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# Living Eyewitnesses of the Past – Sacred Trees as Parts of Ritual Architecture in Eastern Polynesia

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## Résumé

The concept of sacred trees is something that appears in many different cultures of the world. In Polynesia, trees are known to have been of great importance. Much of the vegetation on the different islands has been introduced by the Polynesian settlers who carried seedlings and seeds of many plants with them and changed their new environments significantly. While many of the introduced species were agricultural crops, we know of various tree species that had a religious significance. A number of species are known to be sacred and connected to specific deities of the Polynesian pantheon. They were planted as parts of ritual architecture and considered emanations of the respective god. The trees played an important role in funerary rites and attracted birds that were considered to be messengers of the gods. Thus, the sacred trees were seen as a bridge to link the world of the gods to the world of man.

Despite this information from early ethnographic sources, many aspects of sacred trees are still unknown, especially when it comes to them being elements of an architectural ensemble. This paper presents the first results of a survey and mapping project on Nuku Hiva, Hiva Oa, and Tahuata in the Marquesas group, where there are still many sites with giant and seemingly old trees. Considering the biogeography of the different tree species and possible natural agents of seed dispersal, there is no doubt that the trees documented during our survey could only have been planted by man.

Since in the tropics the size of a tree alone is not enough to infer its age, we took core samples of living trees on a number of sites for dendrochronological and <sup>14</sup>C-dating to establish the contemporaneity of the trees and the use of the sites where they grow. Detailed mapping of the sites using terrestrial and 3D-documentation techniques allowed us to register certain patterns in the different components defining the sites and the trees that grow within them, the location of trees within the sites, and the species of trees on the different kinds of sites.

The dates derived from the core samples are most significant also in the discussion about inbuilt age for charcoal samples on the Pacific islands – some of the dated trees are over 300 years old. Thus the sacred trees today are living "eyewitnesses" of the ceremonies performed at the sites where they constituted an integral part of the architecture.

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**Mots-Clés:** Polynesia, Marquesas, Ritual Architecture, Sacred Trees, Dendrochronology, Inbuilt Age