



**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION MONOGRAPH 19:**  
**Michael W. Graves and Roger C. Green (eds), *The Evolution and Organisation of Prehistoric Society in Polynesia***

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THE EVOLUTION AND ORGANISATION  
OF PREHISTORIC SOCIETY IN  
POLYNESIA

Edited by Michael W. Graves and Roger C. Green

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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION  
MONOGRAPH

# A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE TONGAN MARITIME CHIEFDOM ON THE LATE PREHISTORIC SOCIETY OF 'UVEA, WESTERN POLYNESIA

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Continuous prehistoric and ethnohistorical research on the islands and archipelagos of western Polynesia and Fiji began more than 30 years ago. Based on the numerous programmes carried out, especially in Samoa (Green and Davidson 1969, 1974; Jennings *et al.* 1976; Jennings and Holmer 1980) and Tonga (Dye 1987; Groube 1971; Kirch 1988; Poulsen 1967, 1987), an outline of its regional cultural evolution was constructed in the 1970s (Green 1974; Kirch 1984).

The cultural origin of western Polynesians is found in the Lapita cultural complex dated to the second half of the second millennium B.C. The first third of the regional chronology is characterised by the evolution of earthenware derived from the Lapita tradition (Green 1979, 1981). The abandonment of the production of ceramics during the first millennium A.D. marks the beginning of a period called the West Polynesian "Dark Age" (Davidson 1979, 1989). This period, little known in terms of archaeological sites throughout the region, is thought to cover approximately 1000 years.

During this millennium a centralised polity of stratified social type emerged in the island of Tongatapu, in the south of the Tongan archipelago, known as the Tu'i Tonga dynasty (Gifford 1929). This dynasty, after having conquered and integrated various smaller chiefdoms of Tongatapu towards the end of the first millennium A.D. and the beginning of the second millennium A.D., attempted at various times to extend its political control to the other islands of western Polynesia and Fiji, and to construct links as far as eastern Melanesia. The great ability of organisation within this centralised political system has enabled some authors to speak of the Tongan maritime chiefdom (Guiart 1963; Kirch 1984).

Oral traditions of the islands of West Polynesia concerning this empire are in agreement. They give an independent historical foundation to the study of Tongan expansionism covering the middle of the second millennium, between the 12th and the 17th centuries A.D.

My aim is to present a short analysis of the impact of the Tongan maritime chiefdom on the late prehistoric cultural evolution of the Polynesian society of 'Uvea (or Wallis Island). This analysis uses the local oral traditions (Burrows 1937; Henquel n.d.), and archaeological and historical results collected in 'Uvea by Kirch in the 1970s (1975) and others assembled by a French team of ORSTOM and CNRS during the 1980s (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984; Frimigacci and Vienne 1984).

## 'UVEAN CULTURE HISTORY

'Uvea is a small low basaltic island of volcanic origin approximately 15 km long, surrounded by a lagoon. It is situated in the north of western Polynesia, west of Samoa and north-east of Fiji (Fig. 5.1). Vegetation is predominantly second growth forest and low shrubs. The traditional economy is based on the cultivation of wet taro in raised pondfields located between the beach and the uplands. Additional food production includes the cultivation of dry crops (taro, yam) and harvesting products of arboriculture (coconut, breadfruit). The island, which now has ca 10,000 inhabitants, is politically divided into three districts (Fig. 5.2), ruled by local councils of chiefs under the leadership of a paramount chief, the Lavelua (glossed here as 'king') who resides in the capital Mata Utu.

'Uvea was first settled ca 1000 B.C. by people of the Lapita cultural complex (Frimigacci and Vienne 1987:117; Sand 1991:87-89). The ceramic chronology of the island covers approximately 1500 years. During the middle of the first millennium A.D. all districts of the island were inhabited and most of the fertile lands had already been placed under cultivation. By this time much of the original primary forest had been removed and replaced by managed vegetation. Refuge zones existed at that time in the central unsettled part of the island, an indirect sign of conflict and intergroup aggression (Sand 1991:90).

