



Oceania, c. 1200–1450 CE

By Trevor Getz and Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

By 1200 CE, the population of Oceania had become a web of far-flung communities. Despite long distances and great diversity, they used sophisticated maritime technology to stay connected.



Acknowledging Pacific history

The Pacific Ocean is a really big place. In this article, we're only talking about one part of the Pacific. Oceania lies within the vastness of the world's greatest ocean, but it's a huge region in its own right! We're not going to deal much with the peoples on the Pacific Coast of East Asia or Siberia. Nor will we discuss the indigenous societies that settled the Pacific coast of North and South America. We'll focus on Oceania—which includes island groups known as Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and some parts of Australasia, including New Zealand, New Guinea, and the east coast of Australia. Much of this region was populated by humans as many as 40,000 years ago! You may have seen a representation of this process in Disney's *Moana*. The film depicts the historical movement of Polynesian peoples through the song "Know the Way." It also shows Moana herself navigating by the stars via technologies Pacific peoples pioneered over thousands of years of seafaring.



Ha'amonga 'a Maui, a gateway put up in the thirteenth century by a King of Tonga, probably partly to honor the ancestor Maui, who is locally believed to have constructed it himself. By Tau'olunga, CC BY-SA 3.0.

But here's a weird fact. Oceania, and the peoples of the Pacific, were often left out of world history textbooks (at least those written in the US) until about 1999. That was when two historians, both teaching at the University of Hawaii, wrote *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*.¹ They were, after all, living in Hawaii, the long-standing Pacific society established by the Polynesian people. They knew that Hawaiians historically were part of a Pacific community that played a significant role in the human past.

So, in their textbook, they made sure to acknowledge that history. It became a bestseller, changing the way this region has been studied ever since.

¹ Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler, later joined by Heather Streets-Salter.

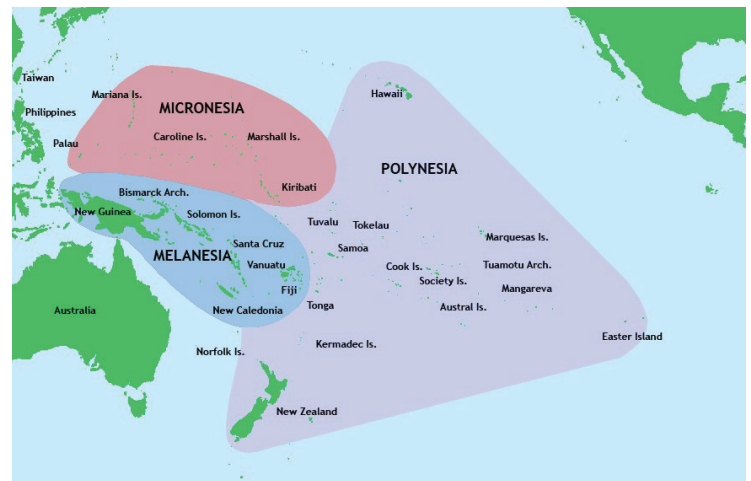
Human geography of the Pacific, c. 1200

Scholars also continue to debate whether this first wave of migrations from southeast Asia was intentional or unintentional. Oceania was settled by humans over a long period beginning 40,000 to 60,000 years ago, though scientists still argue about these numbers. Scholars also continue to debate whether this first wave of migrations was intentional or unintentional. New studies have shown that unintentional crossings—journeys where ships went off course or had no intended destination in the first place but still managed to settle somewhere—were unlikely. Therefore, it's possible that early humans intentionally island-hopped from southeast Asia to the coast of New Guinea using early boat-building and sailing technologies. Once there, people developed sophisticated agricultural techniques and built densely-populated communities.

Some of these people then also crossed the straits that separate New Guinea from Australia. Those who settled in Australia encountered a difficult new set of environments, including widespread arid (dry) zones. Few plant or animal species in Australia could be domesticated, but the continent did have some large animals that could be hunted. That's how most of the communities of Australia became expert foragers (hunters and gatherers).

Meanwhile, the societies of Southeast Asia and Taiwan, and the early settlers of the south Pacific, were together developing a whole range of technological innovations that slowly— as in, over thousands of years—allowed them to travel deeper and deeper into the Pacific Ocean. The most important of these innovations allowed them to read wind and ocean currents to situate themselves, and to construct vast, sail-driven canoes that could go very long distances. With these technologies, these peoples gradually populated the outermost islands of Oceania.

