This volume addresses significant issues for understanding colonization and culture change in the insular Asian-Pacific region. The broad range of contacts among the islands — as well the coastal regions of mainland Southeast Asia — represents an aspect of the tangled web of Southeast Asian prehistory in need of "unraveling". According to Solheim, maritime networks of trade and social obligations were essential for adaptation to island life and for maintaining status relationships through imported goods in a variety of contexts. The role that regular inter-island voyaging and contact had in cultural and linguistic change in the region is the critical question.

Solheim’s concept of a "Nusantao" system in Southeast Asia provides a model for interpreting inter-island communication and influences broadly throughout the Pacific region. The name “Nusantao” is derived from the terms nusa (“south island”) plus tau (“man”). Several earlier definitions of the term are summed up in this book (p.60) as:

...natives of Southeast Asia, and their descendants, with a maritime-oriented culture from their beginnings, these beginnings probably in southeastern Island Southeast Asia around 5000 BC or possibly earlier. Most of the Nusantao probably spoke a related or pre-Austronesian language, but there were likely some who spoke a non-Austronesian language as well.

Solheim does not consider non-maritime Austronesian-speakers as part of the Nusantao.

This book consists of two main parts: Solheim’s review and presentation of his proposal for an early maritime Nusantao cultural complex in greater Southeast-East Asia (190 pages) and a second part consisting of supplemental contributions, including Ambika Flavel’s study of ceramic design motifs in early Sa-Huynh-Kalanay pottery (44 pages) and David Bulbeck’s statistical analysis of Flavel’s data, which incorporates new samples as well (32 pages). In all, these provide interesting perspectives on early Southeast Asian inter-regional contacts and early pottery styles that are thought to document a very broad sphere of cultural interaction. Victor Paz’s foreword offers an insightful review of the development of Solheim’s ideas about early trading and communication networks in Southeast Asia.

Significant issues addressed in Solheim’s book include questions about contact and trade relationships among people in Southeast Asia, both narrowly — and broadly — defined; the scope of prehistoric regional identities; the initial coloniza­tion of eastern islands, including New Guinea and Australia; and specific matters about Austronesian origins and dispersal, including the importance of the Sa-Huynh-Kalanay pottery tradition. The remarkable scope of the network Solheim lays out is a fulcrum for his ideas about early human dispersal, as well as his ideas of maritime trading and long-distance communication ranging from Melanesia to Indonesia, to even as remote as Korea, Japan, and eastern China.

This volume is the most complete and updated statement from Solheim about the significance of maritime contact and trading systems in prehistoric-historic Southeast Asia. Solheim has been impressed for decades by similarities in archaeological materials found throughout Southeast Asia and has argued that these could not all be explained as independent innovations. Some of Solheim’s earlier writing on this topic was questioned, as it was viewed by some as placing too much emphasis on cultural trait distributions that he interpreted as spread through long-distance trade. However, in some ways Solheim was in the vanguard of those seeing the importance of the sea as a “road” facilitating long-distance interaction among peoples in the western Asia-Pacific region. This is now more widely accepted as a key element of early Pacific cross-cul­tural communication spanning many millennia, and this is particularly the case with the Austronesian language expansion in the region. However, as Paz notes (p.ix), Solheim’s ideas about early Austronesian movements represent only a small part of the broader Nusantao hypothesis and his larger contribu­tion to Southeast Asian archaeology, and I will explore other aspects of these ideas developed in this volume.

Selected previously unpublished papers spanning the 1960s to the 1990s — mostly Solheim’s conference presenta­tions that for one reason or another were not published — form the basis for Chapters I — VI. He states (p.xv) that he is presenting the substance of unpublished papers largely in the order that they were written in as a way of showing the development of his thinking. He feels that the readers need to grow with him to understand the concept as his ideas crystal­lized. In “A Proposed Prehistoric Maritime Network from Southeast Asia to Korea and Japan” (Chapter I), Solheim goes back to papers and publications dating to the 1960s, in which he began to define the idea of Nusantao, conceptualizing it as having four subareas or “lobes”, complexly interwoven with northern and southern sections of Southeast Asia. The northern section is defined as Taiwan, northern Luzon and Palawan, northern Vietnam, and South China. Key artefacts include two...
kinds of jade earrings or pendants and the Sa-Huynh-Kalanay pottery tradition. The more distant connections to Korea and Japan from this northern lobe are linked to the spread of rice agriculture. Other artefact indicators include: the table and capstone dolmen, cist grave, double burial jar, semilunar or crescent knife, stepped adze, pediform adze, perforated disk, stone dagger, concave-based and long-stemmed polished stone arrow or spearhead, and plain or cord-marked pottery (p.4).