The end of the ceramic period marks the beginning of a 'Dark Age' in the cultural chronology of 'Uvea. This little



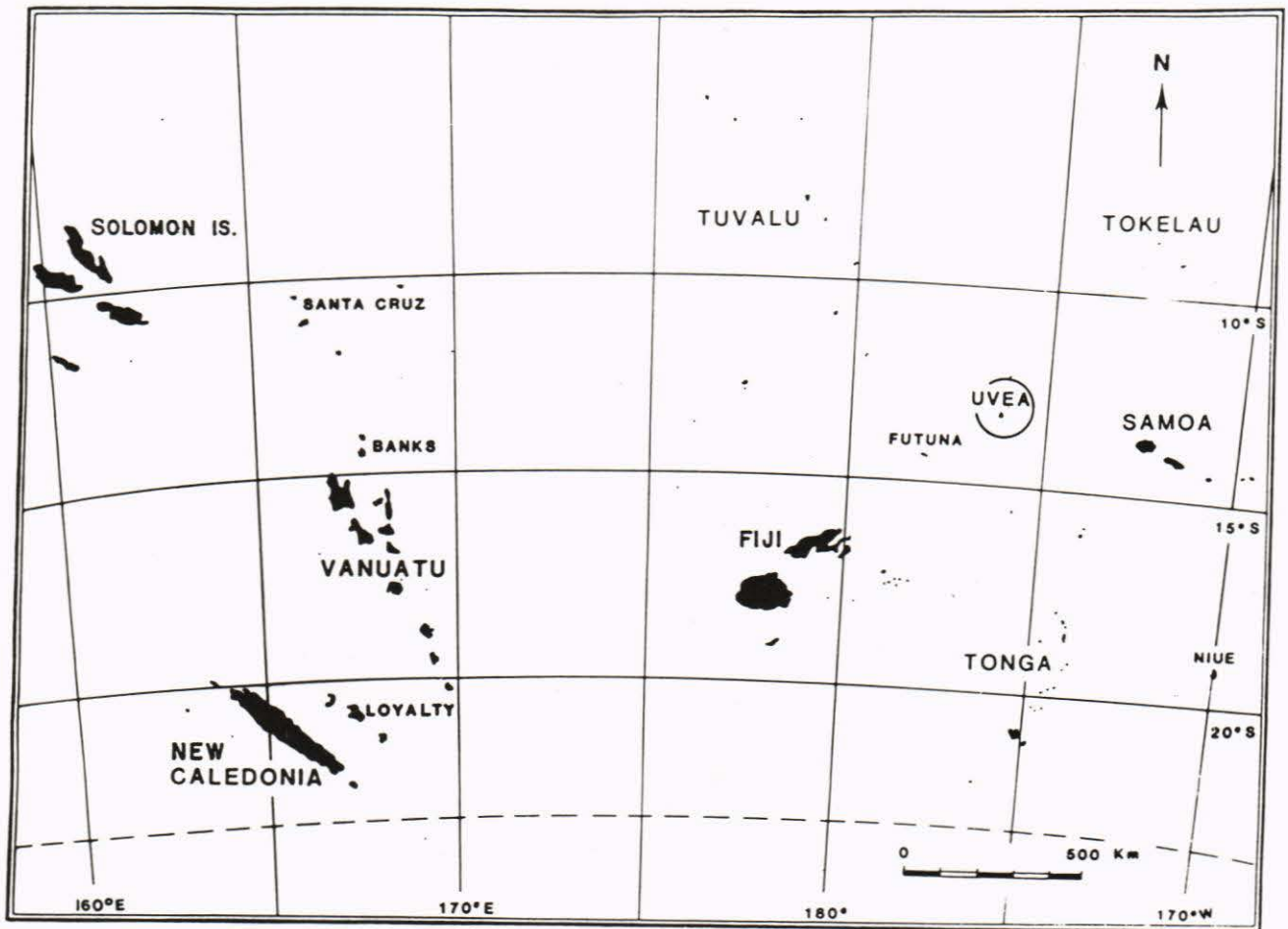


FIGURE 5.1. Location of 'Uvea in the south-western Pacific.

known period is politically characterised at its finish by the division of the island into segments under different independent chiefs.

The oral traditions of 'Uvea extend, according to genealogical accounts, back to approximately the 15th century A.D. They describe the first settlement on the island (said to be previously uninhabited) by Tongans, a dependency of the local leaders on the power of Tu'i Tonga during the next two centuries, and the slow evolution of the 'Uvean political system towards independence during the 18th century, followed by rivalry between local families for power during the recent era (Henquel n.d.).

#### TRADITIONAL HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

##### *Early contacts between Tongatapu and 'Uvea*

One characteristic of 'Uvean oral traditions about its first Tongan inhabitants is the number of conflicting accounts

relating to the appearance of several major chiefly titles. Often quite different persons of rank appear in the accounts, ruling well defined political units with absolute control. These political units are all located in the southern part of 'Uvea, among the localities of Ha'afuasua on the east coast (title of Hoko) and between Vaimalau and Utuleve on the west coast (title of Tu'i Alangau).

