

# The French Revolution and the Politics of Sea Voyaging

Jean Fornasiero and John West-Sooby

In recent years, the historiography of French travel and exploration has been rejuvenated by studies highlighting the influence of maritime voyages on public policy, as well as the key role they played in the evolution of scientific thought and the history of ideas, most notably through the discovery of new lands and peoples, the gathering of natural history collections, or research into tropical medicine. McClellan and Regourd (2012), for example, in their detailed study of the interaction between science and imperial expansion under the *ancien régime*, demonstrate the pivotal role of maritime exploration in what they term the ‘colonial machine’—the complex network of state-controlled organisations that, from the sixteenth century through to 1789, joined forces to build a coherent programme of world domination aimed at countering Britain’s developing colonial empire. As McClellan and Regourd show, French institutions such as the Royal Navy, the Royal Academy of Sciences and the *Jardin du roi* collaborated closely in order to address the problems raised by European colonial expansion: cartography and navigation; the medical care of sailors, colonists and slaves; applied botany and commodity production. In philosophical and ideological terms, the major Enlightenment voyages—most notably those of Bougainville, La Pérouse and Cook—had a major influence on European thought.

But what happens after 1789? Despite some major advances in our understanding of the history of science and of intellectual societies during the French Revolution (e.g. Chappey 2002, 2010), the interaction between voyages of discovery and the political and intellectual ferment of the period has as yet received little attention. The ‘Revolutionary Voyaging’ project was

conceived with the aim of filling that gap by focusing on the 1789–1804 time frame and setting the various state-sponsored voyages that were organised during that period firmly within their political and intellectual context.

It is indeed important to highlight the fact that, notwithstanding the see-sawing fortunes of science<sup>1</sup> and the general political turmoil of the times, several major scientific expeditions were organised and sponsored by the Revolutionary and Consular governments. These were: Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux's voyage in search of La Pérouse (1791–1793); Nicolas Baudin's botanical voyage to the West Indies (1796–1798); and Baudin's voyage of discovery to the 'Southern Lands' (1800–1804). On a more modest scale, but, remarkably, in the middle of the Terror in 1794, the Convention charged the naturalist Joseph Dombey with the mission of taking copper replicas of the new measurement standards, namely the metre and the kilogram, to the young republic of the United States, while also gathering information that might be of use to the French Revolutionary government in its deliberations regarding the constitution. To these maritime expeditions must of course be added the one expedition that did leave a lasting memory in the collective imaginary: Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign (1798–1801), which, despite its hybrid nature, was nevertheless an 'Enlightenment undertaking' whose military objectives were complemented by ambitious scientific aims, its contingent of 167 savants, engineers and artists forming what Edward Said (1979, 84) described as 'the learned division of the army'.

Although we have grouped these expeditions under the generic heading of 'Revolutionary Voyages', it is clear that each was framed by the particular political context that presided over its organisation. That evolving political context is responsible for a number of modulations as these voyages unfolded—moving from the early optimism of the Revolution through the Terror to the Republican moment of the Directory, and ending with the Consulate. Despite their distinctive features and 'moments', however, all four of these major expeditions were characterised by the methodical and programmatic pursuit of science, and all participated in some way in the overall revolutionary project of renewal through the advancement of knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> As C. C. Gillispie (1959, 678) has observed, the revolutionaries considered science to be 'undemocratic in principle, not a liberating force of enlightenment, but a stubborn bastion of aristocracy, a tyranny of intellectual—and especially mathematical—pretension, stifling civic virtue and true productivity, drawing a veil of obscurity between nature and the people'. The academies were abolished in 1793.

The political revolution of 1789 and the grand project of regeneration it spawned raised new questions not just about society and the polity, but also about the way in which different societies should interact with each other (both within Europe and beyond), and about human nature itself. It inspired fresh philosophical reflections, as well, on Man's relationship with nature and the environment. Against this political and philosophical backdrop, a new mode of scientific enquiry emerged during the 1790s, namely disciplinary specialisation and the segmentation of knowledge into discrete, albeit connected, areas of study. These two developments are closely related. The dynamics of the interplay between science and politics are essential to our understanding of the period and are central to our work on this project.

