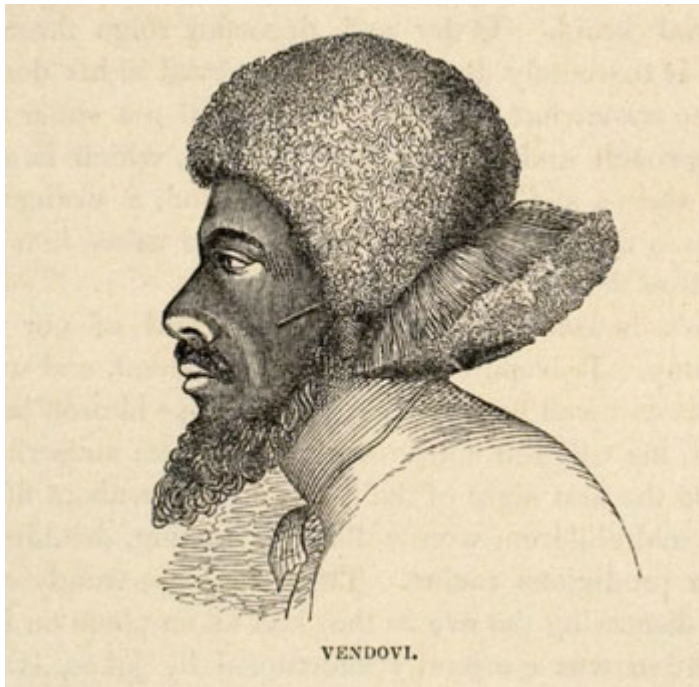


One Man's Skull



Here is an 1880 description of a human skull from the *List of Specimens* on display in the Anatomical Section of the United States Army Medical Museum:

(292) *Cranium M. aet. C.40, Cap. 1495 c.c., L. 187 mm., B. 141 mm., H. 136 mm., I.f. m. 49, L. a. 391 mm., C. 467 mm., Z.d. 145 mm., F. a. 70°.* "Vendovi," chief of one of the Fiji Islands. Received in exchange from the Smithsonian Institution.

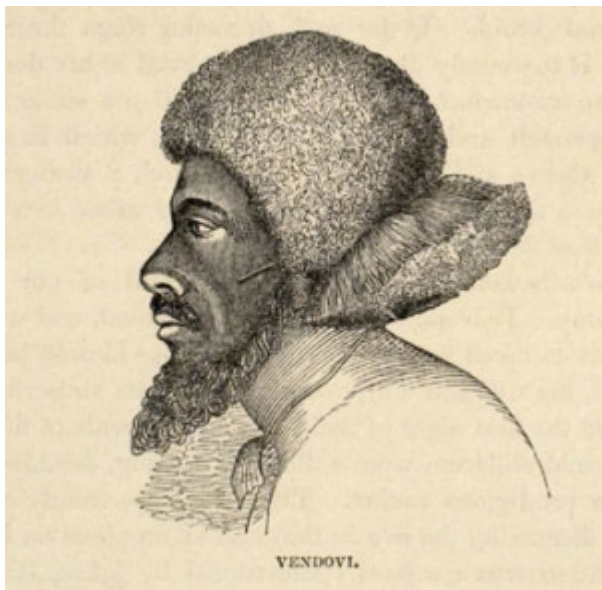
We can learn this much from the description's cryptic phrases: a man from Fiji had died at about age forty. Someone had taken his skull, measured it, inside and out, and logged it into the museum's collections as specimen 292. A reader versed in craniology would picture the skull parsed out in its angles and volumes. Most of the rest of us would stop at the nouns: the man's name, his station, and his origin. Specimen 292 was the skull of a man the museum called "'Vendovi,' chief of one of the Fiji Islands."

Odds are that "Vendovi" never planned to have his skull end up in the United States, let alone in a museum display case. The skull took a great long trip from Fiji to New York and then through several collections in Washington. It is sometimes troubling to find human remains on display, but museum visitors were little troubled by this head, and brochures touted it as one of the museum's star attractions. Perhaps visitors would have responded differently had they had a piece of information dropped from the cataloger's description. Thirty years before it wound up on the Army Medical Museum's *List of Specimens*, one collector had labeled it the skull of "the Feejee Chief and Murderer." Murderer? Murder would have been too sensational to slip into a medical museum's scientific description. But there must be a story behind specimen 292.

