
Micronesian Islands and Archaeological Issues of Monumentality

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Résumé

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for

Exploring the World's Prehistory

XVIIIe congrès mondial UISPP-Paris - 4-9 juin 2018

Session XXXVIII-2

Abstract

Monumentality in the Pacific Islands represents a significant aspect of the cultural past as seen in oral history and archaeology, and one that continues even into contemporary life. Studies thus far have focused on social and political links to stone and earth monuments in small-scale, island societies, often without clarification of the term "monumentality." They highlight the diversity of this pan-Oceanic tradition as well as its significance for understanding political centralization and social status differentiation in the broader world sphere.

This paper represents a continuing effort to understand cultural developments on Pohnpei Island, Federated States of Micronesia, that resulted in early and unusually elaborate ritual and chiefly megalithic construction at several coastal sites or centers, especially at Nan Madol, with its core area of more than 1 km². Archaeological and historic preservation projects, which I did in conjunction with the island's historic preservation office, have produced data relevant for testing models that trace ideological changes in how status and power were marked. When and how monumental stone constructions began to characterize these island traditions is at issue, as is the inter-island and extra-areal uniformity of ways to resolve the means for signifying social hierarchy. The sequence for the Nan Madol complex has clarified the site's position in the broader geopolitical landscape, one also reflected in oral history. The earliest settlement of Pohnpei took place at least 2000 years ago; available evidence shows that Nan Madol began as a ritual center more than 1000 years ago, followed by three main building periods.

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A structural model to trace the escalation and retrenchment of building manifestations in terms of construction scale and methods, building material types, and labor investment also provides a way to compare these variables in other Pacific cases. Here, I focus on the nature of initial site development, organizational frameworks, and functional interpretations. I also examine the magnitude of extra-island exchange goods that serve to mark social differentiation in the context of Pohnpei's ritual sites and mortuary complexes.

Mots-Clés: monumentality, Pacific Islands, archaeology and oral history, Micronesia, megalithic, stone architecture