Another fundamental aspect of our approach is the idea that fresh perspectives will emerge by treating the scientific expeditions undertaken during this period as a collective grouping, highlighting their similarities and contrasts, and allowing comparisons to be made across a broad geographical spectrum (the Pacific, North Africa and the Middle East, the West Indies). This comparative dimension, focusing on a well-defined and significant period in French history, is one of the distinguishing features of the project. The historiography of French maritime exploration has tended to fall into one of two categories: the analysis of individual expeditions (and their participants) on the one hand, and the interrogation of the broad chronological history of French voyaging on the other. In the first case, recent major studies have led to significant advances in our understanding of particular voyages, such as those of Binot Paulmier de Gonneville (Sankey 2006), La Pérouse (Dunmore 1994, 2006; Pisano & Deville 2011), and Baudin (thanks to the work conducted by Sankey, Fornasiero, Jangoux & West-Sooby through the ARC-funded project, 'The Baudin Legacy', building on the ground-breaking study of Horner in 1987).

Studies of the broader chronological sweep of French maritime exploration have also yielded important insights, most especially in terms of the founding myth of 'Gonneville Land' and the utopian imprint it left on the French imaginary (Sankey 2013; Dutton 2008; Dunmore 2000). However, while these studies do highlight changes over time—drawing useful distinctions, for example, between the voyages of the Enlightenment and those that preceded or followed—the time periods in question are generally broad and defined by macro-level shifts in terms of the history of ideas.

There have been very few studies explicitly seeking to characterise the voyages of the revolutionary years.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, a body of research in the field of contact history has paved the way for fresh assessments of the anthropological work undertaken during this period. Thanks to the research focusing on indigenous agency conducted by scholars such as Bronwen Douglas, and the records collected by Brian Plomley and others on French-Australian contact history, the dynamics of the encounters between European voyagers and the indigenous peoples of Australia and the Pacific are now understood to be far more complex than is suggested by the restrictive analytical framework of conflict and conquest. (See Douglas 1998, 2008a, 2008b; Douglas & Ballard 2008, 2012; Plomley 1983; Plomley & Piard-Bernier 1993. See also Konishi 2007, 2012, 2013; Harrison 2012; Fornasiero & West-Sooby 2015; Starbuck 2013b.)

This question takes on a particular acuity when considered against the backdrop of revolutionary France, where moral, philosophical and political debates about human rights and the nature of Man formed part of a wider re-evaluation of the relationship between the individual and society, of the nature of 'civilisation', and of the ways in which different societies and peoples should interact. Several (mainly French) scholars have discussed this development but have focused almost entirely on the French/European context: creating a 'single family' of the French peoples (Bourguet 1976); 'civilising' the peoples taken over by the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies (Woolf 1991). There has as yet been no study relating Pacific exploration, for example, to this aspect of revolutionary history. A fresh examination of the cross-cultural encounters that took place during all four of these expeditions, viewed through the lens of the revolutionary project of regeneration and questionings regarding the 'civilising' mission of the Revolution, is central to our re-assessment of the voyages and their impact. In addition, a stand-alone side project is being undertaken by a research associate, Nicole Starbuck, who is seeking to contextualise the early anthropological work conducted by the expeditions in the light of contemporary revolutionary surveys of French 'peoples'.

In terms of organisation and methodology, it is clear, given the considerable scope of this project, that a team-based approach was required in order to bring together colleagues with complementary expertise

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<sup>2</sup> Two notable exceptions are Harrison (2009) and Starbuck (2013a).

covering a range of fields: the political and social history of the Revolution; maritime history; the history of science; the intellectual history of the eighteenth century; collection practices and museology; and the history of contact between European explorers and indigenous peoples during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The research team comprises eight scholars from three continents: Jean-Luc Chappey (Université de Paris I-Panthéon), Alexander Cook (Australian National University), Cédric Crémère (Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Le Havre), Jean Fornasiero (University of Adelaide), Carol Harrison (University of South Carolina), Shino Konishi (University of Western Australia), Nicole Starbuck (University of Adelaide) and John West-Sooby (University of Adelaide). The primary result of the project will be a collectively written monograph—an exercise which in itself is something of a voyage of discovery, as the book we are writing is not simply a collection of separate essays on the different aspects of the topic, but a fully integrated and argued text to which all members of the team are contributing. In this respect, the project itself has been conducted in a republican spirit, with each member of the team contributing his or her expertise for a collective outcome.