Here is the beginning of that story: Vendovi was brought back to the United States in 1842, a prisoner aboard one of the ships of the United States Exploring Expedition. On June 10, 1842, four ships from the expedition sailed into New York harbor. The U.S. Ex. Ex., to use the popular shorthand, was nineteenth-century America's greatest voyage of oceanic discovery. In August 1838, when the small fleet of six ships left Norfolk, Virginia, to sail south to Antarctica, out across the Pacific, back to the coast of Oregon, and then back to New York via the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope, the United States had no Pacific Coast (or didn't have one yet). But just in case, the U.S. Ex. Ex. would demonstrate to the great powers—England, Russia, and France—that the United States was ready to jostle for position in the Pacific.

Controversy swirled around the expedition's commander, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, but even accusations against him, of unjust punishment dished out in high-handed ways, could not diminish the value of the charts his surveyors produced or of the forty-odd tons of natural treasures the expedition's corps of scientists collected.

Vendovi was a prize among the specimens, and the expedition's naturalists knew it. While the ships waited for a pilot in the waters off New York's Sandy Hook, Charles Pickering, a senior member of the scientific corps, wrote to America's preeminent skull collector, Dr. Samuel George Morton, and told him to come quickly to New York. "Our Feejee Cheif [sic] is on his last legs and will probably give up the ghost tomorrow. As you go in for Anthropology, it would be well worth your while to come on immediately, for such a specimen of humanity you have never seen, and the probability is, that you may never have the opportunity again."



"Vendovi." Drawn by A. T. Agate, engraved by R. H. Pease. From Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1842, by Charles Wilkes, U.S.N., vol. III (Philadelphia, 1845). Courtesy of the American

Antiquarian Society.

Pickering knew that his "specimen of humanity" from Fiji was particularly interesting to an "anthropologist" like Morton, who was trying to sort the world's diverse peoples into races. He also knew that any existing systems of racial categorization would have to be adjusted in light of what he discovered on his voyage with Wilkes. The racial diversity of the Pacific was so staggering to Pickering that he began to argue that the standard five races—the Ethiopian, the Mongolian, the Malay, the American, and the Caucasian—could not possibly account for all the people he had seen. Fijians were particularly puzzling; they had dark skin and curly hair but sharp features. Were they a race of their own or a mix of many?

Maybe a live Fijian would help race-expert Morton solve this puzzle. Morton owned a few shrunken heads from the Pacific. These were not difficult to obtain. American whalers occasionally brought them back, even though missionaries and government officials in Australia and New Zealand were trying to stop the trade. But full-size human skulls from Southeast Asia and the South Seas were still rare in American collections. (Morton once complained that there was not a Malay skull to be found in all of Philadelphia.) He knew that most sailors still did not like packing pickled or even cleaned human remains in a ship's hold. Dead bodies went overboard.

But here was Vendovi who had been good enough to carry his own skull all the way from the Pacific. On that long trip, Vendovi became friends with the crewmen. He crops up in their accounts, playing a Jews harp, telling them about love in Fiji, adding to Fijian vocabularies, and telling harrowing tales of a mysterious flood that destroyed island villages (which, his American companions assured him, was caused by an undersea earthquake off the coast of Peru, not by the Fijian gods). Vendovi was especially close to the pilot, Benjamin Vanderford, an old Salem hand who had learned Fijian during his years in the *bêche-de-mer* or sea-slug trade. When Vanderford died, Vendovi's heart was broken, the sailors said. Maybe it was to humor sorrowful Vendovi that Wilkes named an island in Puget Sound "Vendovi Island." Vendovi is still on our maps.

In June 1842, Vendovi was dying in New York harbor. If Morton could rush up from Philadelphia, he might have the rare chance to compare measurements of a man, alive and dead. But Morton was not a man to do anything quickly, and while he dawdled in Philadelphia, Vendovi died in New York. Fortunately Wilkes had made notes. Vendovi was five feet, eleven inches tall; had a facial angle of sixty-seven degrees; a head that measured twenty-two inches; a foot of eleven and a half inches; an arm of thirty-four inches. He had thirty-two teeth and a resting pulse of sixty-five beats per minute.