Eventually, these communities formed three large groups. Each was made up of peoples who were geographically spread out, but still related to each other by culture and language. These three groups each covered areas of the planet larger than most continents. The first was the Melanesian group, which made up the densely-populated region of New Guinea and also a large number of pretty closely-packed islands from New Guinea to Fiji. North of Melanesia were the Micronesian group, who were more spread out, based on islands including the Mariana and Majōl (Marshall) chains. Finally, to the east, the long-voyaging Polynesian people gradually populated very far-flung islands. At the geographic center of Polynesian society were the islands of Kūki 'Āirani (Cook Islands) and Tōtaiete mā (Society Islands). Larger communities were formed in the Hawaiian chain and in Aotearoa (New Zealand), where the Maori people spoke (and still speak) a Polynesian language. The furthest extent of Polynesian society was Rapa Nui (Easter Island), settled about 700 CE.



Some cultural communities of the Pacific. Public domain.

Organizing communities and states

From 1200 to 1450 CE, Oceania was inhabited by a series of interconnected, culturally linked communities. The vast distances between many Polynesian islands meant that numerous societies were somewhat isolated, but there is evidence of ongoing trade between all of them. Other regions, like those in Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and New Guinea, built up large communities that needed political and social organizations to manage a large population.

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To make decisions, people in most communities in this region belonged to family groups, where a lot of the decisions were made. But in a number of societies, families were organized into bigger units such as clans and states. Australian Aboriginal peoples developed an elaborate system of kinship, which helped to determine marriage and family relations but also to establish societal rules for behavior. For the most part, Aboriginal society was egalitarian in terms of leadership potential, but only if you were male. There were few established political hierarchies such as chiefs or kings. Hierarchies seemed to be mostly contained to religious or spiritual matters, or those that related to the Dreaming. The Dreaming is the spiritual philosophy of the Aboriginal peoples, and encompasses their history of the universe, the Earth, the present, and the future.

The Maori society of Aotearoa (New Zealand) migrated from neighboring islands. By the mid- to late-thirteenth century CE, they began dividing the land amongst several states, also called *iwis*. These were composed of a number of *whanau*, meaning families. Each state had several important chiefs, called *rangatira* and *ariki*, who came together in a collective decision-making group. Each *iwi* had its own power, but they all worked together. Still, as everywhere in the world, there was conflict both within and between the different Maori states.

The Hawaiian islands were also settled by Polynesian migrants, with the first arrivals often dated to about 300 CE. Continued migrations from the Tahitian islands took place from the ninth century CE.

Hawaiian society resembled that of Aotearoa in many ways. Organized into a series of small, rival kingdoms, the extended family, the village, and the clan were usually the most important political institutions. Both Hawaiian and Maori societies lacked written languages. Still, each had rich oral histories that were similar in nature given that both were settled by Polynesians migrating from Tahiti. Their oral tradition told of the legendary founding of the islands. These histories were passed down through many generations. Polynesians also brought with them farming knowledge as well as their shipbuilding and navigation techniques.

Gender relations also varied widely among these communities. Women in Polynesian societies may have been closer to full equality with men than any other part of the world. They could certainly be very independent, and women whose families held royal or chiefly positions could often inherit authority. This was less true in other societies of the Pacific. But the most important aspect of gender roles in this region was the complementary relationship of men and women. In general, people in this part of the world believed that men and women each had their own spheres of influence and their own roles, and that both were needed for a family or community to be successful. This meant that men and women both exercised power, but in different ways, and they weren't really supposed to step outside of their roles. Also, as in many parts of the world, some Pacific societies had (and continue to have) their own fundamental conceptions of gender. For example, Samoan society saw more than two genders. The third gender, known as *fa'afafine*, are biologically male but fulfill roles that are historically seen as being more feminine, such as caring for elders and children.