In Chapter II, Solheim claims that some kind of Nusantao network can be expected, and is found, in the archaeological materials extending back to c. 50,000 BP. This conclusion is based in part on language and bio-anthropological comparisons. Among other innovative aspects of this proposal is that there is something to be identified as “Hoabinhian” in Japan (pp.23-26), with comparisons back to the Son Vi cultural complex of Vietnam. This conclusion is reinforced perhaps by evidence of long-distance inter-island contacts as early as the late Pleistocene in the Melanesia-New Guinea area and especially in a later time frame of 3,500 to 2,500 years ago in association with Lapita pottery traditions.

Solheim defines in greater detail, in Chapter III and Chapter IV, his original concept of the Nusantao Maritime Trading and Communication Network (NMTCN) and its four lobes. He invented the concept “Nusantao Maritime Trading Network” in the 1990s but notes (p.41) that he no longer uses that label. He says (p.57): “The Nusantao are a prehistoric, maritime-oriented people, as are their cultural descendants”. However, he also says (p.99): “I would like to find a theoretical and cultural term for the Nusantao as a whole”. He returns to this issue later when he states that the NMTCN and pre-Austronesian started developing about 11,000 years ago (p.183).

Although not the standard linguistic interpretation, Solheim identifies the people engaged in this network (and outside of Taiwan) as the source of the Proto-Austronesian language (and later “Austronesian” as a lingua franca; pp.42-43).

In Solheim’s view, the Northern Lobe consists of Taiwan and areas to the north. The Nusantao Expansion focuses on the Eastern Lobe of Nusantao (that is, Lapita links to Melanesia and into Polynesia). While he distinguishes early and late distributions, the map (p.67, fig.1) does not clearly show this nor is the text entirely clear. Solheim maintains that Lapita shares a common ancestor with Sa-Huynh-Kalanay (p.51). The Western Lobe extends to Malaysia (e.g., sites such as Gua Cha). In this chapter, he defines only three lobes; however, in Chapter IV (p.67, fig.1), the early Central Lobe is identified as the south coastal area of Vietnam. An important conclusion (p.46), and one in which Solheim agrees with Tsang Cheng-Hwa (1995), is that early corded ware cultures are Austronesian and that they spread along the coast of the South China Sea.

Solheim’s ethnographic comparisons to a Nusantao group or adaptation come from the Philippines (p.61), and from this he sees that the elements of culture spread by an early Nusantao network are very broad and include aspects of language relationships as well. Solheim (p.88, fig.3), defines the geographical distribution of Pre-, Proto-, and AN languages and suggests “homelands” based on these distributions. These stages are followed by later “formation and movement of these same language categories” (p.91), a somewhat confusing statement. With regard to the archaeological record, Solheim explores the critical connection between the NMTCN and pottery in a 30-some page section (pp.100-134), where he comes in the end to the Sa-Huynh-Kalanay pottery “Tradition”. Solheim returns to the issue of what the concept of Nusantao encompasses in Chapter V, summarizing the previous chapters in an effort towards clarification.

After reviewing an entire career’s length of writing about the Nusantao and Southeast Asian archaeology, Chapter VII offers a series of thought-provoking conclusions about the nature of long-distance, multi-ethnic trading, and communication that seems to be characteristic of both narrower and broader Southeast Asian regions with which Solheim is so familiar. He discusses Flavel’s contribution, which he claims shows clearly that the “Sa-Huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition is real and has meaning” — a pottery complex that has long been important to Solheim’s conception of Austronesian origins, and he makes much of Flavel’s analysis of Sa-Huynh pottery. In fact, a significant part of his conclusions in Chapter VII are actually derived from Flavel’s Master’s thesis.

Apart from its primary purpose, the secondary aim of this book is to explain why Solheim’s reconstruction of the spread of AN languages fits the archaeological and linguistic data better than Bellwood’s (p.183). In particular, according to Solheim, it is not migrations of people out of Taiwan but a larger network of maritime traders who spread the Austro­nesian languages and cultural attributes so broadly across Southeast and East Asia. This controversial topic is of crucial importance to many Southeast Asianists at present.

In all, this is an important volume, one that reviews the evolution of key ideas that have helped shape the transformation of Southeast Asian archaeology over the last five decades, a development greatly aided by Solheim’s charisma and active encouragement of field studies, collection analysis, and a myriad of other research efforts. Not the least of his impact is his successful fostering of scholars from nations throughout the Southeast Asian region. The book also represents an interesting and effective way to summarize, update, and clarify Solheim’s perspectives on Southeast Asian anthropology and prehistory, and the complicated Nusantao hypothesis in particular. These have been influential and significant for several decades, and his impact on generations of archaeologists specializing in Southeast Asia is well-established.

Does the geographical distribution of various cultural traits — such as pottery styles, ornaments, and stone monuments — reflect migrations of early Southeast Asian peoples, or does it represent the diffusion of ideas, technology, and material culture relatively independent of human migrations? This is a complicated problem in most culturally-diverse regions, and Southeast Asia is no exception; both processes were ongoing to varying degrees throughout prehistory. Archaeological and linguistic evidence supports the idea that there was no uni-directional migration pattern for Southeast Asia. Solheim’s complex and well-documented volume contributes significantly to our understanding of how raveled those processes really are.