To provide a brief illustration of the links that have emerged between the institutional and ideological upheavals of the Revolution on the one hand and the business of scientific voyaging on the other, the next section will examine Baudin's voyage to the West Indies, setting it within its metropolitan political context, and drawing some contrasts with his subsequent voyage to Australia. In both cases, it is the scientific work that proves to be emblematic of the political changes which, from the Directory through to the Empire, had such a profound impact on French social and intellectual life.<sup>3</sup>

### **Nicolas Baudin's *Belle Angélique* voyage (1796–1798)**

In March 1796, Nicolas Baudin offered to donate to the Paris Museum the natural history collections he had been forced to leave behind in Trinidad during an earlier voyage. His one condition was that the government would accept to finance his voyage to the West Indies. The professors at the Museum and the members of the Directory were quick to accept this offer.

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<sup>3</sup> Because of space constraints, the analysis presented here is necessarily limited. For a more detailed study of the political and sociological characteristics of the *Belle Angélique* voyage, see Fornasiero & West-Sooby (2016).

Official approval was granted on 1 July 1796 and Baudin and his team left Le Havre three months later, on 30 September. Baudin was thus on the path to being granted the role to which he aspired: that of a natural history traveller working in the service of the Republic. In order to obtain this status, all he had to do was bring his collections safely back home, in conformity with the instructions drawn up by the government and the Museum.

For the organisation of the voyage, good relations were immediately established between the captain and the authorities. The brevity of the instructions provided by the Minister of Marine, Laurent Truguet, attests to the complete trust he had in Baudin. The respect extended to the commander by the Museum is likewise evident in the instructions compiled by its director, Antoine-Laurent de Jussieu. Jussieu does go into some detail regarding the role that Baudin is to fulfil, but this is because he wants to insist on the absolute authority he is expected to exercise over his scientific team. The captain is designated as the ‘prime mover of the undertaking’ and as its ‘soul and leader’:

It is he who must decide which places will be visited and when, who must preside over all the preparations for the work on shore, supervise the general conservation of all the collections, organise all the means of transport...<sup>4</sup>

The naturalists were considered by the professors as being collectors working in their service. The three naturalists chosen to accompany Baudin to Trinidad were certainly in this mould. Two were employees of the Museum: the zoologist, René Maugé, and the gardener Anselme Riedlé, whose familiarity with the Museum’s botanical collections was well established. Jussieu, for example, said of him that he had ‘in his head more or less the entire list of our current riches’.<sup>5</sup> The third naturalist, André-Pierre Ledru, was well known to the Museum’s gardener, Jean Thouin, for his botanical knowledge and collections.

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<sup>4</sup> *‘C’est lui qui doit décider les lieux qui seront parcourus, les époques où ils seront visités, qui doit présider à tous les préparatifs pour les courses, surveiller la conservation générale de toutes les collections, s’occuper de tous les moyens de transport...’* (Jussieu 1796a). Reproduced in Jangoux (2009, 36).

<sup>5</sup> *‘à peu près dans sa tête le répertoire de nos richesses actuelles’* (Jussieu 1796b; Jangoux 2009, 31).

In his instructions, Jussieu stresses ‘first of all’ the necessity for all to establish ‘harmony, a great unity and a regular disposition to assist one another in their respective areas of expertise’. He advises them to ‘act always in common and to join one another for fieldwork excursions, which will thus be safer and more pleasant.’<sup>6</sup> This theme of unity and solidarity is a feature of the general instructions provided by the Director of the Museum, but also of the individual *memoirs* he compiled for each of the naturalists. The zoologist Maugé, for instance, was enjoined to assist all of the others, but could in turn count on them to help him care for the live animals during the journey home. Jussieu was convinced that this team spirit would prevail because the naturalists, he asserted, had been chosen for their commitment to the mission and their ‘gentle and friendly disposition’. Their gentle temperament would allow them to be ‘always strongly united, ready to assist one another whenever necessary and to rally constantly around their captain.’<sup>7</sup> Jussieu’s desire to see a spirit of fraternity and solidarity reign within the team was reinforced by his insistence that all the naturalists be seen as equals. He specified that they should be ‘treated all three of them as passengers, without excluding the gardener who, by virtue of his knowledge, deserves to enjoy the same conditions and to sit at the same table since he will share the same tasks.’<sup>8</sup>

