Chapter 6: Settlement of the Americas and the Pacific Islands: 6-5 Ancestral Polynesians and the Settlement of Oceania
Book Title: World Civilizations
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6-5 Ancestral Polynesians and the Settlement of Oceania

The ancestors of today's Polynesians, Indonesians, and Malaysians are classified as **Austronesians** (Linguistic group of Southeast Asians who populated islands of the Pacific Ocean, Madagascar, and much of modern Indonesia and Malaysia.) (southern peoples) because they speak tongues of the Austronesian language family. Speakers of the Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family were the first humans to venture into the Pacific Ocean and colonize its archipelagoes. In doing so they completed the process of peopling the globe that had begun when *Homo sapiens* left Africa. Many details of Austronesian prehistory remain controversial; however, the linguistic and archaeological data coincide sufficiently to provide the following outline of this migration.

The first stage of the expansion began about 4000 B.C.E., with certain agriculturalist peoples in the Southeast Asian islands. They were a maritime civilization inhabiting coastal areas where they had learned how to exploit both land and sea resources. These ancestral Austronesians were accomplished Neolithic farmers of root and tree crops, such as taro and yam, and were skilled fishermen and shellfish gatherers. Domesticated pigs and chickens added protein to their diets. The Austronesians handcrafted tools from stone and shell, and tattooing may have been one of their early traditions. They experimented by improvising simple boats, first embarking on rafts, then simple canoes. Later, they invented a seaworthy outrigger canoe built of sewn planks lashed together with coir (a fiber made from coconut husks), then sealed with a viscous form of coconut oil. Perhaps most importantly, they developed uncanny navigational abilities by sailing first to nearby visible islands, then continuing to more far-flung archipelagos.

Why did they migrate? Perhaps it was for trade, or to find less-crowded coastlines to settle. Whatever their original motives, the Austronesian worldview prized exploration and colonization of new islands. The structure of their societies supported an oceanic worldview. They created a portable package of materials (that is, crops, animals, and trade goods) that could be loaded on large canoes and transported, which enabled them to colonize even the most barren atolls. Their trading and communication networks were among the earliest and most far-reaching in the world.

After about 1500 years, eastern Austronesian groups reached the islands north of New Guinea, where features of the second stage of development of that culture emerged, known now as the **Lapita culture** (Neolithic maritime and farming culture in Near Oceania with distinctive pottery (c. 1500–c. 1000 B.C.E.)) . (see Framing History: Society & Economy). The Lapita migrations brought the Austronesian expansion to the edge of Remote Oceania, where their descendants, the Polynesians, would take over and colonize the Polynesian Triangle, reaching Hawai'i, Easter Island, and New Zealand (see Map 6.3). Polynesian

double-hulled canoes were large enough to carry about fifty people along with the supplies for starting colonies from scratch. The taro and yam crops fueled colonization of Polynesia.

Framing History

Society & Economy: The Lapita Link to Polynesia

The seafaring Lapita (lah-PEE-tah) people colonized islands covering 2000 miles eastward from New Guinea in just 500 years (c.1500–c.1000 B.C.E.). The Lapita were descendants of the original Austronesians who had migrated from east to west across the islands of Southeast Asia. Like their forebears, the Lapita were culturally adaptable and innovative in maritime practices. The Lapita honed their distinctive skills (canoe building, farming, fishing, and pottery) on islands near New Guinea. They embarked from New Guinea in ocean-worthy outrigger canoes, first to trade in obsidian craft items, then later in volcanic basalt rock and other goods. They had one of the widest trade networks of the time. Lapita societies probably also encouraged young men to sail off and acquire higher status as founders of new settlements.

The Lapitas' emphasis on expanding horizons led to the extraordinary navigational skills that they passed on to their descendants, the Polynesians. They observed the stars and other celestial features; they could decipher patterns in the prevailing winds and in the movements of birds. They read the ocean's movements by lying in the bottom of their canoes.

