

## 1 Oceania's Island World: Geographic and Conceptual Background

Oceania, comprising thousands of islands scattered across the Pacific Ocean, covers roughly one third of the Earth's surface. Many of the islands are quite small, spread across an area completely dominated by the sea. Oceania sits outside of the normal geographical scope of studies of the 'Middle Ages', which is a phenomenon generally assumed to apply to Europe, and sometimes more generously including parts of Africa or Asia. The Americas, Australia, and the Pacific are consistently thought to be outside of this topic of study (though see also Bairnes' forthcoming work in this series).

Such a definition is reasonable if the Middle Ages or Medieval period are thought of as primarily a European historical time period or cultural phenomenon with echoes in neighbouring regions. If, however, the Middle Ages are thought of in terms of their thematic content, then the narrative shifts quite considerably. The Middle Ages are no longer considered a 'Dark Age' of societal collapse and turmoil following the dissolution of the Roman Empire. Increasingly, scholars point to a historical era of new opportunities for the movement of people, things, and ideas, and a flourishing of new forms of cultural, religious, political, and creative expression. If that is the case, then Oceania certainly fits thematically within the latter definition (see also Williams 2021, which was published while this Element was in press). This Element focuses on the Oceanic region between 800CE, after which Polynesian navigators embarked on a major period of navigation and expansion, and the period of initial European encounters in the region, which ends roughly 1,000 years later.

The goal of this Element is not at all a specialist's gripe about how my area of interest has been neglected by scholars working in other regions. Quite the opposite: given the breadth and richness of studies in the Global Middle Ages, as expressed in this series and other works (e.g., Holmes and Standen 2018), Oceania simply provides another example of a broader process of cultural florescence and evolution during the period falling in and around the Middle Ages. There is already some productive comparative work being done for Oceania during this time period, for example examining the parallel and divergent trajectories of Viking-age Scandinavian societies with the ancient Hawaiian kingdoms (Price 2018; Price and Ljungqvist 2018; Ravn 2018). Hopefully this Element will encourage Middle Ages specialists to look more broadly across the Pacific region, without falling into the trap of overly-simplistic analogising (Spriggs 2008, 2016).

The Element is also not a complete synthesis of Pacific archaeology or history (see instead Leclerc and Flexner 2019; Kirch 2017; Kirch and Green 2001;

Rainbird 2004; Spriggs 1997). It is not possible to cover every archipelago and period to the same depth, and I have not sought to do so. Instead, this study offers broad coverage across Oceania while also developing the stories from the islands with which I am most familiar in Hawai‘i, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and Vanuatu. This Element seeks to introduce the reader to the reasons Oceania would be of interest in relation to the Global Middle Ages, using a series of illustrative examples. For those looking for a deeper dive into Pacific history and prehistory, I offer extensive references for further reading.

This Element is primarily archaeological in its outlook, though it also draws on anthropological and historical research to construct its narrative. The European Middle Ages are often defined temporally as having taken place during the millennium preceding 1492. Because of the history of voyaging, settlement, and interaction in Oceania, the narrative here begins slightly later, during the century when Polynesian people left the ancestral homelands of Tonga and Samoa and began sailing towards the east after about 800CE (Kirch 2017: 191–208). The study ends a millennium later during a period when the region was initially drawn into the globalising world system (*sensu* Wallerstein 1974) expanding from early modern Europe as the Middle Ages came to an end. The goal is to write a history that extends to some extent across the ‘prehistory/history divide’ (Lightfoot 1995), in order to show the creative ways in which Pacific Islanders adapted to colonial encounters during the early years of their interactions with Europeans. These engagements would set the scene for the more intensive period of European colonialism that began after 1800CE, which falls beyond the scope of this series (see instead Flexner 2014a, 2020; Lydon 2006; Smith 2014).

Initial settlement of the Pacific region included colonisation of uninhabited lands by maritime navigators, beginning with some of the first islands colonised after behaviourally modern *Homo sapiens* left Africa during the Pleistocene (the last Ice Age), including the earliest known sea voyages (see Kealy et al. 2016). New Guinea has been inhabited for at least 40,000 years, including Pleistocene occupation of the mountainous interior (Gosden 2010; Fairbairn et al. 2017). If some of the earliest dates from northern Australia are reliable, initial human colonisation of the region could be pushed back closer to 60,000–70,000 years (Clarkson et al. 2017). While beyond the scope of this Element to discuss in detail, it should be noted that New Guinea was also an independent centre of early plant domestication and cultivation, including the key Oceanic crops of yams, taro, bananas, and sugarcane (Golson et al. 2017).

