
This new work by the author consists of a two book set that includes a volume of text and a disc, and a second volume of color photographs. The format of this publication is directed towards the generalist public. Brightly colored photographs of Rapa Nui’s landscape, archaeological features, and vegetation convey the present day context of the island. However, the discussion is direct, reasoned and not over-simplified for the lay public.

During the prehistory of Rapa Nui two major corporate efforts were conducted over multiple centuries that included the sculpting of hundreds of tuff statues (moai) at the Rano Raraku quarry and their transport to, and installation on, religious altars (ahu).

In contrast to much of the conventional thinking about these prehistoric activities, the author provides us with a new, and potentially controversial, interpretation of the archaeological record. At the Rano Raraku quarry, the current visitor sees hundreds of statues in the process of creation scattered on the face of the cliff and erected in a vertical position at the base. Are the latter statues awaiting transport? Apparently not, says Cauwe, who interprets the intentional positioning of the unfinished, partial, and standing moai as impediments to the removal of additional statues. Thus, we now see the statue quarry not as a production center that came to a quick demise but an intentionally closed precinct. Statues at the margins of the quarry lying in a prone position or in transport were once vertically set warning signs to those who approach that the tradition of ancestor worship had come to an end.

The author does not enter into the fray and excess verbiage concerning statue transport but provides the reader with an understanding of ahu refurbishment practices in prehistory. Ten years of careful excavation at smaller ahu around the island has shown that ahu platforms were constructed, utilized, abandoned, refurbished, and moai fragments were recycled into the fill of the reconditioned ahu. Again and again this happened, until the finial time in the 17th century when the ahu began to be lowered for the last time, a process that took at least a century.

The positioning, torso breaking patterns, and lack of damage to the face indicate that the process of reconditioning ahu was symbolic, and changed the ahu and surroundings from socio-religious precincts to burial mounds or necropolis. As with the statue quarry, ancestor worship had come to an end.

The data used to support the interpretation of the statue quarry, and statue lowering process, are likely to be closely scrutinized. A serious spatial analysis of the positioning and temporal order of the quarry moai is required, as is the retrieval of chronological data from the quarry. At present the interpretation is mostly impressionistic, but not without merit. However, the statue lowering hypothesis will certainly raise some

References


References


Review by Christopher M. Stevenson, Richard Blond College, The College of William and Mary


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How does one reconcile the broken statues on the ramps of the ahu with that of proposed gentle handling? Caune introduces the concept of “flexion” or that of material stress and eventual fatigue as the head of the prone moai is elevated above the ground for a prolonged period before it simply drops off. A fuller argument with a consulting engineer will likely be required to convince a skeptical readership. In the final section, the reasons for the demise of ancient Polynesian society and its replacement with a more generalized religion are discussed. What role did deforestation and climate change play in this mostly peaceful revolution? While the interplay of events and the reasons for their occurrence still remain unclear, the change of several basic interpretations about what happened in prehistory will cause us to continue with a lively dialog.


Reviews by Timothy M. Rieth, International Archaeological Research Institute, Inc.

Patrick Kirch is in a select group that includes very few people who can boast of 40+ years of research and ponderings about the prehistory and history of the Hawaiian Islands and their context within Polynesia. How Chiefs Became Kings is a synthesis and culmination of themes and ideas, both methodological and substantive, that Kirch has been publishing on for decades: a holistic historical anthropology incorporating multiple approaches and data sets; delineation of an ancient Polynesian baseline from which unique cultural innovations can be determined; the interaction between environmental variants and socio-cultural patterns; the development of monumentality; agricultural expansion and intensification, and its relationship with demography, and, Polynesian chiefdoms. As indicated by the book’s subtitle, Kirch’s stated objective is to overturn “received anthropological wisdom” that has classified Hawai‘i as a complex chiefdom, and to present evidence supporting the thesis that by the late 19th century, just prior to Western contact, “Hawai‘i consisted of three to four competing archaic states, each headed by a divine king (or kings) who performed the first to take this position (e.g., Hommon 1976). Kirch has produced the most comprehensive argument incorporating some of the latest archaeological data. As a whole, he presents a plausible argument for pre-contact Hawai‘i as a state (based on his stated criteria), and as such, will assuredly foster debate and continued analyses on this issue.

Kirch approaches his explanation for the development of archaic states in Hawai‘i by discussing provenance, causation, and ultimate causative factors that place proximate causation in the decisions, actions, and intentions of individual ali‘i (kings), as they are recorded in genealogies and traditions. Ultimate causation of the reasons for the demise of ancient Polynesian society and its replacement with a more generalized religion are discussed. What role did deforestation and climate change play in this mostly peaceful revolution? While the interplay of events and the reasons for their occurrence still remain unclear, the change of several basic interpretations about what happened in prehistory will cause us to continue with a lively dialog.

How Chiefs Became Kings: Divine Kingship and the Rise of Archaic States in Ancient Hawai‘i


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