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– ARTICLE –

The Significance of Religious Ritual in Ancient Hawai'i

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ABSTRACT

A volume in honour of Patrick Kirch's intellectual contribution to the archaeology of Hawai'i would be incomplete without a discussion of his wide-ranging scholarship on the topic of traditional Hawaiian religion. In this paper, I focus on themes that we can see throughout his career. The first is the incorporation of the study of *heiau* (temples), shrines, and other sacred sites described in ethnohistory within the historical context of the development of Hawaiian society. The second is his contribution to the interpretation of architecture and ritual practices through close attention to details such as orientation, elaboration, and offerings. The final theme is best captured in the Hawaiian concept of *mālama*, meaning to take care of, preserve, or protect these sites. Finally, I summarise some of the future directions in research that are now possible thanks to Kirch's contributions to the field.

Keywords: ritual, monumental architecture, ideology, archaic state, Hawai'i

INTRODUCTION

From its founding, anthropology has taken as its purview the study of all aspects of human life. This mandate makes anthropological archaeology by definition intra-disciplinary in that we must take a broad and holistic view of human history that includes considering topics that are central to other fields. The anthropological study of religion, for example, is preceded by a large volume of work in theology stretching back centuries to the founding of university scholarship, and developed in parallel with modern fields such as religious studies and comparative religion. With this much scholarly attention, studies of static material culture (e.g., artefacts, architecture) would seem an unlikely source for understanding the subtlety of religious beliefs or ritual practices (see P. McCoy 1999; and M. McCoy 2008). Nonetheless, the cumulative history of religious ritual has left behind an indelible mark in the world in the form of massive monumental scale architecture and beautifully ornate works of art which draw our attention, regardless of our knowledge of the history or meanings attached to these sacred places and objects.

While most of what we know of contact era Hawaiian religion comes from 19th century Hawaiian scholars (I'i 1959; Kamakau 1976; Malo 1951), what we know of the development of Hawaiian religion through archaeological evidence we in large part owe to the scholarship of Patrick Kirch. In this paper I look back over his considerable body of research with an eye toward what it tells us about the significance of religious ritual in Hawai'i. The term significance is often used rather loosely by archaeologists especially in cultural resource management, but it is most often used to refer to the emotional connection between sites of religious ritual and the people who originally constructed and used them. It is also important to reflect on what makes these same places significant to archaeologists who have taken an interest in them and to modern people more broadly but especially the Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) community. My purpose is not to contrast these perspectives, but to highlight how the anthropological imperative to consider all aspects of human life and the moral imperative to protect and respect these sites can be fruitfully combined in thoughtful research.

Kirch has already shown us by example what one person can accomplish with both intellectual rigor and heart-felt reverence for this topic. While his work covers many aspects of the history of religious ritual I have chosen to focus on themes that we can see throughout his career. The first is the incorporation of the study of *heiau* (temples), shrines, and other sacred sites described in ethnohistory within the historical context of the development of Hawaiian society. The second is his contribution to the interpretation of architecture and ritual practices through close attention to details such as orientation, elaboration, and offerings. The final theme is best captured in the Hawaiian concept of *mālama*, meaning to take care of, preserve, or protect these sites. Lastly, I briefly discuss some of the ways that Kirch's path-breaking scholarship has made it possible for future research.

BACKGROUND

At the time of European contact, Hawaiian temples, called

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heiau, were loci for creating and maintaining political power. King Kamehameha I, the first leader to unite the archipelago, certainly recognized the importance of religious authority. During his rise to power he ordered the construction of a massive war temple called Puʻukoholā Heiau (Fig. 1), and the consecration of the site is intimately tied to the founding of the 19th century Hawaiian monarchy. Upon Kamehameha's death in 1819, his successor Liholiho publically ended the *kapu* (taboo) that prohibited men and women from eating together and declared 'there should no longer be any priests or any worship rendered to the gods' (Ellis 1969[1842]:127). The *kapu* system was of course much more than a set of rules regarding eating, it was a body of religious regulations unique to Hawaiʻi that defined proper behaviour, rights, and obligations that in essence justified class and gender distinctions (see Kahn 2014). At the time of contact, breaking *kapu* had varied consequences that ranged from fines, exile, and corporal punishment, to death. Historians largely credit powerful women in the royal family, specifically Queen Regent Kaʻahumanu, for arranging for the newly crowned Liholiho to overturn this tradition at a feast in Kailua on Hawaiʻi Island. Western religion was well known to Hawaiians in the years leading up this shift and some have suggested the end of *kapu* was intended as a first step in arranging a marriage between Lihiliho and the Christian ruling family of Tahiti (Sissons 2008, 2011:209). Just a year later, the first resident Christian missions were established which would eventually find converts at all levels of society.

