

# 8



## The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific (c. 700–c. 1756)

Source 8.1 *Moai* statues on Easter Island

# Before you start

## Main focus

The last wave of the human settlement of the Earth was performed by the Polynesians, who developed a flourishing culture across the vast distances of the Pacific Ocean.

## Why it's relevant today

Polynesia occupies most of the Pacific Ocean between Australia and the United States, and includes many of the countries in our region. Studying the cultural achievements of the Polynesians, as well as how they adapted to their marginal environments, helps us to understand the challenges facing our own society.

## Inquiry questions

- Who were the Polynesians and what were their origins?
- How do we explain the spread of Polynesian cultures throughout the Pacific region?
- What was it like to live in a traditional Polynesian society?
- What were the significant cultural achievements of the Rapa Nui (Easter Island) society?
- Were Polynesian communities sustainable?

## Key terms

- *ahu*
- *mana*
- Melanesia
- moa
- *moai*
- Polynesia
- *tapa*
- *tapu*
- *tiki*

## Significant individuals

- Andrew Sharp
- Captain James Cook
- Hotu Matu'a
- Jacob Roggeveen
- King Kamehameha I
- Queen Kaahumanu
- Queen Pomare IV
- Thor Heyerdahl

# Let's begin

From our earliest beginnings we humans have always been migrants. More than a million years ago, early humans arrived on the shores of what we know today as the Pacific Ocean. As they stood looking out on this ocean, they were unaware that the Pacific was larger than the Indian and Atlantic oceans combined. They were also unaware that beyond the horizon it was full of rocky island chains and coral atolls. But having arrived on its shores they were not yet equipped to venture further. It would be a long time before they could cross the waters of this ocean.



Source 8.2 A hokulea sailing canoe



Source 8.3 Unfinished moai statues, Rapa Nui (Easter Island)



Source 8.4 Traditional Maori wood carving, Okains Bay, Maori and Colonial Museum, Banks Peninsula, New Zealand



Source 8.5 Captain James Cook

# Timeline

CHAPTER EVENTS	WORLD EVENTS
<b>60 000 BC</b> ..... First humans arrive in what we know as Australia and Papua New Guinea <b>c. 60 000</b>	
<b>40 000 BC</b> ..... Solomon Islands are first settled <b>c. 40 000</b>	
Land bridge between Australia and Tasmania is flooded <b>c. 13 000–8000</b>	
<b>10 000 BC</b> ..... Land bridge between Australia and Papua New Guinea is flooded <b>c. 8000–6000</b>	<b>c. 10 000</b> Last ice age ends; pottery is first developed in Japan
<b>8000 BC</b> ..... Migrants leave what we know as Taiwan for Melanesia <b>c. 6000 BC</b>	<b>c. 8000–7000</b> Indochina is settled
<b>6000 BC</b> ..... Migrants leave the Solomon Islands for what we know as New Caledonia <b>c. 4000</b>	<b>c. 4000–3000</b> Mesopotamian cities first emerge in what we know as Iraq
<b>4000 BC</b> ..... Migrants continue further to Fiji, Samoa and Tonga <b>c. 2000–1000</b>	<b>c. 2000</b> Middle Eastern and Chinese societies begin using bronze
<b>2500 BC</b> ..... Samoan migrants continue on to what we know as the Marquesas Islands <b>c. 200</b>	
<b>200 BC</b> ..... Island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) is occupied by migrants from the Marquesas Islands <b>c. AD 300–c. 800</b>	<b>c. 300</b> 'Classical' era of the Maya civilisation begins in Mesoamerica
<b>AD 300</b> ..... Hawai'i is settled by migrants from the Marquesas Islands <b>c. 400</b>	<b>c. 500</b> Aztec city of Teotihuacán thrives as a major trading centre
<b>400</b> ..... Maori settlers leave the Cook Islands for Aotearoa (New Zealand) <b>c. 700</b>	<b>c. 800</b> Charlemagne is crowned Holy Roman Emperor
<b>800</b> ..... Almost all islands of Polynesia are settled <b>c. 1000</b>	<b>c. 1000</b> Leif Eriksson sets sail from Greenland to North America
<b>1000</b> ..... Almost all islands of Polynesia are settled <b>c. 1000</b>	



Source 8.6 The Polynesian triangle in the Pacific



## The origin and spread of the Polynesians

### Theories about Polynesian origins

When European explorers sailed into the Pacific in the eighteenth century, they were stunned to find so many people living on the thousands of islands they encountered. Their first thought was, 'How did they get here?'

**anthropologist** an expert in the study of human societies, cultures and their development

**Polynesia** from the Greek: *poly* meaning 'many' and *nesos* meaning 'islands'

Over the past two centuries, **anthropologists**, archaeologists, scientists and historians have been trying to pinpoint the origins of Polynesians and to explain how they spread across the region we today call **Polynesia**. In many cases individual reputations have been staked on the conclusions reached by these experts.

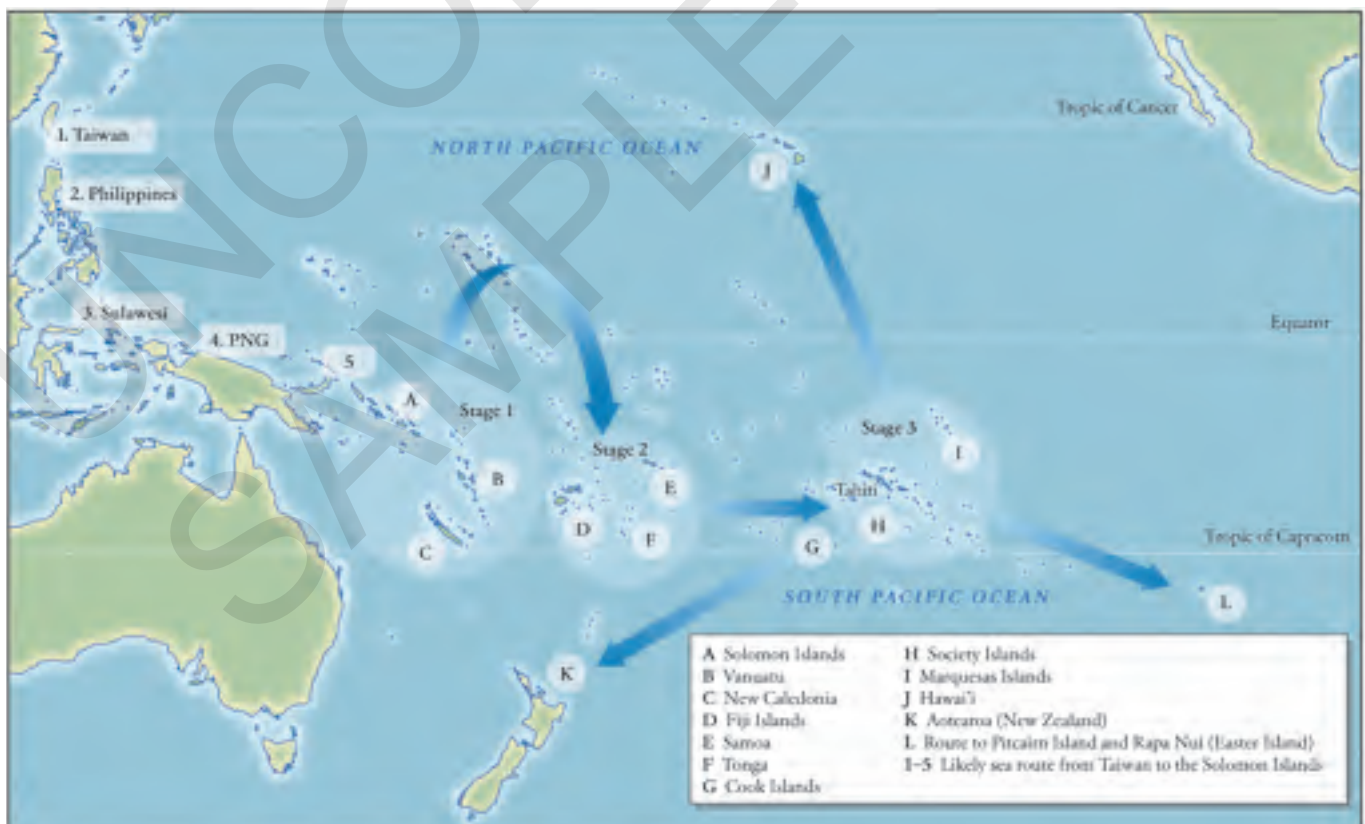
From all of the evidence we have managed to accumulate, it is clear that humans occupied

Polynesia over a long period of time. However, a number of issues still cause debate among specialists on the subject. Put simply these issues are:

- Did the people who would become Polynesian occupy the islands and atolls in the region in carefully planned stages or by a series of happy accidents?
- Did these people travel eastwards from Papua New Guinea or westwards from South America in their occupation of Polynesia?
- How did they manage to successfully navigate the Pacific Ocean across vast distances using primitive technology and without maps?

### Planned or by accident?

While this debate continues today, the general consensus is that the people who occupied Polynesia did so in a series of planned stages (see Source 8.7). New Zealand historian Andrew Sharp proposed in 1956 that any argument that Polynesians set out to explore and occupy the Pacific was little more than 'romantic nonsense'. He argued that occupation of the islands of Polynesia



Source 8.7 Stages of occupation of Polynesia

was probably more accidental than intentional. He claimed that the boats of the Polynesian explorers were simply not seaworthy enough, and their navigational equipment not accurate enough, for them to be able to deliberately find land across the vast stretches of the Pacific.

