Abstract

Patrick V. Kirch and Roger C. Green propose that Polynesian cultures today emerged and developed in an ancestral homeland situated in western Polynesia, primarily Tonga and Sāmoa. The archaeological marker for the beginnings of cultural and linguistic divergence from a founding Eastern Lapita base is Polynesian Plainware pottery produced for nearly 1,100 years during the Polynesian Plainware phase. Kirch and Green believe this transition reflects social and economic changes that led to the development of an ancestral Polynesian society. An ongoing debate in Pacific anthropology is whether archaeologists can convincingly identify and explain the historical trajectory of an ancestral Polynesian society.

My dissertation evaluates the development of an ancestral Polynesian society in Tonga by identifying three processes that shaped its trajectory: isolation, integration, and adaptation. By focusing largely on undecorated ceramics from several Tongan sites, comparisons can be made within Tonga and across the archipelagos of western Polynesia that have implications for understanding unique island histories.

If Polynesian culture is said to have developed in western Polynesia then the evidence for social and economic change may potentially be reflected in an adequate assessment of the archaeological record from the end of the Lapita phase into the Polynesian Plainware phase. That includes not only ceramic data but non-ceramic data such as site distribution, settlement patterns, subsistence practices, demographic studies, and geochemical source data – all which provide a more holistic view of early Polynesian culture in Tonga and aid anthropologists considerably in how we perceive past Polynesian lifeways and developments through time.

Keywords: Ancestral Polynesian Society, Tonga, Polynesian Origins, Ceramics