

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF PREHISTORIC
OCEANIA

Edited by Ethan E. Cochrane and Terry L. Hunt. 2018.
Oxford University Press. \$150.00 USD. Hardback, 513 pp.
ISBN: 9780199925070

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As implied by the title, the focus of this contribution to Oxford University Press's handbook series is on the archaeology of the islands of Oceania in the era prior to the written record. The project took several years of effort to reach publication but was well worth the wait. It is an excellent resource for anyone looking to catch up on current research on an island, or island group, and a valuable repository of a great deal of the relevant evidence and models for the origins of Oceanic peoples.

Make no mistake; this is not an encyclopaedia. Contributors provide in-depth reviews (~25 pages long) written in a scholarly format and fully referenced. The book's index is handy if you are looking for a topic that crosscuts several chapters. Production quality is high there is just the right amount of maps, illustrations, and tables for the scope of the volume.

The handbook begins with an essay by the editors (Cochrane & Hunt) that gives a short synthesis of the archaeology of Oceania; its history, current research, and future directions. It emphasizes themes that are central to their own research, as it should, but it also makes an effort to present a balanced summary appropriate for a volume focused on the region's culture history.

Over half of the book is comprised of reviews of an island, archipelago, or geographic grouping of islands. Six have their own chapters: New Guinea (White), Vanuatu (Bedford & Spriggs), New Caledonia (Sand), Fiji (Cochrane), the Hawaiian Islands (Kirch), and Rapa Nui (Hunt & Lipo). The other regional chapters cover Western Polynesia (Tonga, Sāmoa; Burley & Addison), South Polynesia (New Zealand and nearby islands; Anderson), Melanesia immediately east of New Guinea (Bismarck Archipelago plus Buka; Specht), Western Micronesia (Palau, Yap, Marianas; Fitzpatrick), Eastern Micronesia (Pohnpei, Kosrae; Athens), and Central Eastern Polynesia (Society Islands, Cook Islands, Austral Islands, Gambier Islands, Tuamotu Islands, Marquesas Islands; Kahn).

The remaining chapters are topical, almost exclusively centred on the theme of island colonisation. This includes the peopling of Sahul and Near Oceania (S. O'Connor & Hiscock); the origins of Austronesian language speakers is covered in two chapters, one mainly on archaeology (Denham) and the other on linguistics (Pawley); Lapita (Terrell); coastal geomorphology (Dickinson); radiocarbon

dating in Remote Oceania (Reith & Cochrane); and the evolution of sailing technology (Anderson). The remaining topical chapter is a reflection on settlement pattern archaeology in Polynesia (Morrison & J.T. O'Connor).

A regional edited volume like this is long overdue. With the fast pace of journal publications, the last regional edited volume (Lilley 2006) seems dated; although it should be said that the previous volume covered a broader geographic range and more discussion of cultural heritage. Readers will note that the Oxford Handbook comes on the heels of a major revision to the regional overview *On the Road of the Winds* (Kirch 2017). While drawing on the same body of recent studies these are divergent formats that make the two complementary for teaching Pacific Island archaeology. The handbook contains alternative readings of the evidence by different scholars and exhaustive reviews not possible in a synthetic, single-authored volume.

Even for readers who are already up-to-date on the human colonisation of the Pacific, or follow closely the evolution of thinking on its culture history, I guarantee there will be something in here that you will have missed or a topic addressed in a slightly different way. Below is an extremely brief summary of chapters in the order in which they appear.

S. O'Connor & Hiscock's chapter on peopling of Sahul & Near Oceania presents a good summary of the current evidence of animal extinctions and archaeology from the Pleistocene.

Denham's chapter contests the farming-language hypothesis articulated by Bellwood and others to explain the distribution of Austronesian speaking people in the world today. The author would have us only use the term Austronesian to refer to a group of languages divorced from archaeology and genetics.

White's chapter focuses on Holocene New Guinea. He makes a strong case for New Guinea showing contrasting patterns to what we see elsewhere in the world, especially in terms of the development of agriculture, social networks, and high population densities not correlated with complex societies.

