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0521783097 - *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia: An Essay in Historical Anthropology*

Patrick Vinton Kirch and Roger C. Green

Excerpt

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## Prologue: on historical anthropology

Our problem may be metaphorically defined as the translation of a two-dimensional photographic picture of reality into the three-dimensional picture which lies back of it . . . The gaining of an historical perspective will mean the arrangement in as orderly temporal sequence as possible, within as definitely circumscribed absolute time limits as circumstances will allow, of the processes studied by our science, the carriers of these processes being generally defined more inclusively than in documentary history.

SAPIR 1916:2

Polynesians called it *Hawaiki* (or sometimes, Kahiki, or Pulotu), the distantly remembered homeland, source of their ancestors, mythical site of the creation of culture, and spirit realm to which their own souls would voyage after death.<sup>1</sup> They honored this ancestral homeland in chant and song, and named newly found islands after it: Savai'i in Samoa, and the large island of Hawai'i, among them. But was there ever in reality such a "Hawaiki," or does it exist only in the shadowy realms of cosmogonic myth? Archaeologists, after a half-century of intensive pursuit of the question of Polynesian origins, would answer affirmatively. More precisely, they would fix the coordinates of this ancestral homeland in time and space: the archipelagos of Tonga and Samoa (with their immediate smaller neighbors), in the first millennium BC. Through an unbroken sequence of cultural change that begins with the arrival of small groups of Early Eastern Lapita peoples around 1100–1000 BC, a distinctive Ancestral Polynesian culture had developed four to five centuries later.

While archaeologists confidently point to various settlements and sites of this period and to their characteristic material assemblages of Polynesian Plainware pottery and plano-convex adzes, securely fixed in time by numerous radiocarbon dates – what do we really know about this Ancestral Polynesian world, this Hawaiki? Is it possible to move beyond the strictly material evidence of potsherds, adzes, and shell fishhooks, postmolds and earth ovens? Simply stated, this is the problem that has energized us to write this book, for we would maintain that twentieth-century anthropology has

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indeed developed powerful tools and methods for recovering and writing the deep history of “peoples without history.” Yet we are perturbed that as the twenty-first century dawns, the academic and scholarly rush toward specialization and even sub-specialization (not to mention the current postmodern conceit that “culture” or “history” are anything other than academic constructions) threatens to erode the essential strength of a *holistic* vision of anthropology as an integrated set of perspectives and methods trained upon a diversity of evidence.

The founders of the unique Americanist tradition in anthropology – Boas, Kroeber, Sapir, and others – reacted in part to the theoretical excesses of a generalizing “evolutionary” approach, and advocated a more rigorous “historical particularism.” They saw the advantage to be gained from multiple lines of investigation and evidence, and thus bundled ethnography, archaeology, linguistics, and physical anthropology together in a way that the European academic world never fully embraced. Eighty years ago Edward Sapir advanced a charter for historical anthropology in his short monograph on *Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture: A Study in Method* (Sapir 1916). This paper – once famous but now seldom cited – laid out the potential contributions to historical reconstruction to be made by combining the *direct* evidence of documentary writings, native testimony, and archaeological finds, with the *inferential* evidence provided by physical anthropology, ethnology, and linguistics.<sup>2</sup> Sapir envisioned a historical anthropology that – as a joint intellectual enterprise – required contributions from all of these fields, each with its own unique evidential sources. The historical goals that motivated Sapir have waxed and waned in anthropology over the intervening decades, and the paradigms and methods of the “subfields” (archaeology, ethnology, biological anthropology, and linguistics) have also changed dramatically.<sup>3</sup>

Despite some interesting proposals in the interim (e.g., Romney 1957; Vogt 1964, 1994a), few integrated data-rich explorations along the lines conceived by Sapir have evolved. Nonetheless, in the first decade of the twenty-first century a renewed interest in matters historical may be discerned in the several subfields into which anthropology has been partitioned. These trends lend cautious optimism that our present endeavor – fundamentally similar to Sapir’s, but here applied to Polynesia – may be of more than strictly regional interest.<sup>4</sup> Like Sapir, we aim to advance a historical anthropology, but one that brings to bear the myriad advances in data, methods, and theory developed throughout the twentieth century.