Sharp's views were controversial when he published them and have remained a challenge

to the views of the majority of experts on the subject. After navigation experiments were successfully conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, employing replicas of the double canoes that the Polynesians would have used, most scholars today think that Andrew Sharp was mistaken in his understanding, although Sharp continues to argue his case.

## Times gone by ...

Almost a decade before Sharp wrote his book, a Norwegian adventurer named Thor Heyerdahl argued in 1947 that all the experts had it wrong. He argued that it was not possible for the Polynesians to have sailed east from Melanesia into the Polynesian triangle because both the winds and the currents constantly would have been against them. Instead, Heyerdahl proposed that the Polynesians must have left the west coast of South America and sailed westwards into Polynesia, and he intended to prove it by demonstration.

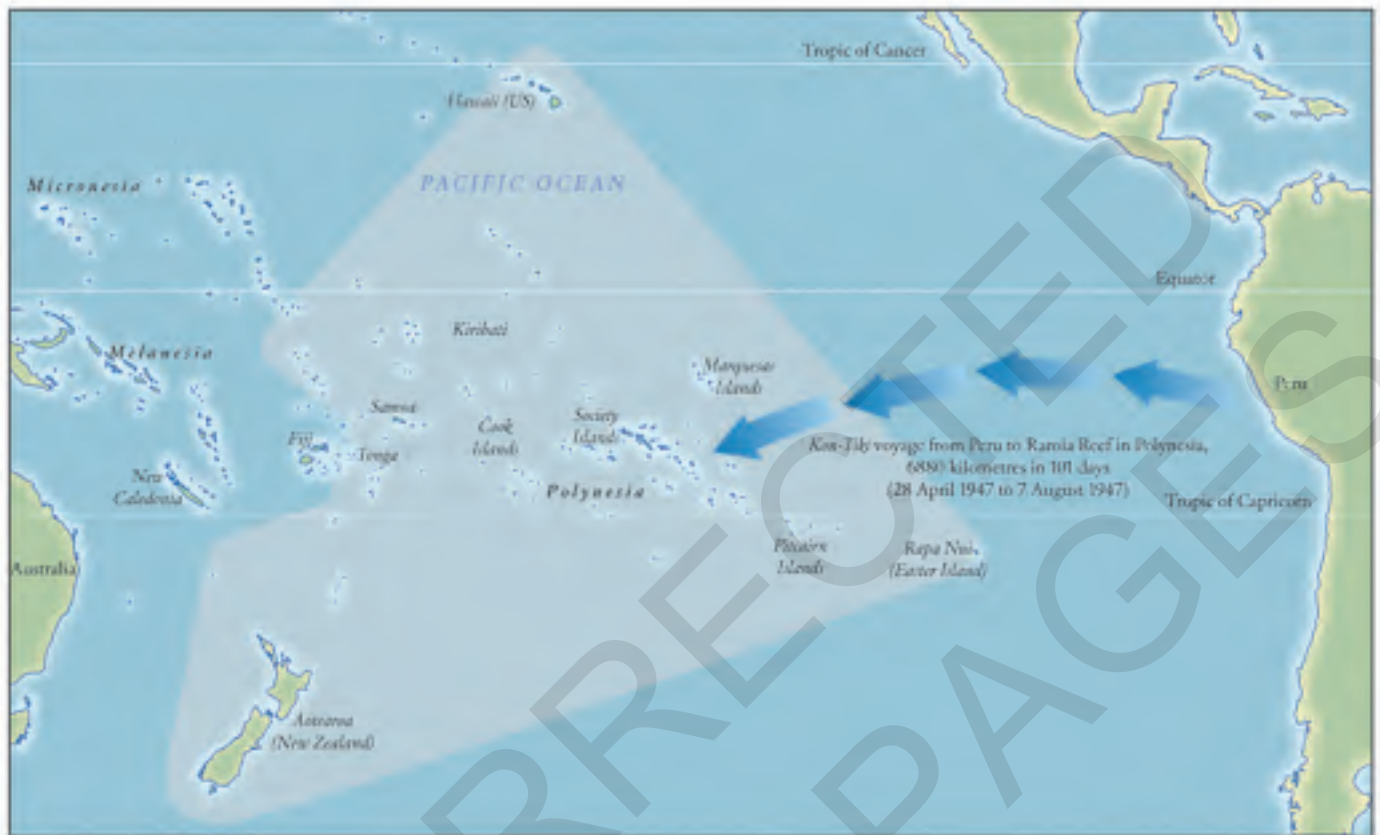
Heyerdahl and his team of fellow adventurers went to Peru on the west coast of South America and built a raft of balsa wood that they then named the *Kon-Tiki*, after an ancient name for the Incan sun god. The raft was lashed together with hemp ropes. It sailed out of the port of Callao on the coast of Peru in April 1947. After 101 days, Heyerdahl and his crew did indeed arrive in Polynesia.

- Did Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki* expedition conclusively prove his argument that the Polynesians sailed west from South America?

### From which direction was Polynesia settled?

Just because Heyerdahl was successful in demonstrating that it was possible to sail westwards from South America into Polynesia (see the 'Times gone by' box), it does not follow that he was correct in arguing that Polynesia was settled this way. To be certain, we would need more evidence than this. Surely if the Polynesians

had settled the Pacific by sailing westwards from South America, there would be evidence of some transference of traditional crafts, religions, customs and languages from South America as they moved on westwards. This does not seem to be the case, however, although the appearance of the sweet potato in eastern Polynesia does provide a riddle. It is an American vegetable, so how did it appear in eastern Polynesia?



Source 8.8 Voyage of the *Kon-Tiki*, 1947

The alternative hypothesis, namely that the Polynesians sailed eastwards out of Melanesia, explains cultural and genetic links between Polynesian cultures and Melanesian and even indigenous Taiwanese cultures. For all the books and lectures that followed his voyage, Heyerdahl might have shown that it was possible to settle Polynesia from South America, but he had not proved it beyond all doubt. There are many scholars who would like to locate the evidence to prove that Heyerdahl was correct all along. To date, however, that evidence has eluded all who have searched for it.

## Successful navigators

By c. 40000 BC, some of the earliest settlers had worked their way from the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea to reach the Solomon Islands, east of Papua New Guinea. Archaeology and history know little about the origins of these people, for time has erased much of their imprint. However, one thing

is certain: these people were the descendants of those who had arrived on the shores of the Pacific Ocean more than a million years ago.

These early settlers were later followed by migrants from the area around Taiwan in about c.6000 BC. Whereas the earliest settlers came overland with short, shallow sea crossings, these later people seemed more confident in their ability to traverse the seas as they island-hopped through the Philippines and Sulawesi (in modern Indonesia) to Papua New Guinea. Arriving at the Solomon Islands they were able to slowly push further over time to what we know today as Vanuatu and New Caledonia. These later migrants raise a number of important questions for students of history.

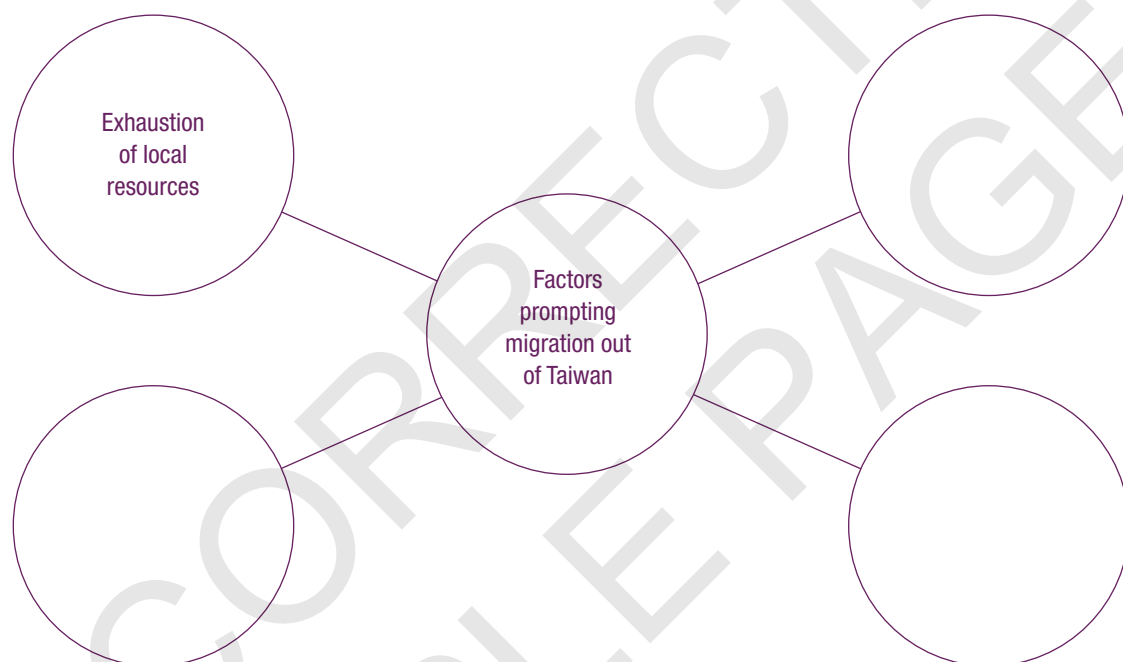
## Why did they leave their homeland to undertake such a perilous journey?