This spirit of cooperation applied likewise to the hand-over of the collections to the Republic, as the totality of the specimens gathered was to be put at the disposal of the Museum’s scientists, in keeping with the agreement Baudin had negotiated. This is confirmed by the naturalist Ledru, who proudly declared at the end of his account of the voyage that:

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<sup>6</sup> *Ce ne sera pas leur imposer une obligation rigoureuse que de leur recommander, en premier lieu, la concorde, une grande union et une disposition habituelle à s’aider mutuellement dans leur partie respective. [...] Ils feront bien d’agir toujours en commun et de se réunir dans leurs courses qui en seront plus agréables et plus sûres.* (Jussieu 1796a; Jangoux 2009, 33).

<sup>7</sup> *Jussieu ‘ne doute point, d’après la connaissance de leur caractère doux et liant, qu’ils ne soient toujours très unis, disposés à s’aider mutuellement en toute occasion et à se rallier constamment autour de leur capitaine.’* (Jussieu 1796a; Jangoux 2009, 36).

<sup>8</sup> *‘Nous pensons encore qu’ils seront traités tous les trois comme passagers sans en excepter le jardinier qui mérite par ses connaissances d’être sur la même ligne et d’être à la même table puisqu’il partagera les mêmes travaux.’* (Jussieu 1796b; Jangoux 2009, 32).

our expedition to the Antilles is different from those for which the government has incurred the costs by virtue of a circumstance which is particular to it [...]. The collections were rigorously handed over to the Paris Museum. Baudin and his collaborators did not withhold a single living plant, bird, insect, etc. Doubles of samples of dried plants and seeds are the only objects which the botanist and the gardener allowed themselves to share with the Museum, with the full consent of the professors.<sup>9</sup>

Not only did Baudin scrupulously respect his instructions in this regard, but he also fulfilled Jussieu's wish for the Museum to acquire 'a richer collection than all those we have attained to this point'.<sup>10</sup> The professors were impressed by the rarity of certain objects and the great variety of the specimens collected, not to mention the sheer quantity of items that they were able to add to the Museum's collections. The spectacle of the *Fête de la Liberté*, during which the tropical plants brought back by Baudin were paraded through the streets of Paris together with the artistic treasures and objects acquired from different countries as spoils of war, provided confirmation that knowledge and power were the complementary benefits provided by the Republic's travellers, be they scientists or soldiers. Baudin, having now confirmed his credentials as a collector-voyager, was given a triumphant reception.

### A changing world: the voyage to the Southern Lands (1800–1804)

Baudin was thus a celebrated figure when he prepared to leave in 1800 for an even more ambitious scientific voyage—to the *Terres Australes*. Everything seemed to promise the same successful outcome as he had achieved in 1798.

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<sup>9</sup> 'notre expédition aux Antilles se distingue de celles dont le gouvernement avait précédemment fait les frais par une circonstance qui lui est bien particulière [...]. Les collections ont été exactement remises au Muséum de Paris. Baudin et ses collaborateurs n'en ont pas soustrait une plante vivante un oiseau un insecte etc. Les échantillons doubles des plantes sèches et des graines sont les seuls objets que le botaniste et le jardinier se soient permis de partager avec le Muséum, du consentement exprès des professeurs.' (Ledru 1810, vol. 2, 292–293).

<sup>10</sup> 'un envoi plus riche que tous ceux qui nous sont parvenus jusqu'à présent'. Jussieu asserted, on the expedition's return: 'Jamais il n'avait été apporté en Europe de collections aussi considérables en plantes vivantes et aussi bien choisies'. (Jussieu 1798; Jangoux 2009, 491).