Sapir devoted most of his attention to linguistics and ethnology; he only briefly mentioned documentary sources, oral history, and physical anthropology, and relegated archaeology to a single page of his monograph. Sapir’s ethnolinguistic bias is understandable, given the embryonic state of New

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World prehistory in 1916. Even for the Old World, where archaeology had an earlier start, existing knowledge was then encompassed within the boldest of schemes: Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. But a growing subdiscipline of anthropological archaeology, especially in North America, increasingly became the main player in historical anthropology, where during the first half of the twentieth century it struggled to develop methods for establishing relative or absolute chronology (Taylor 1948; Trigger 1989a). At the same time that archaeology concentrated on cultural *homologies* (similarities due to common ancestry) and *synologies* (similarities produced by diffusion or borrowing), within what became known in North America as “culture history,”<sup>5</sup> ethnology increasingly rejected historical reconstruction. Following Radcliffe-Brown’s pejorative characterization of ethnology’s earlier efforts in this direction as “conjunctural” or “pseudo-history” (1941:1, 1950:1–2), developments in social and cultural anthropology moved steadily toward synchronic orientations.<sup>6</sup> In the Pacific, the ethnographies of Raymond Firth, Gregory Bateson, and Margaret Mead provide examples. Interest in historical sources and problems was largely relegated to the temporally restricted topic of “ethnohistory” (Denning 1966). Attempts to weld the shorter-term perspective of ethnohistory to the longer-term trajectories revealed by archaeology, proposed by some North American scholars, came to be known as the “direct historical approach” (Wedel 1938; Steward 1942; Strong 1953). Although the direct historical approach fell out of favor in the post-World War II era, it now shows signs of renewed application (Lightfoot 1995).

Archaeology too, at least in North America, went through its own phase in which the particular contingencies of history were devalued in favor of a more “scientific” orientation that sought universal “laws” of cultural process. The New Archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s replaced the earlier emphasis on homologous change with a concern for *analogous* change, driven in part by a paradigm of archaeology as an experimental and even predictive social science (e.g., Watson *et al.* 1971). Anthropological linguistics, in contrast, has always retained to varying degrees its historical component (Hock 1986:v–vi), even while it underwent a range of transformations in its more mainstream descriptive, theoretical, and sociological varieties (Hymes 1964). These continuing historical linguistic enterprises – largely independent of archaeology – have culminated in a series of language-family histories based on genetic subgroupings, for many of the world’s languages (Blench 1997: table 2). Finally, like linguistics, biological anthropology has long maintained its evolutionary interests in the genetic history of human populations.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these varied efforts in anthropological history over the course of the twentieth century – or perhaps just because they remained largely

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uncoordinated as the subdisciplines burgeoned and specialized – a genuinely systematic, methodologically rigorous, and theoretically sophisticated historical anthropology of the kind that Sapir envisioned eighty years ago failed to materialize. However, that situation has begun to change, and especially in the Pacific.

The varied strands of a new historical orientation are contained within what Trigger (1989a, 1989b, 1991) calls “holistic archaeology,” an approach he sees as forming “a new synthesis for archaeological explanation.” Echoing Sapir, Trigger proposes to combine archaeological data with the findings of historical linguistics, oral traditions, historical ethnography, and historical records so as to produce a more rounded view of prehistory, as well as of ethnohistory and historical archaeology. Trigger (1991:562) argues that such interdisciplinary approaches first developed as early as the 1950s, citing examples from Africa (e.g., Murdock 1959; McCall 1964; Trigger 1968). Early efforts were, however, largely rejected by the emerging and rapidly dominant “processual” archaeologists. Renewed efforts at tackling sequences of homologous change are noted by Trigger as recurring in the late 1970s and early 1980s in North America, the Mayan region, and Polynesia, as well as in Africa.<sup>8</sup> They are one basis for Trigger’s claim that “the direct historical approach is perhaps the most challenging and potentially important task confronting archaeology today,” requiring archaeologists to become “still more open to using non-archaeological forms of data to study the past” (Trigger 1991:563). Other recent examples include the collaborative works of Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (1983; Marcus and Flannery 1996) on the long-term historical evolution of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples of Mesoamerica, and Kirch and Sahlins’ collaborative work on the Hawaiian Kingdom (1992).<sup>9</sup>