While some welcomed the 1819 royal abolition of traditional religious practices, especially high-ranked women who could no longer be excluded from political discourse on the pretext of religious doctrine, others publically and privately resisted. The most notable public example is the case of Kekuaokalani, a nephew of Kamehameha, who received dominion over the war god Kūkāʻilimoku from his uncle upon his death. Kekuaokalani led a rebellion against the monarchy but his forces were quickly met with defeat. Nonetheless, many continued to practice religious ritual traditions in private after 1819. As the historian Daws (1968:59) puts it,

> Many of the images from the heiaus were hidden and worshipped secretly; the bones of dead chiefs in the mausoleum at Honaunau were venerated as before; the gods of fishing and planting continued to be given first fruits; Pele, the goddess of the volcano, had her devotees for decades after 1819; travelers' shrines were piled with offerings; and the spirit world of the Hawaiians was still filled with powerful supernatural beings.

There is material evidence to support the notion of

Figure 1. Puʻukoholā Heiau, South Kohala District, Hawaiʻi Island. This *luakini heiau* (war temple) was commissioned by Kamehameha I during his bid to establish the first pan-archipelago monarchy. Photograph by Thérèse Babineau.

continued private religious practices including wooden images (*ki'i*) found hidden in caves that were clearly carved in the post-contact era with metal tools. More importantly, core beliefs and practices carry on to the modern day within the Kānaka Maoli community despite protracted colonial efforts to discourage public ritual practices, such as chanting (*oli*). Today in Hawai'i, thanks in large part to the Hawaiian cultural renaissance, we see more and more public expression of traditions that have their origins in the pre-contact era, including celebrations which incorporate traditional sacred sites such as Pu'ukoholā Heiau (Tengan 2008).

The earliest formal studies of Hawaiian religion were based on the writings of 19th century Hawaiian scholars. The dominant theme of these was the arrival of a priest from Tahiti in the 14th century called Pā'ao who introduced human sacrifice and the practice of building war temples (*luakini heiau*) (see also Valeri 1985). At the turn of the 20th century the Bishop Museum sent John Stokes to collect oral traditions and map religious structures in an effort to 'prove' the Tahitian-priest-hypothesis (Dye 1991). But, Stokes' surveys uncovered much more than war temples. By talking to local people who shared with him the location and history of hundreds of sites, he recorded temples and shrines dedicated to a truly remarkable range of purposes. His survey further documented rock art, locations built for the traditional sledding game (*hōlua*), and unaltered sacred places. Stokes of course was not alone; pioneering efforts by Bennett, Kekahuna, McAllister, and Walker gave us some of the best direct historical evidence of religion as it was practiced at more than 800 *heiau* and other locations across the archipelago.

With hundreds of religious sites documented we might reasonably ask why didn't the Hawaiian Islands attract much academic interest from archaeologists until the 1960s and 1970s? One factor, which Kirch has pointed out, is that Hawai'i like other Pacific Islands was presumed to have had a brief period of pre-contact era occupation; a misconception that was only soundly overturned when radiocarbon dating put colonisation closer to 800 years before Captain Cook arrived (Kirch 1985). Looking back, I would argue that another factor slowed the development of archaeology between the turn of the century and the 1960s. While professional archaeologists of this era caught headlines for their expeditions to religious sites they were extremely hesitant to deal directly with religion in a serious scholarly fashion. Take for example Hawkes' (1954) well-known 'ladder of inference.' Hawkes' ladder is a metaphor where the reconstruction of material needs is placed on lower-rungs, being straightforward and decipherable, when compared with the high-rungs of religious belief. It stands to reason that since the archaeological record in Hawai'i as it was known then consisted overwhelmingly of temples, it remained on the periphery of archaeological scholarship because it was thought to be too difficult.

