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THEN DIG

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Some thoughts on the past and future of archaeological mapping in Polynesia

By *Dr. James Flexner*, *The Australian National University*

In a thought-provoking paper, Bowden and McOmish (2011) identify a “British tradition” of field archaeology, which they apply specifically to the careful mapping of archaeological earthworks, a practice that they claim is unique in its capturing of not only space, but time in the landscape. Many archaeologists will take issue with the idea that only British archaeologists do “field archaeology”, but I think this misses the point of the paper. Rather, I take this as a challenge to further explore the disciplinary histories of the regions in which we work. In doing so, we might understand a bit better why archaeological practice takes the form that it does, and we might uncover some of the unstated assumptions behind both theory and method in many of the regions in which we work.



Mapping a Polynesian landscape (Photo by Robert Flexner).

Is there a “Polynesian tradition” of field archaeology, and how can we trace its evolution through time? Before the 1950s, archaeologists assumed there wasn’t much of interest in Polynesia. The region for the most part lacked the pottery that in the pre-radiocarbon era was the mainstay for archaeological dating. Most archaeologists thought it was thus impossible to say anything about the origin and spread of Polynesian culture. One result was a focus on documenting and mapping stone structures throughout the region.

Kenneth Emory (e.g. 1928, 1934) believed that you could trace the migration and development of Polynesian cultures through the variability of ritual sites called *marae* in many Polynesian languages (*heiau* in Hawaiian). Emory’s maps were often schematic in nature, interpreting ritual spaces to show their most important features. (for an example of this style, see Plate I from Danielsson 1952). The arrangements of stone features were used as evidence for Emory’s theories of Polynesian origins and migrations.

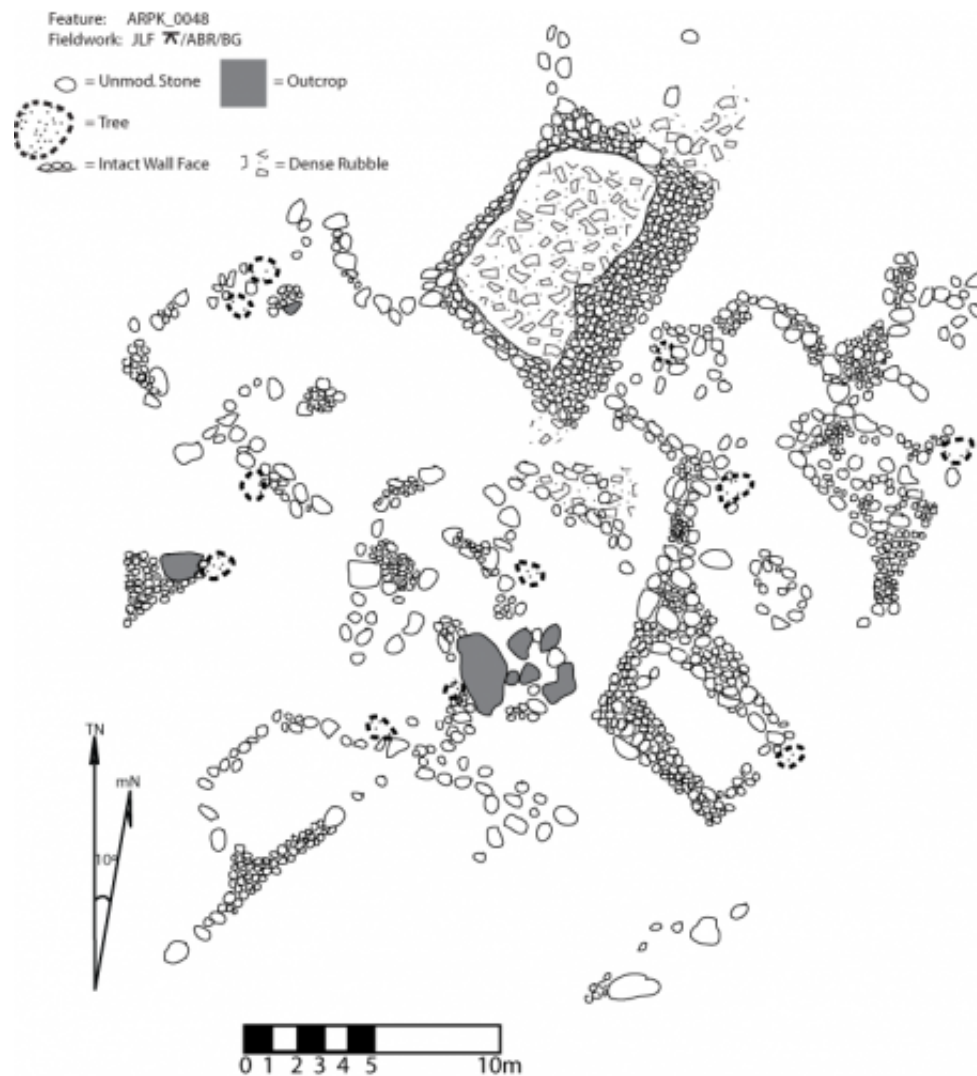
Emory’s Native Hawaiian research assistant, Henry E. P. Kekahuna, produced plan maps of sites throughout the Hawaiian Islands in the 1950s that foreshadowed the state of the art for Polynesian archaeology (a selection of these stunning maps have been made available online by the B.P. Bishop Museum).

Kekahuna recorded Hawaiian stone construction in great detail, often relating specific features to his knowledge of Hawaiian ethnohistory, which is an ongoing practice in Hawaiian archaeology. Kekahuna also included relevant ethnobotanical details on the maps, reflecting an early interest in environmental archaeology, which would characterise much of the work to come from the 1960s onwards.

The development of the “settlement pattern approach”, pioneered by Roger Green in the 1960s (e.g. Green and Davidson, eds. 1969; Green et al. 1967), was something of a revolution for Polynesian archaeology. The theoretical development is accompanied by a notable turn in the representation of archaeological landscapes, as the focus shifted from individual ritual sites to entire landscapes, including agricultural features, domestic sites, and the temples and shrines that had been the staple of Polynesian archaeology.

As the settlement pattern approach developed over the last 50 years in Polynesia, hand drawn plan maps produced in the field have become the standard, based on close observations recording a range of features in great detail, often down to the individual stone. These plans often show the

overlapping layers of human modification of the landscape, what Polynesian archaeologists sometimes call the palimpsest of stone structures going from the present to the past, which can be read from the map.



Plan map of a Hawaiian domestic site, Kalaupapa, Molokai.

In the 21st century, there has been a shift back to more schematic mapping style, largely correlating with technological shifts, notably the nearly ubiquitous use of hand-held GPS units for archaeological survey. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as GPS has allowed for the recording of thousands of previously undocumented sites and features throughout Polynesia. However, if we rely solely on these schematic maps, or if we record these landscapes too hastily, we risk missing out on important features that can tell us new things about the Polynesian past.

We should be careful not to overlook the importance of being able to read the palimpsest of features in the landscape, especially in training future generations of Pacific archaeologists.

Further, as Ballard (2013) points out, drawings, including maps, have an under-utilised potential as a tool for engaging in a dialogue with local communities about the work we do as anthropologists and archaeologists. This is where an understanding of our field mapping traditions becomes so important. If we recognise the crucial role that cartographic techniques have played in the evolution of our understanding of Polynesian archaeology, we will be better placed to use all of the technologies at our fingertips, the new alongside the old, for another century of exciting discoveries in the region.

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