The truth is we do not really know. Perhaps an answer is that migrations to Taiwan from the continental mainland of China put pressure on

already established populations on the island. Perhaps more aggressive people arriving in Taiwan drove out the migrants, or the climate of Taiwan might have changed, thus prompting the people to leave. Perhaps the impact of a cyclone or tsunami forced them to leave. Or, perhaps their local resources were exhausted. Unfortunately, reliable evidence of this event, so long in the past, is extremely difficult to come by.

### Note this down

Using the graphic organiser below, summarise the four factors that may have prompted Taiwanese people to migrate to new lands.



### How did these migrants from Taiwan sail over such long distances?

Today, an aircraft flying between Taiwan and the Solomon Islands in a straight line would fly for 5653 kilometres. But the route taken by these early travellers was not a straight line, so the distance they travelled would have been greater. When they left Taiwan it was not in ones or twos, but in larger groups. They brought food and water with them, their families, domesticated animals such as dogs, pigs, and chickens, plus the technology and know-how of the civilisation they had left behind.

As mentioned earlier, they employed a strategy involving frequent stops at islands to gather fresh

supplies of fruits and vegetables plus water. This strategy is known as **island hopping**. The rafts they used on the voyage (the technology was not there in c. 40000 to hollow out logs to build canoes) were specifically designed for use on rivers, inland lakes and inshore seas, not deep and extensive ocean waters. Therefore, sailing from island to island was the most appropriate strategy.

We'll never know how many of these travellers were lost in storms at sea or how many were attacked and killed by indigenous people on the islands they encountered. We just have to acknowledge that both were a distinct possibility. The voyage from Taiwan to the Solomon Islands was no pleasure cruise. It was risk-taking at its highest level.

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**island hopping** breaking up a long voyage with stops at many islands, gathering crucial supplies at each one

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### Activity 8.1

- 1 Briefly explain the concept of 'island hopping'.
- 2 Why do you think that it was the perfect strategy for settling Polynesia?
- 3 Locate one piece of evidence that indicates that Polynesian languages had a common origin.

### Research 8.1

Research the English translation for the following Maori words:

- |            |           |                |         |
|------------|-----------|----------------|---------|
| • Aotearoa | • patu    | • te           | • waka  |
| • haka     | • po      | • Te Reo Maori | • whetu |
| • iwi      | • rangi   | • umu          |         |
| • kia ora  | • tangata | • wairua       |         |

You can find some useful links at [www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks](http://www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks).

 *Note this down*

Using the graphic organiser below, summarise what the Taiwanese migrants might have brought with them on their voyage.



### How do we know today that these people living in Melanesia had originated in Taiwan?

DNA testing performed by **geneticists** has revealed a close connection between the people of Melanesia and the indigenous people of Taiwan. The same work revealed that the Taiwanese migrants who came to the Solomon Islands in c.6000 were also closely connected with the modern people of Polynesia.

Another key piece of evidence is that the languages spoken by Polynesians today belong to a group called **Austronesian**, a family of languages that are today

spoken throughout of the islands of Melanesia and the Philippines, along with Madagascar, the Indonesian **archipelago** and (originally) Taiwan. As a result, **linguists** believe there is a strong connection between the Polynesian people and the original migrants who left Taiwan and travelled through the Philippines and on to the Solomon Islands.

What we do know for certain is that once the migrants from Taiwan had reached Melanesia, and most notably the Solomon Islands, they intermingled with the indigenous inhabitants of the area – and stayed there. They had gone as far as they were going. However, within two thousand years they were slowly pushing out to what we know today as Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

**archipelago** a group of islands

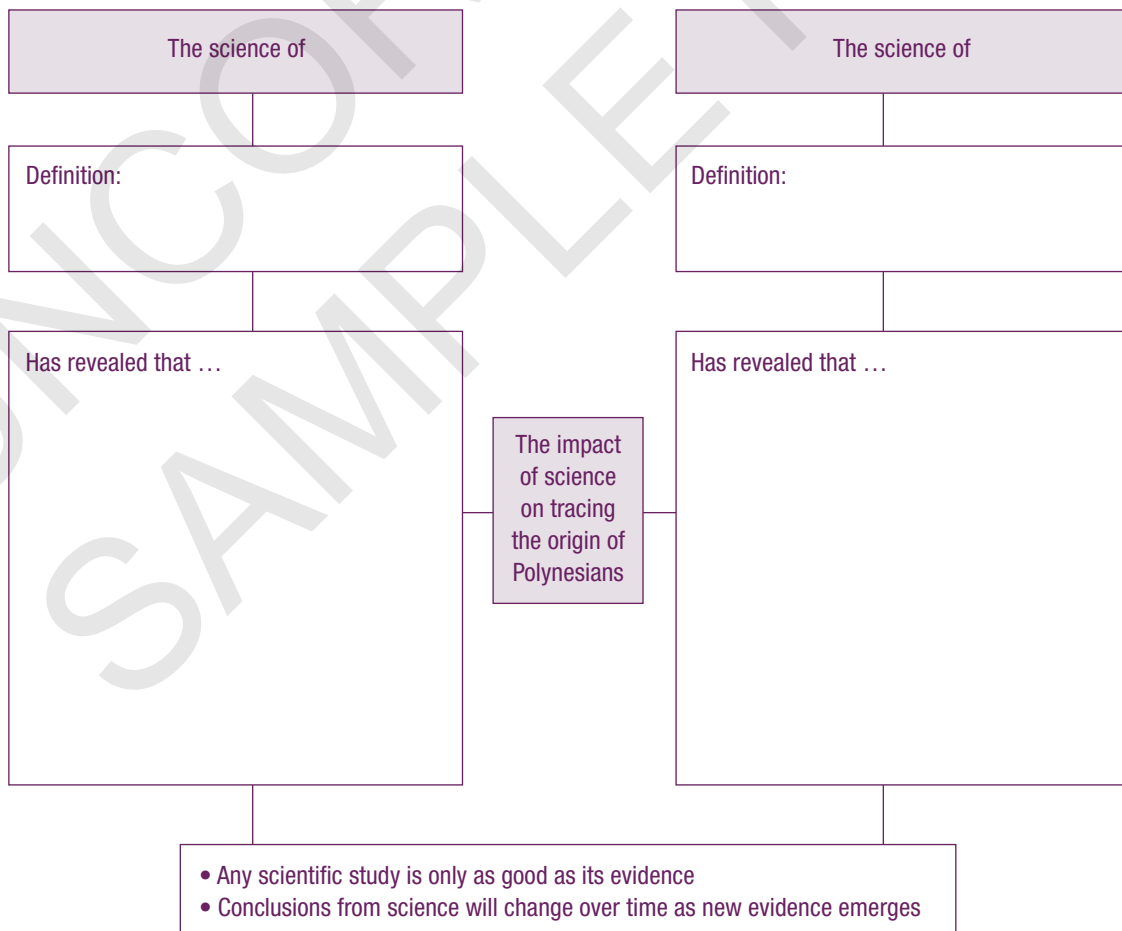
**linguist** an expert in the study of language and its structure (linguistics)

**geneticist** an expert in the study of inherited characteristics in animals and humans (genetics)

**Austronesian** a family of languages spoken in Madagascar, the Pacific and Southeast Asia

**Note this down**

Using the graphic organiser below, outline the impact of the sciences of genetics and linguistics on tracing the origins of the Polynesians.



Though they were not yet geographically in the triangle of Polynesia (see Source 8.6), stage one of Polynesian migration was complete.

It was their descendants, along with perhaps some of the earlier indigenous inhabitants from the Solomon Islands, who would become the people who reached out in quest of settling Polynesia's many island archipelagos.

## The Lapita culture

**sherd** broken pieces of ceramic material found in an archaeological site (abbreviation of potsherd)

In 1952, American archaeologists Edward W. Gifford and Richard Shulter Jnr discovered **sherds** of pottery at a site they called Lapita in New Caledonia. The pottery was ornate and had been scratched by a toothed instrument in the process of making it. Human

faces appeared on many pieces (see Sources 8.9 and 8.10).

What surprised archaeologists most about the pottery was that it was found at all. No people in Melanesia were using pottery of this form in the twentieth century, so the discovery raised many questions:

- Who were the people that had made this pottery?
- What had become of these people?
- When had it been made?
- What was the meaning of the scratched decoration on the pottery?
- How had the people of Lapita used the pottery?

Around 3000, skilled potters were at work in Taiwan. Archaeologists now believe that Taiwanese migrants brought pottery-making skills with them during their travels in c.1350.



Source 8.9/8.10 Lapita pottery designs

### HISTORICAL FACT

When the original pottery discoveries were made in 1952, Gifford and Shulter coined the term 'Lapita' after they misheard indigenous people using the word *xapeta'a* (meaning 'to dig a hole') in their local language. So, whereas archaeologists specifically describe the Lapita culture even today, we still do not know for certain the name of the culture that made the pottery.

These people migrated along the northern coast of Papua New Guinea to the Solomon Islands, ending up in New Caledonia where the original 1952 pottery discoveries were made. Why they had come to New Caledonia at that time is still unknown. Archaeologists have now discovered

Lapita pottery in numerous places as far away as Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, quite apart from the original finds in New Caledonia (see Source 8.11). The highly decorated sherds are now described as samples of earlier-Lapita culture.