Calls for a renewed historical orientation within anthropology are not limited to archaeology. Throughout the 1980s some sociocultural anthropologists became increasingly historicized (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990:1–6), taking their lead in part from the well-developed *Annales* tradition of encompassing social history as practiced by Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, and others. Marshall Sahlins incorporated and modified aspects of Braudel’s (1980) famous “wavelength” scheme of history in his brilliant work on Captain Cook and the confluence of Hawaiian and British cultures in 1778–79 (Sahlins 1981, 1985, 1995). At the same time, Greg Dening – a historian with anthropological training – was moving in his studies of Marquesan ethnohistory and early European contacts in the Pacific toward what he calls “history’s anthropology” (1980, 1988, 1992). The pioneering efforts of Sahlins and Dening have been extended by others (e.g., Linnekin 1990; Thomas 1991, 1997). Such historicization of social anthropology was, moreover, by no means confined to the Pacific arena (see Cohn 1980, 1981;

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Ohnuki-Tierney 1990). Biersack, in her introduction to *Clio in Oceania*, a book with the notable subtitle “Toward a Historical Anthropology,” writes:

In varying degrees, the issues of history and theory rehearsed herein bear on other branches of anthropology [in addition to archaeology] and serve as core issues around which the subfields of anthropology may coalesce and enter into collaboration . . . . Positioned among historical and cultural studies and at a powerful confluence of subdisciplines within anthropology, historical anthropology provides a forum within which to perpetuate the debates of the last two decades but on new and less parochial terrain. To historical anthropology is thus transferred the theoretical commissions of the discipline: past, present, and future. (1991:25)

A concrete expression of these merging historical interests within social anthropology and archaeology is the collaborative work of Kirch and Sahlins, *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii* (1992). This project – combining the data and perspectives of a historical ethnologist and an archaeologist, focused on a particular geographic and historic space, the Anahulu Valley – is a book-length example of research that purposively merges subdisciplinary approaches. That more collaboration between archaeologists and historical ethnographers has not been undertaken may reflect a long-standing – and in most cases implicit rather than explicit – bias toward those last few hundred years of global European expansion, and an implicit privileging of textual records (Wolf 1982).<sup>10</sup> Thus Sahlins, while discovering that the “peoples of the Pacific I had studied indeed had a history,” could still remark that “these exotic histories . . . as recorded do not go very far back” (1985:xviii). And Dening can claim that “the history of Polynesian cultures *could only be written* out of sources that were European” (1991:372, emphasis added). These comments for the Pacific are echoed in Ohnuki-Tierney’s more general remark that “the *longue durée* is not easily accessible for histories of nonliterate peoples” (1990:3, fn. 2).

Thus turning their backs to archaeological colleagues often housed in the very same academic departments of anthropology, historical ethnographers have often haughtily disdained anything except the documentary form of the literate world’s historical texts, usually European-authored. In such agendas, the archaeological record is assumed to be either irrelevant to history, or relevant only to a short segment of it.<sup>11</sup> But the historical “texts” of the *longue durée* are encoded not just in the ciphers of Western scribes; they exist equally as material traces dispersed over landscapes and sedimented in their depths, no less as patterns of cognate words in the linguists’ comparative lexicons, or as indigenous traditions transmitted orally over long generations. Only when archaeologists, as valued interpreters of their unique historical “texts,” are accorded seats in the same seminar room will historical

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anthropology truly be able to encompass the *longue durée* of nonliterate societies.