In the *memoir* he read to the Institut on 7 and 8 March 1800, Baudin expressed his great optimism for his impending voyage. He insisted in his speech on the values that were shared by all the actors in this great undertaking, values which, for him, had changed little since 1798. While the Republican government had changed form, voyages of scientific discovery still drew their inspiration from the passion for national glory and the conquest of knowledge. If anything, the change of regime had opened new doors, he asserted, as the ‘new order of things’ allowed ‘all those who had no other goal than the progress of science and the public good openly to show themselves.’<sup>11</sup>

Was this simply a nod to the new regime, or a serious misreading of the transformations that had begun to emerge on the political and institutional level since 18 *Brumaire*? Whatever the explanation, Baudin’s optimism proved to be based on foundations that were more fragile than he might have thought. Despite his confidence in the ‘*nouvel ordre de choses*’, he was relying a little too much on the immutability of the institutions and individuals who had presided over the organisation of his voyage to the West Indies and ensured its success. It is true that certain key elements of his preceding expedition were once again in place: Jussieu, who was still in a position of dominance, once again provided the commander with the support of the Museum; the nucleus of Baudin’s team for this new voyage included several key members of his West Indies voyage, both officers and naturalists. However, the fall of the Directory and the advent of the Consulate had ushered in a number of changes whose ramifications would be profound, both within the institutions of the State and in the nature of scientific work.

The differences with respect to the *Belle Angélique* voyage were subtle but significant, and their impact can be seen at every level. For the voyage to New Holland, the authority of the State weighed more heavily in the instructions provided by the minister of Marine. The absolute trust that Baudin had enjoyed for the *Belle Angélique* expedition was no longer in evidence.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘*nouvel ordre de choses*’ (which allowed) ‘*tous ceux qui n’ont d’autre but que le progrès des sciences et l’utilité publique, de se montrer à découvert*’. extract from *Le capitaine de vaisseau Nicolas Baudin aux membres de l’Institut national à Paris, Séances des 16 et 17 ventôse de l’an VIII de la République française [7 et 8 mars 1800]* (Baudin 1800, 2–4; Bonnemains 2000, 30–32).

His itinerary was now very detailed and included specifications regarding the amount of time to be allocated to each location. Also in contrast to the West Indies voyage, the minister's instructions this time devoted little attention to the work of the scientists and naturalists, despite the significant increase in their numbers. The scientific instructions themselves were different in nature and spirit. Indeed, as Michel Jangoux (2013, 306) has noted, the specifications for the zoological and botanical work were 'deplorably banal' ('*d'une affligeante banalité*'). Moreover, certain scientists received private instructions, of which the captain was not always made aware. The trainee-zoologist, François Péron, for instance, would later write that 'the study of molluscs was recommended to me in a private capacity by citizens Cuvier and Lamarck'.<sup>12</sup> The overall impression that emerges from this documentation is one of a breakdown in the spirit of collaboration and solidarity: the scientists are now given a certain autonomy and the work to be carried out in their different branches of specialisation is more fragmented in its conception. In contrast to the *Belle Angélique* voyage, there are few references here to republican values. The refusal of the savants to compose an inscription in Latin for the gardener Riedlé, who died from dysentery in Timor, was a notable sign of the individualism and the sense of hierarchy that prevailed during the voyage to Australia. The fact that Riedlé was given a room on board the *Géographe* had given rise to complaints even before the expedition had left Le Havre. This is a far cry from the egalitarian spirit that had characterised the voyage to the West Indies.

What did unite a certain number of the officers and scientists, on the other hand, was their sense of animosity with respect to their commander. The officers, as we know, considered Baudin to be an outsider and resented his appointment from the outset. The attitude of the scientists was motivated by more profound factors. The trend towards the specialisation of knowledge that emerged during this period of time imbued the savants with a sense of hostility towards those they deemed to be amateurs, even such an experienced and knowledgeable practitioner as Baudin. The prevailing image of the commander during the second campaign, following the sojourn in Sydney, is that of a man isolated and excluded from the work of his companions.

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<sup>12</sup> ...*l'étude des mollusques m'avait été recommandée d'une manière particulière par les citoyens Cuvier et Lamarck*'. On this oral communication between Cuvier and Péron, see Jangoux (2005, 28).