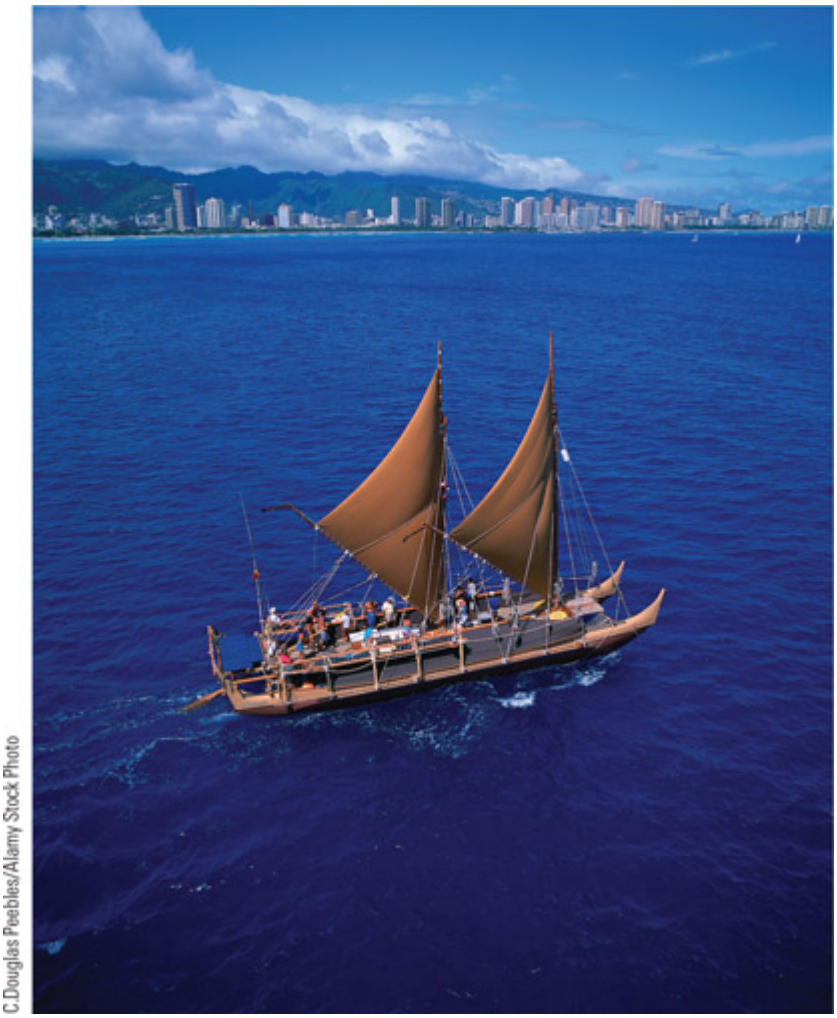
Lapita artifacts (mainly pottery shards) are found at two hundred settlement sites scattered between the islands of New Guinea to Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa (see Map 6.3). These settlements continued to trade among themselves, as evidenced by items of obsidian (native to New Guinea) found at the colonized sites. The people lived in small villages, probably in stilted houses over marshy land, often near the sea. Their food staples were root crops such as taro and yams; they also cultivated tree crops including coconuts, bananas, and breadfruit. They kept pigs and chickens and supplemented their diet with fish and crustaceans. They crafted fishhooks, adzes, ornaments, and other trade items from shells and obsidian.

As these peoples pushed eastward over generations, the islands they encountered were farther apart and relatively barren of resources. The Lapita invented the double-hulled canoe (with a central raised platform for living space) to carry both the colonists and their plants and animals to each new island home.

The Polynesian language and culture are rooted in the Lapita settlements around Fiji and Samoa. Here, at the western edge of Polynesia, the Lapita culture paused and gestated for a millennium. A distinctive Polynesian language and culture emerged from these Lapita roots, and their descendants prepared to sail their sixty-foot double-hulled canoes into the regions of Remote Oceania that had never before been populated.