This longer-term history is important for understanding some of the variability and diversity of Oceanic societies and their more recent pasts. The pre-eminent Pacific archaeologist Roger Green (1991) proposed that the region

could be divided into ‘Near Oceania’, those areas first settled during the Pleistocene encompassing the islands of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands as far south as Makira, and ‘Remote Oceania’, the area of the Pacific first settled by the people of the Lapita Cultural Complex and their descendants (Kirch 1997b). Near Oceania, and the region referred to as Island Melanesia more generally, sees the greatest concentrations of cultural, biological, and linguistic diversity in the Pacific (Spriggs 1997). People in Near Oceania speak both Austronesian languages, generally agreed to have developed from ancestral forms in Island Southeast Asia with further creolisation and evolution across the Pacific, and Non-Austronesian or ‘Papuan’ languages, thought to have originated from Near Oceania’s preliminary settlers during the last Ice Age which likewise would have transformed, diversified, and proliferated over time.

The part of Remote Oceania known as Polynesia, settled later and by smaller, more uniform founding populations, has more closely related cultures that arguably hold together as a ‘phyletic unit’, having evolved from a common ancestral society that can be reconstructed on linguistic, anthropological, and archaeological grounds (Kirch and Green 2001; see below for a discussion of the problematic nature of the Melanesia/Polynesia divide). It was the Polynesian navigators who reached the last of the islands in Oceania to be initially settled beginning around 900 years ago.

Finally, it should be noted that while our understanding of Pacific archaeology has advanced by leaps and bounds over the past two decades, particularly for the period commonly called ‘prehistory’, knowledge in the region remains markedly uneven. Large areas remain unsurveyed by archaeologists and many time periods remain poorly represented, particularly in Island Melanesia (see discussion in Kirch 2017: 9–10). In New Zealand initial settlement has been dated to within a generation around roughly 1250CE using high-precision calibrated radiocarbon dates. This date matches the genealogical estimates for the timing of first settlement based on Māori historical traditions (see Wilmshurst et al. 2011: 1817). Even more remarkably in Tonga the initial date of Lapita settlement has been narrowed to a span of a few years (2838±8 years before present) thanks to the super-precise technique of coral dating using uranium and thorium isotopes (Burley et al. 2012). Contrast this with places like the central Solomon Islands (Walter and Sheppard 2017) or southern Vanuatu (Flexner et al. 2018a) where, while work is ongoing, we are only beginning to construct a reasonable picture of basic culture history. Rather than despairing, though, this should be seen as an encouragement to any intrepid students interested in working in a fascinating area of the world with incredible people and much to learn!

## 2 Timeless Backwater, or Written Out of History?

When Europeans began defining the culture areas of the world they had conquered over the course of the 1700s and 1800s, the peoples of Oceania were generally classified as ‘Neolithic’. They made ground-stone tools, practised agriculture, and in some cases, though not all, produced pottery. As such, they were placed on an imaginary and misleading evolutionary ladder that located the ‘hunter-gatherer’ populations of, for example, Aboriginal Australia towards the bottom. The people of Oceania sat higher on the ladder but below, for example, metal-producing societies in Africa and Asia. European ‘civilisations’, particularly the great empires of Britain or France, represented the pinnacle of human achievement. In reflecting on the definition of stone tools collected from living people as ‘archaeological’ in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Hicks (2013: 4) refers to this as ‘the anthropological trick of collapsing geographical distance into temporal distance’. In other words, classifying living peoples as ‘contemporary ancestors’ or ‘survivals’, holdouts from earlier periods in history from which Europe had long since progressed, was a convenient myth for justifying European conquest and colonialism (Fabian 1983).

The absurdity of this exercise can be demonstrated through the arbitrary choice of technology used in the ranking system. The standard European classification had humanity progressing through ages of stone, bronze, iron, and onward into protohistoric and historical civilisations, ending with the great colonial empires of the nineteenth century. But if another trait and moment in time is used as the focus, say, sailing technology in the 1400s, a different picture appears. While the Portuguese were still struggling to reliably cross the equatorial doldrums, the Swahili maritime world was emerging along the coast of eastern Africa (Fleisher et al. 2015; Kusimba forthcoming). The Chinese built huge ships not for deep-water voyaging but rather to carry massive amounts of people and cargo closer to shore, participating in Indian Ocean trade including with the Swahili (Pomeranz 2009: 72–3). At the same time Oceanic master navigators were regularly and reliably making return voyages of thousands of kilometers on their *waka* (double-hulled sailing canoes; see Doran 1981; Haddon and Hornell 1938).