This stands in stark contrast to the sprit of teamwork and inclusion that had characterised the voyage to the West Indies. Baudin expressed his bitterness in a letter to Jussieu:

My opinion, which is often contrary to theirs, on the manner in which they should conduct themselves, study things and reflect upon them, my repeated invitations to them to work hard and offer fewer theories by following the example of Citizens Maugé et Riedlé, whom they deem to be their inferiors, are the reason they stopped reporting to me a long time ago the results of their scientific work. Perhaps they feared the criticism of someone who is not a man of science in their eyes and who has expressed more than once his disapproval of systematic descriptions or wild conjectures. But what seems to me to be the most likely reason is that they thought I might take the credit for the value that they attach to the slightest object that their fertile imagination transforms into something different as soon as they set eyes on it, just as it does when they describe it.<sup>13</sup>

The commander found himself in the midst of a clash of cultures, both political and scientific, for which his preferred mode of scientific voyaging had ill prepared him. The disharmony and the distrust that he had noted within his team made it clear to him that they had no intention of operating within the bounds of a collaborative scientific project, or indeed of a republican-type scientific voyage. Several factors had combined to render the model non-operational: the personal ambitions of the young scientists who refused to collaborate with simple ‘collectors’; the constraints linked to the growing specialisation of scientific knowledge; and the implicit and explicit encouragement of this specialised and individualistic approach at the institutional level. Once the savants sought to exercise their individual scientific authority, the teamwork favoured by Baudin became untenable and

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<sup>13</sup> *Mon opinion souvent opposée à la leur sur la manière de se conduire, d'examiner et de réfléchir, mes invitations réitérées pour qu'à l'exemple des citoyens Maugé et Riedlé, qu'ils jugeaient bien au-dessous d'eux, ils fissent beaucoup d'ouvrage et peu d'esprit, sont cause qu'ils ont refusé depuis longtemps à me faire connaître les résultats de leurs travaux scientifiques. Peut-être ont-ils craint la censure d'un homme qui n'est pas savant à leur manière et qui plus d'une fois n'a pas approuvé des descriptions systématiques ou des conjectures hasardées. Mais ce qui me paraît le plus vraisemblable est qu'ils ont pensé que je pouvais m'approprier le mérite qu'ils accordent au moindre objet que leur imagination féconde dénature en le voyant, comme quand ils le décrivent.* (Baudin 1802).

conflicts multiplied in their severity, since the individuals concerned were not simply defending their territory but were also pursuing irreconcilable ideas of what it meant to be a scientific voyager.

However, it was the shift from the Consulate to the Empire, shortly after the expedition's return in 1804, that delivered the final blow, as political forces conspired with scientific imperatives to occult or deride the expedition's achievements (Fornasiero & West-Sooby 2010). Those who had lived through the tensions played out within the microcosm of the expedition were now subjected to the ideological shift announced by the adoption of a more authoritarian and individualised form of government. This was the social and political reality which presided over the aftermath of the voyage to the Southern Lands. The expedition's leader, who had been acclaimed as a republican hero under the Directory only to become a strongly contested figure during the Consulate, definitively lost his reputation under the Empire (Chappey 2010b), when neither the scientific establishment nor the new government recognised the authority he had once held. As we have seen, one of the compelling reasons for his disgrace lay in the type of voyaging that he had come to represent and in the refusal of his team to endorse it. Baudin's reputation was inextricably linked to the rise and fall of French revolutionary voyaging.



As the contrasting examples of Baudin's two expeditions demonstrate, the social and political ferment of the French Revolution had a significant impact on the manner in which scientific voyages were planned and conducted. Commissioned and completed under the regime of the Directory, Baudin's *Belle Angélique* voyage, in both its intent and its execution, stands as the exemplar of the republican voyage. But was it a model that inspired others? Or, was it, on the other hand, the product of a brief moment in time, as the circumstances of Baudin's Australian voyage may incline us to conclude? The detailed study of the range of state-sponsored French voyages of the revolutionary era that is currently under way will no doubt bring a response to these questions, and to many others. Above all, it is hoped to determine whether or to what degree scientific voyaging came to operate a fusion between science and politics, either by overtly engaging in the 'civilising' mission of the Revolution, or by actively pursuing its ideal of renewal through the advancement of knowledge.

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