancestry. The presence of dental and skeletal paleopathology, especially osseous changes that are consistent with treponemal (yaws) infection, and the association of shell beads and other indicators of traditional Pohnpean mortuary behavior, further strengthen the assertion that the remains brought back from Na Islet are those of native Pohnpeans and not those of Father Bachelot.

Future endeavors to repatriate the remains of Father Bachelot should be preceded by a thorough archaeological survey of Na Islet which might help to identify archaeological features and mortuary sites, and quite possibly, Bachelot's grave site. Once located, the excavation should follow standard archaeological procedures of burial excavation.

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Additional information and reprint requests:

Michael Pietrusewsky  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Hawai'i-Mānoa  
2424 Maile Way, Porteus 346  
Honolulu, HI 96822