“Vendovi.” Woodcut; sketched by A. T. Agate, engraved by J. W. Paradise. From *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1842*, by Charles Wilkes, U.S.N., vol. III (Philadelphia, 1845). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

When Vendovi’s heart stopped, New York’s penny press had a field day with the dead man’s story. The *Herald* reported that he had died of “consumption in consequence probably of having no human flesh to eat.” “We have understood that the body of the Fejee chief, Vendovi is about to be embalmed by the learned faculty of the University of New York. We hope Dr. Mott will be prevailed upon to deliver a lecture on his remains.” As far as I can tell, there was no lecture about the remains, but we know that Vendovi’s head, cleaned of flesh, went to Washington; his headless body, to a cemetery in Brooklyn. In just a few years, the specimen skull, tattooed with its number 292, turned up on display in case 37 in the Great Hall of the United States Patent Office, part of the collections of the Smithsonian precursor known as the “National Cabinet of Curiosities.”

From the cabinet, from the pages of the penny press, and from tales of the Wilkes expedition, the story of Vendovi made its way into American culture, coloring the stories of Herman Melville’s white whale and P. T. Barnum’s “Feejee Mermaid,” two of the greatest imaginary creatures to come out of midcentury America.

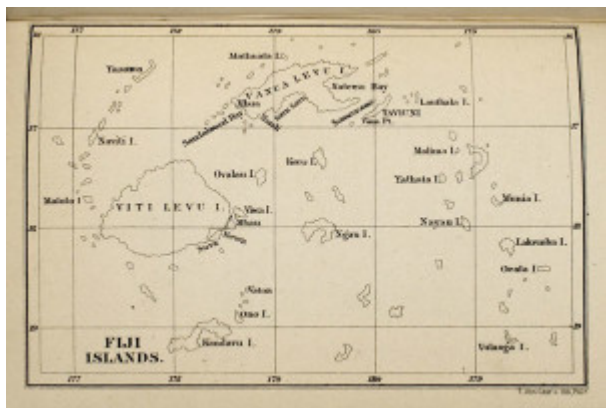
But it would be wrong to leave Vendovi among the creations of the American imagination. His skull’s more interesting “object lesson” may lie in the real man and what we can learn from him about the history of Fiji and Fiji’s encounter with the modern world and its search for profits.

Wilkes had been instructed to map the reefs around the islands of Fiji, an archipelago considered so dangerous—for its seas and its cannibals—that sailors heading there sometimes prepared their wills and insurance companies refused to underwrite voyages. But by the late 1830s, America’s Pacific interests were

substantial enough to compel the government to send Wilkes to chart Fiji's uncharted waters. According to one of his marines, Wilkes had also been instructed "to revenge some injuries and insults that the Chiefs of some of these islands have committed on American ships and citizens." Vendovi, it seems, was wanted for murder, accused of masterminding the deaths of eleven men who were curing "bêche-de-mer" (more commonly known as sea slugs) on a Fijian beach in 1834.

A history of the "bêche-de-mer" trade might be one lesson too many to take from the poor skull, but if it were not for the lowly sea slug (*holothuria*), Vendovi would not have become specimen 292. In the 1830s, Salem traders, who had cut down and sold off Fiji's valuable sandalwood, found they could make good money by drying and selling the sea slugs (which abounded in Fiji's coral reefs). They shipped the dried sea slugs to Manila or directly to Canton, where the prized soup ingredient fetched handsome profits.

But catching and drying sea slugs was a delicately orchestrated, labor-intensive practice, and—even though some Fijians were pleased that it maintained a flow of trade goods into island villages—to insure profits Salem traders meddled their way into Fijian ecology, economy, politics, and labor practices. Traders drew local men from traditional tasks and put them to work harvesting and drying sea slugs.



Map of Fiji Islands. Lithograph by T. Sinclair. From *The Cannibal Islands; Or, Fiji and Its People* (Philadelphia, 1863). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

It did not take long for the sea-slug trade to fall on hard times. In an all too familiar pattern, a commercial market reduced the sea-slug population, although the trade was playing its part in Fijian politics. And the nine or ten men (Americans, Tahitians, Hawaiians) drying sea slugs for the "Charles Doggett" were killed, probably by Vendovi and his kinsmen. It is not entirely clear why Vendovi might have helped murder the men. Some said he was just being a Fijian and giving vent to a uniquely Fijian kind of violence. Others said he was after the "Jew box" that contained the trader's supply of whale's teeth, made plentiful by sea-slug traders but still highly valued by Fijian chiefs.