Kirch on the other hand has never run from the incorporation of ethnohistory or the symbolic. For example, when he wrote *Feathered Gods and Fishhooks* (Kirch 1985), the first book-length synthesis of the archaeology of Hawai'i, he drew upon settlement pattern archaeology which documented a wide range of variation in shrines and temples, as well the results of systematic excavations. If he had chosen to ignore or mistrust local traditions, his summary might have stopped there. Instead, he goes on to engage the Tahitian-priest-hypothesis, not denying the existence or importance of Pā'ao, but drawing the conclusion that we should look for explanations that take in to account local historical trends. He reasoned that, 'most of the unique features of Hawaiian religion and temple construction were developed locally, in *isolation from the rest of Polynesia*' (Kirch 1985: 259, emphasis added). This seemingly simple point redirected scholarship away from the diffusionist path it had been on for so long and challenged archaeologists to develop models to explain the development of Hawaiian religion in terms of the local historical sequence.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

In one of his major works early in his career we find an example of Kirch's commitment that archaeology not leave out the symbolic side of the human experience. He notes in his concluding chapter of *Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms*, that '…we cannot afford to lose sight of the dynamic role of individual creativity in cultural evolution' (Kirch 1984: 283). In my view this is the epitome of the anthropological imperative to simultaneously consider all aspects of the human experience. Of course, how one puts this in to practice is the real challenge, and looking broadly over Kirch's contribution to reconstructing religion, there are several general categories that are useful for thinking about how Hawai'i can contribute to world archaeology: reconstructing the ritual landscape; connecting religious belief and ritual practices through careful study of material culture; and exploring the role of ideology in the rise of an archaic state society.

The Ritual Landscape

Today archaeologists take for granted that the spatial distribution of *heiau* and other locations of religious ritual can be examined as an avenue to gain insight in to the larger social and cultural history of Hawai'i. This is understandable given that this notion is supported by a thick literature coming out of settlement pattern archaeology, and more recently landscape archaeology, where the placement of sites of ritual is used to interpret power relations in the past. But, it has been research by Kirch that laid the foundation for this line of enquiry. In an issue of the journal *World Archaeology*, Kirch (1990) compares data from Tonga and Hawai'i pointing out critical differences in size, purpose, and mortuary architecture that set a standard in

linking monuments with the social hierarchy. Perhaps just as importantly, he clearly shows that the construction of large war temples was favoured within an ecological zone where farmers relied more on rain-fed than irrigated agriculture. He elaborated on this theme in his book, *The Wet and the Dry*, noting that in resource-poor regions elites are often more quick to engage in warfare to increase their tax base (Kirch 1994).

Religious Belief and Ritual Practices

Another theme I want to highlight falls under the category of identifying ritual practices, specifically identifying aspects of Hawaiian religious practices that are poorly documented, or undocumented, in ethnohistory. For example, we know from ethnohistory that Hawaiians had a specialist priest class (*kahuna*, singular; *kāhuna*, plural) who acted as chief architects of temple construction. We know that these same priests had knowledge of astronomy born out of the necessity of navigation but also deeply imbued with meaning. Further, we know that priests used this knowledge to mark out the ritual calendar through combined solar and astronomic observations. In a paper in the journal *Antiquity*, Kirch (2004) showed us that if one followed these facts in evidence out to their logical conclusion, then we should be looking at religious architecture with an eye toward archaeo-astronomy (Fig. 2). Using detailed observations on the orientation of Maui temples, he noted a bias toward three directions; directions that are associated with specific gods in the Hawaiian pantheon, and the all-important location in the northeast sky where priests watched for the constellation Pleiades to rise marking the start of the *makahiki* season; an annual event described in written accounts going back to Captain Cook's fatal encounter in Hawai'i. So, while it might not seem particularly controversial to say we can identify *heiau* associated with the *makahiki* tradition, at the time it flew in the face of received wisdom among archaeologists going back to Stokes that orientation reflected no more than local landform.

