

Port Louis



PORT LOUIS

**An Archaeological and Historical Survey of
the First Capital of the Falkland Islands**

Robert A. Philpott

with contributions by David Barker and Quita Mould

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available his transcriptions of documents relating to Port Louis including Thomas Helsby's accounts of the Port Louis Massacre.

Permission to reproduce the view of Port Louis dated 1842 and probably by J. E. Davis (cf. Desmond 1999, 73) was kindly granted by Dr Jane Hooker, Andrew Hooker and Christopher Hooker; Jane Hooker sent a digital version for this volume.

The initial archaeological survey was undertaken by David Barker and the writer in three main seasons, 26 November to 12 December 1994, 25 November to 11 December 1995 and 27 November to 7 December 1996, with a further visit from 5 to 6 December 2000 to record newly revealed features. The subsequent technological developments in drone survey and three-dimensional photogrammetry offered an opportunity to enhance the terrestrial survey that was undertaken from 20-30 November 2023. The opportunity was also taken to record finds recovered from eroded surfaces within a sheep pen near the shearing shed.

Grateful thanks are due particularly to Dr David Barker, a leading ceramics specialist, former Keeper of Archaeology at the City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, and a long-standing friend, who was as ever a highly committed and hardworking colleague; his

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Quita Mould kindly examined the photographs of the preserved leather found in 2023 and produced a report that is summarised in Chapter 10.

Permission to reproduce documents in their care was granted by Jane Cameron National Archives, Stanley; Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Brazil; Museo Naval, Madrid; Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla; Staatsbibliothek Bamberg; State Library of Western Australia; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; Archives nationales d'outre-mer (France); National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; and The National Archives, Kew.

David Barker took the photographs of the ceramics in Chapter 10. All other photographs, the archaeological survey plans and location maps, as well as the monograph typesetting, were undertaken by Robert Philpott.

Chapter 1: Early Discoveries in the Falklands and Introduction to Port Louis

The Falkland Islands

The Falkland Islands consist of an archipelago of 750 islands in the South Atlantic Ocean, between latitudes 51° and 53° south and longitudes 57° and 62° west (Woods 2002, 120). The nearest land mass approximately 450km to the south-west is the island of Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of the continent of South America. The group has two main islands, East and West Falkland, that are separated by a strait, Falkland Sound. The islands have a land mass of about 12,000 square km (Strange 1992, 19). The coastline is heavily indented by drowned river valleys that form protected harbours.

The islands have a cool oceanic climate, dominated by westerly winds with an average windspeed of about 31km/hour. The temperature range is fairly narrow with an average mean of about 5°C, average maximum of 9°C and average minimum of 3°C. Annual precipitation averages 635mm (25 inches) (Britannica 2023).

The Pre-Colonial Era: A Prehistoric Human Presence?

At the time of the European settlement in the 18th century, there was no indigenous population on the Falkland Islands. However, various claims have been made for a human presence in the pre-European phase of prehistory (e.g. Buckland and Edwards 1998). Recent research by Hamley has adduced no fewer than five separate strands of evidence to argue for pre-European occupation (Hamley *et al.* 2020). Discoveries of Fuegian canoes have been interpreted by some as evidence that occasional visitors from the nearest land-mass Tierra del Fuego, located 450 km to the west, made the perilous sea crossing whether accidentally from being swept by the Antarctic Circumpolar Current from the Drake Passage between South America and Graham Land Peninsula in Antarctica. The Falkland Current flowing eastward brings driftwood and pumice from Tierra del Fuego and reports of Fuegian canoes found on the shores of Bleaker Island raise the question as to whether they were accompanied by people (e.g. Strange 1983, 27; Hattersley-Smith 1983). Piana has suggested that canoes may have been transported to the Falklands during the European phase. Weddell (1827, 162-163) for instance brought a Yámana canoe when he needed another boat and as Piana (*pers. comm.*) observes, there is no reason to think this was exceptional. A number of stone tools found in or near Keppel Island (including Saunders and Pebble Islands) are considered most likely to have been brought by Fuegians conveyed by the South American Missionary Society to Keppel (Philpott and Eshelman 2004; Philpott 2009, 135-8).