A group of high graves, surrounded by stone slabs can be found on the promontory overlooking Vaimalau, called Atualu (Fig. 5.3) (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984:Fig. 49; Sand 1990:24-32). Each is ca 20 m long and oval in form. The central part of each grave consists of sand in which skeletons are buried in a lengthwise position. However they lack burial vaults (Sand 1990:9-35).

The group of Atualu burial mounds is the only important site in 'Uvea that cannot be precisely attributed to an ethnohistoric context by the oral traditions, except for an account of a mythical king which is genealogically unclassifiable (Burrows 1937). However, one of these graves,



excavated in 1983 (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984; Sand, in press), has been dated to approximately the 14th century (Frimigacci, pers. comm.). In the north of 'Uvea during the same period, graves are all small and low.

In type, these high burial mounds are similar to those found in Tongatapu dating to the 12th-14th centuries (McKern 1929; Sand 1986). Information from 'Uvean oral traditions indirectly indicates the existence of political units allied with the Tongans in the southern part of 'Uvea at a time before the 15th century. Taken together, the archaeological and oral data point to the establishment of some form of political control before 1400 A.D. Regular interaction seems to have occurred at least one or two centuries earlier and Tongan immigrants probably established settlements at that time in the south of 'Uvea, beginning the transformation of cultural traditions for this part of the island.

#### *Invasion of the Tu'i Tonga Kau'ulufonua*

With the above as background, the rapid development of political control in the southern part of 'Uvea by the Tongans during the 15th century, described by the oral traditions, is an understandable outcome. That episode of 'Uvean history took place during the war of conquest pursued by the Tu'i Tonga Kau'ulufonua through many of the islands of western Polynesia and in the eastern part of Fiji. This is an oral tradition known throughout the entire region (Herda 1988:50-51; Rutherford 1977:35). Kau'ulufonua, the 24th Tu'i Tonga according to Gifford's (1929) chronology, used the assassination of his father as an excuse to pursue the fleeing murderers, while at the same time trying to take control of autonomous or independent islands. After having invaded Ha'apai, Vava'u and Niuatoputapu, the Tongan fleet went on to 'Uvea.

The Tongans probably landed in the south of 'Uvea without much violence. Local chiefs with traditional alliances probably allowed them to disembark, causing certain other chiefs to flee to the north of the island where they remained in exile.

Even though the land belonged to local independent chiefdoms not subject to the invaders, oral tradition relates the division of the island between three title holders of Tongan origin, Hoko, Kalafilia and Folau-Fakate. Traditions also relate the establishment of a paramount chief, affiliated with the Tu'i Tonga family, under whom a centralised polity was created.

In order to reinforce this first colonisation by Tongan warriors in the south of 'Uvea, entire families were subsequently transported from Tonga. To subdue the rebellions of the northern chiefs and to protect the new

colony, two groups of warriors, the Ha'amea and the Ha'avakatolo were also sent with the second paramount chief Nga'asi'elili. This chief was the founding member of the Tu'i Ha'a Takalaua and was probably sent from Tongatapu after a political upheaval in which the younger brother of Kau'ulufonua usurped the power of the Tu'i Tonga (Herda 1988:51-52).

#### *Tongan subjugation of the south of 'Uvea*

Archaeological remains from this period (A.D. 1600-1700) of the history of 'Uvea are particularly numerous (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984; Sand, in press). In order to protect the southern population, the Ha'amea and the Ha'avakatolo groups in approximately 100 years constructed, on this island without real topographic relief, a dozen large fortifications and fortified residences. These structures consisted of basaltic stone walls as much as 4 m high and 10 m wide, surrounded by deep ditches. These fortified places were connected by networks of roads whose construction covered the southern portion of 'Uvea (Fig. 5.4; Sand 1991).

In order to feed this new population, large parts of the land were brought under cultivation. The archaeological remains reflecting this intensification of horticultural production are particularly visible as a great number of abandoned walls between Utuleve and the fort of Lanutavake (Sand 1991), which are characteristic of the Polynesian divisions of intensively cultivated garden areas (Yen 1973:144-146).

In addition to this impact, the Tongan chiefs radically transformed the island's political system. They installed, in brutal suppression of the old independent chiefdoms, a central council of chiefs based on the Tongan system, one which used the same vocabulary. At the head of this hierarchical council was the paramount chief, issuing from a collateral branch of the Tu'i Tonga family. Following the paramount chief were a number of chiefs with hereditary titles, the *kau aliki*, chosen from among the recently arrived Tongan chiefs as well as from chiefs who had lived in the south of the island for several generations. After the initial period of Tongan control, it was they who had the power to choose the paramount chief and also to dismiss him.

