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# ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY: THE STUDY OF TONGAN PREHISTORY

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## Introduction

The study of prehistory in the Pacific has drawn extensively from anthropological and historical studies and source materials. This paper focuses on the archaeology of the Tongan islands. An island by island overview of the archaeological work that has been undertaken there is provided and I focus on the effects of the four following categories of source material for the study of Tongan prehistory:

1. The records of early European explorers.
2. The record left by the colonial administrator Basil Thomson.
3. The Bishop Museum monographs of the Bayard Dominick expedition.
4. The post-World War II archaeological enquiry.

## The Niuas

The modern nation of the Kingdom of Tonga consists of three main island groups: Tongatapu and 'Eua, the Ha'apai islands, and Vava'u. There are also outlier islands in the northernmost reaches of the kingdom. Of these, the island of Niuatoputapu has come under the most extensive archaeological scrutiny. During 1970-71, a field survey was undertaken on the island by Garth Rogers and a site record of archaeological monuments were an incidental result (Rogers 1974). Rogers highlighted the following categories of structures:

1. Mounds and platforms.
  - 1.1. Named *'esi* or commemorative flat-topped platforms for chiefly persons.
  - 1.2. Named *sia* and un-named, un-faced earth mounds.

1.3. Earth-mounds with some form of stone facing or edging (*paepae*) in the form either of vertical coral slabs or of small stones placed on edge.

1.3.1 Named *langi* or chiefly burial mounds.

1.3.2 Unnamed, square or rectangular mounds with *paepae*.

1.3.3 *Fa'itoka* or low earth-mounds.

1.3.4 *Fa'itoka* or high earth-mounds.

1.3.5 Contemporary village or descent group graveyards.

2. Miscellaneous structures.

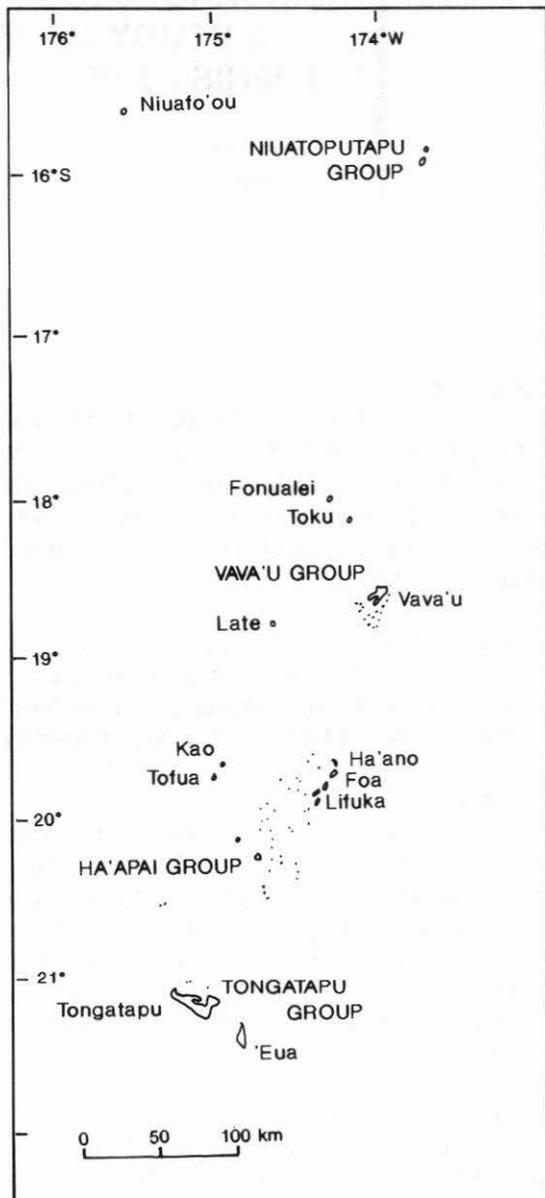
2.1. Named and unnamed stone boundaries, stone markers, former sacred stones and quarry sites.

2.2. Fortifications, ditches, former sunken roads.

2.3. *Luo maa* or food fermentation pits; *vai tupu* or wells.

2.4. Abandoned historic settlement sites.

2.5. Pottery-bearing non-concentrated middens.



Location map of Tonga.

The oral traditions on the island suggested that the named mounds and burials did not exist before the establishment of the Ha'a Falefisi lineage in the seventeenth century. There were two stone mounds on the eastern extreme of the island unlike anything in the rest of Tonga but akin to mounds in Western Samoa, which led Rogers to speculate and propose that such structures belonged to an earlier "Samoic" period or were built by Lapita pottery voyager-traders for astronomical purposes.

