



# Polynesian Expansion

## Patterns of Polynesian Migration

### Transcript

Narrator:

Polynesia is the name for a huge group of islands found in the Pacific Ocean that form the shape of a triangle. It is home to some of the world's most well known islands, such as New Zealand, Hawaii and Tahiti. Spread out over a giant area of 8,000 kilometers, the Polynesian triangle covers about one fifth of Earth's surface. Because Polynesia is such a big place, it has many types of environments, animals and plants. There are even different sorts of islands.

Did you know some of the bigger islands like Samoan Tonga started off as volcanoes at the bottom of the ocean? And there are still some active volcanoes such as on Hawaii. Some of the lower islands used to be coral reefs and are now barely higher than the sea level. Depending where in Polynesia you are, there are also lots of different sorts of animals. You can find seals, tortoises and bats. And sometimes, there's not much wildlife to find on an island at all.

The weather is usually very tropical and humid on the islands, and there's lots of storms and cyclones. The islands of Polynesia are part of a trade wind zone, meaning that there are strong winds and sea currents that make travelling and trading along the ocean routes much faster. When European expeditions began arriving in Polynesia in the 16th century, they were fascinated by the extensive network of islands for them to explore. One of the early visitors was French explorer Jules Dumont D'Urville in the late 1820s.

Jules Dumont D'Urville: Islands in the Pacific Ocean are incredibly far away from the European mainland and are very hard for European explorers like me to reach. There are so many islands, both big and small, that when I arrived, I decided to split them into different regions, Polynesian, Melanesia and Micronesia. I decided on these regions based on what the local populations looked like and the darkness of their skin. The name Melanesia means 'black islands'.

Narrator:

Even though the Dumont D'Urville was making assumptions about the relationships between the different island peoples that we'd now find inappropriate, those names have stuck and we





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still use them today. The name Polynesia is a term that French scholar, Charles de Brosses, came up with in 1756. It comes from the Greek words poly and nesos, meaning 'many islands', probably because he saw that there are thousands of islands in Polynesia. For hundreds of years, since European explorers first met its inhabitants, there has been an ongoing mystery about Polynesia.

People haven't been able to agree on how the islands' first communities arrived there. These groups settled and flourished on the islands without the modern tools most Westerners thought were required to navigate the ocean. Scientists and historians have been trying to solve this migration mystery for centuries.

Explorers from many different countries have formed their own theories about the earliest settlers.

Jacob Roggeveen: When I arrived to the island on Easter Sunday, I naturally decided to call it Easter Island. I thought the people I found on that island must have been brought there by the Spanish, although I couldn't seem to find any sign of them. Given a lack of other possibilities, I've decided that the Lord must have placed the people on this island.

James Cook: I learned a lot from my visit to Tahiti in 1769. After witnessing the extraordinary ability of the Maui people on the sea and their knowledge of the land, I believe they may have voyaged to Tahiti themselves from the west with the help of the sea winds.

Thor Heyerdahl: Captain Cook got it completely wrong. If you study the winds of the area, it is clear that travelling from the west would have been nearly impossible. They must have come from the east using the ocean currents to travel from South America.

Narrator: It's a bit confusing when nobody can agree, isn't it? And people will go to great lengths to prove that their idea is right. Thor Heyerdahl attempted to complete the same journey he theorised that early Polynesian settlers had taken centuries before to show that it was possible to cross the vast ocean without European





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technology. Departing from Peru in a raft made of wood, he successfully reached the Tuamotu Islands 101 days later.

Speculation about where the Polynesian settlers came from and how they arrived at their islands is still a topic of debate. New Zealand historians put forward new ideas as recently as the 1990s and the early 2000s, with Andrew Sharp proposing that maybe they reached the islands by accident after the winds blew them off course. However, thanks to modern technologies, we now understand that many of these theories vastly underestimated the skill and knowledge of the early Polynesian adventurers.

In the past, the people contemplating this mystery and others like it could only deduce their theories based on the evidence available to them. Now, modern science allows us to get more information using technology such as DNA analysis of modern Polynesian people. Combined with the archaeological discoveries in the 1950s of pots used by the ancestors of Polynesian settlers, we now have a new answer to this historical mystery. It is now generally accepted that the early Polynesian travelers did not arrive with the Spanish, travel from South America or drift to the area by accident. The current theory is that they began to arrive over the sea from Taiwan and other parts of Southeast Asia over 2,000 years ago. They settled on islands such as Samoa and, for the next 1,000 years, continued expanding across the vast network of Polynesian islands. The ancient Polynesian travellers were experts at navigating the oceans and had an amazing culture of exploration.

According to the oral tradition of the Rapa Nui people of Easter Island, more than 1,000 years ago, one of these early voyages was led by Hotu Matu'a.

Hotu Matu'a:

We sailed on giant, double-hulled canoes. Sometimes they were over 30 meters long. We didn't have any written maps or a compass; we knew our direction by reading the environment. We used the sky, the stars and the sea to work out our own course. We also made our own maps out of natural materials like sticks and shells.





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Narrator:

Nearly 2,000 years after the ancient Polynesians began these journeys, a group called the Polynesian Voyaging Society followed in their footsteps. In 1976, they successfully recreated a journey from Hawaii to Tahiti, using only those methods to navigate. There have been four centuries of debate and disagreement over how the early Polynesian settlers arrived on the islands. Many European visitors underestimated the Polynesians' ability to make the journey, but their voyages are now understood as among the most impressive examples of maritime exploration in our history.

