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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEW

Geoffrey Irwin, *The Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific*.  
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1992. 248 pp. \$69.00

The *Prehistoric Exploration and Colonisation of the Pacific* is a systematic examination of the technical and methodological problems of prehistoric voyaging in Oceania. Unlike a number of earlier works Irwin does not attempt to separate the technical aspects of voyaging, navigation and colonisation from the wider cultural system. In this respect, the entire episode of Pacific colonisation is considered within the context of long term processes of adaptation and culture change.

A technical analysis of possible exploration and colonisation strategies comprises the major focus of this work. Irwin's central thesis is simple; he requires a methodology that minimises the dangers of failure and consequently, death at sea. In devising a hypothetical strategy that meets these requirements, Irwin examines all aspects of meteorology and geography pertinent to Pacific voyaging. He writes as an accomplished sailor and navigator and his technical discussions are handled simply, but without much technical compromise.

Irwin concludes that the safest and most reliable exploration methods involved sailing into the prevailing winds during the short, but (relatively) predictable, periods of wind reversal. By following this strategy, the canoes could return safely to their point of origin as the winds shifted back to the prevailing direction. Colonisation then preceded using navigated two-way voyaging at which point indigenous and only partly understood, navigation techniques would come into play. Irwin looks in some detail at the locally specific sailing conditions that prevail throughout Oceania and proposes a number of regionally and historically specific aspects to the general model. One of the most interesting of these is the existence of a hypothetical 'voyaging nursery' in Near Oceania where most of the technical difficulties could have been solved in relative safety before the ancestors tackled the longer stretches of water to the east.

The exploration strategies proposed by Irwin are tested using a series of complex computer simulations supplemented by his own sailing experiences. These simulations provide predictions for island discovery and colonisation, several of which (New Zealand, Hawaii, Chatham Islands) conform well with the archaeological evidence. Elsewhere in East Polynesia the evidence does not appear to be as clearly supportive (Spriggs and Anderson n.d.) although there are still many archaeological gaps to be filled. His models also provide predictions and explanations for various aspects of post-colonisation prehistory including island abandonment (the 'mystery island' phenomenon) and some aspects of long term culture change.

The hypothetico-deductive approach which Irwin adopts is quite unusual in recent archaeological works on Pacific colonisation and is particularly appropriate

to the technological and methodological aspects of the colonisation issue. The strengths are that it provides predictions, and Irwin is quite explicit about the implications of his hypothesis in terms of the order and dating of island settlement in Polynesia. I doubt whether the work will remain unchallenged for long, and I am certain that it will have to be modified in response to new archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, it will stimulate new debate and give direction to an important issue which has fallen recently into something of a rut - long on experimental voyages but short on new ideas.

The book is very well produced, well indexed, well illustrated. It is overpriced but not excessively so by New Zealand standards.

Richard Walter

### References

- Spriggs M., and A. Anderson. n.d. Late Colonization of East Polynesia. Ms.  
Irwin, G. 1989. Against, across and down the wind: a case for the systematic exploration of the remote Pacific Islands. *Jnl Polyn. Soc.* 98 (2): 167-206.