

Origin of the Polynesians

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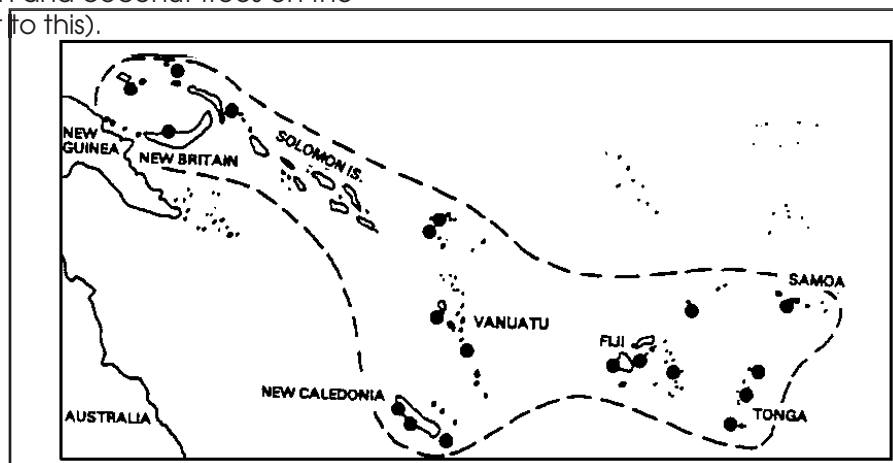
The vast Pacific, and in particular the islands of Polynesia, was the last part on Earth to be settled by humans. The recent voyages of the *Hōkūleʻa* are but a reenactment of multiple voyages spanning a period of more than 3,000 years.

The Fiji-Tonga-Sāmoa region was apparently the first part of Polynesia to be settled from the West. Archaeological evidence gives a date of 1500 BC for Sāmoa. Pottery styles, still practiced in Fiji, have their origins in New Caledonia (Lapita site). There are other "Lapita" sites in Vanuatu, New Britain, and the Solomon Islands. Dates from there indicate settlement by 2500 BC. It seems to have taken people 1,000 years to successfully cross the 1,000-mile (1,400-km) gap from Melanesia to Polynesia. Evidence in Fiji (obsidian fleakes from an island north of New Guinea) indicates a trading relationship lasted at least another 1,000 years after settlement between Fiji and islands in Melanesia.

The 1,000 years it took "to get" to Polynesia was a period in which the capability to successfully undertake long ocean voyages was developed. Way-finding (navigational) techniques were developed; ocean-going voyaging canoes were perfected. In this process the culture became "Polynesian" after the initial settling of Western Polynesia. Polynesian navigational voyaging technology enabled people to mount successful voyages of exploration and settlement to the far corners of Polynesia and even to make landfall in South America (the Native American sweet potato in Polynesian and coconut trees on the coast of Peru attest to this).

Polynesian traditions indicate that deliberate settlement of distant islands was preceded by voyages of exploration and discovery; Hawaiʻi Loa, Kupe to Aotearoa (New Zealand), and to Rapa Nui (Easter Island before the settlement landing of Hotu-matua. Evidence in Aotearoa (presence of the Polynesian rat) indicates human presence at about the time of Christ although archaeological evidence does not show settlement until the early eighth century AD. Some archaeologists contend that the Marquesas could have been settled by 200–300 BC and Hawaiʻi about 100 AD. We know from Hawaiian traditions that voyages between Hawaiʻi and Raiatea (then known as Hawaiiki) in the Societies continued up to the mid-fourteenth century AD. Maori traditions place the Great Fleet (the seven canoes from the Cook Islands) in the fourteenth century AD. Captain Cook took aboard a Tahitian navigator who accurately took him to distant islands and who told him of people having come originally from the west.

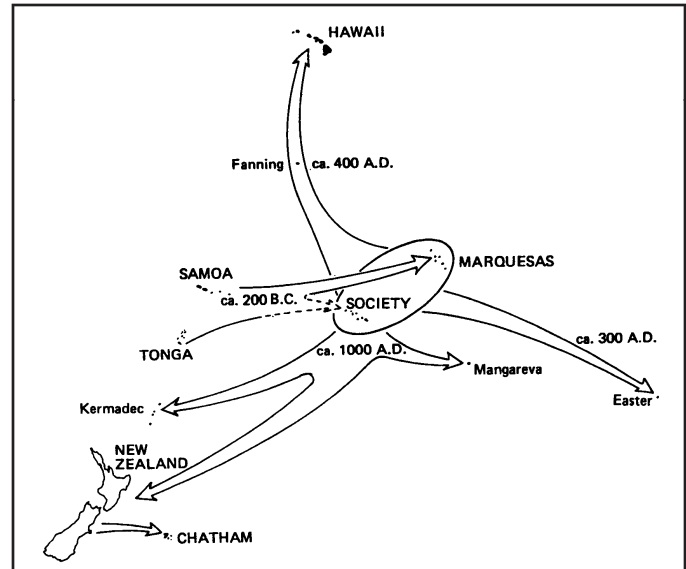
Concrete evidence that people settled Polynesia from the west, despite the prevailing winds being from the east, lies in language affinities and (except for the sweet potato) in the economic plants they introduced.



All the Polynesian languages are in the Austronesian family as are those of Micronesia, the Philippines, and Taiwan, Indonesian and far away Madagascar (settled by Malagasy speakers from Indonesia). The Austronesian family of languages stretches more than halfway around the globe, from Rapa Nui to Madagascar, testimony to the voyaging prowess of these peoples. Some linguists believe the Austronesian speech has its roots in an area north of India. The only words in the pre-contact Polynesian languages that do not have an Austronesian root are the names for the sweet potato, which are all variants of the Quichua (northeast Peruvian) word *cumara* (*kumara* in Aotearoa, *'uala* in Hawai'i, *umala* in Sāmoa). Although there are many other names for the sweet potato in the Americas, the fact that all the Polynesian names are variants of the same word indicates a one-time contact. Comparing the sea-going qualities of the Polynesian and Peruvian crafts, the antiquity of the sweet potato in Eastern Polynesia, and Spanish explorers finding coconut trees on the Peruvian coast it is most likely that Polynesian explorers, ever seeking land to the east, encountered South America.

The other firm evidence of the western Pacific/Southeast Asian origin of the Polynesians is the fact that virtually all of the major economic plants utilized in Polynesia have their botanic origins in Southeast Asia and Melanesia, and most of those do not naturally disperse but must be moved by people. These plants include the taro, which was a principal crop in Southeast Asia before rice was introduced from the north; the yam, which was generally preferred to the later-introduced American sweet potato; the banana, which originated in Melanesia; the *wauke*, which can be found in South China; the mountain apple, which is from Malaysia; as are the *kukui*, the breadfruit, and the ti. While ocean dispersal of the coconut is possible over relatively short distances, the nut will not germinate after prolonged immersion in salt water, which rules out natural dispersal to Hawai'i or the coast of Peru.

The above information is evidence and corroborates the belief that the Polynesians indeed were the greatest navigators the world has ever known.



Recommended Reading

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