Whatever Vendovi's role in the murders, Wilkes carried out his orders to arrest the man. He sent Captain William Hudson to capture Vendovi. Hudson invited all the locals to a party on his ship. He was sure that Vendovi would come, but when he did not show up, Hudson locked up all the Fijians and said he would hold them until someone brought him Vendovi. A half-brother and political rival volunteered to go after the man he and his family knew as "Ro-Veidovi." While Americans and Fijians waited through the night for the pair to return, the foreign sailors put on a black-faced minstrel show to entertain their Fijian guests. It is hard to know what the audience thought of Jim Crow mounted on the back of his dancing donkey, but the Americans thought the Fijians were amused.

It is also hard to know what the Fijians made of Ro-Veidovi's trial, particularly the principal evidence against him. The latter had been taken under oath from a yarn-spinning white beachcomber widely known for his vivid imagination (his great boast of 150 wives). While the Fijians wept, the Americans slapped Ro-Veidovi in irons, cut off his great head of Fijian hair, and carried him off to teach him a lesson: "to kill a white man is the worse thing a Fijian man can do." The Americans told themselves that the whole affair was a lesson in American justice. Historians of Fiji think Ro-Veidovi was surrendered for Fijian reasons, one opening salvo in the great wars of the 1840s.

News of Ro-Veidovi's fate in America (if not the fate of his skull) would make its way back to Fiji and become one piece of the story Fijians told themselves in the 1840s as their kingdoms of Rewa and Bau fought bloody civil wars. A prophet had once described the fates of the four brothers of the King of Rewa.

That one would die a natural death, another would float away, two would be killed, the most diminutive of the whole would be made king, and principal chief of Bau would be shot during a war with Rewa.

Ro-Veidovi was the man who had floated away. The Fijians waited for the rest of the prophecy to come true.

The Americans sailed away, although they were not through with violence on Fiji, and an ugly scene unfolded just weeks after Ro-Veidovi's capture. Two Americans were murdered in an altercation, which seems to have happened too quickly for anyone to understand. In their grief and rage, the Americans burned Fiji villages, but as their anger waned, the slaughter of innocents disturbed even the mourning sailors. The most eloquent of them wondered if America's "path through the Pacific is to be marked in blood."

Have we begun to fill out the cryptic caption on specimen 292? Pickering, Morton, and Wilkes thought they had taken the measure of the man and his skull. We might better use specimen 292 to take a measure of American culture in the early 1840s and to begin to chart differing American and Fijian versions of this improbable encounter from the great age of American expansion.

Further Reading:

Nathaniel Philbrick wrote a wonderful account of the U.S. Ex. Ex. in *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, the U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (New York, 2003). Although lacking Philbrick's narrative drive, there is still much of value in William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (Berkeley, 1975). The best accounts of the materials collected by the naturalists of the U.S. Ex. Ex. appear in the essays published in Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, eds., *Magnificent Voyagers: The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (Washington, D.C., 1985). The official accounts of the voyage and related materials are [available online](#).

First-hand accounts from the voyage are scattered in archives around the country. I have used "The Journal on Board the Vincennes" of Simeon A. Stearns in the manuscript collections at the New York Public Library and the Diary of William Hudson from the American Museum of Natural History. Nathaniel Philbrick and Thomas Philbrick have edited *The Private Journal of William Reynolds: The United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (New York, 2004). There is little doubt that Reynolds was the best writer to sail with Wilkes.

To understand the wars in Fiji, it is best to begin with Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago, 2004) and his "The Discovery of the True Savage," originally published in 1994 but reprinted in *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (New York, 2000). Readers interested in the "bêche-de-mer" trade will want to start with Mary Wallis, *Life in Feejee: Five Years Among the Cannibals* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2002), originally published anonymously in 1851, and R. Gerard Ward, "The Pacific Bêche-de-Mer Trade with Special Reference to Fiji," in R. Gerard Ward, ed., *Man in the Pacific Islands* (Oxford, 1972): 91-123.

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