Source 8.11 Locations of Lapita pottery finds in Melanesia and Polynesia

In 2011, new unexpected finds were reported on the southern coast of Papua New Guinea by Australian archaeologists Bruno David and Ian McNiven. These new finds were less decorated than the earlier discoveries, and archaeologists are now referring to the culture that produced

them as later-Lapita culture. Carbon-14 dating of the pottery sherds found in New Caledonia and Vanuatu indicate the remains came from the period c.1000 to c.800. The later-Lapita discovery in Papua New Guinea has been dated as c.400 (that is, 400–600 years younger than the earlier finds) and has come as a real surprise for the archaeologists, who had always believed the Lapita culture was an island culture.



## Activity 8.2

- 1 Identify some of the historical problems we have today in using the term 'Lapita culture'.
- 2 How do the pots of the early-Lapita and late-Lapita cultures differ?

## Research 8.2

Go to [www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks](http://www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks) and watch the Catalyst program, 'Lapita People', then answer the following questions:

- 1 Is the site representative of early-Lapita or late-Lapita culture?
- 2 What did the archaeologists find at the site?
- 3 What did the archaeologists discover about the diet of the people at this site?
- 4 Why do you think that the pottery finds are so important for analysing the history of Polynesia?

## Later stages of expansion

Between c.2000 and c.1000, the islands of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga were occupied by Melanesians from Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Today, Fiji is chiefly a Melanesian nation, though there are some among its population who can be considered Polynesian genetically and culturally. Just as their ancestors from Taiwan had done, these migrants took all they needed with them: coconut palms, breadfruit plants and banana plants were part of their baggage, along with pigs, chickens and the occasional stow-away rat. Once more the new populations stopped where they had arrived, adapted to and changed their environment, planted their foods and consolidated their culture. Stage two of Polynesian settlement was complete.

It would be about another 2000 years before migrations to eastern Polynesia began again. By that time, the cultures of Samoa and Tonga were no longer Melanesian. The people had evolved new traditions, new languages and new ways of doing things. Although there were connections

with their Melanesian past, by the third century they were a new people. They had become Polynesian – occupiers of 'many islands'.

Stage three of Polynesian settlement began in c.200 when migrants from Samoa pushed outward to the east, travelling more than 3550 kilometres to the island chain of the Marquesas. The Marquesas became the springboard for further Polynesian migration south-eastward to Pitcairn Island and, by c.300, the remotest destination of all, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), 3058 kilometres from the Marquesas. They then moved northward to Hawai'i (3862 kilometres from the Marquesas) by c.400, and southward to New Zealand by c.700. Clearly, the people involved in these migrations had confidence in the canoes they used as well as their navigation skills.

## Ships and seacraft

Original outrigger canoes – such as that pictured in Source 8.12, and still in use today – were not ideal for long sea voyages. The outrigger provided more stability than the simple canoe could do, but



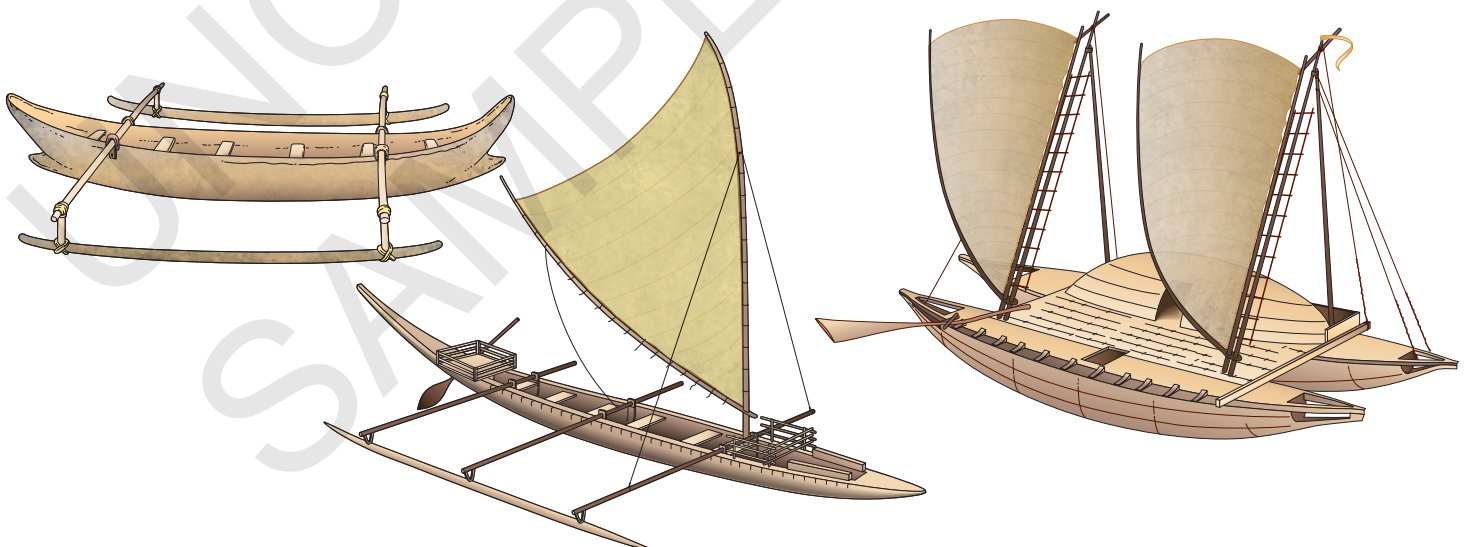
Source 8.12 A traditional outrigger canoe in Tonga

in deeper waters, craft like this were too easily flooded and capsized. Much sturdier craft were required for ocean travel.

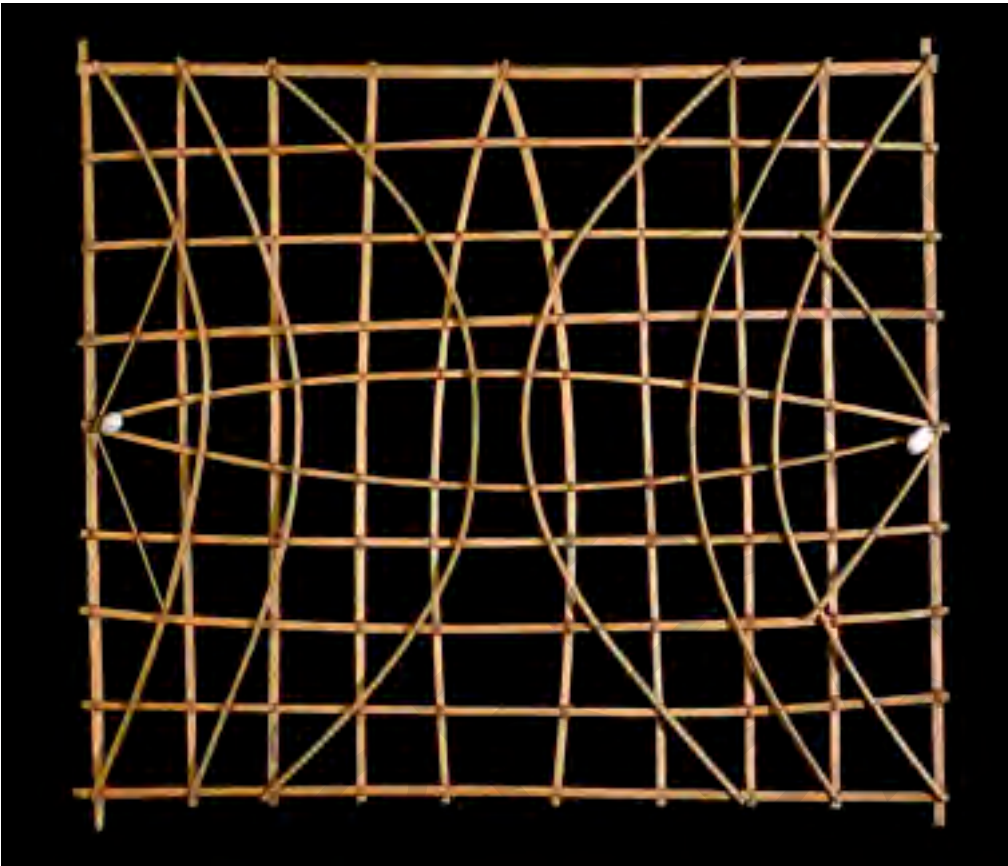
Over time, Polynesian peoples learned to construct canoes with higher sides on them and with a double hull that was crossed by a decking joining the two hulls. Both Melanesians and Polynesians

developed the skills to construct such craft. Topped with a mast and triangular sail, they were able to sail long distances connecting the archipelagos.

But how did Polynesian sailors find their way? Sailors in Melanesia and Polynesia had to deal with changing wind directions, currents and variable wave patterns as they crossed the oceans. Just as



**Source 8.13** Canoe development for ocean voyages: the central canoe was joined to the two outrigger floats by two booms, making the craft one unit. Sometimes, the booms supported a whole deck on which people could walk, sit, carry livestock in wooden cages or even shelter under a lean-to construction on board. A mast and a triangular sail made the craft perfect for sailing across deeper waters over long distances. Over time they became even more sophisticated, with two sails and two canoes joined together.



Source 8.14 A Polynesian stick chart

**stick chart** a map used by Polynesian navigators that indicated islands, waves and currents across the ocean

we might use a geographical map, they invented a unique method of keeping track and recording for later reference the variations they experienced. The invention was

the **stick chart** (see Source 8.14). The lines of sticks represented a course to be followed; the knots visible on the chart represented the islands and atolls that would be found on the course between two knots; and curved sticks represented the impact of wave patterns, winds and currents.