Also damaging to the effort to develop a historical ethnography has been the postmodernist critique in anthropology (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986), which among other things has eschewed or rejected regional and comparative perspectives.<sup>12</sup> For a Pacific example, in his book on *South Coast New Guinea Cultures*, Knauft struggles with the problem of describing and comparing *ethnographic regions* in the face of the postmodernist stance that such regions in and of themselves are no more than “the result of a Western academic discourse that projects its own cultural biases and assumes incorrectly that these characterizations reflect other people’s reality” (1993:3; see also Knauft 1999). Significantly, Knauft finds a key to the reinvigoration of ethnographic comparison in the analysis of “historical context.” While we do not dispute the potential validity of the critique that concepts such as “cultural regions” are anthropological constructions, we do find disturbing the postmodernist tendency to dismiss such constructions out of hand, rather than on the basis of a critical examination of empirical validity.

With respect to linguistics, we detect a renewed and more weighty interest in the intersection of its disciplinary contribution to the historical concerns among the various subdisciplines of anthropology. An example from the 1970s, notable for its methodological rigor, is Dyen and Aberle’s (1974) reconstruction of Proto Athapaskan kinship systems. Marshall (1984) offered an exposition on the culture history of structural patterning in Oceanic sibling classifications, a line of inquiry more recently taken up by Hage and Harary (1996). A return to an interest in linguistics and archaeology is evident as one major theme selected for the 1994 World Archaeology Congress, stimulated in part by provocative ideas of Colin Renfrew (1987, 1989, 1992) on the spread of Indo-European (Blench and Spriggs 1997, 1998).

Two of the most robust regional endeavors linking archaeological and linguistic evidence focus on Africa, and on the Pacific. The first includes the work of Ehret and his collaborators (Ehret and Posnansky 1982; Ehret 1998) on Mashariki Bantu origins and their spread in sub-Saharan Africa, and on Nubian speakers in the Sudan. In the Pacific, collaborative linguistic, archaeological, and anthropological research has burgeoned since the 1970s. In his extensive writings leading toward the reconstruction of the Proto Austronesian lexicon, Blust (e.g., 1980, 1985, 1987, 1995a) advances many important hypotheses regarding early Austronesian social organization and culture, as well as the locations of homelands and particular proto-languages, stimulating new archaeological research. The Comparative Austronesian Project of the Australian National University (Fox, ed., 1993;

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Pawley and Ross 1994; Fox and Sather 1996; Ross *et al.*, eds., 1998) has likewise adopted a research methodology explicitly incorporating a historical perspective, and drawing upon linguistic, comparative ethnographic, and archaeological approaches. Some of these trends in the study of the Austronesian language family and culture history are reviewed by Pawley and Ross (1993). Recently, McConvell and Evans (1997) attempt to bring archaeology and linguistics closer together, with a geographical emphasis on Australia.

For those who, like us, would advance anew the cause of historical anthropology, Pawley and Ross (1993) make several salient claims. Although they concur that the job of the culture historian is to make sense of resemblances as well as differences by aligning the evidence compiled by various disciplines, Pawley and Ross point out a number of methodological challenges. One is the sizable gaps in the data sets provided by each contributing field of study. A second issue – the problem of synthesis – is more serious and not so readily corrected. Whereas each discipline and subdiscipline has its own kinds of data and particular array of methods for their interpretation, historical anthropology (or “culture history” in their terms) as yet has no equally reliable procedures for marrying the evidence of different disciplines.<sup>13</sup> A third problem is “that much writing on culture history is marred by a weak understanding of linguistic methods” (Pawley and Ross 1993:428). Nonetheless their conclusion is worth quoting in full:

The problem of culture history is that it is an interdisciplinary enterprise, but the methods and data used by each of its major constituent disciplines are not readily comparable. Nonetheless such comparisons are necessary in order to evaluate competing hypotheses within disciplines and to gain a more complete picture of the past than any single method can provide. *The AN[Austronesian]-speaking region offers exceptionally favorable conditions for such interdisciplinary research.* Until recently, most prominent hypotheses about the culture history of the AN-speaking regions originated in the data of comparative linguistics or comparative ethnography, with scholars from these two disciplines generally working independently. Archaeology has been a vigorous latecomer. Early attempts at integrating linguistic and archaeological evidence concentrated on centers and directions of AN dispersal, with archaeology providing a chronological framework for linguistically-based scenarios. Currently, the focus of culture historical syntheses is shifting toward comparisons of the lexicons of reconstructed languages with the content and environmental contexts of various archaeological assemblages. There has been no serious attempt to square the recent findings of historical human biology with those of other disciplines, but there are signs that this too is under way. (1993:452, emphasis added)