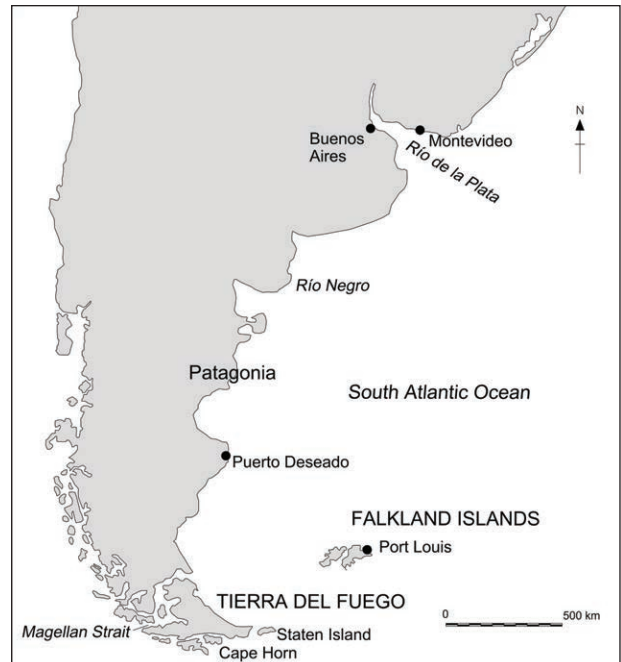


Figure 1.1: Location of the Falkland Islands and South America, with places mentioned in the text

Another stone point manufactured in local quartzite was found at New Island (Hamley *et al.* 2021).

Elevated peaks of macrofossil charcoal in dated peat cores have also been attributed to the early presence of humans (e.g. Buckland and Edwards 1998) but a natural origin in lightning strikes is perhaps more likely in the light of recent research (Mauquoy *et al.* 2020). A further phenomenon is the deposits of mixed bone consisting of species of Rockhopper penguin and Southern Sea Lion that have been found in various coastal localities, including New Island (Hamley *et al.* 2021), and also at Saunders Island by the present writer. Radiocarbon dating of one New Island deposit suggests a pre-European date. However, the dates require adjustment for the Marine Reservoir Effect of organisms, which makes organisms with a marine life cycle appear older than the date of death. Depending on the value used to take account of this, the bone piles may relate to European sealers or to prehistoric intervention by visitors from Tierra del Fuego (Zangrando and Borrero 2022). The absence of cutmarks on the bones is not considered typical of Fuegian (Yámana) processing techniques in the homeland while the lack of stone, bone or shell tools in association with substantial accumulations of bones, other than a single find on New Island, tends not to support a Fuegian origin.

Finally, the presence of the extinct fox-like canid, the warrah or Falklands Wolf (*Dusicyon australis*), which was