Ideas about culture and politics were broadly shared, despite the diversity of these many societies, because the impressive technology developed by the people of Oceania allowed them to continue to trade with each other across vast distances. An archaeological study set in the Cook Islands, for example, uncovered trade goods such



Maori waka (canoe) at the Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand.
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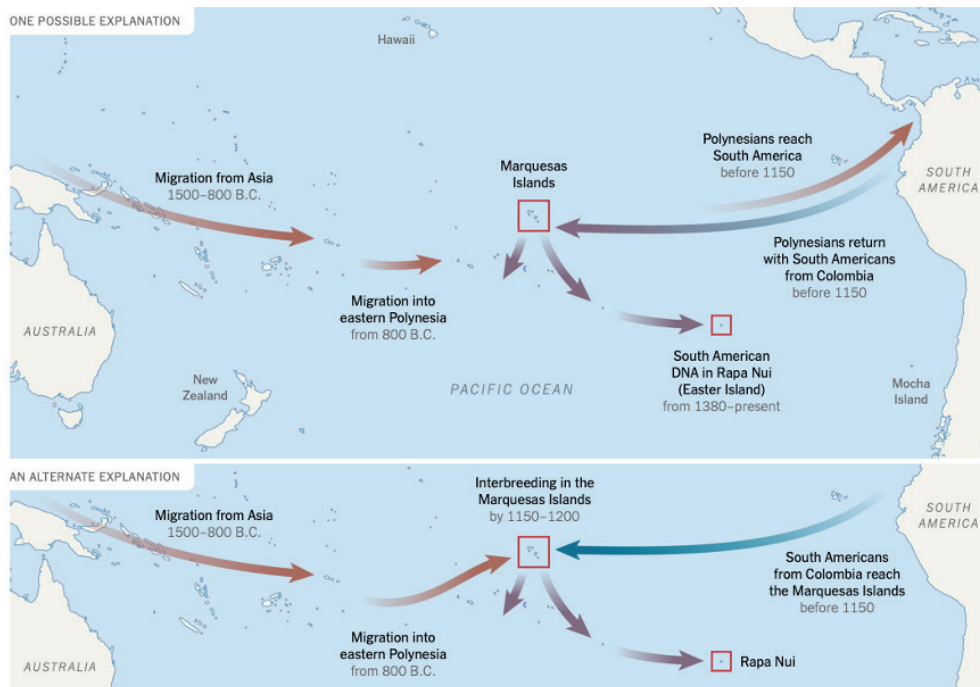
as stone tools that came from islands as far as Samoa, 1,000 miles away, and the Marquesas, 1,500 miles away. Trading connections like these helped communities on various islands to keep up to date with new technology. They could also disperse rare goods like obsidian, a useful type of stone just as desired in the Oceanic sphere as it was in the Americas.

A world apart?

Generally, Oceania is treated as an area that was entirely separated from other parts of the world before the modern era. Not true. After all, many of the people who settled Pacific regions remained in contact with the societies of South and Southeast Asia from which many of them originated. But there is also intriguing evidence of links to further regions.

For example, the language of the people of the large island of Madagascar, off the coast of East Africa, is about half African in origin, and half Southeast Asian with strong relationships to Polynesian languages. This may not be proof of sustained interaction, however, but rather a common origin in Southeast Asia.

In another example, DNA evidence from the Marquesas and other islands suggests that migrants from South America may have joined Polynesians to create mixed communities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. This evidence, which emerged only very recently, is forcing us to re-imagine a lot of what we thought we knew about the history of this region.



Map showing the possible joining of Polynesian and South American people in the Pacific, twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The word “admixture” in this context is about genetics, meaning the coming together of different peoples whose DNA becomes shared over several generations. By Jonathan Corum, Nature.

Instead of a vast area of ocean dotted with isolated islands, should we now think of the Pacific—even as early as 1200—as a great zone of interaction and exchange? It’s probably still too early for a final analysis, but it’s clear we can no longer rest on our older narratives that dismissed, or worse, ignored, this global zone.

Sources

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Ha'amonga 'a Maui, a gateway put up in the thirteenth century by a King of Tonga, probably partly to honor the ancestor Maui, who is locally believed to have constructed it himself. By Tau'olunga, CC BY-SA 3.0. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ha'amonga.jpg>

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Map showing the possible joining of Polynesian and South American people in the Pacific, twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The word "admixture" in this context is about genetics, meaning the coming together of different peoples whose DNA becomes shared over several generations. By Jonathan Corum, Nature. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/science/polynesian-ancestry.html>