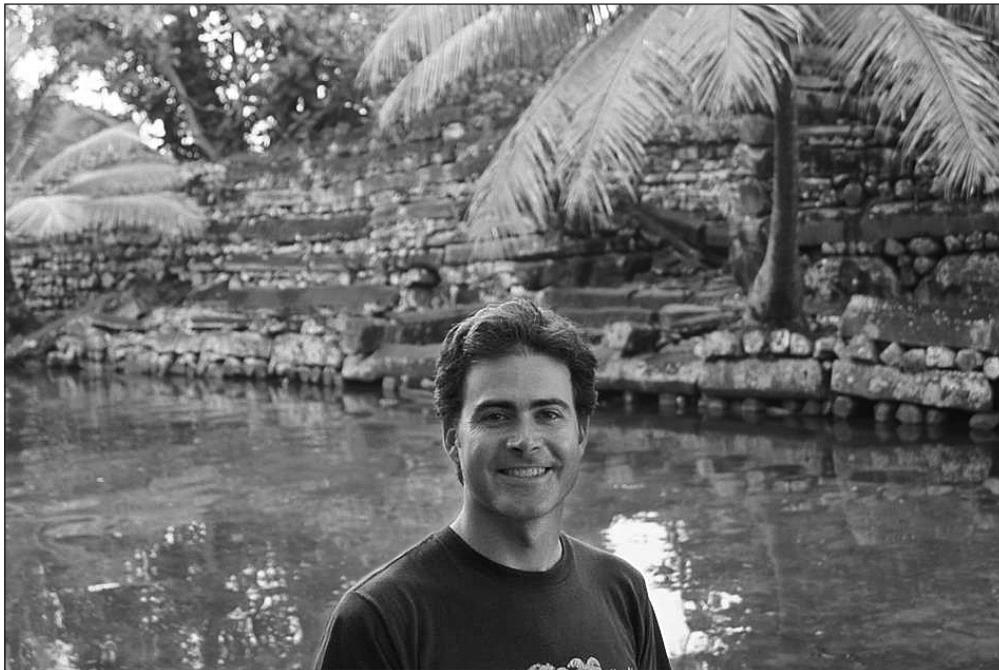


Getting to Know You

Mark D. McCoy



Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Pacific archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. If I'm honest here, I have to say it was Indiana Jones. My first experience with non-fictional archaeology was as a teenager in Delaware. The sites were a truly odd mix – including the property around an abandoned 19th century Wilmington house that was being used as a crack den. Odd as these contract jobs were, from my first digs I distinctly remember the feeling of disbelief that anyone could get paid to do a job as cool as archaeology. I still find it hard to believe I get to have as much fun at work as I do.

What got me in to the Pacific was reading Kirch's "Evolution of Polynesian Chiefdoms" in my second year at the University of New Mexico. I read it again now and it is still the kind of anthropological archaeology I aspire to; it is grounded in trying to understand Polynesian history on its own terms but with a big picture goal of trying to understand humanity better.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. The person who most shaped the person I am today is my mom. Like a lot of parents of academics, she

never really got what I do, but she fully understood that it made me happy and that was all that mattered. I lost her to breast cancer a few years ago and my dad passed away recently. I miss them both terribly. I am, however, lucky to have a large, and proudly Irish-American, extended family. I have always felt that growing up in that tightly woven network was excellent training for working in the Pacific.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. The archaeological record is the product of such a hodge-podge of human behavior and post-depositional action, that what surprises me is that we do sometimes find a pattern in the data that answers the research questions we pose. Having said that, recently I've been working on looking at how interaction between Māori communities changed over the period when people built hillforts (*pā*) and I've been pleased and surprised with the results there.

Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. What job would I want if I weren't in archaeology? This is a hard one. I'm going to say Time Lord.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. I love to see my students have Eureka moments. It is one of the few objective signs I get that I'm doing my job. For myself, I operate under the assumption that my own best Eureka moment hasn't arrived yet. I think that's one of the things that keeps me going back out into the field and slogging through mountains of data.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) in Oceania in the future?

A. To me there are three kinds of stories about the past. There is fiction, which like any art is there to entertain and enlighten. There is non-fiction, which archaeology should be in the business of. And then there are stories that have what Steven Colbert calls 'truthiness'. They pass for true, but aren't. Over the long term, I hope my research makes it easier for people to tell the difference between the true and truthy.

Q. What is your favorite archaeological site and why?

A. It changes. Right now it is Nan Madol in Pohnpei. It is a site that was purpose-built to impress and it is definitely still doing that today. I love it because it presents us with a remarkable historical puzzle, in a fantastic setting, and it is a genuinely one-of-a-kind place. Every Pacific archaeologist should have visiting there on their 'bucket list'.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about the island(s) where you carry out your research?

A. The most important thing I'd like visitors to the Pacific to know is that the past was made up of real people. They were not any more, or less, moral; or more, or less, intelligent; or more, or less, creative; or more or less anything than the folks living on your block right now.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Pacific archaeology or anthropology (or those fields generally)?

A. I have to give this type of advice a lot in my job, so it is hard to narrow it down to one thing that applies to anyone interested in the Pacific. But, if you are in college right now, you should spend your summers out digging and spend your semesters in science classes – geology, chemistry, biology, etc.

I think it is safe to say that archaeology attracts people who, at the end of the day, are romantics. But, it isn't good enough to be in love with the topic you are studying, you have to be able to understand how to create and follow through with a research design, as well as understanding the materials we study, and the technology we use to study them. If you can do those things, you can confidently point your *waka* anywhere you want to go.

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?

A. Our field needs more women in senior positions. Where I live, there are 13 academic archaeologists active in the country, only one of whom is a woman. That is no way to put an end to the old boys club.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. I just finished "The Golden Door: Letters to America" by A.A. Gill. It is a great study of the relationship between Europe and America.

Q. Credentials?

A. Current position: Senior Lecturer in Archaeology, University of Otago, New Zealand

2006 Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, Anthropology

1999 M.A., First Class Honours, University of Auckland, Anthropology

1997 B.A., *magna cum laude*, University of New Mexico, Anthropology and American Studies

Q. Date and place of birth?

A. 10 October 1975, South Bend, Indiana, USA