

POLYNESIAN MIGRATION, DISCOVERY and SETTLEMENT

By Cecilia Kapua Lindo

Polynesian voyagers explored the Pacific Ocean and settled its many islands long before Europeans dared to sail out of sight of their Atlantic shores. Where the seafaring Polynesians came from and what caused them to explore the ocean still remain mysteries. Dr. Kenneth P. Emory and many others are solving some of those mysteries.

Scientists believe the ancestors of the Polynesians were the Lapita people, who came from southeast Asia. It is believed that these people migrated to New Guinea over 25,000 years ago, sailing in rafts or simple boats.

As time went on descendants of the Lapita people ventured farther and farther into the Pacific. They would live on an island for hundreds or maybe thousands of years, but eventually move on to find new homes, until they inhabited nearly every island in the Pacific Ocean.

Perhaps they moved from island to island in search of food. Perhaps they were defeated in war and forced to leave their homelands as punishment for some misdeed. Perhaps they sailed for love of adventure. Canoes traveling between known islands may have been driven off course by storms and heavy winds, drifting accidentally toward new landfalls.

Dr. Kenneth P. Emory and other scientists believe that Tonga and Samoa were settled between 1500 and 200 B.C. About a thousand years later natives from Samoa and Tonga sailed east to the Marquesas Islands, north to the Tokelaus, and northwest to the Ellice Islands. Seafarers from the Marquesas are thought to have been the first settlers in Hawai'i, probably around 500 A.D.

Between 100 and 1250 A.D. adventurers sailed to Hawai'i from Raiatea in the Society Islands, near Tahiti. These people conquered the descendants of the Marquesans.

The ancient name for Raiatea was Hava'iki. There may have been other islands named Hava'iki, as it was said to have been the original home of the Polynesians. From Hava'iki the Polynesians sailed from island to island. Some stayed on the new islands, others returned to Hava'iki. As time went by they settled many of the islands in the Polynesian triangle, carrying with them the name "Hava'iki" and giving it to islands in their new home lands. On their last journeys throughout the triangle they reached far away New Zealand in the south, Easter Island to the east, and Hawai'i in the north. Sailing to Hawai'i was their longest journey.

Evidence from artifacts, tools, temple and house platforms, language, and human bones, indicates that Hawai'i was settled by Polynesians. Ancient chants and songs of the Polynesians tell about the discovery of the Hawaiian Islands. A passage of an ancient chant says, "Behold Hawai'i, an island, a people, an offspring of Tahiti."

Polynesians knew their double-hulled canoes could carry many people and a large cargo. The canoes may have weighed five to ten tons and were probably 60 to 100 feet long. Thirty or more people could ride on the platform between the hulls of each canoe. A hale or shelter was built on the platform to protect people from the hot sun and to give them a place to store food.

Perhaps a number of canoes traveled together. They may have spread out in a line so that they could keep in touch with and in sight of one another.

Those who led the voyages were the ali'i and the kahuna or learned navigators. Like today's astronauts, they ventured out into an unexplored area, and, like the astronauts before undertaking the journey they were well prepared and trained in the skills they would need.

Can you imagine sailing against the wind, currents, rain and storms? Perhaps you would experience other problems. You would be a tired traveler tossed about by the powerful sea. Maybe you could not survive the rugged journey. And when you think that the only instruments the Polynesians had to guide them were their intelligence and senses, the feat seems amazing.

Polynesians lived in harmony with nature. Their senses gave them incredible knowledge of the sea, stars, moon, sky, sun, winds, clouds, birds, and currents. Their belief in themselves and their gods enables them to make long journeys throughout the Pacific Ocean on their double-hulled canoes.

Source: Cecilia Kapua Lindo and Nancy Alpert Mower, eds. Polynesian Seafaring Heritage. Honolulu: The Kamehameha Schools and the Polynesian Voyaging Society, 1980. pp. 21, 22.