Each canoe had to rely on many such charts to navigate large areas of ocean.

The Tahitians introduced the charts to Captain Cook when he arrived there in 1777 on his third and final voyage of the Pacific. He was both intrigued and amazed by this technology, for European sailors weren't able to show the effects of winds, currents and wave patterns on their maps. The charts were used throughout Melanesia and Polynesia, and clearly reveal a cultural transference between the cultures of the two regions.

### Research 8.3

In groups, construct a PowerPoint presentation to explain the major developments that allowed Polynesians to sail unknown waters.

## Settlement and isolation

**adze** a tool similar to an axe with an arched blade at right angles to the handle, used for cutting or shaping wood

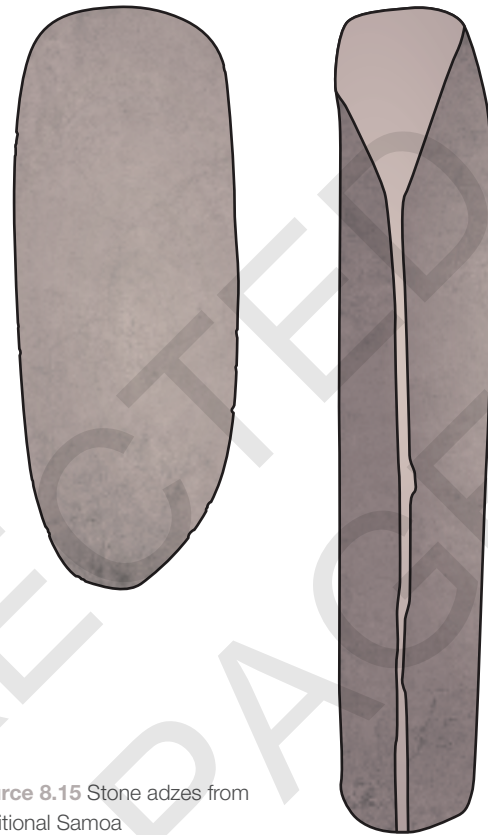
The people who settled Melanesia used rafts lashed together by vines. By the time Polynesia was being settled, breakthrough technology was available to build canoes.

The **adze** allowed canoe-builders to hollow out entire logs from trees. The earliest adzes were made of stone.

These earliest forms of stone adzes (dating from around c. 2500) did not have handles attached to them. They were held by the narrowest part and thrust into the wood in a hammering and grinding motion to help shape the wood into the desired shape. The whole exercise took considerable skill and effort. People who built canoes were usually highly regarded in Polynesian society.

From around 1700 new, slimline triangular adzes began to appear in Samoa. Archaeologists believe that either new materials for making adzes became available, or that much more refined work was needed by the craftsmen who used them.

As they colonised one group of islands after another, the people of Polynesia made use of the same island-hopping strategy employed by their ancestors when they migrated to Melanesia centuries before. When new settlers left their island bound for the horizon, the people left behind experienced isolation from those who had left. By the time Europeans encountered the Polynesians between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, isolation had become part of cultural life across all Pacific societies. Rapa Nui (Easter Island), for example, lies 4426 kilometres from Tahiti, and 1800 kilometres from its nearest neighbour, Pitcairn Island, both to the west.



Source 8.15 Stone adzes from traditional Samoa

To the east of Rapa Nui, 3600 kilometres away, lies the South American country of Chile. By any stretch of the imagination, such distances in times past were significant.

Travelling between islands from one location to another over such distances could not have been possible without keen navigational skills. Rapa Nui is only 24 kilometres long and 11 kilometres wide, so, sailing from Pitcairn or Tahiti, it was a small target to locate in a huge area of ocean. To locate Rapa Nui in the first place, the Polynesians have to be admired for their skills of seamanship as well as navigation.

The Tahitians explained to Captain Cook in 1777 that Polynesians used the sun and stars to navigate from island to island. They were also able to recognise other signs of land as they sailed the Pacific. Bird life at sea indicated that they were





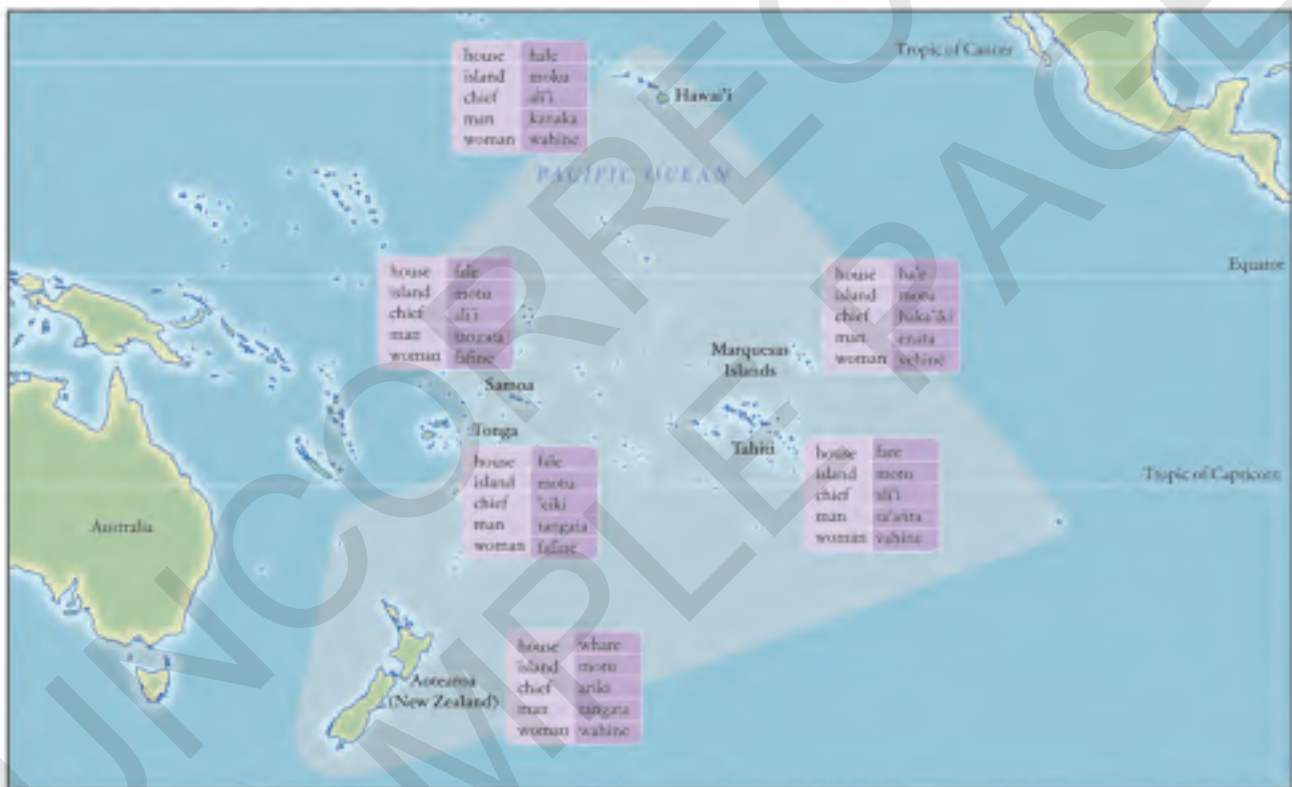
**flotsam** wreckage or lost cargo from ships found floating at sea or washed up on shore; also pieces of plant life floating at sea

within 200 kilometres of land; **flotsam** floating on the waves indicated that they were close to land; and specific cloud shapes forming over islands during the heat of the day also revealed that

they were nearing land. Wind and wave patterns were also affected by the proximity of land and they learned to anticipate this over time.

All of the peoples of Polynesia share a common ancestry, yet as they sailed the seas of the region and settled new islands, their isolation from one

another saw adaptations of cultural connections. Languages were related, but over time variations in spoken words or vocal sounds had emerged. However, when Captain James Cook arrived in Hawai'i on his third voyage in the Pacific in 1777, he had onboard a Tahitian man who was instantly able to speak with the Hawaiians that Cook encountered. Captain Cook was amazed, but the Polynesians were not. Source 8.16 reveals how close the language connections are, no matter the location of the Polynesian society.



Source 8.16 Some common words in Polynesian societies





## The way Polynesian societies used environmental resources

Polynesia is a difficult and isolated environment, with limited land for growing crops, fragile and sensitive ecosystems, and low-lying land that is vulnerable to changes in sea level. While some Polynesian societies have flourished, others have collapsed – the Rapa Nui civilisation in particular.

### What happened to the Rapa Nui civilisation?

The collapse of the once-flourishing Rapa Nui civilisation is a great historical mystery. By the sixteenth century, it was a shadow of what it had once been. When Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen encountered it in 1722, he was unaware that he was seeing a civilisation well in decline.

While the civilisation had flourished after people first arrived, some time between 300 and 800, later migrations to the island placed significant pressure on the island's population. Unlike other Polynesian islands, the range of seafood was more limited and the range of land animals was small. The original population had spread across the island, forming close clan connections with one another. They would trade with each other, share labour between groups when something had to be done, and intermarry. But unlike the experience of earlier settlers elsewhere in Polynesia, their crops failed miserably. Only the sweet potato seemed to flourish; together with the chickens they brought with them, sweet potato became the islanders' staple diet.