The pre-eminent Pacific scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa (1993) defined Oceania as a ‘sea of islands’ (Figure 1). For Islanders, the ocean represented not a boundary or obstacle, but a fluid medium for long-distance interactions and a bountiful resource, perhaps more so than for people from any other part of the world. However, the point here is not to choose another measure to show that Polynesians were somehow ‘better’ or more advanced than Europeans or

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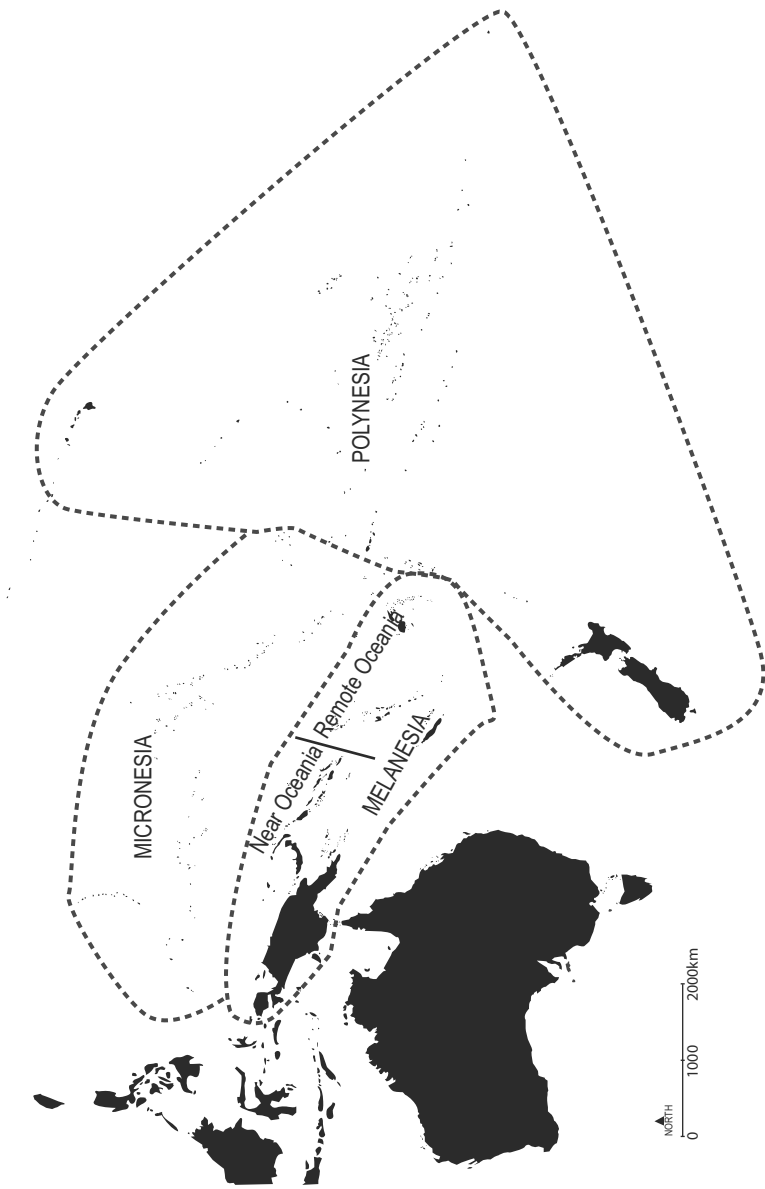
**Figure 1** Map of Oceania, Epeli Hau'ofa's (1993) 'sea of islands', labelling major island groups in capital letters and other islands and locations mentioned in the text. Note I was not able to label every single island mentioned in the text at this scale, but more detailed maps are available in the referenced publications.

anyone else. The aim is to demonstrate that this kind of ‘progress’-oriented colonial perspective on human achievement needs to be challenged and rejected as it is unhelpful for understanding global histories.

Decades of scholarship from anthropologists, historians, and others has refuted and overturned the Eurocentric mythology that attempts to rank human societies as more or less ‘evolved’. In many cases the ‘primitive’ peoples whose societies were documented and classified by colonial anthropology, including those in Oceania, were dramatically transformed by the upheavals of colonial encounter and empire (Wolf 1982; see also Sand 2002; Sand et al. 2003; Spriggs 2008). Among other things, a better understanding of how social evolution actually works demonstrates that such a ranking system is not justified scientifically or logically. Rather, evolutionary anthropology can outline the ways that related cultures have changed through time while also acknowledging that all social forms have their own versions of complexity (for Pacific examples of evolutionary anthropological scholarship see Cochrane 2021; Kirch 2021; Kirch and Green 2001).