Polynesian Platform Canoe Hokulea

Big canoes like this one enabled ancestral Polynesians to reach distant islands of the Pacific and to colonize even the most barren ones. Their double hulls gave them great stability when sailing the huge swells of the Pacific. In addition, platforms built across the hulls could carry enough food to last many weeks.



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Analyze and Interpret

Compare and contrast the Lapita culture with the earlier eastern Austronesian culture and the later Polynesian cultures.

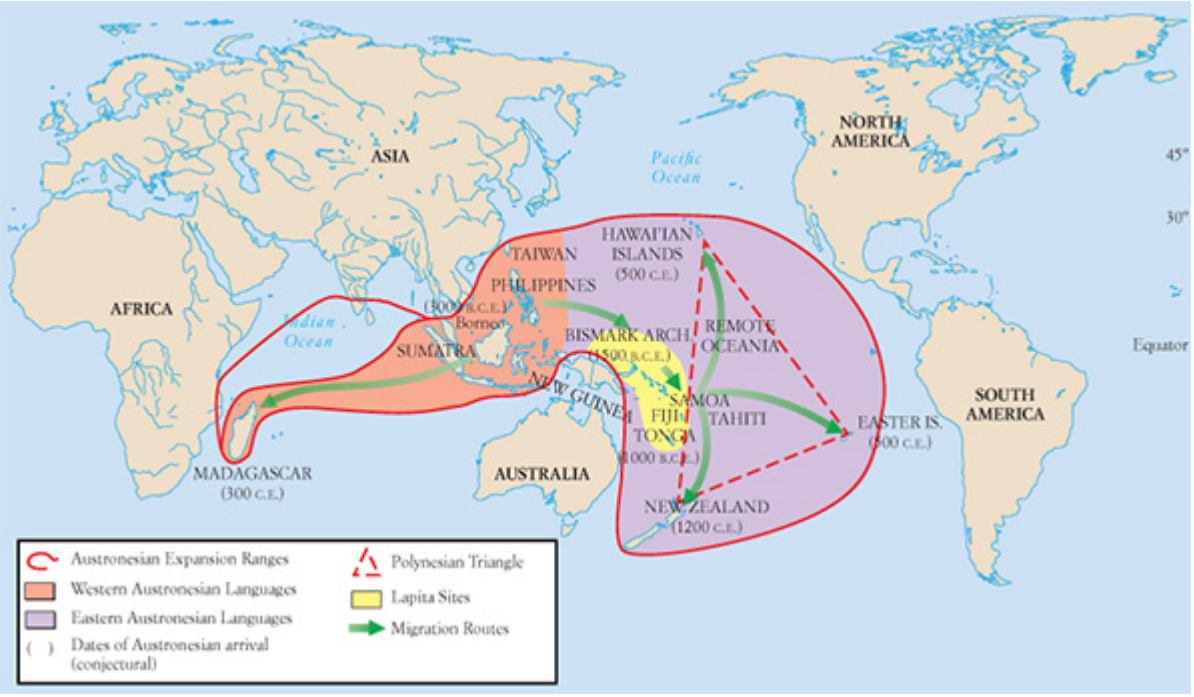
Map 6.3

Migrations and Settlement of the Pacific Islands

The first wave of *Homo sapiens* reached Near Oceania about 40,000 B.C.E. Many millennia later (c. 4000 B.C.E.) some intrepid Austronesian-speaking peoples from Taiwan began spreading throughout the islands of Southeast Asia.

Thinking About This Map

Given the great distances covered in these migrations, how did the ancestral Polynesians find their way from island to island?



The western stream of Austronesian seafarers accomplished the equally extraordinary feat of sailing across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar, near Africa. After c. 500 C.E., the Austronesians on Madagascar had Iron Age technology and belonged to trade networks that stretched to India and Indonesia. They may have learned this technology from the Bantu-speaking Africans, but most scholars believe that the Austronesians of Madagascar introduced the southeast Asian yam that has been in use throughout Africa for the past 2000 years, replacing the indigenous Guinea yam.

Although their languages share a common origin, the Austronesian people have mixed genetic backgrounds as a result of their contacts with other islanders over the millennia.