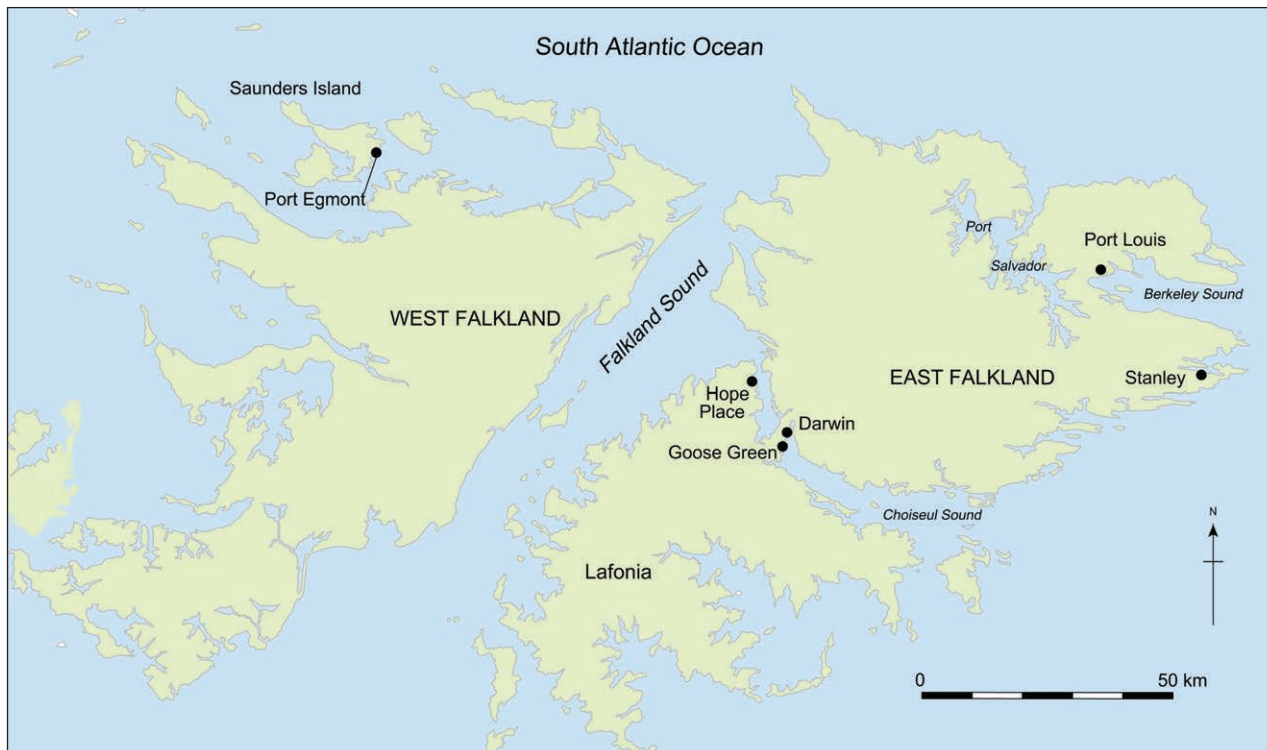


Figure 1.2: The Falkland Islands with location of key sites mentioned in the text

seen by Charles Darwin as a unique example of a large aboriginal quadruped on an island so distant from the nearest continent (Darwin 1968 [1859], 193-194), has been interpreted as a mammal semi-domesticated by Fuegians and transported to the islands (Buckland and Edwards 1998). The nearest relative of the warrah was the extinct *Dusicyon aves* on the South American mainland. Genetic studies have established that the division of the two species occurred about 16,000 years ago, with a margin of error between 32,000 and 8,000 (Slater *et al.* 2009; Austin *et al.* 2012). The sea level in late Pleistocene and early Holocene was much lower than today as much planetary water was locked up in ice. The distance between the Fuego-Patagonian coast and the Falkland Islands was much smaller and the possibility that a small number of hunting or scavenging individuals made the crossing on an ice floe or across a temporary ice bridge cannot be dismissed (Zangrando and Borrero 2022).

Each of these strands has been subject to critical review by Zangrando and Borrero (2022). They conclude 'in our opinion it is hard to accept a pre-European occupation in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands based on the available data' (2022). Definitive proof must either await prehistoric bone, shell or stone tools stratified in securely datable archaeological deposits or unequivocal Fuegian artefacts in association with bone piles that are securely dated to the pre-European contact period. Given the likely ephemeral nature of any potential prehistoric activity, such proof may be elusive. However,

at the time of the first European settlement in 1764 there was no native population on the islands.

Discovery and Early Sightings

Following the voyages of exploration by Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama, Spain and Portugal divided up the continent of South America between them. The line of demarcation in the west was established by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 which sought to divide the spheres of influence between the two great empires. Portugal occupied the eastern continent, notably Brazil, while Spain took amongst others the territories later known as Peru, Argentina and Chile. With the mainland closed off, the British had little choice but to seek new territory and markets further afield in the Pacific. The hope that a northern passage to the Pacific would be discovered eventually proved illusory. The only certain route to the Pacific was the south-west one followed by Drake, Cavendish and Hawkins in the Elizabethan era through the Strait of Magellan.

The early history of discovery in Falkland Islands is controversial and much debated (e.g. Boyson 1924; Goebel 1927; Cawkell *et al.* 1960). Julius Goebel, who undertook one of the first detailed analyses of the early navigators' accounts, acknowledged the impossibility of achieving certainty. 'The records of the early voyages into the South Atlantic are exceedingly meagre, and that those that we still possess are often sketchy and

inaccurate' (Goebel 1927, 2). Recent critical reviews of the early discoverers summarise the state of current scholarship (Pascoe 2008, 197-9; 2022a, 39-104).