At these same Maui *heiau*, Kirch noted offerings of freshly picked branch coral. Similar coral offerings have been found associated with shrines, men's houses, and temples across the archipelago. Through his collaboration with geochronologist Andrew Sharp, Kirch published in the journal *Science* a novel method of uranium-thorium dating that yielded dates on coral that have precision an order of magnitude greater than the best AMS carbon-14 dates (Kirch and Sharp 2005). Offerings found in contexts interpreted as marking the dedication of new temples converged on a period of just a few decades. This high resolution dating gives us a plausible temporal link between these sites and Pi'ilani, a leader who politically unified Maui Island.

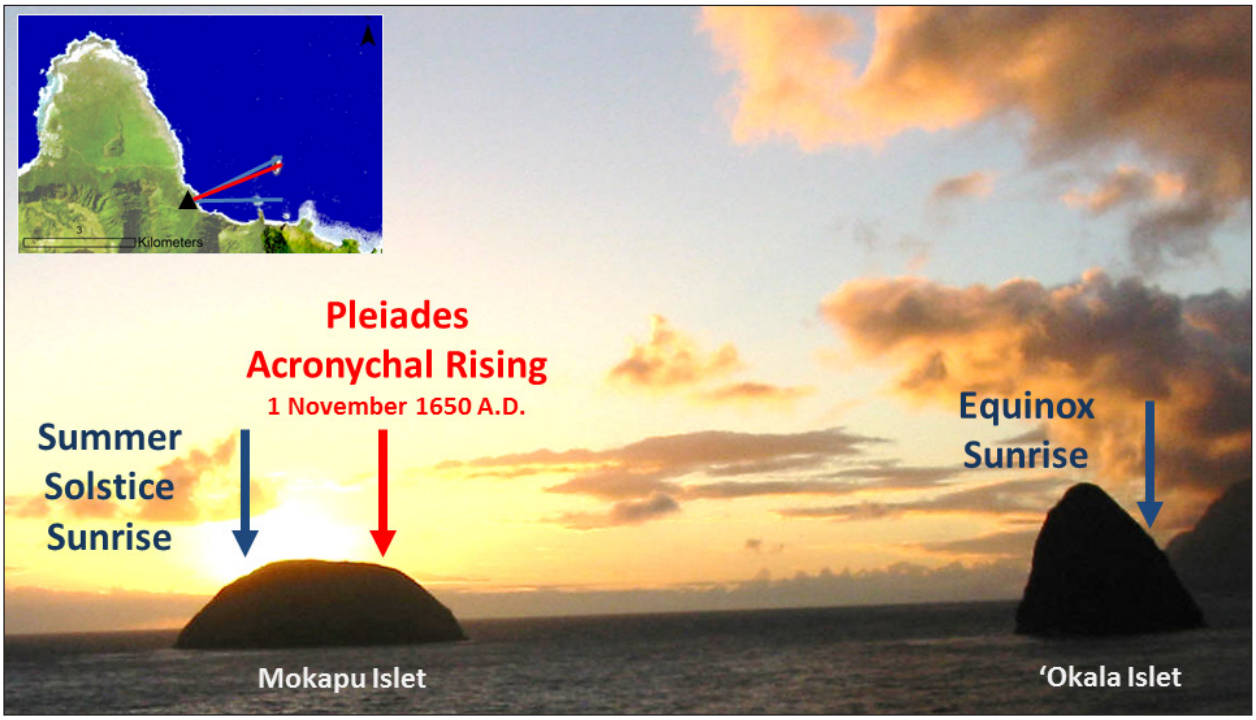

Figure 2. Archaeoastronomy and Heiau Architecture. This example of the eastern view from Kalaupapa Peninsula demonstrates how temple orientation was used to signify the location on the horizon where the constellation Pleiades (Makali'i) would rise over an off-shore island. This same view would also allow one to track the sun's progression from equinox to summer solstice and return back to equinox. (See McCoy 2006, 2008; Site: 50-60-03-2270).