Despite apparent progress in anthropological thought, broader popular narratives about the Pacific often reproduce precisely the kinds of colonialist ideological constructs described above. There are of course the obvious tropes of simple, smiling islanders living in tropical paradise, or, worse, bloodthirsty cannibal feasts in the dark jungles, both of which can be rejected as inappropriate and indeed hurtful for living Pacific Islanders. But there are also more subtle forms of colonial thinking that are worth challenging. For example, Diamond’s (2005) use of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) as one of the major case studies in his writing about the ‘collapse’ of past societies has proven a compelling popular science narrative. As will be seen below this narrative misses some of the key evidence for the actual processes through which Rapa Nui’s landscape was transformed by human activity (see Hunt and Lipo 2009). Here as elsewhere in the Pacific, European colonial activities prove to be a major culprit for the island’s apparent environmental degradation.

One of the major historical works that continues to shape perceptions of different areas of the Pacific is Dumont D’Urville’s ‘*Sur les îles du Grand Océan*’, published in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* in 1832 (see Clark 2003). D’Urville proposed three sub-regions in the Pacific: Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia (see Figure 2). Polynesia (‘many islands’) consisted of the great triangle with Hawai‘i, Rapa Nui, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) at the corners, plus the western ‘homeland’ of Samoa and Tonga. Micronesia (‘tiny islands’) was defined by its geographical features as consisting primarily of small islands and atolls, including some inhabited islands only a few kilometres in surface area with high points just a few meters above sea level. Finally, and



**Figure 2** Oceania showing the boundaries of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, along with Green's (1991) alternative division between Near and Remote Oceania.

most problematically, Melanesia ('dark islands') was defined by the 'racial' characteristics of the islands' inhabitants, who had dark skin and 'wooly' hair. Following the logic of the time, Dumont D'Urville and subsequent anthropological scholars placed the lighter-skinned Polynesians above the darker inhabitants of Melanesia, while Micronesians sat somewhere in between as their social organisation and material culture was believed to be 'simpler' than that of the Polynesians.

The twentieth-century extension of this logic saw a distinction created between the more complex hierarchical and hereditary 'chiefdoms' of Polynesia, and the 'simpler' peoples of Melanesia who had ranked societies of 'big men' who achieved their position but did not have the level of sophistication reached on the other side of the Polynesia/Melanesia divide (see discussion in Sahlins 1963). This classification made two major errors. First, it masked the immense diversity within each of these regions. Melanesia holds most of the diversity of human cultures and languages in Oceania. Just the small island nation of Vanuatu, with eighty-five inhabited islands and a current population approaching 280,000, is home to around 100 distinct languages (Crowley 2000). The Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea exhibit similar diversity (Greenhill 2015; Pawley 2009). Significantly, these areas include languages from the Polynesian family, evidence of an imaginary colonial boundary that was in fact permeable, something to be covered below in the section on the history of Polynesian Outliers.

Second, the apparent simplicity of the Melanesian societies as documented by colonial anthropologists is an artefact of intentional and unintentional bias, as well as the social, ecological, economic, and demographic disruptions that resulted from encounter and entanglement with European empires from the 1500s to the 1900s (see Spriggs 2008). The apparent difference across the Polynesia/Melanesia divide has shaped to some degree the history of archaeological scholarship in the Pacific. Melanesian archaeology focused on early, pottery-bearing sites, while archaeology on the other side of the boundary emphasised the large stone constructions of Polynesian chiefs and their followers (see Kirch 2017: 13–32). Archaeological research since the 1980s has shown that Melanesians in fact also lived in large aggregated settlements, built complex stone structures both in the form of agricultural terraces and ritual constructions, and exhibited a high degree of socio-political complexity. This has been demonstrated clearly for New Caledonia (Sand 1996, 2002), the Solomon Islands (Walter et al. 2004), and Vanuatu (Bedford 2019; Spriggs 1981, 1986).

Again the point is not to show that Melanesians have somehow reached the same 'stage' or level of complexity as the Polynesians. Rather, this perspective



undermines the very divisions that Dumont D'Urville originally proposed, even as we still use them as a geographic heuristic in contemporary scholarship (Flexner and Leclerc 2019). Not only does the entire Oceanic region have a rich and complex history, but this history is significant and informative for comparative perspectives in other parts of the world, including for topics such as 'the Middle Ages'.