Around this council were grouped the other title holders, the chiefs of the villages (*matua fenua*), the families of warriors and the *matupule* (chief's ceremonial attendant). Theoretically more powerful than the paramount chief, was the lineage of the Tamaha'a, descendants of the sister of the paramount chief, who had the right of the 'Fahu' as in Tongatapu. This right allowed them to appropriate food provided for the paramount chief during feasts (Burrows 1937:63). In order to maintain links between Tonga and

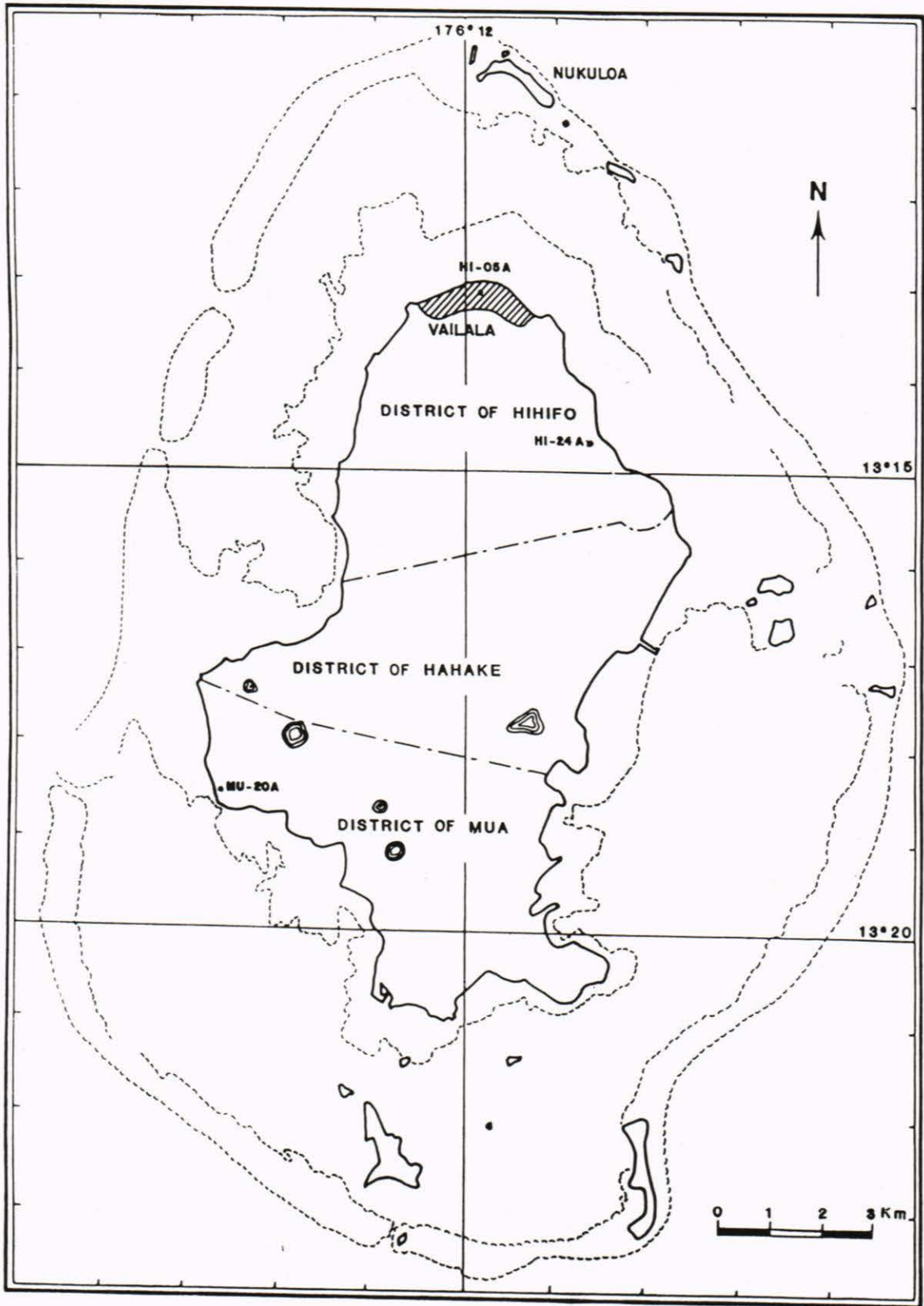


FIGURE 5.2. Map of the island showing three principal districts.