In the 18th century, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, the great French explorer and scientist, believed that Amerigo Vespucci sighted the islands in 1502 (Bougainville 1772, 35-6), a view found credible by Boyson (1924, 14-6) but which receives little support from modern scholars (cf. Pascoe 2008, 198). It is widely accepted now that the first discoverers were Portuguese sailors at some point before 1519. The evidence comes from early maps. The Miller Atlas, an illustrated Portuguese Atlas dated from 1519, in the Bibliothèque nationale France, the work of cartographers, Lopo Homem, Pedro Reinel and Jorge Reinel, illustrates a cluster of unnamed islands east of Patagonia which might represent the Falklands. A second key source is an engraving by André Thevet of *Les Isles de Sanson ou de Geantz* dated 1586, which bears a striking resemblance to the islands (de Lasa and Luiz 2021, Fig. 3.2; Pascoe 2022a, fig. 2.14a). The source of his information derives from a Portuguese original from a sea captain in Lisbon who had been with the first discoverers of the islands, a Portuguese who claimed to have accompanied Magellan (Pascoe 2008, 198-9). Pascoe concludes that the Thevet map, together with the appearance of the islands on the Pedro Reinel map of about 1519, points to an otherwise unrecorded Portuguese expedition in 1518-19, which investigated the north coast and Falkland Sound before Magellan set sail (2008, 198-199). As an alternative view, de Lasa and Luiz Pedro date Reinel's map of the southern hemisphere to between 1522 and 1524, although as Destombes argues, this is an updated version (Pascoe 2022a, 74). This represented the Patagonian coastline up to 52° south and included an island in the location of the Falklands, probably based on the map of Andrés de San Martín (de Lasa and Luiz 2021, 46). He had been the pilot of a vessel *San Antonio* that had undertaken reconnaissance from San Julián in July to August 1520. Whatever the precise chronology, from that time onwards, a group of islands called the *Islas de Sansón y de Patos* makes an appearance on maps off the Patagonian coast.

Goebel makes a convincing case for an early visit, though not the first, by an unnamed vessel that he terms the Incognita. An expedition despatched by the Bishop of Plasencia, Extremadura in western Spain, commanded by his kinsman Francisco Camargo, left Sevilla in August 1539, was driven eastward from the entrance of the Strait of Magellan for several days in January and early February 1540 by a storm and arrived amongst eight or nine islands. His description fits well the Falklands topography, vegetation and wildlife. The islands were uninhabited, and they overwintered for six months (Goebel 1927, 17-28; Cawkell *et al.* 1960, 5-6).

Pascoe points out that the fact they had maps showing the islands demonstrates they were not the first to visit.

There is little doubt that the first English explorer to see the islands was the Elizabethan navigator, John Davis, whose vessel *Desire* was driven among the islands in 1592 (Cawkell *et al.* 1960, 6-7; Strange 1983, 47). Davis was engaged in a series of voyages to find a north-west passage to the Pacific which did not conflict with those of Spain and Portugal. His fourth voyage sought a south-westerly route, via the South Atlantic and Strait of Magellan (Savours 2008a, 188-9). On 21 May 1592 Davis parted company from his sister ship under Thomas Cavendish at Puerto Deseado and after waiting three months made their way to the Strait of Magellan in the hope of meeting up with Cavendish. On 7 August they stopped at an island, but by the 14th were driven by a violent storm 'in among certaine isles never before discovered by any known relation, lying fiftie leagues or better from the shore east and northerly from the Streights' (Cawkell *et al.* 1960, 6).

More controversial is the claim of the explorer Sir Richard Hawkins who sailed in the *Dainty* from Plymouth to emulate Drake's recent circumnavigation. He arrived off the Brazilian coast in November 1593, and on 2 February 1594 reached an uncharted land, which he located in 48° latitude, though his master, John Ellis placed it in 50°, closer to the actual position at 51° to 53° south. It has been suggested Hawkins deliberately misplaced the islands to deflect foreign attention (e.g. MacDermott 2008, 281). Davis sailed along the coastline for 60 leagues (180 miles), and observed a 'goodly champion country' with great rivers and a climate temperate like that of England. He saw many fires but they did not speak with the people as they were anxious to reach the Strait of Magellan to continue their voyage. Hawkins named the land Hawkins's Maidenland in honour of Queen Elizabeth (Drinkwater Bethune 1847, 107-8). It has been suggested that he was in fact on the east coast of the South American continent, but this is difficult to reconcile with the statement that on leaving the new land he sailed a westerly course for several days.¹

The Dutch enter the arena with a sighting of the outlying Jason Islands, on the north-western edge of the Falklands archipelago by Sebald de Weert, on 24 January 1600, and the name the Sebaldines soon followed into cartographic history.

