

ANOTHER FRENCH ÉCU SURFACES IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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In Volume 9 of this journal (The role of a French écu in the colonization of Western Australia, pp. 34–42) the author alerted readers to an exciting development which took place on 1 April 1998. This was the finding of a bottle believed to contain a parchment, and capped with a lead capsule seal which possibly had a coin enclosed. At the time of publication the bottle was being investigated using non-invasive scientific analysis; it had not at that stage been opened.

The progression of events after this was quite tense, but unfortunately it turned out that there was no parchment in the bottle. Notwithstanding the outcome, it is interesting to see how all of this developed.

The Western Australian Maritime Museum mounted an expedition commencing 25 March 1998 with a team comprising Ms Stanbury, Dr McCarthy, Ms Souter, and Ms Sinclair of the Museum, Mr Harrison (UWA), Mr Sheppard and Mr Creasy (metal

detecting), and Mr Kimpton (boat skipper). The team had an idea of where on Dirk Hartog Island they should look, based on the results of previous expeditions and maps.

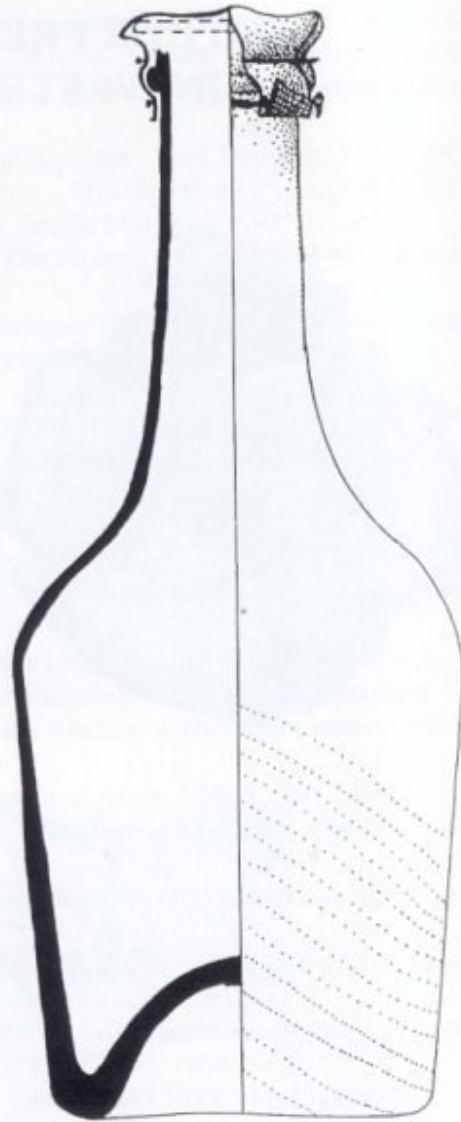
On 1 April 1998 the team recovered, at the north end of the island overlooking Turtle Bay, a complete carefully sealed bottle which was lying horizontally in a uniform sand/limestone deposit at a maximum depth of 42cm. The bottle was taken to Perth for non-invasive analysis. An initial radiological examination indicated the presence of a quantity of sand inside the bottle and some low density inclusions, possibly paper or other organic material.

The bottle is similar to late 18th century wine bottles and is made of thick dark green glass. There was a piece of lead wrapped over the top of the bottle to form a cap held in place by two thin pieces of wire, much like the cap of a champagne bottle.

The next stage was the removal of the lead capsule enclosing the top of the bottle. In it was found a silver écu of 1767, one year later than the previous find, and also of the Bayonne mint. It was decided to leave the coin in the capsule, so it is just as well that it was the reverse that was showing.

The neck of the bottle contained a partially degraded cork bung with possible remnants of a wax seal. With much fanfare it was announced that the cork would be removed in the hope of discovering an annexation document buried in the sand. The latter would be investigated using modern surgical technology.

The document being sought was believed to be associated with the annexation of this part of Western Australia by Louis-François-Marie Aleno de Saint-Aloüarn. Indeed records of his ship *Gros Ventre* indicate that a document bearing an inscription was



Artist impression of bottle section

placed in a bottle, which was buried at the base of a small tree along with two silver écu coins nearby.

On 23 October 1998 a series of CT scans were carried out on the bottle which, at this stage, had not been opened. A week later on 30 October the lead cap was successfully removed, and on Friday 6 November the

cork was removed. The headline of the article in the Saturday West Australian (p. 3) the following day said it all:

“NO MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE”

The organic material in the bottle appeared to be remnants of plant roots, and there was no sign of any parchment, nor of any residue that might be expected if insects had infiltrated it. Of course this was disappointing, but the bottle and its contents might still yield secrets of the expedition. A great deal of analysis has been carried out on the bottle, lead seal, cork and sand contents since then, and there is still more to be investigated.

And where is the bottle now? For many months it was on display at the Maritime Museum in Fremantle, but last year it was taken to the Geraldton Regional Museum for the 25 May – 10 June Batavia Week cel-

ebrations. The bottle was then returned to Fremantle and is being studied in the Museum’s Materials Conservation Department. As for the site of the find, this is now protected under the Maritime Archaeology Act as one of Western Australia’s most important European landing places.

References

Western Australian Maritime Museum Press Release, 5 November 1998.

<http://www.mm.wa.gov.au/Museum/march/dhibottle/dhbottle.html>

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