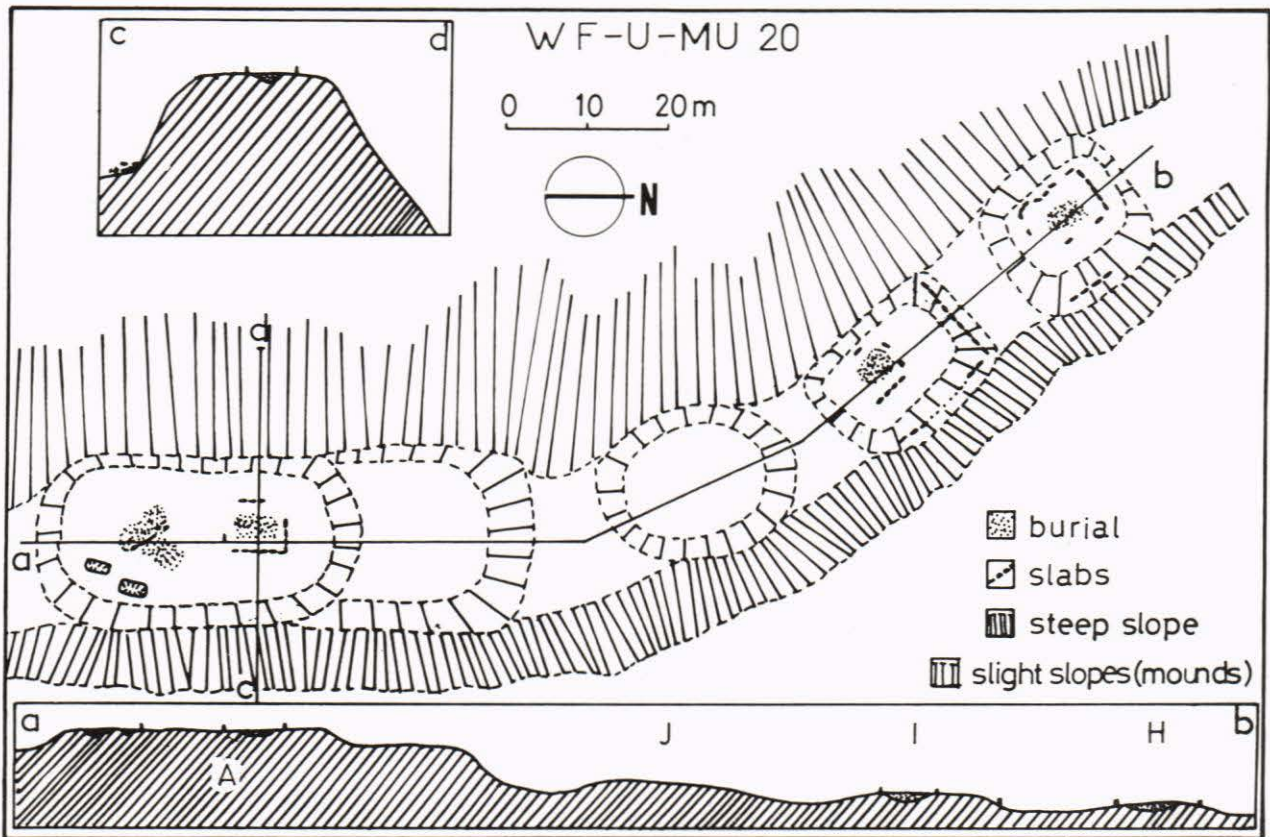


FIGURE 5.3. Partial plan of the site of Atualu, with the high graves H, I and A, and the house platform J.

'Uvea, Tongan wives were sent to the paramount chief and the title holders.

The council was originally answerable to the Tu'i Tonga in Tongatapu, and every year had to supply food as a sign of 'Uvea's dependence on the central power. This dependence could go as far as the appropriation by the Tu'i Tonga of goods belonging to inhabitants of 'Uvea. This is how the great canoe of Lomipeau, constructed in 'Uvea and capable of carrying hundreds of people according to the oral traditions, was requisitioned by the Tu'i Tonga Uluakimata I (also called Telea) and incorporated in the Tongan fleet. This canoe was used, according to the oral traditions, to bring huge basaltic stones from 'Uvea to Tongatapu to build the burial grave Paepae-o-Telea in Mu'a (Burrows 1937:24).

The Tongans also influenced 'Uvean settlement patterns, with the emergence of divisions of the land into 'api, a Tongan term which probably replaced the older term of *kainga*. Tongans also had an influence on language, with the reshaping of the original 'Uvean Samoic-Outlier language by extensive borrowing from Tongan.

#### *Resistance in the north of 'Uvea*

The abrupt imposition of a centralised power by Tongans was not realised without major confrontation. It appears that the Tu'i Alagau, a chief of probable Tongan origin who had been long settled in Utuleve, managed to preserve a certain independence in exchange for his military help.

