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Author

Molle, Guillaume, Dr,

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“Bones and Sand”: Archaeology of the Dunes in Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia

By Dr. Guillaume Molle, *University of French Polynesia*

“*Beautiful paradise shores*”, is how they were described by the first western explorers who rediscovered, sometimes tragically, the Marquesas Islands from the 17th century (Dening 1980). But the true history of these island societies didn’t start, nor stop, at this moment. It began nearly eight centuries before when some canoes coming from the West landed on these same shores bringing small groups of Polynesians who settled and established thereafter in this archipelago a rich, though intriguing, culture.

Regarding the ecology and geography of the Marquesas, with its rugged topography consisting in deep valleys with no coastal plains, the sand dunes played there the role of interface between land and sea, and appeared to be ideal locations for a first human settlement as they provide easy access to both marine and terrestrial resources. Not only are they favorable places for fishing or shell gathering, dunes are also the spots for departures and arrivals of the canoe trips to other valleys and neighboring or distant islands which communities maintain relations with, for exchanging basalt adzes as well as going to war. For these reasons, they have been occupied throughout the whole of Marquesan prehistory and even beyond, until today. As such, the dunes are among the preferred locations for archaeologists because they offer long-term sequences that open windows on all the periods. Furthermore, their natural drainage favors a good preservation of the artefacts.

I came myself to excavate sand dunes when I started to work on Ua Huka Island, as part of my PhD in archaeology at the University of French Polynesia (Molle 2011). Located in the northern group, this small island proves particularly important because of Hane, a site that was excavated in 1964-65 by Y. Sinoto, a leading archaeologist of his time, which provided some old dates that were used to define a first colonization model of East Polynesia. Since the early 1990s, my colleagues and I have conducted more research, especially on the dune systems on the south shore, and over 20 years of intensive excavations, we came to document almost all of them.

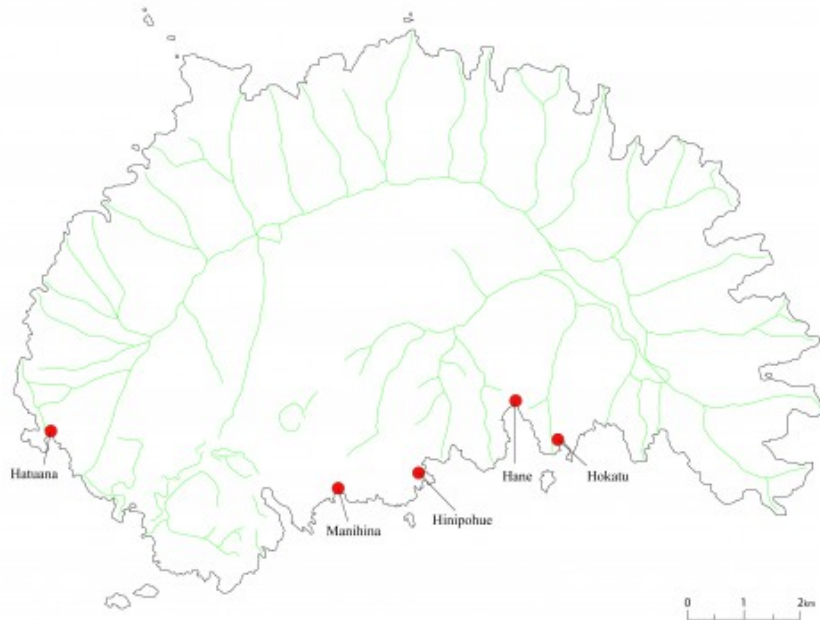


Fig.1 : Map of Ua Huka showing the locations of the main dune systems on the South shore.

One of the most interesting and challenging points to me here is to compare the different coastal sequences in order to reconstruct a global history of the island. It brought us to realize that the functions of these sites have evolved through time. Let's take a look at a few compelling examples.

On the Hane dune site, the lowest levels we excavated in 2009 provided the oldest dates of occupation in the archipelago as well as in French Polynesia, proving now that the human colonization of these islands took place by the 10th century A.D. The coastal areas were then frequented by small groups mainly relying on the exploitation of marine resources. Later, by around 1200 A.D., the Marquesans started to build in the dunes' areas some large stone dwelling platforms called *paepae* that supported houses built in perishable materials. It indicates, both in

Hane and Manihina, the will to develop a long-term occupation in these coastal hamlets and as such, a shift in lifeways. Then, after a temporary abandonment of the dunes and the beginning of the settlement in the valleys, the groups came back on the shores but mostly to bury their dead. Manihina and Hane were thus turned into cemeteries between the 14th and 16th centuries A.D. (Conte and Molle, *in press*).

But other specific functions can be put into evidence. Located in the south-west, Hatuana Bay is known in oral traditions to be the soul-jumping off spot towards Hawaiki, the original and sacred land of the Polynesians, a symbolic importance also demonstrated by the numerous petroglyphs discovered in the vicinity. The area turned into a lookout to prevent enemies coming from Nuku Hiva from the 17th century, a period during which we see an intensification of warfare in the Marquesas (Molle and Conte 2011).



Fig.2 : Hatuana bay (photo G.Molle).

By giving us the opportunity to identify series of key-markers or events, the dunes provides us with precious information about the way people used to live, move, fish, defend themselves, pray or bury their dead. As they have been occupied almost constantly, dune sites constitute the best records of temporal changes in Marquesan culture and provide a useful framework for interpreting its evolution.

In the recent years, the Hane dune site became a sitting place for watching soccer games during week-ends, but the inhabitants were far from imagining what was lying beneath them, just a few centimeters under the surface: a giant sandbox

encompassing the whole history of their ancestors. What's better for an archaeologist than to play the game of History on these beautiful shores?

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