There is the customary anxiety about doing the right thing; the book opens and closes with diligent protocols for good practice. Yes, these analyses are mostly destructive, but the samples can often be tiny, paintings are also falling off the walls, and art is being destroyed in so many other ways. Yes, but there is nothing in standard practice as I myself know it which breaks the protocols, except practice may be less elaborate and lengthy. Endless talks and meetings and letters and FAQs and visits each with no clear outcome themselves become a kind of humming that communities have to cope with.

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References


On the Road of the Winds — An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands Before Contact, By Patrick Vinton Kirch.

On the Road of the Winds provides an in depth review of the history of Pacific Island archaeology, regional culture histories and their definition, the theoretical issues and debates that forge these understandings, and the relevance of the whole toward broader themes in anthropology and history. Patrick V. Kirch wrote this volume as a text, in his words, “for students as well as other professionals seeking an introduction to the long-term history of the Pacific”. This work is much, much more. It is a well researched, well written and engaging piece of scholarship. It will be as appreciated and at home in the library of the most senior Pacific researcher as that of the unknowing neophyte.

Kirch’s title reflects the innumerable tracts “on the road of the winds” that led to the settlement of Near and Remote Oceania. In a metaphorical sense, it also reflects the many intellectual voyages through which pre-European Pacific history has been deciphered, not from written texts, but from pot sherds and other minutiae of the ancient past. In starting this volume’s journey, Kirch invites us to “take a voyage to the islands of history” with a nine chapter, 424 page excursion organized “partly on time and largely on space”. The trip begins with necessary context — a history of discovery, scholarship and archaeological praxis followed by the essentials of Oceanic geography and island ecosystems. The reader is led subsequently into the deep antiquity of “Old Melanesia”, from the settlement of Sahul some 40,000 plus years ago through to Pleistocene and early Holocene evidence for settlement, economy and cultural innovation of Papuan speaking peoples in Near Oceania. The presence of Lapita pottery in the Bismarck archipelago almost three and a half millennia ago brings a new people into the tale, and marks a new and critical chapter in Oceanic prehistory. Kirch’s review of “Lapita and the Austronesian Expansion” provides the base upon which detailed culture histories for “New Melanesia”, Micronesia and Polynesia are penned. The journey ends with chapters on the Polynesian Chiefdoms and “Big Structures and Large Processes in Oceanic Prehistory”. Congruence and variation in socio-political organisation are explored in comparative detail and case by case study in the former. The latter attempts to transcend time and space by highlighting issues in Oceanic prehistory of relevance to anthropology and history as a whole.

The strength of this book as a synthesis and text lies in the foundation upon which it is based. Not insignificantly that includes no less than eight major volumes on Oceanic prehistory authored by Kirch as well as innumerable edited volumes, journal articles, book chapters and detailed reports. With the syntheses of “New Melanesian” and Micronesian prehistory as exceptions, each of the chapters is drawn from and updates in depth treatments published elsewhere. The volume consequently has an encyclopedic and fully up to date reference bibliography of almost 1,300 entries, a feature made all the more impressive by the numerous dissertations and unpublished pieces that are included. Kirch has spent over 30 years engaged in the breadth of Oceanic archaeology and only a few can claim to be as widely acquainted with its literature, material culture, and peoples. This truly is a basis for success.

More than academic review, Kirch offers a personalized journey into Oceanic prehistory, one in which a lifetime of study and memories are often distilled into story-teller narrative. Description of the author’s chance discovery of an early Polynesian settlement in Tavai, Futuna in 1974, his breathless excitement 14 years later staring into the eyes of “God belong ol Lapita” in Mussau, or his excursions into the Boroko, New Guinea, laboratory of a disheveled Les Groube, complete with “a wily tabby cat” rolling about on a pile of potsherds, is the kind of read not just engaging to students, but one that attracts them into the profession itself. At the same time, the personalized elements of the book will no doubt foster criticism in some circles. This will not be directed to the narrative accounts described above but, to use Kirch’s terms, it will be his personalized “construction” of the past through the emphasis he accords “particular times, places and concepts”. The author’s sites and data, for example, are very much privileged throughout, whether they are the most appropriate to illustrate a case or not. Equally important, Kirch has developed a strong and coherent theoretical framework over his career, and this structures and defines the content of the volume. He takes a holistic and comparative approach to the past that is not only informed by archaeological data, but those of historical linguistics, ethnoigraphy, indigenous history, and biological anthropology. It is a position that more than once has put him into intense debate with less inclined archaeologists, but it is a position that is well founded within the confines of the Oceanic world.

Any volume as long and as ambitious as the one being reviewed will have particularistic elements subject to reproach. In light of the book’s larger contribution to our understanding of the Oceanic past, the ones I might take issue with are minor and hardly of note. This volume is dedicated to Douglas E. Yen, an ethnobotanist who has been one of Kirch’s long-time mentors. In the book’s truly comprehensive treatment of the Oceanic past, Yen must be pleased and Kirch is to be congratulated.

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