Patrick Vinton Kirch (1988) published a report on the island of Niuatoputapu based on a six-month project in 1976. The synthesis with which Kirch concludes the publication, focuses on the effects of Niuatoputapu's changing landscape as a result of progradation. Network models and connectivity matrices are utilised in order to understand the nature of interisland contacts.

Richard Walter (1992) reviewed the publication. He points out how archaeological techniques were used to predict patterns and how ethnoarchaeological approaches provided a means to "retrodict". Kirch (1990) also used the Niuatoputapu data in an article on social stratification that compared the use of monumental architecture in Tonga with those in Hawaii.

### **Vava'u**

Janet Davidson (1965) helped Jens Poulsen with his Lapita pottery excavations on Tongatapu island from 1963-64. In 1971, Davidson published a report on Vava'u. Davidson also described mound structures. Due to inconsistent local reports, she stuck to a typological classifications system. Most were considered by Davidson to have been used for interments and she viewed these structures as being recent introductions to Vava'u from Tongatapu (see also Davidson 1976).

Kirch (1980) also published an article in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* based on fieldnotes during a stop-over at Vava'u. Kirch cites the then current "New Archaeology" literature concerning the search for universal regulations and studies proposing a link between societal rank and the amount of labour involved in constructing archaeologically designated interment structures (Tainter 1973, 1976; Tainter & Cordy 1977).

### **Ha'apai**

Archaeology in the Ha'apai islands has come to be characterised by the endeavours of David V. Burley, working from Simon Fraser University in Canada. In a 1993 paper presented at the University of Calgary in Alberta,

Burley proposed that the monumental archaeological landscape in Ha'apai was constructed in order to symbolically subjugate local chiefs and bring areas under the central control of a paramount in the island of Tongatapu, *Tu'i Tonga Kau'ulufonua Fekai*. The interpretations of the oral traditions concerning Kau'ulufonua as representing the extension of chiefly influence from Tongatapu to the rest of the Tongan islands and other parts of Western Polynesia are presented. It is also pointed out that on each of the four main Ha'apai islands with contemporary villages, a ring ditch fortification has been located.

Burley (1994a) went on to provide a case study, focusing on the monumental structures of Mala'e Lahi and Makahokovalu on the island of 'Uiha and how they provided a means through which claims of rank and authority could be expressed. Burley (1994b) also went on to expound on Tongan settlement patterns, even bringing into account the Christian missions on chiefly institutions and traditional ideologies. He (Burley 1995) has also commented on the usefulness of monumental archaeological data for interpreting localised traditional histories. This perspective is also applied in interpretations of pre-contact religion and the role of the fertility goddess figure Hikule'o (Burley 1994c), and in a study on the role of pigeon snaring mounds in the northern Ha'apai islands (Burley 1996). As Burley (1996:1) explains:

In the study of Polynesian chiefdoms, monumental architecture has become a virtual requisite in the recognition of complex chiefly polity (e.g., Kirch 1984). Sepulchral architecture serves as a visual indicator of status and hierarchical position within and between classes. Elaborate forms of religious architecture, and their associated rituals, emphasize and legitimize the sanctity of chiefs as mediators between supernatural and worldly realms. And in various other public works of a secular nature (irrigation systems, fortifications, etc.), the abilities of chiefs to organize or appropriate massive amounts of labour can be clearly evidenced.

### **Tongatapu**

The island of Tongatapu is covered by Dirk H.R. Spennemann as part of a multi-volume doctoral thesis for the Australian National University. Spennemann has also done tourism work for the Tongan National Centre in Nuku'alofa.

Spennemann also provided a definitive chronology for Tongan history as part of a feasibility study on the set-up of an Ha'amonga Historical Trail (Spennemann 1987:35). It is outlined here with the chronology provided by Burley (1994:380). There are two points to note. Firstly, the "Dark Ages" was originally termed by Janet Davidson to mark an hiatus between a period

in the archaeological record characterised by the presence of distinctive pottery also found throughout Melanesia and a period where major differences in social status are clearly evidenced archaeologically by the elaborate mortuary practices and large-scale public architecture (Kirch 1984:220). The second point is the distinction of a Civil War period by myself (Pepa 1997b), as outlined by Ian Campbell (Campbell 1992: Chapter 4). The period began, more precisely, in 1777, the year that Captain Cook was in Tonga, and ended at the death of Tupouto'a, the father of Taufa'ahau, in 1820.