The Role of Ideology in the Rise of Archaic States

In his recent book, Kirch (2010) lays out the evidence which, in his view, points to Hawaiian society having transformed from a complex chiefdom to a state before European contact (see also Hommon 2013). He is not the first to advance this notion but this is a departure from how anthropologists have classified Hawaiian society. Why should we include Hawai'i in the select club of 'pristine' states? And what caused this fundamental shift in society? The short answer to these questions centres on material conditions like population growth and surplus production, but also status rivalry, symbolic entanglement that comes with peer polity interaction, and divine kingship.

What I want to draw attention to here is the fact that the materialization of power through religion is the strongest evidence we have for the operation of archaic states in the Hawaiian Islands. For example, what set royal centres apart from other places is the clustering of large scale and elaborate temples and other religious features like the large dividing wall at Honaunau on Hawai'i Island's Kona Coast (Fig. 3; for another example of a large exclusionary wall at Nāpo'opo'o see Hommon 2014). This is unsurprising given that the thing that separated kings from their chiefly ancestors was their divinity – they were living gods – a commonality across all early states. Nonetheless, we must take care not to presume that each monumental scaled structure was built with the same purpose. Again, looking at the use of large dividing walls, we find that these features at the time of contact were employed in defining not only royal compounds but also refuges (*pu'uhonua*) and other religious precincts.

Along these same lines, if we conceive of states as a hierarchical network of elites, I think it is hard to underestimate the importance of priests in the operation of that network. Religious doctrine no doubt masked and justified power imbalances–something possibly nearly universal in world religion–but more than that, priests traded in knowledge and information; they were likely, at different times society's tax collectors, police, judges, historians, accountants, and on and on. But, while we have many examples of the handiwork of the priestly class, we know remarkably little about the priests themselves. Kirch and colleagues have looked in great detail at what I believe to be the only published example of a pre-contact era Hawaiian priest's house (Kirch *et al.* 2010). At this and other religious sites, they found that the sources of basalt flakes, probably associated with retooling adzes, were far more likely to come from non-local sources as compared with the assemblages found at commoner house sites; a mate-

Figure 3. Exclusionary Wall at Honaunau. This photo shows the massive size of the 'Great Wall' near the royal mausoleum. Photograph by Thérèse Babineau.

rial reflection of this critical network of *kāhuna* (Kirch *et al*. 2012).

In each of these research themes Kirch put sites of religious practices in their historical context through interpretation based on close attention to the details of the material and ethnohistoric records. In this review thus far I have looked at this body of work mainly in terms of what Hawai'i can do for archaeology as an unparalleled opportunity to work out some of the truly difficult problems in both studying religion and understanding its role in human history. What I want to do now is to turn things around and talk more about what archaeology can do for Hawai'i.

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

In his book *Legacy of the Landscape*, Kirch produced a field guide to the archaeology of Hawai'i. He starts by stating that: 'Above all, keep in mind that these sites represent the cultural heritage of the native Hawaiian people, and as such deserve great respect' (Kirch 1996: 11). He goes on to talk about *heiau* and the fact that, '[e]ven after the traditional rituals were no longer practiced, these sites continued to be regarded as *wahi pana*, or sacred places. They are imbued with *mana*, or spiritual power, and continue to have great significance' (Kirch 1996: 11). In these brief instructions, he appeals to an underlying moral obligation to behave respectfully. Here we see someone using the bully pulpit afforded him through his scientific credentials to instil a moral imperative to not just respect, but drawn out to its logical conclusion, protect these sites. I would argue that working to attract people to the right way to behave rather than trying to ban visitation altogether, is a positive, inclusive, and sustainable way to protect sites.