In the remaining pages of this Element, I focus on the concept of interactions for an Oceanic world over a period covering roughly 1,000 years. This begins with some of the last human colonisations of undiscovered lands, 'pristine' islands including the ones at the vertices of the great Polynesian triangle: Hawai'i, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and Aotearoa (New Zealand). These encounters represent important examples of the kinds of environmental learning that people had to undertake to figure out how to survive in ecosystems that pushed the limits of their transported agricultural systems. Voyages to the east brought Polynesians into encounters with the Pacific coastal peoples of South America, and possibly North America (though the latter is a more controversial claim; see Jones and Klar 2012). In the other direction, voyages to the west brought Polynesians back into contact with populations with whom they shared a common ancestry, resulting in the formation of 'Polynesian Outliers'.

Far from being nomadic sailors, Oceanic peoples lived on islands over many generations, establishing lineages, political rivalries, and mythic historicities (see Ballard 2014). With the possible exception of the enigmatic *rongorongo* script of Rapa Nui, likely a protohistoric invention resulting from Spanish contacts in the 1700s (Fischer 1997), Pacific Islanders did not record their stories in writing. Thus much of what we know about social and political history in Oceania prior to European contacts comes from oral traditions, many of which were written down beginning in the nineteenth century, by European explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists (e.g., Fornander 1917; Gray 1892, 1894; Humphreys 1926), and in some cases by Native scholars such as Kamuela Kamakau and Davida Malo in Hawai'i (Kamakau 1976, 1991; Malo 1951). For much of the 19th and 20th centuries much of the content of these traditions was treated as mythical in nature: stories that structured cultural beliefs and identities to maintain cohesion and stability in small island societies. Increasingly by the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars determined that these stories recorded actual histories (see Dye 1989; Garanger 1996; Kirch 2010a). The names of the individuals and the feats involved really did happen. Even where the stories are augmented with magical events or supernatural explanations for happenings, there is an underlying element of factuality. These traditions allow for alternative interpretations of the material record of archaeological evidence (David et al. 2012; Flexner 2014b; Kirch 2018). Archaeological research has

subsequently added richness and depth to our understanding of past dynamics in these complex island societies (Kirch 2017).

One of the points of this Element is to treat European expansion into Oceania not as a distinct break with the indigenous past, but part of a longer history of interactions and incursions by various newcomers over shorter and longer periods. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the presence of Europeans did cause major upheaval among island societies, not least because of the significant demographic decline caused by introduced diseases. Thus I do provide a separate section on European colonial encounters and invasions. During a period covering almost 300 years, different groups of Oceanic people had initial interactions with explorers and sailors beginning with Magellan in 1519 and basically finishing with Cook, whose great voyages in the Southern Ocean ended in 1779. Poignantly, both of these voyages that bookend the ‘heroic’ era of European exploration in the Pacific end with the deaths of the now famous navigators at the hands of Islanders.

Major incursions by the European powers and attempts to dominate or even exterminate Oceanic populations did not begin until well into the 1800s. In some cases Europeans, their things, and their ideas were barely present for Islander societies even into the twentieth century, as was the case in the New Guinea Highlands, for example (see Gosden 2004: 93–103). There is a long period of early European ‘contacts’ that pre-dates the major upheavals in Oceanic societies beginning in the nineteenth century (Flexner 2014a) that is nonetheless relevant to the broader narrative here for what it shows about the adaptability and resilience of Pacific Islanders in their ability to accommodate and respond to outside influences.

Finally, the Element closes with a discussion of what the Pacific past means for the future of Islander societies. People in the region face a number of challenges as the twenty-first century enters its third decade, from climate change, to conflicts over resources, to the struggles faced by some of the world’s youngest democratic nation-states. However, I will present an argument that the knowledge produced by centuries of scholarship encapsulating the wisdom of Oceanic peoples, including increasingly the scholarship led by indigenous Islanders, is cause for some optimism regarding the ways that Pacific Island societies might continue to adapt during the next 1,000 years of their history.

### **3 Encountering New Environments: The Ends of Polynesia**

The settlement of the Polynesian islands is one of the great epics of human exploration, discovery, and settlement (Kirch 2010b). As the New Zealand Māori scholar Ranginui Walker (1990: 24) framed the story, ‘Within a time