The scientist Jared Diamond has suggested that the deforestation of Easter Island was brought about by the construction of the rollers for the *moai*. This deforestation dramatically reduced the ability of the islanders to feed themselves, as it caused soil degradation and stopped the islanders from building their wooden fishing boats, which of course heavily restricted their access to seafood.

When Jacob Roggeveen arrived, he estimated the population to be about 3000 people, but some modern estimates suggest that it was

perhaps closer to 10000. Roggeveen found the people living in reed huts and caves. They were at continuous war with each other, even resorting to cannibalism in bad times. Like all European sailors, Roggeveen did not realise that he and his crew were introducing exotic diseases that would kill many of the island's inhabitants.

In 1770, the Spanish took possession of the island but did not colonise it. What they did do was to kidnap some inhabitants as slaves for their American empire. American sailing ships and sailors from Peru continued this practice in the nineteenth century.

The food shortage suffered by the Easter Islanders, Diamond suggests, caused internal conflict and the breakdown of traditional social structures. This factor, combined with external interference, slavery and the impact of foreign diseases, undermined the civilisation of Rapa Nui.

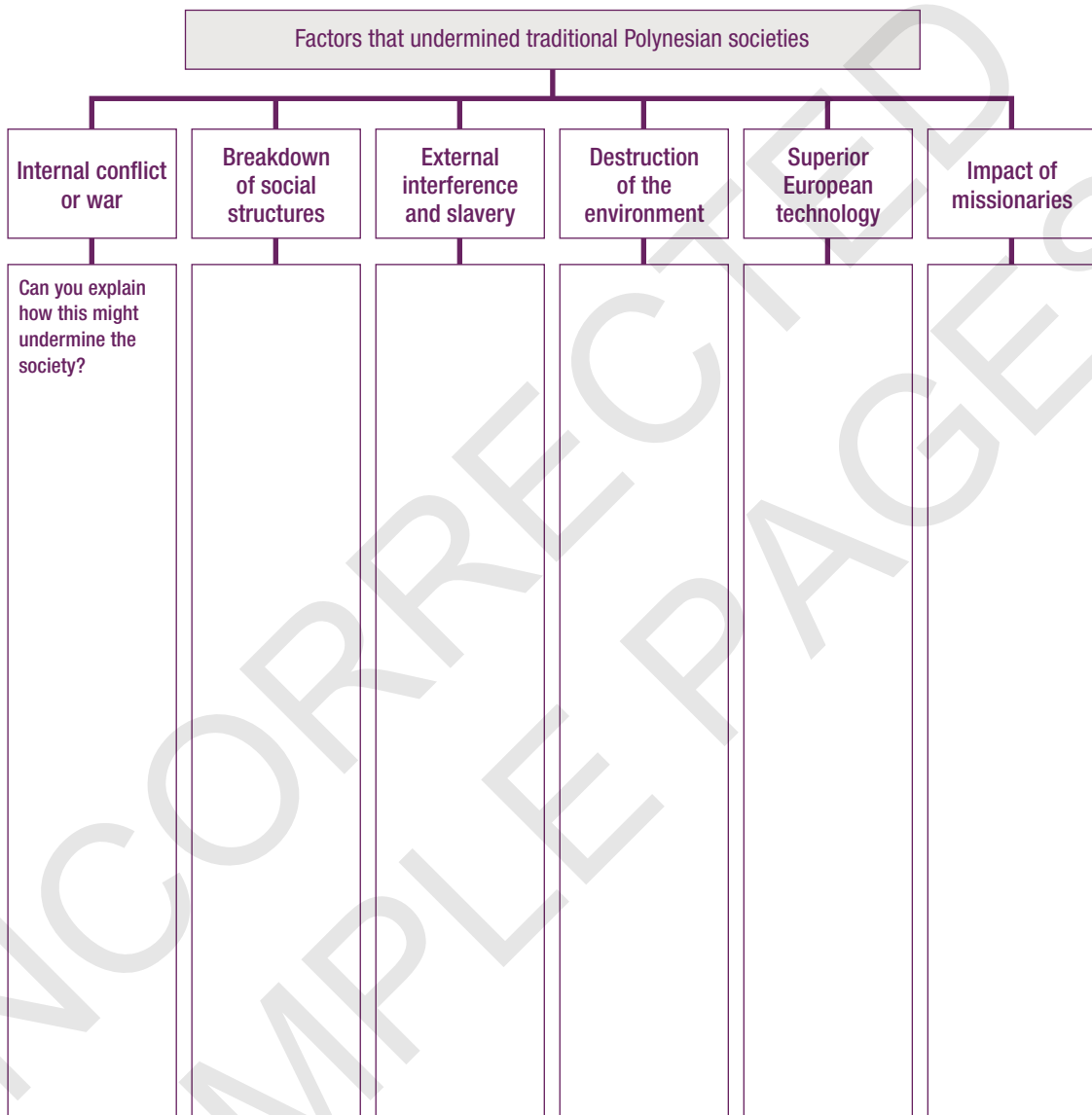
### Extinction of native species

Across Polynesia, there was a limited range of land-based foods, apart from the food crops that the migrants brought with them. Some islands were infested with snails and insects, and some had large quantities of flightless birds. These birds existed right across Polynesia, though their isolation from each other meant that there were differences in size. Some were as small as parrots or chickens, while others were as large as birds like today's ostrich or emu.

These birds did not have any predators before the arrival of humans, and by the sixteenth century they had been hunted into extinction. Most famously, the New Zealand bird known as the moa – a flightless bird bigger than an emu – was hunted to extinction by the Maori population of Aotearoa by the fourteenth century.

 *Note this down*

Using the graphic organiser below, outline how Polynesian societies may have declined.



## The way of life in Polynesian society

The Polynesians expanded to the many islands throughout the the Pacific Ocean, which comprises one-third of the entire Earth, studded with almost 25 000 rocky volcanic islands and **coral atolls**. Island chains such as Hawai'i and Samoa form archipelagos built by volcanic action.

**coral atoll** a ring-shaped reef, island or chain of islands formed by coral

The earliest settlements by Polynesian people were along the island belt just below the Equator.

This allowed the people to predict the climate and the suitability of islands for cultivating the crops they brought with them. It also allowed them to use their knowledge of growing seasons and rainfall patterns. The nature of archipelagos such as Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Tahiti and the Marquesas allowed the earliest Polynesians to exploit knowledge that was familiar to them as they extended their colonisation of the region. But it was not just the land they were interested in: the

oceans and reefs surrounding the islands allowed them to harvest seafood and other resources that formed part of their diet.

## Climate

The vast majority of Polynesia lies within the equatorial zone, and has a tropical climate with

high rainfall, high humidity, storms and cyclones. The Polynesians had to be highly familiar with, and responsive to, this climate as it dictated which plants would grow, how the natural resources of Polynesia would be used by its inhabitants, the style of architecture of houses and important buildings, the style of clothing worn by people and the food these people would eat.

### Activity 8.3

- 1 Explain what you understand about the term 'Polynesia'.
- 2 Identify three characteristics of the Polynesian islands.
- 3 Name the tool needed for the construction of ocean-going canoes.
- 4 Analyse why the DNA evidence for the origins of Polynesians and the archaeological evidence may not be mutually inconsistent.

### Activity 8.4

Research the formation of a coral atoll and explain how this determined the nature of the many of the islands of Polynesia. You can find a useful link at [www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks](http://www.cambridge.edu.au/historynsw8weblinks).

## Agriculture and food production

As they spread across the Pacific Ocean, the people who settled on the islands had the task of making the new lands their home. This involved several steps. Planting the crops they had brought with them was a priority. All Polynesian groups introduced new flora into the lands they settled. Crops such as coconuts, breadfruit, taro and bananas moved eastwards out of Melanesia as people migrated into Polynesia. Some of these products were native to south-east Asia or India

and had been carried with migrants during the earlier stage of the migration.

Establishing crops was never easy, but it was vital to the survival of the new settlements. The crops had to supply food, materials for housing, clothing, tools and medicine. There were three stages in the development of agriculture on a newly settled island:

- the *adaptation* stage, in which plants were adapted to the new conditions
- the *development* stage, after the crops had become established, and decisive action was taken to increase the area under cultivation

- the *expansion* stage, when the demanding needs of a growing population promoted further development and increase of successful crops under cultivation.

Each stage reflected the nature and needs of the society being established. Adaptation reflected a

**hierarchy** a system of organisation in which individuals or groups are ranked one above the other

small population, with everybody working together to establish a viable settlement. Development began to reflect the emergence of a **hierarchy** in the society, as well

as a significant land clearing. Expansion reflected a fully developed hierarchical society.

From the time they lived in Melanesia (before c.2000) Polynesia-bound immigrants consumed seafood as well as crop foods. As they explored their way eastwards through Fiji to Samoa, they were always on the lookout for supplies of the seafood they knew so well. Some of this was to be found inside coral reefs in lagoons, but some

was found in deeper waters outside the reefs. Using nets and pens, the Polynesian settlers were able to catch seafood. Even they must have been surprised at how rich the waters were.

Occupation of new islands also tied the people to the land they settled. On all islands where settlement had evolved to maturity, a complex social hierarchy emerged.

The exact nature of this hierarchy not only reflected the power and authority of certain individuals or groups in society, but also the **folklore** or **mythology** that often supported the social hierarchy. Stories of the gods and their connection with the chiefs, for example, guaranteed the status of the island chief and tied the population not only to the island but to the chief as well.

