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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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BOOK REVIEW

Peter Bellwood, Archaeological Research in the Cook Islands. Pacific Anthropological Records, No 27, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1978. 214 pp., 98 figures. No price.

This most recent Pacific Anthropological Record follows Peter Bellwood's three fieldwork periods (1968-72) in the Cook Islands. The report comprises detailed archaeological data from four islands including both the northern and southern Cooks. Bellwood's report comes as a welcome published contribution in central East Polynesian archaeology where other important fieldwork awaits similar monographic treatment.

The archaeological data are presented in five relatively self-contained parts, with a sixth section serving as an overall summary and evaluation of the results to date.

Part I concentrates on Rarotonga Island where most of the fieldwork was accomplished. This section begins with a review of some traditional evidence followed by detailed reporting of the surveys conducted in Maungaroa, Rutaki, Avana, and Turangi Valleys. Excavations in Maungaroa Valley and at the Ngati Tiare site (RAR.40) in Avarua town are reported. The Ngati Tiare site comprises a stratified habitation which produced several artefacts, earth ovens and features interpreted as a wooden house with associated cookhouse. The site has two occupation phases dating between approximately A.D. 1200 and 1500. Several adzes were recovered from the site which Bellwood suggests have strong Samoan affinities.

Part II reports the result of an archaeological survey of marae as well as the collection of marae-associated traditions and genealogies on the island of Aitutaki. In concluding Part II Bellwood explores the value of traditions for archaeological interpretations and is faced with a negative view of their applicability. Two interesting excavations were undertaken on Aitutaki. The 'Are Karioi (AIT.3) excavation revealed evidence interpreted as a large rectangular structure which can be associated with traditional evidence. A conjectural reconstruction is well illustrated and aids the readers' understanding of the site. Limited excavation took place at a stratified beach-midden and produced what Bellwood has identified as an early eastern Polynesian assemblage of pearl-shell fishing gear and adzes. The site extends back into the 10th century A.D. and further investigation seems warranted.

Part III reports the survey of marae on Mangaia Island, as well as a few other site-types and the test excavation of a rockshelter. Evidence seems to indicate only ephemeral use of the rockshelter.

Part IV focuses on archaeological survey and excavation on Tongareva Island in the northern Cooks. A catalogue of Tongarevan marae was completed adding to the work of Peter Buck in 1929. A survey of surface remains identified as settlement clusters provides a baseline for examining prehistoric settlement patterns. Bellwood's only Tongareva excavation was undertaken on a stratified mound interpreted as a turtle oven dating back to about A.D. 1600. With these results Bellwood concludes that "archaeological documentation of early settlement of Tongareva is still absent" (p.197).

Part V briefly reports archaeological traces for Palmerston and Suwarrow, which must have been colonised and abandoned in prehistoric times. In addition, a stone structure is recorded on Pukapuka.

Part VI summarises the overall results and provides some conclusions with little prehistoric synthesis attempted. In his final evaluation Bellwood suggests that the Cook Islands appear to be one of the later groups of islands in Polynesia to receive human settlement with evidence pointing to cultural adaptations to the volcanic islands of the southern group differing little from those apparent in the Society or Austral Islands. Cultural and linguistic evidence seem to separate Pukapuka and Tongareva from the other Cook Islands. Bellwood concludes that while "Tongareva remains enigmatic at the moment... it seems unlikely that any of the northern atolls, with the possible exception of Pukapuka, served as an early settlement loci during the earliest migrations into eastern Polynesia." I hold an alternative view that more linguistic and archaeological fieldwork is needed to adequately deal with this problem.

While the reader is appropriately referred to the ethnographic and historical literature available, only brief mention is made concerning the natural environments of the Cooks.

This data-rich report fits well into a sequence of improving quality in content and presentation of the Pacific Anthropological Records series. However, better use of photographs and a more even standard of artefact illustrations would improve Bellwood's important contribution. As many archaeological reports this one is not easily read from cover to cover, but is necessarily data-rich and provides an invaluable baseline for a further phase of detailed investigation in the Cook Islands.

Terry Hunt