1. Early decorated ceramic Lapita period (3,200 - 2,500 B.P.)
  - 1.1. approx. 1500/1300 BC, Initial settlement of the Tongan Islands
  - 1.2. approx. 1500/1300 to 1000 BC, Early Tongan Lapita Period
  - 1.3. approx. 1000 BC to 700/500 BC, Middle Tongan Lapita Period
2. Plainware ceramic period (2,500 - 1,800 B.P.?)
  - 2.1. approx. 700/500 to 200 AD, Late Tongan Lapita Period
3. A-ceramic Dark Age period (1,800 - 1,000 B.P.)
  - 3.1. 200 to 1000 AD, Dark Ages or Formative Period
4. Monument building period (1,000 - 250 B.P.)
  - 4.1. 1000 to 1500 AD, Pre-classical Tongan Period
  - 4.2. 1500 to 1770 AD, Classical Tongan Period
5. Historic period (250 B.P. to the present)
  - 5.1. 1770 to 1830 AD, Civil War or Contact Period
  - 5.2. 1830 to 1945 AD, Missionary Period and Modern Tonga
  - 5.3. 1945 AD, post-World War II Tonga

### 'Ata Island

Atholl Anderson (1978) provided an archaeological investigation of the plateau settlement area of this island in the southernmost reach of the kingdom. It is concluded that the main settlement area was protohistoric and that the community was isolated, unable to fully exploit the surrounding marine resources and dependent on gardening. No large earth mounds were found on the island. An excavation unit yielded a couple of burials which included a cache of adzes.

### Source Materials

Quoting Ian Campbell's standard history of the kingdom of Tonga (Campbell 1992:33-34):

Europeans had first visited Tonga in 1616 when the Dutch explorers Willem Schouten and Jacob

Le Maire, looking for trading opportunities, arrived at Tafahi and Niuatoputapu, and Niuafu'ou. Fighting had taken place, but this visit had no important consequences. In an unconnected expedition, another Dutchman, Abel Tasman, came to Tonga in 1643, visiting Tongatapu and Nomuka. He also saw 'Ata and 'Eua. He spent about ten days in the group and it is thought that the citrus tree, known in Tonga as moli, was introduced by him.

Tasman's visit has an additional importance in assisting the dating of events in Tongan history. Tasman did not discover the personal names of any of the leading chiefs, but in 1777 the celebrated English navigator, James Cook, inquired whether there was an oral tradition of Tasman's visit, and was told that two ships had paid a short visit five generations before. "They told us the name of the Fatafee [Fatafehi] that was then King, and of those that succeeded down to the present, which is the fifth sence [sic] that period, the first being an old man at the time". Unfortunately, Cook did not record the names, but the fifth before the time of his visit was 'Uluakimata II, the thirty-second Tu'i Tonga.

The information on Tongan society that Cook gathered described a society that was well regulated, at peace, and apparently free of social or political tension. To quote Kirch, on the topic of agricultural intensification in Tonga (Kirch 1984:221):

The intensity of Tongan agriculture is well documented in the journals of early European explorers, and we can do no better than to quote Cook's observations on Tongatapu in 1773:

"I thought I was transported into one of the most fertile plains in Europe, here was not an inch of waste ground, the roads occupied no more space than was absolutely necessary and each fence did not take up above 4 Inches and even this was not wholly lost for in many of the fences were planted fruit trees and the Cloth plant, these served as a support to them... Nature, assisted by a little art, no were [sic] appears in a more flourishing state than at this isle (Beaglehole 1969, Book II:252)."

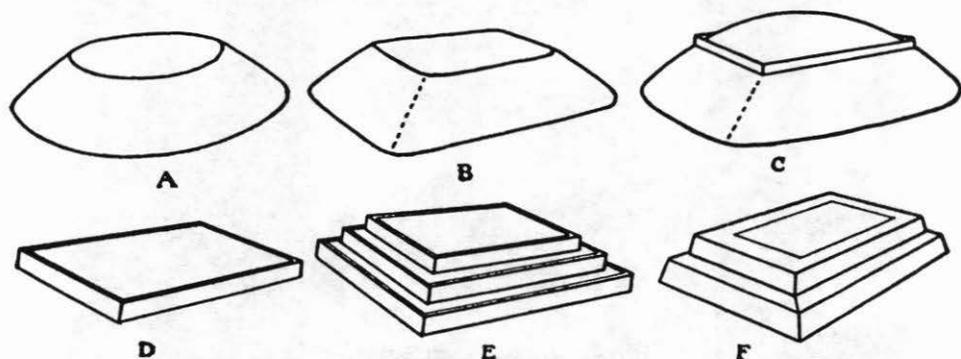
Comments have been made on Kirch's work on agricultural intensification in Polynesia (see Helen Leach 1997).