Today, sites of religious ritual are inextricably linked to the identity of Kānaka Maoli. Kirch's former student Kathleen Kawelu (2007: 219) has underlined the importance of respect and specifically respect for spirituality within living Hawaiian culture (see also Kawelu and Pakele 2014). Of course, in the absence of scholarship that addresses continuities and changes in religious beliefs and practices in the two centuries since the *kapu* system was abolished, it can be all too easy for academics to dismiss these emotive connections to place as the so-called 'invention of tradition' (Keesing 1989). I can say with certainty that Kirch rejects this premise (see also Johnson 2008). In his most recent book *A Shark Going Inland is My Chief* he describes his own observations on connections, disconnections, and re-connections between contemporary people and sacred places (Kirch 2012). For example, his former student Peter Mills discovered the Russian Fort Elizabeth on Kaua'i, was built on, or with the stones of, a war temple; a fact obscured in written history (Mills 2002). On Maui, Kirch is quick to credit oral traditions passed down in a local family for allowing him to recognise and appreciate the importance of a unique 'sighting wall' used for astronomical observations (Kirch *et al*. 2013).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Patrick Kirch has shown us by his example that we do not need to choose between employing scientific rigor and preaching the moral imperative to treat sacred sites and Hawaiian culture with respect; we need to do both (Kirch 1999). It is in that spirit that I offer to contemporary and coming generations of anthropological archaeologists three questions that we are in a better position today than even just a few years ago thanks to Kirch's continual effort to bring this aspect of Hawai'i's past to life:

1. *What can decisions that people made with regard to the placement, style, and arrangement of religious architecture tell us about the development of society?*

This question speaks to the interplay between belief, agency, and action–core topics in the archaeology of religion–but also to the unique historical trajectory of Hawaiian culture and society. For example, in my work on Kalaupapa Peninsula, Moloka'i Island, I have argued that we need to take an approach that considers the history of religious architecture as reflecting different strategies to create and maintain religious authority (McCoy 2006, 2008). I found that the focus of early religious ritual appears to be on natural features that are visually dramatic. Over time, as the priorities of the ruling classes shifted, we see a more even spread of *heiau* and shrines across the landscape, reinforcing boundaries, and in some cases giving us our first material signal in the study area of the practice of the *makahiki* ritual cycle. I have argued that the broad range of variation here and elsewhere in the archipelago can be read in terms of continually shifting strategies in how architects, and their chiefly underwriters, carefully chose when and where to apply different building techniques (McCoy *et al*. 2011).

2. *What elements of ritual practice can we discover through ethical research regarding sacred sites?*

This question again speaks to fundamental goals of anthropological archaeology, specifically to discover how religious belief was enacted in practice, and to do so with a clear ethical grounding. For example, Mills *et al*. (2008) have shown how new geochemical studies of Mauna Kea, a sacred mountain and source for adze quality basalt, can be accomplished through engaging in cultural protocol (see also Mills and Lundblad 2014).

Along these same lines, I recently completed a brief pilot study at Pu'ukoholā Heiau aimed at applying a non-destructive method (portable x-ray fluorescence) to determine the source of basalt used to construct the site (Fig. 4; McCoy 2012). Well known traditions reported by Thrum (1907: 60–61) describe Pololū Valley on the opposite side of the island as a source of building material passed hand-to-hand in a fashion famously represented in a Herb Kane

Figure 4. A portable XRF (x-ray fluorescence) mounted on a tripod in the process of non-destructively determining the geochemistry of the main paving stones of Pu'ukoholā Heiau. Results reflect two groupings, one consistent with Pololū Series (Type I) and one with younger Hawi Series (Type II) stone (Tables 1 & 2). While these are consistent with Pololū Valley geology, which contains potential building stones from both series, without further study we cannot eliminate the possibly that these also include local stone from nearby gulches and/or stone from other locations.