The first recorded English landing, by Captain John Strong of the *Welfare* on 27 January 1690, resulted in the English name for the islands. Strong called the channel

¹ The debate over Hawkins's sighting is discussed in Cawkell *et al.* (1960, 8-9).

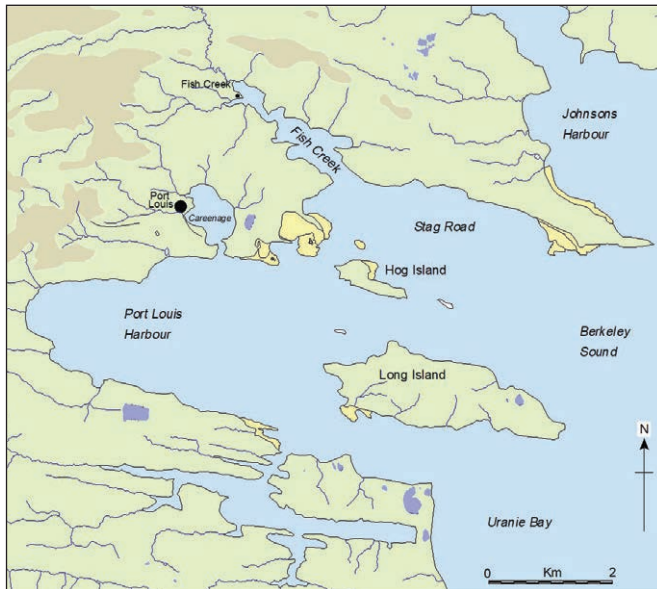


Figure 1.3: Location of Port Louis settlement, the Careenage and Fish Creek

between the two main islands Falkland Sound, after Viscount Falkland, then Treasurer of the Navy. Richard Simson, on board Strong's vessel, noted in his journal, 'the Island if it were not quite destitute of Wood would make a Noble plantation; It bears an English name, a good Harbage, and a great variety of land and Sea Fowl' (Boyson 1924, 30).

During the early 18th century French sailors made occasional visits, and in 1722 the French cartographer Guillaume Delisle bestowed the name Isles Malouines on the islands after the vessels' usual home port of St Malo. From the French was derived the Spanish name *Islas Malvinas* (usually written as *Maluinas* up to 1805: Pascoe 2008, 199) and the 19th-century American whalers' term *Maloon* (Boyson 1924, 33).

18th-Century Voyages of Exploration

Fresh impetus to the voyages of discovery and trade was generated by George Anson's voyage of circumnavigation. In 1739 after the declaration of war with Spain, Anson was despatched with a fleet of six vessels to Manila to harass Spanish ships. He lost two ships rounding Cape Horn, and captured a Spanish ship and sold its plundered cargo in China. In promoting the idea of further trading voyages to the South Seas, Anson recognised the need for a base to supply and refresh themselves before undertaking the hazardous leg around Cape Horn (Gallagher 1964, xxxvi-xxxviii). As the mainland of South America was in the hands of rival empires, an island base off the coast of the mainland would have to serve. Two islands were proposed by Anson, Pepys's Island and the Falkland Islands. Pepys's Island suffered the distinct disadvantage of not existing,

although that was not finally established until the 19th century (Goebel 1927, 234, n. 42). He was on more secure ground with the Falkland Islands. Mindful of the commercial potential of the route, Anson's appointment to the Admiralty in 1745 enabled him to promote the idea of an expedition to discover Pepys's Island, to gain further knowledge of the Falkland Islands and explore the South Seas. The Spanish objected once they became aware of the proposed expedition and Britain, keen to maintain good relations with Spain, abandoned the plan for the moment. Two decades later, the resolution of the Seven Years' War in 1763, which had pitted the great European powers against one another, Great Britain and Prussia against Spain and France, reopened the age of exploration (Gallagher 1964, xxxviii).

