

## BOOK REVIEW

# Review of *A Shark Going Inland is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai'i*

*A Shark Going Inland is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai'i*, by Patrick Vinton Kirch. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2015, ISBN: 9780520273306

Andrew A. Brown\*

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*A Shark Going Inland is My Chief* is the latest book from noted Pacific Island scholar Patrick Kirch. Kirch's involvement in Pacific Island archaeology is broad, including theoretical contributions as well as information from key Lapita, West Polynesian and East Polynesian sites. For this book Kirch returns to Hawai'i, his homeland and the location of a significant portion of his research, to present an account of Hawaiian history using science, tradition and his personal stories. From the outset Kirch sheds the usual academic prose, instead attempting to convey complex, often contested, ideas with clarity. The reason for this approach becomes clear in Kirch's first sojourn into personal anecdote. Here, the author finds two elderly fishermen on a beach and, after some discussion, asks what they know of a nearby spit of land. The fishermen's knowledge extends back to 1816–1817 when a Russian fort was built on the land but not to the *laukini heiau* (temple of human sacrifice) located there at initial European contact. It is a simple story but in presenting it Kirch clearly conveys that findings published in traditional

sources often do not reach beyond the bounds of academia.

The book is composed of three parts. The first part, *Voyages* provides background to the story of human migrations in the Pacific. Through the lens of his excavations at Talepakemalai, Mussau Island, Kirch outlines the development of the Lapita culture and its rapid spread from Near Oceania to its eastern extent in the West Polynesian archipelagos of Tonga and Samoa. Kirch details the development of the ancestral Polynesian culture in Tonga and Samoa and the remarkable diaspora of Polynesians across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, including the return voyages to South America and the movement to the marginal islands of Hawai'i and New Zealand. Toward the end of the section, archaeological data is interspersed with a fictional account of the Marquesan voyagers who, in their canoe, *Mahina-i-te-Pue*, discovered and settled Hawai'i. While fictional, this story serves to humanise the process of long-distance voyaging, adding weight to the achievement of settling the far-flung islands that comprise Polynesia.

Part two, *In Pele's Islands*, focuses on the settlement and development of Polynesian society in Hawai'i. Return voyages are discussed as an important part of the settlement process, both to maintain social bonds and to

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\* Institute of Archaeology, University College London, GB  
[andy.a.brown@gmail.com](mailto:andy.a.brown@gmail.com)

collect new settlers. Kirch invokes geochemical evidence from adzes as a major indicator of the contact between Hawai'i and the homeland; however, the contested nature of this evidence is not discussed and thus the alternative narrative of society developing in isolation is not entertained. Other evidence of voyaging, such as the *pānānā* (a 'sighting wall' used to direct mariners) that Kirch serendipitously learns of from a local man, is interesting although it seems unclear why it is linked with on-going homeland contact rather than localised seafaring. The story is compelling however, because it shows the value of local informants to archaeology. In this case a unique and interesting site would have been missed were it not for local knowledge. The section continues by discussing the human impact on the pristine environment, particularly the decline of palm forests and the extinction of large flightless birds (consistent with the pattern seen throughout Polynesia). Kirch also details the construction and continued re-development of wet and dry-land horticultural infrastructure, which supplied a surplus that aided the development of complex social structures in Hawai'i. In the last chapter, Kirch draws on his extensive research into palaeodemography to show the population growth of Hawai'i exhibits a logistic pattern with rapid initial growth followed by a 'levelling off' period as local environmental limits were reached.

The last part, *The Reign of the Feathered Gods*, departs from archaeological data and draws almost exclusively from the oral traditions of Hawai'i to explain the socio-political and geopolitical developments within the archipelago. In particular, the fortunes of the Hawaiian kings and kingdoms are a major focus.

*A Shark Going Inland is My Chief* represents a substantial departure from Kirch's previous books on Pacific prehistory. The book aims to present a narrative based on available information in an accessible manner. In this it is successful and certainly a useful introduction to key themes in Polynesian archaeology. Despite Kirch's wish to give voice to competing ideas, readers familiar with Polynesian prehistory may be disappointed in the single narrative at the expense of such debates. The occasional slide into prehistorical fiction may also rankle. However, as this book is not written for the specialist it seems such critique is unwarranted. Indeed, at a time when a focus is placed on the dissemination of scientific information and when many people, like the Hawaiian fishermen, know little of prehistory, it seems that books such as this have an important role to play in engaging these communities with archaeology.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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