Table 1. *Results of pXRF (portable x-ray fluorescence) study of architectural stone of Pu'ukoholā Heiau. Average values (ppm) shown. Paving stones are divided in to two geochemical groups (Types I & II). Stones used in the northern and eastern faces are broadly similar to one another and are consistent with highly weathered a'a cobbles readily available in the immediate area.*

	Mn, ppm	Fe, ppm	Zn, ppm	Th, ppm	Rb, ppm	Sr, ppm	Y, ppm	Zr, ppm	Nb, ppm
main paving (Type I), n=22	1588	50177	136	7	38	798	40	382	57
main paving (Type II), n=3	1331	63006	143	5	8	314	24	148	13
north wall, n=4	1615	57656	145	4	8	277	23	153	15
east wall, n=4	894	38660	248	8	10	250	18	151	21

Table 2. *International Standard (BHVO-2). Recommended values and results from pXRF.*

BHVO-2	Mn, ppm	Fe, ppm	Zn, ppm	Th, ppm	Rb, ppm	Sr, ppm	Y, ppm	Zr, ppm	Nb, ppm
USGS recommended	1290	78144	103	1	10	389	26	172	18
Otago, n=4	1276	69052	141	2	11	392	24	162	15
s.d.	256	1227	63	1	1	18	2	9	2

painting of the *heiau*. Archaeologists have used the volume of stone in the structure's foundation to estimate how much labour went in to its construction in 1791 (Mulrooney *et al*. 2005), but little has been done to document long-distance transported building material. Unsurprisingly, the geochemical results are consistent with Pololū Valley as a source for the site's iconic main paving stones. But, the study was also useful in identifying some of the logistical challenges in using this technology to exclude other sources of stone.

Another advantage of applying a non-destructive method of evaluating the geochemical make up of architectural stone is it gives us an additional means to look at the complex histories of sites as well as the potential to identify sources of stone perhaps dismissed by previous evaluations of traditions. For example, when Thrum (1907: 60) visited Puʻukoholā Heiau he was shown 'two maika stones of a white fine grain of extraordinary size, said to have been brought by Paao from foreign lands, from 900 to 1000 years before the time of Kamehameha.' With regards to the association between Pāʻao and this *heiau* he expresses reservation in reconciling, 'current reports and belief with recorded traditions' (Thrum 1907: 60), implying the link is a conflation of Pāʻao's key role in building Moʻokini Heiau in the neighbouring North Kohala District. He goes on to repeat a report by the missionary Rev. Bond on the use of Pololū Valley stone in the construction, or rededication, of Moʻokini Heiau. While it is understandable that Thrum, Bond, and other 19th century writers would seek to record and relay a single, simple narrative in the history of these important cultural sites, as anthropologists we should begin with assumption that these places will have life histories which will be complex and layered with meaning.

3. *What happened at sites of traditional Hawaiian religious ritual after the abolition of* kapu *in 1819?*

One of Kirch's great contributions to the field is the seamless way he has interwoven the pre- and post-contact era in his research (Kirch 1992; see Bayman 2014). When we extend this to sites of religious ritual it raises the question, were they simply abandoned after 1819, as has often been assumed, or did people continue to use them, and if the latter, how? To return to the Kalaupapa Peninsula, if we extend the history of the ritual landscape to beyond the contact era, not only are there the obvious missionary churches, including St. Philomena Church established by St. Damien, but less obvious sacred places that date to an earlier time that were either actively avoided or maintained through activities like cleaning (Flexner 2010; see also Flexner 2014). Further, we are only beginning to understand how the religious beliefs and practices of the myriad of new arrivals to Hawaiʻi who brought with them Old World religions created new layers on the ritual landscape.

In Sam Low's (2013) recent book *Hawaiki Rising* he chronicles the history of the voyaging canoe Hōkūleʻa and writes specifically about the spiritual connection of Kānaka Maoli to place and how traditional religious concepts devalued in public discourse for so many years were given new life through the Hawaiian cultural renaissance. At one point he underlines the fact that the ancestors of Hawaiians carefully planned their voyage to settle Hawaiʻi with reference to the discovery of evidence of early life dated to 1300 AD on Molokaʻi Island, including the bones of dogs, pigs, chicken, and other material evidence. While these types of discoveries have become commonplace in modern archaeology, what is important here is we must take care not to portray cultural sites as belonging only to the past; one might say they are perhaps more significant today than at any other stage in their histories, and none more so than places of ancient religious ritual.

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