Specht's contribution centres on the Bismarck Archipelago plus Buka in the Solomon Islands. In it he gives a much-needed update on fundamental topics (colonisation, subsistence, exchange, etc.) and makes the case for more research, and research led by indigenous archaeologists.

Terrell uses his chapter to rechristen Lapita as a community of practice. The author goes pretty far afield in the course of the piece and then brings it home by reaffirming points he has made before.

Reith & Cochrane shine a bright spotlight on the radiocarbon evidence for people arriving on the islands of Remote Oceania to give a coherent, current, and complete summary of the topic. I predict this will prove far more

useful in the long run than previous meta-analyses of dates.

Bedford & Spriggs present a summary of Vanuatu research since the government moratorium was lifted in the 1990s. There is plenty about Lapita, as one would expect, but it is fairly balanced across time including the post-European contact era.

Sand's contribution on New Caledonia naturally also highlights Lapita, but also the Kanak Cultural Complex and how efforts to decolonise Pacific archaeology can put archaeologists in the middle of local conflicts.

Cochrane gives a rigorous review of the archaeology of Fiji including Burley's paper on Fijian polygenesis, which the author sees in terms that will be of interest to evolutionary archaeology.

Burley & Addison review the major islands of Western Polynesia, Tonga and Sāmoa. The authors make it clear they are presenting their own personal perspectives in an effort to tease apart complex historical processes. It is, in my view, one of the best chapters in the volume.

Fitzpatrick gives a review of our current knowledge of Western Micronesia as the setting for larger processes that archaeologists are trying to address elsewhere in the Pacific, including settlement contemporary with Lapita and the rise of monument building.

Athens' chapter on Eastern Micronesia is a summary of research from the 1980s on Pohnpei and Kosrae with a few more recent radiocarbon results. It is a disappointing reminder of how much about the prehistory of these islands remains asserted based on decades old studies rather than tested.

Pawley discusses linguistic evidence that is foundational to the culture history of Oceania. He presents some commentary on the origins of linguistic diversity in Non-Austronesian languages, with most of the chapter on Austronesian. It covers a wide range of issues and evokes at least as many questions as it answers.

Dickinson, who sadly died three years ago in Tonga, provided a good short review of coastal dynamics in the Oceanic context for the volume and reminds us all that colonisation and later prehistory relies on understanding paleo-coastlines.

Kahn's chapter is an ambitious review of the archaeology of Central Eastern Polynesia. The author sees broadly shared patterns; problems stemming from poorly defined sequences; and differences in pathways that led to power. It is a region that has genuinely seen a lot more attention and this overview is a welcome addition to the literature.

Kirch's review of recent archaeology of the Hawaiian Islands runs the gamut from colonisation, settlement patterns, and demography, to economy and society. It is an excellent primer to the thick literature on these topics and the author identifies key research issues that have yet to be resolved.

Anderson reviews the culture history of New Zealand/Aotearoa in the Early, Middle, and Late Phases, with some

reference to neighbouring islands, only one of which has living decedents (Chatham Islands/Rēkohu). Critical research problems are spelled out here with incredible clarity. But, there is little reference to new research published over the past decade.

Hunt & Lipo review their research on Rapa Nui (Easter Island). It is a useful summary as their studies have been spread over a number of publications.

Morrison & J. O'Connor's contribution is a review of classic settlement pattern archaeology from Sāmoa and more recent research on Hawai'i Island in the North Kohala District. They present time perspectivism as a solution to the inherent problems of interpreting survey data (chronology, site formation processes).

Anderson has the final word with a chapter about sailing technology and conditions in the past. In it he contrasts traditionalism with his own view, conservative historicism, offering scenarios to explain why we see a punctuated pattern of island discovery and colonisation.

References

- Kirch, P.V. 2017. *On the Road of the Winds: An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands before European Contact*. Second Edition. University of California Press, Berkeley.
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