However, the non-Tongan local population living in the north of the island, along with refugees arriving from the south, did not willingly accept the imposition of a foreign centralised power. The first attempts to reassert control over 'Uvea forced the Tongans to construct fortifications. During the 16th century, a coalition of chiefs in the north attempted to crush the Tongan domination during a great war between the north and the south called the Molihina war. With the help of the descendants of the Ha'amea and the Ha'avakatolo and the warriors of the Tu'i Alagau, Hoko, Fakate and Kalafilia, the Tongans succeeded in the last battle. The population of an entire village was killed and this event marked the end of the anti-Tongan resistance (Burrows 1937:31; Sand 1991).

Culturally and socially, this war marks the collapse of the ancestral political system of small independent chiefdoms and the acceptance of a stratified centralised power with title holders for the entire island of 'Uvea. From that time on Tongan immigrants appear in oral traditions of the northern settlements of the island.

*The archaeological evidence*

Tongan settlement in 'Uvea and the creation of a strong centralised political system led not only to a probable intensification in agricultural production and the construction

of fortifications linked by a network of roads, but also stimulated the appearance of monumental structures as markers of rank.

Among the most outstanding monuments are those inferred to be residences. Numerous raised dwelling platforms built out of basalt blocks have been found in the south-western part of the island, especially in Lauiki. These are the remains of old villages constructed near horticultural gardens. But some important title holders constructed far larger monuments, needing a sizeable workforce. Three examples of particular importance are presented below.

