

Polynesia and the Pacific Island Past: Recent Research Reveals New Stories

College of Humanities – Humanities Seminars

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Course Description

In “**Polynesia and the Pacific Island Past**” we will explore recent research from multiple disciplines, including archaeology, ancient DNA, and linguistics, to unravel the remarkable stories of people discovering and colonizing the thousands of islands of the vast Pacific. New discoveries from multi-disciplinary research have dramatically transformed our understanding of migrations and adaptations to ancient life in the islands.

We will trace the earliest movements into the region nearly 50,000 years ago when people first crossed water gaps and colonized strange new lands. Fast-forward several millennia and we examine migrations out of southeast Asia into the undiscovered world of the Pacific Islands. Discovery and colonization of hundreds of islands in the western Pacific happened rapidly. Stunning advances in aDNA reveal a revised history in remarkable detail. The evidence also shows that Polynesian voyaging paused, then resumed about a thousand years ago when a vast expanse of the remote Pacific, including Tahiti, Marquess, and distant the islands of Hawai`i, New Zealand, and Easter Island (Rapa Nui) were discovered and colonized with astonishing speed. What fueled this latest unprecedented episode? Did ancient Americans play a role in Polynesia’s past?

We go on to consider the adaptations to life in diverse islands—including New Zealand, Hawai`i, and Rapa Nui. How did Polynesians adjust tropical agriculture? How did they transform island ecologies? Did long-distance voyaging continue? How are island histories similar and unique?

Modality

Our course will be hybrid: in person and online simultaneously. We will meet in six live/hybrid sessions.

Instructor

Professor **Terry Hunt** is an internationally renowned anthropologist, archaeologist, and educator. Dr. Hunt is one of the world's foremost experts on the human and environmental histories of the Pacific Islands, where he has conducted field research for more than four decades. Dr. Hunt has conducted field research over the past 23 years on Rapa Nui (Easter Island), where he has engaged many students in this work. His current and continuing field research collaboration on Rapa Nui is funded by the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation.

Dr. Hunt is a leader in Pacific Island archaeology. He recently published *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Oceania*, co-edited with Ethan Cochrane (2018). Dr. Hunt is also the co-author of *The Statues That Walked: Unraveling the Mystery of Easter Island*, with Carl Lipo, which details Rapa Nui's archaeological history. Their Rapa Nui research was the focus of a National Geographic magazine cover story in July 2012 and a Nova-National Geographic TV documentary that first aired on PBS in November 2012. In February (2023) Dr. Hunt joined host Michael Strahan and *Good Morning America* featuring his research on the island. His work and that of his colleagues continues to receive high profile press coverage.

Dr. Hunt is Professor in the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. He previously served as W.A. Franke Dean, W.A. Franke Honors College, here at University of Arizona. Dr. Hunt is W.A. Franke Dean Emeritus. He previously served as Dean of the Clark Honors College, University of Oregon, and taught at University of Hawai'i-Manoa for 25 years.

Recommended Reading

Participants in the course may wish to read *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Oceania*, Ethan Cochrane and Terry Hunt, editors (2018). The book is available for purchase on Amazon. These and other readings will be distributed electronically.

Class Schedule and Recommended Readings

Week 1: Oceanic Origins: Earliest Migrations and Ice Age Environments

Reading:

"The Archaeology of Prehistoric Oceania" E. Cochrane, T. Hunt (2018), In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 1-25.

"The Peopling of Sahul and Near Oceania" S. O' Connor, P. Hiscock (2018), In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 26-47.

Week 2: Lapita and the Origins of Polynesians

Reading:

"An ancient DNA Pacific journey: a case study of collaboration between archaeologists and geneticists" (2020), M. Spriggs, D. Reich, *World Archaeology* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00438243.2019.1733069>

Week 3: Samoa, the "Missing Link," and Discovering the Most Remote Pacific (& American Contacts)

Reading:

"Collective action problems led to the cultural transformation of Sāmoa 800 years ago" (2024) Cochrane, E.E., Quintus, S., Prebble, M., Tautunu, T.I.A.A.I.M., Autufuga, D., Laumea, M., Queenin, A., Augustinus, P. and Lincoln, N.K. *PLOS ONE*, 19(6), p.e0304850.

"The last great migration: Human colonisation of the remote Pacific Islands" (2017), T.L. Hunt, C.P. Lipo, In: N. Boivin, Crassard, R., and Petraglia, M.D., Editors, *Human Dispersal and Species Movement - From Prehistory to the Present* (pp. 194-216), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

"The sailing performance of ancient Polynesian canoes and the early settlement of East Polynesia" Irwin, G., Flay, R.G., Dudley, L. and Johns, D., 2023. *Archaeology in Oceania*, 58(1), pp.74-90.

Week 4: Hawai`i and Long-Distance Relations in Polynesia

Reading:

"The Prehistory of Hawai`i," P. Kirch (2018), In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 375-395.

"Looking for Lost Proficiency in East Polynesian Voyaging Traditions and Ethnology" Anderson, A. (2024). *The Journal of Pacific History*, 1–20.

Week 5: The Remarkable Story of New Zealand (Aotearoa)

Reading:

"The Prehistory of South Polynesia," A. Anderson (2018), In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 396-415.

Week 6: Spectacular Rapa Nui (Easter Island)

"The Archeology of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)" T. Hunt, C. Lipo (2018), In E.E. Cochrane and T.L. Hunt, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Oceanic Prehistory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 416-449.

The 'walking' megalithic statues of Easter Island" (2012) C.P. Lipo, T.L. Hunt, S. Rapu-Haoa, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 40:2859-2866.

Film Documentary (*Easter Island Origins*, PBS Nova, 2024):

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1yIVzCTOqkAYGQ-QOXrNGbzmoPIY1yrmB?ths=true>