**Finding Polynesia**

*By Richard A. Gould*

The islands of **Polynesia** extend thousands of miles across much of the Pacific Ocean and are some of the most remote places on earth. Some are high islands, formed from old volcanoes, while others are low coral atolls. All are separated by great distances and are difficult to find.

**According to Captain Cook**

When the renowned English navigator and explorer James Cook entered the far Pacific in the late 1700s he found that nearly all the islands were already inhabited by people whose language and culture were remarkably uniform. He appreciated their skills in building, sailing and navigating large canoes over oceanic distances, and he offered his ideas as to how they managed to reach the distant islands. Since Captain Cook's time, many people have questioned how these people ventured great distances out of sight of land to colonized new, unknown islands. What scholars have acknowledge is the fact that the true "discovery" of **Polynesia** occurred long before the arrival of the first Europeans.

**According to Thor Heyerdahl**

The first chapter in *Kon Tiki*, a widely read book by the famed explorer/anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl, is titled "A Theory." According to Heyerdahl, **Polynesia** initially was colonized from east to west, starting in South America. Heyerdahl then set out to prove his theory by building a balsa-log raft. In 1947, he and his crew launched the craft for 101 days across, 4,300 miles of the Pacific until landing at one of the Tuamotu Islands in French **Polynesia**. The raft, which had the same name as the book, could not be steered or effectively sailed. Rather, it rode the prevailing winds and currents--and its direction was toward the west. Heyerdahl concluded from this voyage that drift voyaging from east to west across the Pacific was possible and could account for the initial colonization of **Polynesia**. Later, he gathered further evidence to support his belief.

**But What About the Lapita**

Heyerdahl's theory has the advantage of simplicity. No real skills in boatbuilding, seamanship, or navigation were required to accomplish this feat--just a reasonable amount of luck and physical endurance. However, when archaeologists later tested his theory on land, they encountered serious problems. A distinctive style of decorated pottery, known as Lapita, was found at an increasing number of sites in Fiji and the islands of northeastern New Guinea. Radiocarbon dating of artifacts found in these places indicated that the earliest dates for human settlement in the western Pacific islands were around 3,500 years ago in the west and more recently, for the most part, at sites farther east. Thus, the archaeological evidence suggests that voyagers were traveling eastward rapidly into the more remote islands of western **Polynesia** by around 3,000 years ago.

The cultural descendants of the original Lapita voyagers continued into even more distant islands of central and eastern **Polynesia**. Recent studies of radiocarbon dating suggest that by less than 1,000 years ago, they had spread to the islands within eastern **Polynesia**. Overwhelming evidence shows that the discovery and colonization of **Polynesia** occurred from west to east, contrary to Heyerdahl's theory. To make these voyages, the ancient Polynesian had to sail against the prevailing winds and currents. They relied on navigational skills that probably involved both the use of a sophisticated star compass and a knowledge of ocean swells. The theory of west-to-east voyaging is complex. However, it is supported by the Lapita culture finds better than Heyerdahl's theory.

**Are Both Right?**

There are no known wrecks of ancient Polynesian voyaging canoes. However, the experimental cruises made by Hokule'a, a full-size exact replica of a voyaging canoe, have show how such eastward movement could have been achieved. In addition, archaeological evidence has been found in a waterlogged site on Huahine in French **Polynesia**. This included wood planks and a steering oar from a late prehistoric voyaging canoe. Physical and chemical studies of prehistoric adzes and other stone artifacts have also revealed that canoes transported these materials across long distances throughout eastern **Polynesia**. Archaeology shows that Captain Cook was right to recognize the skills and courage of the ancient Polynesian voyagers. But, Heyerdahl noted that the sweet potato, a cultivated plant of South American origin, was found throughout the Pacific Islands and could only have arrived from the east perhaps by raft. So, the "east-west" debate is not entirely over. Maybe a more complex theory will be needed to account for the eastward movement of Lapita culture and the westward spread of the sweet potato.

Gould, Richard A. "Finding Polynesia." *Calliope*. Apr 2013: 15-17. *SIRS Discoverer.* Web. 17 Sep 2013.