**folklore** the traditional customs, traditions and stories of a population, passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth

**mythology** a collection of myths that belong to a particular people or culture and tell about their history, ancestors, heroes, gods and other supernatural beings

## Activity 8.5

In groups, discuss the following questions then complete the task.

- 1 Do members of our Australian community have folklore and mythology?
- 2 Can you name five examples of the various folklore and mythology present in our community?
- 3 Select one example of a piece of folklore or mythology and explain it in a poster, using illustrations and text. Historical work requires you to keep records of sources. Ensure you identify the sources you use for your illustrations and text.

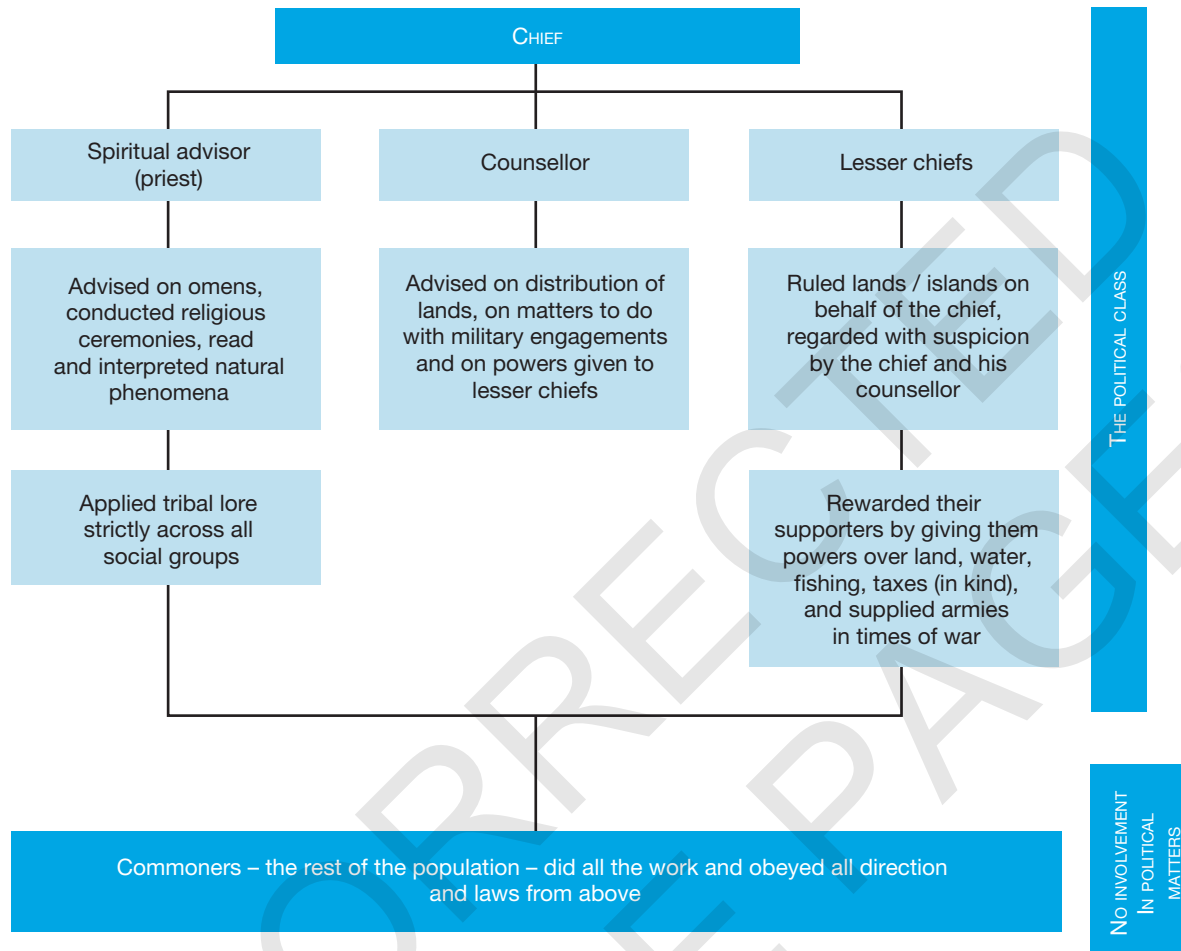
## Role of key groups and individuals

The social structure of Polynesia was similar to that of many societies in history. The power and authority within the society was given to and exercised by the few (the elite, or the political class), while the majority of the population (the commoners) lived with little control over the shape of their lives. They were required to obey those who had power (the elite), and those in the elite could exercise their power and authority as

gently or as harshly as they desired. As is inevitable with cultures spread out over thousands of ocean kilometres, there was a reasonable amount of variation among the different Polynesian nations. The concepts the societies had in common, however, is illustrated by common terms across their languages.

### Chiefs and priests

No Polynesian society could exist without its chief. In traditional Hawai'i and Samoa, the chief's title was *ali'i*, while on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) it had



Source 8.17 Simplified structure of a Polynesian society before European contact

changed to *ari'i* and in Aotearoa (New Zealand) it was *ariki* (see Source 8.16). The first chief might have been the first leader to arrive on the island or the eldest of a group of chiefs. Alternatively, he may have been the one who could command the most power in the group, perhaps through being successful in war. On Rapa Nui, which was settled around or after 300, there was a legend of a founding chief named Hotu Matu'a. Oral traditions indicated that the eldest child in each generation inherited the title *ariki* and the position of high chief from that time.

The position of chief was never guaranteed. His population could flee his lands and go somewhere else. He could be killed in battle with another island group, or by somebody with a grievance in his own group. An ambitious lesser chief could overthrow him. And if misfortune befell his population, he might be exiled or killed. The very idea of being a high chief rested on the well-being of his population. Should earthquakes, volcanic

eruptions, cyclones or tsunamis affect his villages, it might be interpreted that the gods were angry with his people and, by extension, with him.

Spiritual advisors or priests were the link between the spirit world of the gods and the chief. They would interpret natural phenomena and the actions of people, and would advise the chief of what action to take in order to please the gods. The priests were also responsible for applying *mana* and *tapu*, two concepts that both legitimised and reinforced the existing social and political hierarchy. *Mana* was a supernatural or sacred energy force common to both Melanesian and Polynesian cultures. When things were going well, the chief had *mana*. When things were going badly the chief had lost *mana*, and this was a dangerous time for him.

*mana* in Polynesian and Melanesian societies, a supernatural or sacred energy force believed to run through all natural things

*tapu* the behaviours and things that were believed to be prohibited by the gods in Polynesian societies

## Tapu

*Tapu* (or *kapu* in some other places in Polynesia) referred to things that were forbidden by the gods, and a breach of the rules of behaviour could be punishable by death. The rules equally affected the elite and the commoners, and men and women. The exact content of these rules varied between Polynesian communities, so it is difficult to generalise about them. However, some common examples include the following:

- It was forbidden for any commoner to allow his or her shadow to cover all or part of the person of the chief or priest.
- It was forbidden for a commoner to enter the house of a member of the elite, or to touch their clothes or their symbols of power.

- Women could not eat with men, and the food of each gender had to be cooked in separate ovens.
- Women were also forbidden to eat certain foods, such as pork, bananas or foods offered in sacrifice to the gods.

From childhood, a Polynesian grew up convinced that unless *tapu* was respected, bad things would occur – to either an individual or the group. It was a powerful force in traditional Polynesian society.

## Powerful and influential women

Chiefs, or ‘kings’, were not the only influential forces in Polynesian societies. Some women rose through the ranks to influence the future of their people. Often this happened because they were

### HISTORICAL FACT

The English word ‘taboo’ originates from *tapu*.



Source 8.18  
Queen Pomare IV of Tahiti

married to the chief or inherited his position after the chief's death.

Queen Pomare IV in Tahiti was one such woman. Like all Polynesian islands, Tahiti had a royal line. Generally, only men inherited the title, but women were not excluded entirely. If there was no male heir, the queen could rule in her own right. Pomare IV became the ruler of Tahiti at the tender age of 14. In 1857, she also became the chief of the island of Ra'iatea and married the chief of the island of Bora Bora. In 1860, when her husband died, she reunited the two kingdoms together with Tahiti under her rule. She opposed French control of Tahiti, writing a protest letter to the King of France and exiling herself to Ra'iatea. She battled French control from 1847 to her death in 1877, arguing that because France had never formally proclaimed their ownership of Tahiti, their control was illegal. During her life she had ten children, of whom seven survived to adulthood.

Another prominent Polynesian woman was Queen Kaahumanu in Hawai'i. She was the first

of 17 wives of the chief known as Kamehameha I, who united the islands of Hawai'i under his rule in 1810. At the age of 10, she was given to the chief by her father to demonstrate his loyalty to the chief and his acceptance of his rule. After the death of Kamehameha in 1819, she became co-ruler of Hawai'i with his successor Kuhina Nui. She is best remembered for her devotion to her people, the reform of Hawaiian culture and the integration of Christianity into Hawaiian life.

As Kamehameha I lay dying, Kaahumanu wondered how she might rid Hawaiian culture of its *tapu*. She had noticed European men and women eating together and wondered why the gods had not punished them for breaking what she had always understood was *tapu*. Perhaps, she speculated, their god was more forgiving. She converted to Protestant Christianity and was baptised in the faith in 1825 and began the task of dismantling the Hawaiian *tapu*. She used the Ten Commandments in the Bible to write a set of laws that became the more modern, if not European, system of *tapu* for the Hawaiian people.