### Initial enquiry

I have incorporated archaeology into the study of Tongan history, critiquing the records left by the British colonial administrator, Basil Thomson (Pepa 1997a). Although various reports on Tongan antiquities were presented to museums around the world, official archaeological studies in the kingdom of Tonga can be said to have been initiated by W.C. McKern as a member of the Bayard Dominick Expedition of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum. E.W. Gifford (1929) was also present. McKern's study provided a classification of the artificial mounds and platforms present in the Tongan islands. Quoting McKern (1929:10):

Most ancient Tongan structures of mound or platform type may be classified as belonging to one of four groups: (a) *esi* mounds; (b) pigeon mounds; (c) house platforms, and (d) grave mounds. A few mounds with strong individual peculiarities and a few difficult to identify are, for convenience in presentation, treated as one group, (e) unclassified mounds. In this class are included the very rare stone walled house mounds. In general, this classification is based both on purpose, as recorded by tradition or determined by history, and on structural form. Purpose seems to have determined basic peculiarities in form.

McKern also detailed fortification structures as well as prehistoric pottery. (McKern 1929:80,115).

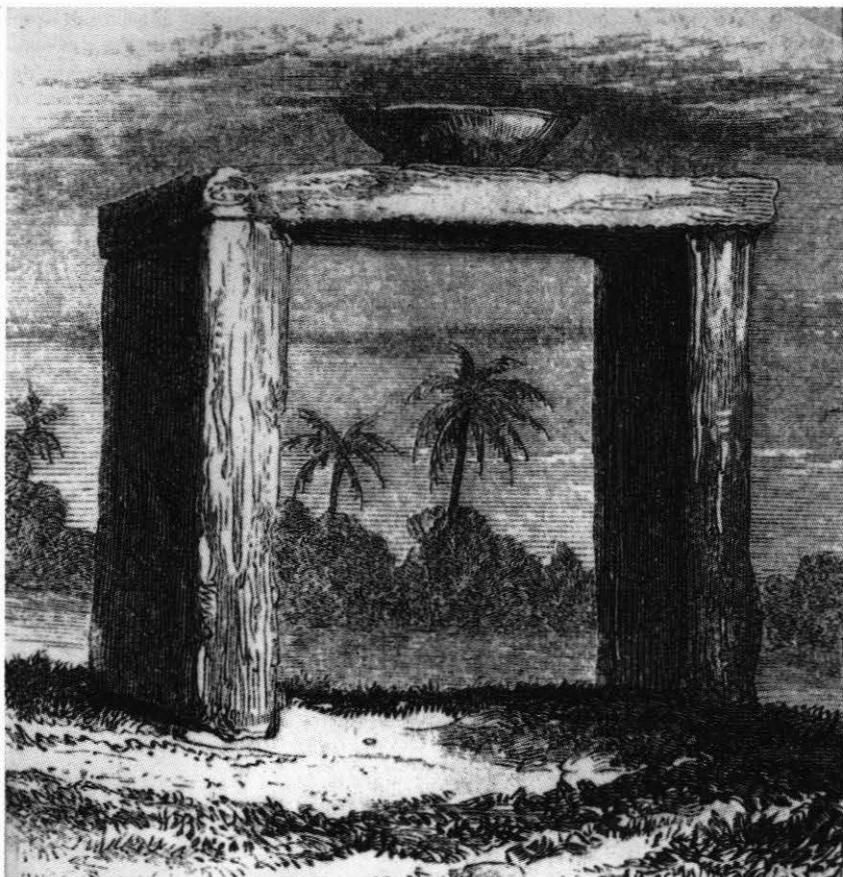


*Sketch illustrating six types of mounds. (McKern 1929:35)*

### Update

Archaeological research in Tonga did not resume again until the 1960s. It can be said that there were two main research areas. One area of research focused on the study of ceramics. As Christophe Sand (1998:7) describes:

Since its discovery earlier this century, the dentate-stamped pottery known as Lapita has been the focus of many archaeological studies in the south-west Pacific region. Identified as the material signature of the first Austronesian populations to discover and settle "Remote Oceania" (Southern Melanesia and Western Polynesia) (Green 1979b, 1991a), Lapita pottery has now been identified in more than 200 sites spread over 3500 km (Kirch 1997, Kirch and Hunt 1988, Spriggs 1990). The characteristics of the Lapita settlement of Western Polynesia (Green and Davidson 1974; Kirch 1988; Kirch and Hunt 1993; Sand 1992, 1993; Shutler *et al.* 1994) are today well documented, due to intensive research on different archipelagos and the continuing discovery and excavation of early sites.