In sum, not since Sapir has there been such renewed interest in developing an interdisciplinary approach to historical anthropology. What Trigger, an

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archaeologist, espouses under the umbrella of “holistic archaeology,” the social anthropologist Biersack advocates under the rubric “historical anthropology,” while linguists Pawley and Ross label the same endeavor a kind of “culture history.” (Biological anthropologists might subsume it all under “co-evolution” and wonder about all the fuss.) This kind of “culture history,” moreover, is quite different from (although a congruent development out of) “traditional archaeology” (Feinman 1997; Renfrew and Bahn 1991:407) or “Americanist culture history” (Willey and Sabloff 1980; Lyman *et al.* 1997) of the first half of the twentieth century. One would be tempted to call such a project a “New Culture History,” were that label not already appropriated by others (e.g., Hunt, ed., 1989). Although the current emphasis on history has its “new” elements, its roots in anthropology run deep indeed, as a rereading of Sapir reminds us; the adjective “new” is hardly required. We thus find the rubric “historical anthropology” elegantly suited to our purposes.

These varied interdisciplinary efforts, not always coordinated but clearly tending toward a common direction of historical anthropology, might be seen on a larger canvas of late twentieth-century science as part of a movement toward increased sophistication of the “historical sciences.” Thus Stephen Jay Gould has drawn a distinction between two modes of science (1989:277–91).<sup>14</sup> The first mode (including *traditional* physics and chemistry, for example) is the Newtonian form concerned with universal laws of invariant expression, able to make predictions about a deterministic universe. In these largely experimental sciences, time is motion, and history is irrelevant. The second mode, of which geology is a good exemplar, is thermodynamically based, concerned with open (rather than closed) systems in which time and history “matter” (Gould 1986). This is the terrain of the historical sciences including cosmology, historical geology, evolutionary biology and – notably – archaeology and historical linguistics, in which retrodiction rather than prediction must be to the fore. As Gould (1980), Ernst Mayr (1982, 1997), and others have eloquently argued, in such historical sciences the recognition of contingency and a historical narrative mode of explanation become not only philosophically valid, but essential. As Gould cogently writes, “If the primacy of history is evolution’s lesson for other sciences, then we should explore the consequences of valuing history as a source of law and similarity, rather than dismissing it as narrative unworthy of the name science” (1986:68).

Our book integrates a study in method with a substantive, data-rich case: the reconstruction of the world of the Ancestral Polynesian homeland, of “Hawaiki.” Polynesia offers exceptionally favorable conditions for historical anthropology, a model region in which to investigate the congruence of



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history, phylogeny, and evolution (Kirch and Green 1987). We intend to explicate more fully the theoretical issues involved, as well as the methodological procedures required to forward a phylogenetic approach in historical anthropology.

Biersack (1991:25), commenting on our 1987 contribution in *Current Anthropology*, wrote that “judging by the responses to their . . . article, the effort [of Kirch and Green] to produce a historical archaeology . . . will prove as theoretically and methodologically challenging and as fraught with contention as the parallel effort in cultural anthropology has proved.” The contention is anticipated. Such is inevitably the case with scholarship that aims, not to sit conformably and comfortably within its own disciplinary cocoon, but rather to reach across disciplinary boundaries, to engage in dialogue across ingrained scholarly traditions. We have written a work that dares to draw upon not just the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches of our own field of archaeology, but also those of historical linguistics and comparative ethnography. Our hope is that this effort will inspire a renewed appreciation of the power of a holistic, “historical anthropology.” Most importantly, if this book manages to move us closer to the kind of integrative anthropology envisioned decades ago by Edward Sapir, we shall be pleased.

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## PART I

# The phylogenetic model: theory and method

As a problem, recognized since Aristotle, natural similarities come in two basic, largely contradictory styles. We cannot simply measure and tabulate; we must factor and divide. Similarities may be homologies, shared by simple reason of descent and history, or analogies, actively developed . . . as evolutionary responses to common situations. GOULD 1986:66