Introduction to the Settlement History

From March 1764 for the next eighty years, with only a brief interlude, Port Louis served as the principal settlement in the Falkland Islands. During its relatively short history as the seat of government, Port Louis underwent successive changes in regime, being held in turn by the French from 1764-67 and Spanish from 1767-1811, abandoned by authority between 1811-20, before being occupied by the United Provinces of the River Plate intermittently from 1820-33 and finally from 1833 onwards by the British. After the capital was transferred to Stanley in 1844, the population re-located, albeit reluctantly, to a new site on Port William, and Port Louis was reduced to the status of an outlying camp settlement or farm which it remains today. Unsurprisingly, its remote location distant from the colonial powers it served together with a lack of a stable long-term authority resulted in a fragmented and disjointed history. The colonial authorities and the private entrepreneurs who operated with their approval proved reluctant to commit to long-term investment. The population fluctuated but at its height never rose above 200. The impact of this instability on the development of the settlement is captured in the sequence of maps and views taken under the successive authorities. Thus, the pattern and scale of settlement under the French and Spanish show a very different picture from that under Moody in the early 1840s. Small areas of continuity, such as in the choice of the prominent headland for the location of the seat of authority in the islands, contrasted with near-complete destruction and wholesale rebuilding between the main phases of occupation, while frequent political change, with concomitant shifts in the direction of sources of supply and protection, led to rapid turnover in the population.

There are several reasons for the discontinuity in the settlement and structural history. The settlement experienced the first major disruption with the

transfer of sovereignty from the French to Spanish in 1767, even though the presence of the colonial power on the continental mainland brought the islands closer to the Spanish sphere of influence. However, after the turn of the 19th century declining investment and use of the islands as a penal colony led to interruptions in the supply vessels, a rapid reduction in the number of wild cattle upon which the settlement was dependent for food and a decline in morale of those remaining. The abandonment of the islands, and withdrawal of the garrison, by the Spanish following the uprising against colonial Spain in 1811 caused sharp disruption and resulted in depopulation and the decay of most of the buildings, and the initial abortive attempts to establish a ranching settlement by Louis Vernet were viewed with some suspicion by the British. Although the scale of damage to Vernet's settlement by the crew of the *Lexington* in 1831 is disputed (discussed in detail in Pascoe 2022b, 7-116), the re-taking of the Islands by the British in early 1833, as well as further damage later the same year after the Port Louis massacre saw further degradation of both the infrastructure and the buildings of the settlement. For the first decade under British jurisdiction, there was little improvement. The government provided no incentive to settlers to invest time and energy in constructing solid durable buildings by failing to clarify the terms of their tenure. Their caution was justified by subsequent events. In the event, Moody's initiative to begin to build stone houses in 1843 was rapidly followed by the instruction to abandon the site and move to Stanley. The lack of

continuity of population in the settlement meant that there was little common reservoir of knowledge or historical memory of the site which survived the 22-year gap from the Spanish through the Vernet period to the British occupation. Vernet's agent Matthew Brisbane was a rare exception as he survived long enough to discuss with FitzRoy progress at the settlement under his former employer (Mackinnon 1840, 33).

A comparison of the buildings visible in the French and Spanish maps and views from the early decades of settlement between 1764 and the 1780s with those shown on Robinson's maps of 1842 and 1843 at the end of its life shows a marked discontinuity between the location and the survival of buildings over the eighty-year life of the settlement. Very few buildings survived from the Spanish settlement to be inhabited by the British after 1833, although in a few cases new buildings were constructed out of the ruins of earlier structures. In an unusual example of longevity, Vernet pointed out that the house occupied by the British Governor from 1834-44 had been his own principal residence, but failed to mention that it was in its own right an earlier Spanish construction. Of the original French settlement, even less survived until the British occupation. Indeed, the official list of buildings drawn up in 1842 records only one building thought to have been constructed by Bougainville, Government House. As it turned out, even this was not a French-period building, but was constructed later, probably by Vernet himself.