*Tongan trilithon from a drawing made by the Hon. Cecil Foljambe of H.M.S. Curaçoa in 1865.*

For non-Lapita sites, I would like to refer to the work of Davidson (1979).

The other area of research focused on ditch and bank fortification structures. In 1965, Green and Terrell undertook a two-week survey of field monuments on Tongatapu which Lynn Swanson presented in a paper (1968). This study was quoted in studies of fortification structures undertaken by Spennemann (1988) and Sosefo Havea (1990). Pepa (1994) incorporated these works in a discussion on the development of Tongan *kolo* structures for the New Zealand Archaeological Association and Anthony P. Marais (1995) took

on the topic in a thesis for Simon Fraser University in Canada.

Most recently, Pepa (1997b) has detailed research on fortifications in West Polynesia, incorporating the works of Simon Best (1984, 1993) for the Fijian and Samoan islands, Davidson (1965, 1971) for Vava'u and Western Samoa, Pepa (1995) for the island of Niue, and Sand (1993a) for the island of 'Uvea. Davidson (1998) has also reviewed a short popular account by Daniel Frimigacci on the archaeology and oral history of 'Uvea and its close links with Tonga. Claire Orbell (1995) has re-evaluated an ORSTOM typology of Uvean mounds for an University of Auckland thesis. The twin high islands of Futuna and Alofi were in regular communication with 'Uvea and although oral traditions refer to battles with invading Tongans, these islands never came under Tongan domination as was the case in 'Uvea (Kirch 1994).

### **Summary**

Archaeological investigations begun by McKern and his etic as well as emic classification of sites appear to have been taken on by Dave Burley, with his discourse on the use of archaeological evidence to validate oral traditions. Otherwise, scholarship from New Zealand and France has focused on the production of archaeological site inventories and site records. This has led to a distinction between non-ceramic and ceramic-bearing sites. This distinction is manifested in the scholarship, with Melanesianist studies of Lapita on one hand and scholarship on the other that aims to better define the history of a neolithic culture that migrated from Taiwan and developed a complex society in Western Polynesia (see Bellwood 1997). The latter is complemented by research on prehistoric fortification systems and the role of earth mounds and stone constructions in expressing socio-political structures. As well there is Kirch's research on agricultural intensification in the region. Archaeological investigations of Tonga's past have gone beyond the boundaries of Tonga itself and have affected the interpretation of archaeological finds on other islands.

## **APPENDIX**

### **I. Rotuma**

Thegn Ladefoged (1998) of the University of Auckland has undertaken research on this island. There are traditions that mention Tongan invasions and even burial sites claimed to have accommodated Tongans.

## II. Vanuatu

I mention Vanuatu in reference to the importance of *kava* in traditional Tongan society (see Luders 1996). Apparently *kava* was traded and legends suggest a spirited rejection of its continuation when matters turned sour. It is proposed that Vanuatu was not part of the Tongan empire in any formal sense, but acted as a neighbouring state, so to speak, and as a source of traded items.

## III. The Cook Islands

Archaeological commentary on ceramic sherds found in the Cooks attribute the Tongan islands with being a point of origin for the earliest inhabitants (Duff 1974; Walter & Dickinson 1989). Also, it has been proposed that slab limestone constructions on the island of Atiu point to a cultural connection with Tonga (Trotter 1974).

## IV. The Solomon Islands

Raymond Firth (1961, 1967, 1983) undertook extensive anthropological research on the island of Tikopia in the Solomons. Firth (1954:121-123) has also outlined the military exploits of Tongans on the island of Anuta. The traditional evidence is supported by linguistic analysis (Green 1971).

Kirch, together with Douglas Yen, has provided an archaeological review of the island of Tikopia (Kirch & Yen 1982). Kirch (1982) has also provided an archaeological sequence for Anuta. A volume of archaeological studies for Anuta was reviewed by Janet Davidson (1975). This review was critiqued by Richard Feinberg (1976). Feinberg (1989) also went on to expound on the relationship that Tonga had with Anuta in prehistory.

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