**Source 8.19** Kaahumanu, the reforming Queen of Hawai'i. The leis and flowers are still placed on this statue in Honolulu today by those who revere the role Kaahumanu played in preserving the future of Hawai'i and in promoting the education of the young. Photo courtesy of Maria Marsh.



Like Pomare IV in Tahiti, Kaahumanu is also remembered for resisting foreign domination in Hawai'i. She believed that education of Hawaiian children would allow them to resist the tricks of the foreigners and would be the best tool to

preserve Hawaiian independence. She died in 1832 and on her deathbed was presented with the first printed copy of the New Testament in the Hawaiian language. Statues and memorials commemorating her abound in Hawai'i.

### Activity 8.6

- 1 Imagine being given away to marry at 10 years of age. Describe how the expectations of childhood and adulthood differed between traditional Polynesian and modern Australian societies.
- 2 Suggest what effect that Kaahumanu's replacement of *tapu* would have had on Hawaiian society.

### Activity 8.7

Examine Sources 8.18 and 8.19 and answer the following questions:

- 1 Why were these subjects chosen to be represented in artistic form?
- 2 Identify the art form used to represent each subject.
- 3 To what extent does each artwork use symbols to reflect the subject's importance?
- 4 Classify each artwork as a primary or secondary source.
- 5 Consider the value of each artwork to you as a student of history.



## The cultural achievements of Polynesian societies

The wide range of Polynesian settlement encouraged the development of a wide range of technologies, arts and artisanal crafts. Polynesians were skilled in the art of making canoes to sail the breadth of the Pacific Ocean. Canoe-builders were held in high regard in all Polynesian societies.

Women became highly skilled in the making of *tapu* (also known as *kapa* or *ngatu*) cloth, made from the bark of the paper-mulberry tree that grows throughout Polynesia. Strips of bark are beaten together using a

wooden mallet into a single piece of cloth. Often women would work together on such a task, producing a sheet of cloth about 3 metres wide and between 6 and 15 metres long. Designs were then drawn onto the cloth, which was painted and dried in the sun. The availability today of so many cheap textiles has meant that *tapu* cloth is less popular than it once was, but the islands of Tonga seem to be persisting with the craft.

The traditional housing in Polynesian villages showed a cultural transference from the ancestral home of Melanesia. Whether it was known as the

*tapu* cloth made from the bark of the Polynesian paper-mulberry tree

Source 8.20 Tongan women sell *tapa* cloth at a market

*fale* (in Tonga and Samoa), the *fare* (in Tahiti), the *whare* (in Aotearoa, or New Zealand) or the *bale* (in Hawai'i), it reflected a style that made use of local timbers and thatched plant roofs. Usually many families shared the one dwelling, similar to the 'long house' of Papua New Guinea in Melanesia. Such a design provided tribal security for the group and could be easily repaired if damaged by storms or cyclones. Following the arrival of Christian **missionaries** in the nineteenth century, there was a move away from the use of this design towards the construction of single houses for independent families.

**missionaries** people sent to spread a particular faith, in this case Christianity, in another country

With thatched dwellings, the cooking was always done outside in earth ovens. The food of men and women would be prepared in separate ovens, so as to not break *tapu*. These ovens were known in Aotearoa as *hangi*.

Canoe building and *tapa* making were not the only crafts that were highly regarded in Polynesian societies and by European visitors to the region. Traditional societies also excelled in representing their spiritual ancestors in terms of carving wooden images of them. Such images are referred to as *tiki* (in New Zealand, the Cook Islands, parts of Tahiti and the Marquesas islands),

Source 8.21 A carved wooden *tiki*

*ti'i* (more commonly throughout Tahiti) or *ki'i* (in Hawai'i). In all cases, the word seems to be related to the origins of the first man, and so is related to creation mythology of the Polynesians.

The craftsmen who created these images and many others like them elsewhere in Polynesia were considered to be guardians of the mythology of the community. As such, they were highly respected for their work. Many Polynesian villages had such statues near them in order to show outsiders that the village was protected by *tiki*. The hope of the people of the villages was that evil spirits would be kept at bay, and that only good would come of the statues.

## The *moai* on Rapa Nui

The inhabitants of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) took their craftwork to quite another level. They did,

**moai** the large stone statues erected by the inhabitants of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)

for a time, create small wooden statues, but eventually shifted to carving giant statues of stone called **moai** (see Source 8.22). Of all the statues in Polynesia, the *moai* made

the early European visitors to the island gasp when they laid eyes on them. The *moai* seemed to have been created between 1000 and about 1500, and like the *tiki* elsewhere in Polynesia, the *moai* were

a representation of the ancestral spirits of those living on the island. Some looked out to sea, and some looked at the villages that early European visitors saw when they arrived. They appear to have been guardians of Rapa Nui.

There are more than 800 such statues scattered over the island. Those pictured in Source 8.22 are located in the quarry where the Rapa Nui people found their volcanic stone. For some reason, they were never moved to where it was intended that they be placed. Hundreds of the *moai* were moved to specific locations and placed on stone platforms called **ahu**, which were constructed around the edge of the island. The *moai* were up to 10 metres in height and weighed up to 72 metric tonnes.

**ahu** platforms on which the Easter Island *moai* were placed

How these were moved is still a mystery, and has caused much debate within scholarly communities. However, archaeological evidence suggests the island's forest was cut down to create rollers on which the islanders could move them. Despite creating these rollers, moving the statues would not have been at all easy. The largest unfinished statue found on the island by archaeologists has been estimated to be 21 metres in height and would have weighed in at 244 metric tonnes – a simply enormous load.

Source 8.22 Typical *moai* on Rapa Nui (Easter Island)



## Chapter summary

- Polynesia is a triangular region across the Pacific Ocean bounded by Hawai'i to the north, Aotearoa (New Zealand) to the south-west and Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the south-east.
- The Polynesian expansion was caused by migrations of people leaving south-east Asia and travelling through Melanesia across the Pacific. Polynesian sailors were highly skilled, using well-designed ocean-going canoes and a sophisticated stick chart to navigate the seas.
- Traditional Polynesian societies were highly spiritual, well-organised and complex communities headed by a chief. While the position of chief was often hereditary, it was not guaranteed. He could be killed in battle or overthrown by a rival lesser chief. If misfortune befell his population, it might be interpreted that the gods were angry with him, which could lead to his death or exile.
- Spiritual advisors (or priests) provided a link between the spirit world of the gods and the chief. They would advise the chief of what action to take in order to please the gods. The priests were also responsible for applying *mana* and *tapu*, two concepts that legitimised and reinforced the existing social and political hierarchy.
- On occasion, women would rule Polynesian societies. Queen Pomare IV (Tahiti) and Queen Kaahumanu (Hawai'i) were influential Polynesian women in the nineteenth century.
- Polynesian communities produced many technological achievements, including *tapa* cloth, canoes, communal family dwellings, *tiki* and *moai*.
- Many factors undermined the traditions and continuity of Polynesian societies, especially that of Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

## End-of-chapter questions

### Multiple choice

- The Pacific Ocean represents how much of the Earth's surface?
  - one-quarter
  - one-sixth
  - one-third
  - one-half
- The island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) is in:
  - Melanesia
  - western Polynesia
  - eastern Polynesia
  - Micronesia
- Samoan settlers set sail to the Marquesas Islands in:
  - 350 BC
  - AD 700
  - 200 BC
  - AD 1000
- Aotearoa is a Polynesian name for:
  - Fiji
  - Tonga
  - New Caledonia
  - New Zealand
- In the early nineteenth century, Chief Kamehameha I ruled:
  - Rapa Nui (Easter Island)
  - Tahiti
  - the Marquesas Islands
  - Hawai'i

## Short answer

- 1 Who was Thor Heyerdahl and why is he important in the historical analysis of Polynesia?
- 2 Why was Queen Kaahumanu so important for the Hawaiian people?
- 3 Compare the role played by Queen Pomare IV in Tahiti with that of Queen Kaahumanu in Hawai'i.
- 4 How did Polynesian cultures pay respect to their spirit ancestors?
- 5 Identify two pieces of evidence that support the idea that the Polynesians migrated from west to east.

## Source analysis

Study Source 8.23 and answer the following questions:

- 1 What evidence can you find in this painting to indicate that it depicts a joyful occasion?
- 2 Locate the chief in the painting. What indicators did you use to identify the chief?
- 3 Identify commoners in the painting. What indicators did you use to find them?
- 4 Using this painting as your source, do you think life in Hawai'i was full of harmony, courtesy and abundance? Give reasons for your answer.
- 5 Evaluate how misleading the painting could be.

## Extended response

Write a response to the arguments of Thor Heyerdahl and Andrew Sharp in 400–500 words. Consider in your essay the nature of Polynesian navigation and shipbuilding, as well as other explanations for the spread of the sweet potato.



Source 8.23 A representation of a Hawaiian village



## DEPTH STUDY 6

# Expanding contacts

### OUTCOMES

A student:

- describes major periods of historical time and sequences events, people and societies from the past HT4-2
- describes and assesses the motives and actions of past individuals and groups in the context of past societies HT4-3
- describes and explains the causes and effects of events and developments of past societies over time HT4-4
- uses evidence from sources to support historical narratives and explanations HT4-6
- identifies and describes different contexts, perspectives and interpretations of the past HT4-7
- selects and uses appropriate oral, written, visual and digital forms to communicate about the past HT4-10

Related Life Skills outcomes: HTLS-2, HTLS-3, HTLS-4, HTLS-5, HTLS-6, HTLS-8, HTLS-9, HTLS-13