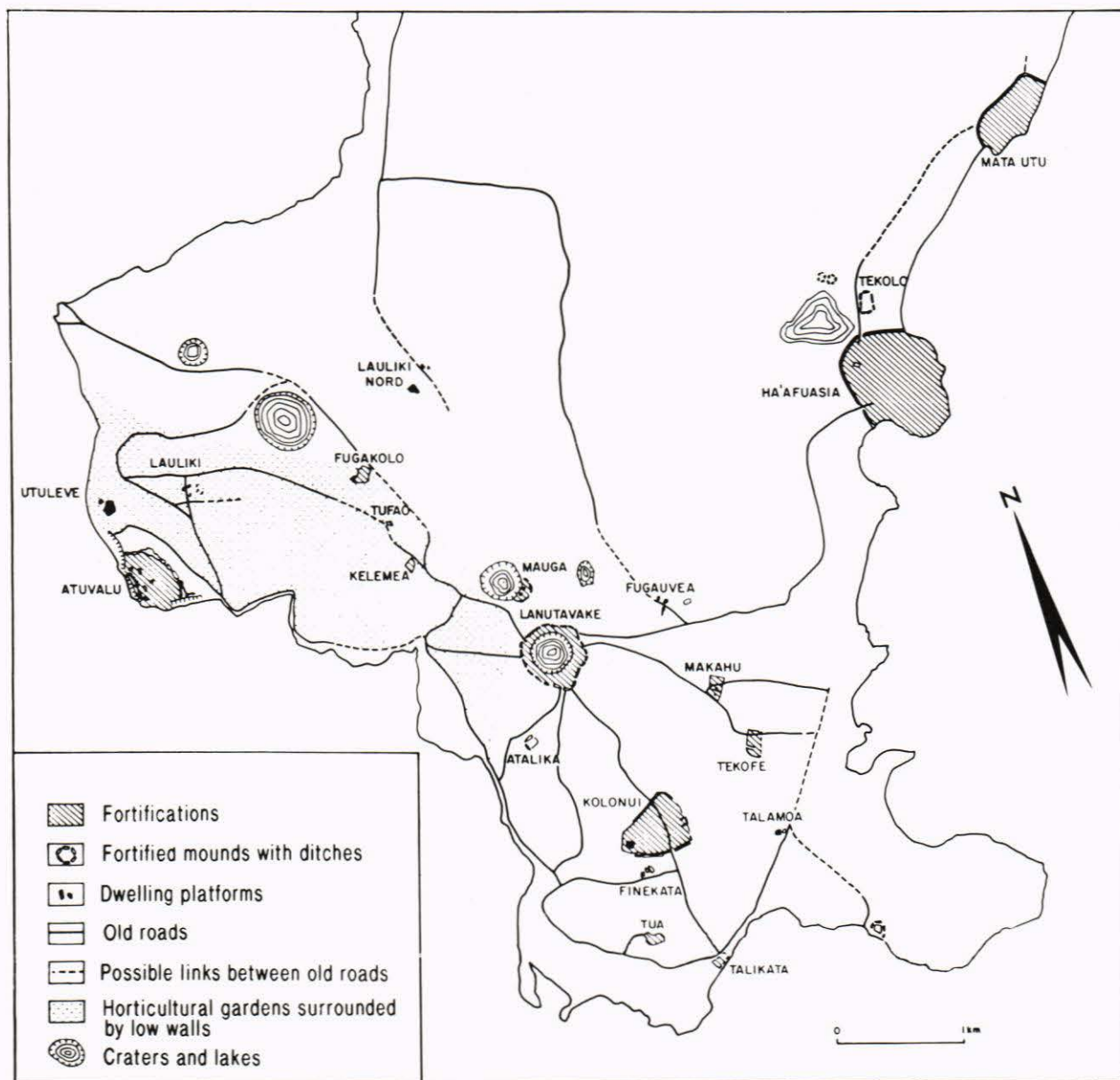


FIGURE 5.4. Southern 'Uvea showing archaeological structures related to the Tongan presence (after J.P. Siorat, in Frimigacci et al. 1984).



*Talietumu.* The stone platform of Talietumu was constructed by Tongans in the interior of the fort of Kolonui at the beginning of their occupation in 'Uvea (Burrows 1937). This monument is 80 m long, 45 m wide, with a maximum height of 5 m. It is constructed entirely of basaltic stones (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984). The platform was protected by watch positions placed on both sides of an access ramp leading to the upper level. A large ceremonial house was located at one end of the central platform, the base of which is still visible. The construction of this monument involved the quarrying, transport and erecting of a stone platform whose total volume is estimated to be ca 9000 m<sup>3</sup>, indicating a political capability to motivate and organise a large workforce.

*Utuleve.* Two other great monumental structures constructed of basaltic blocks are located at Utuleve and are traditionally regarded as platforms belonging to the titles of Tu'i Alagau and Kalafilia (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984). The first platform, today very damaged, is 110 m long, 90 m wide and more than 3 m in height, with a total volume of ca 30,000 m<sup>3</sup>. It is regarded as the dwelling place of Kalafilia, one of the three major titles of Tongan origin. The second platform, called Malama Tagata (torch man), is 35 m long, 15 m wide and ca 1.5 m high, with a volume estimated at ca 800 m<sup>3</sup>. It is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of a Tu'i Alagau.

*Burial mounds.* In addition to the dwelling platforms and fortifications, another type of monumental structure introduced by the Tongans to 'Uvea was the large burial mound in which the paramount chiefs and title holders were interred (Frimigacci *et al.* 1984:154-163; Sand 1986). Most of these, as much as 30 m long and more than 3 m in height, contained a burial vault made of basaltic or beachrock slabs. Individual pieces of the vault were sometimes more than 4 m in length.

There is no doubt that this burial tradition is of Tongan origin. This is confirmed by the relationship in oral accounts of these mounds with burial vaults and Tongan title holders, and by the existence of another form of burial in the north of 'Uvea. The latter are characterised by small low graves of oval form, mostly without surrounding slabs (Sand 1986), also in use at the time of Tongan colonisation.

Elevated mounds with a burial vault are mostly in the south of the island. Furthermore, oral traditions show that mounds with a burial vault in the north are related to families of Tongan origin (Fig. 5.5; Sand 1986).

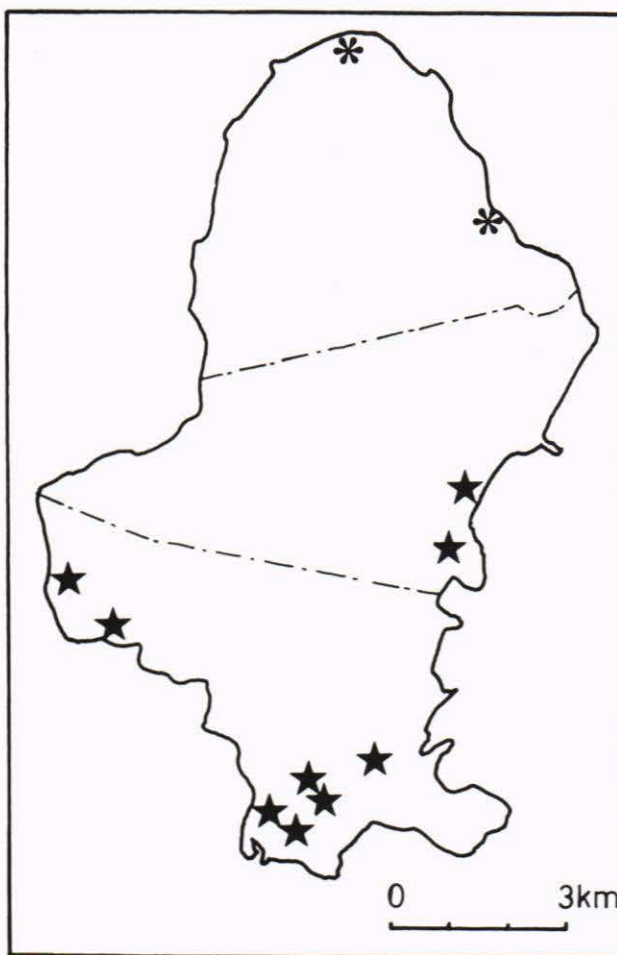


FIGURE 5.5. Map of 'Uvea showing location of the high burial mounds with burial vault.

#### *Collapse of the Tongan maritime chiefdom and political independence*

During the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, the progressive loss of power by the lineage of the Tu'i Tonga in Tongatapu led to the slow collapse of the Tongan maritime chiefdom. One after the other tributary islands seceded and punitive expeditions sent from Tongatapu to reestablish control could not crush the rebellions.

The progressive disappearance of direct rule of the Tu'i Tonga on 'Uvea led to the development of rivalry for power between the various important families of Tongan origin. Ruling dynasties of paramount chiefs, descendants of Tongan families, appeared at that time. Their theoretical autocratic power was offset by the power of the central council which could dismiss them, but above all by the plots of their rivals and junior families. These often led to killings (Burrows 1937; Sand 1991). At the same time, the island divided into



two blocs, the south being in possession of the central power and the north being a land of exile and refuge. Political relations with Tonga were not entirely abandoned, and it was, for example, a tradition for the paramount chief to receive a wife of rank from Tonga, and for the title holders of 'Uvea to marry their daughters to Tongan chiefs.

The arrival of European missionaries in the middle of the 19th century consolidated a Polynesian political system that had been in constant transformation, giving official status to the hierarchical divisions of that period.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted here to propose a first analysis of the impact of the Tongan maritime chiefdom on the late prehistoric society of 'Uvea, using oral traditions along with archaeological and historical data. Even today, knowledge of the influence of the Tongan political system on 'Uvea is essential to understanding the relations which exist in the traditional society of this small island of West Polynesia.

During the 15th and 16th centuries the Tongans were significant in the radical transformation of the ancestral society on 'Uvea. This prehistoric society was characterised by small autonomous polities which were merged into a hierarchical society with strong titles. I have attempted to show there are indications that this change was probably facilitated by pre-existing links between the south of 'Uvea and Tonga. This indicates an old phase of important inter-island relations in western Polynesia in addition to the link between Tonga and Samoa already known during the first half of the second millennium A.D.

Oral traditions and the archaeological structures still extant in the southern part of 'Uvea and dating from the Tongan occupation indicate a large movement of population between Tonga and 'Uvea. It is possible to ask, looking at this data, if one of the reasons for the conquest-war of the T'ui Tonga Kau'ulufonua in the 15th century was not, aside from the wish to settle possible pretenders in remote colonies, to solve a problem of overcrowding in the island of Tongatapu.

Green, in an attempt to study the prehistoric population of Tonga (Green 1973:73), has shown that the maximum carrying capacity of the island of Tongatapu was probably achieved before the mid-second millennium A.D. This interestingly coincides with the period of the supposed movement of population to 'Uvea and possibly other tributary islands.

It should also be recognised that there are similarities in the masonry architecture of 'Uvea and Samoa. Systematic comparisons between the two archipelagos would probably shed new light on the study of interaction between the

islands of western Polynesia. It might also suggest more complex patterns of relationships than those proposed here. None of the 'Uvean constructions have yet been dated by archaeological methods; when they are the interpretation presented here may require revision.

The final point in which the 'Uvean case is relevant on a regional scale, concerns the tradition of the construction of fortifications (*kolo*), in Tonga. It is commonly accepted that these fortifications appeared in Tongatapu in the transition from prehistory to history, during the civil wars that developed at the end of the 18th century and in the early 19th century. The numerous examples of 'Uvean *kolo* (Kolonui, Tekolo, etc.) associated with the Tongan presence in the 15th and 16th centuries, clearly suggest the Tongans practiced the tradition of building fortifications well before the 19th century. This is not really surprising, as some fortifications in Fiji (Lakeba, Taveuni) and West Polynesia (Futuna) are dated to the end of the first and beginning of the second millennium A.D.

A detailed study of the genealogies of the great titles of 'Uvea remains to be completed. It will clarify the influence of each family on the local history of this island during the last few centuries. It will also permit us to better understand the internal transformations of the society during this important period, starting with the incorporation of 'Uvea into the Tongan maritime chiefdom in the 15th century.

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