

Book Review

Polynesia 900-1600: An Overview of the History of Aotearoa, Rēkohu and Rapa Nui

Polynesia 900-1600: An Overview of the History of Aotearoa, Rēkohu and Rapa Nui. By Madi Williams. Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2021. 94 pages.

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Madi Williams' book provides the reader a concise, critical overview of and a fresh perspective on the history of South Polynesia, focusing on Aotearoa (New Zealand), Rēkohu (Chatham Islands), and Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

Written in response to a wider approach to medieval history and commissioned by the Arc Humanities Press for its Past Imperfect Series, this publication provides an account of the pre-modern development and expansion of Polynesia and incorporates oral histories, historical analysis, and archeology that reflect Indigenous perspectives. As the author says, "Non-European histories and perspectives have long been subjugated by dominant, external and often limiting perspectives" (p. 80). And the depiction of time and space have been the "most powerful hegemonic purveyors of Eurocentrism" (p.27).

In this comparative study of the southern Polynesian islands and Rapa Nui, the author provides a thematic examination in an attempt to steer us away from looking at the region's history in a linear, Western chronological order. These themes are woven through the introduction and the three chapters of this volume. In the introduction, equally as important as the main chapters in this volume, the focus on peoples, geography, and time weaves through space, beliefs, and cosmology, historiography, and methodology.

The Maori space-time construct, on the other hand, can be thought of more like a constellation with the past and the people of the past always felt in the present, before you and behind you. The co-existence in the present with ancestors, gods, and culture heroes provides an understanding of the time that is based on *whakapapa* (genealogy). Relationships take an ontological priority in the Maori world.

"Polynesia" itself is a Western construction of space and geography that the author argues does not lend itself to Polynesian understandings of space and geography. The inability of Western historians to accept the mythic aspects of oral traditions because they found them incompatible with their worldviews led to a widespread disregard for non-Western perceptions of the past. Understanding and interpreting oral traditions requires a different set of skills, according to Williams. The Polynesian oral traditions were not simply shared without rules or processes in place to ensure they did not become distorted. The Western and Polynesian methods of recounting the past come from different worldviews, and one cannot be used to validate or invalidate the other.

Chapter one looks into movement and migration through the themes of myth and motivation and voyaging and navigation, debunking the idea that Polynesian voyagers arrived in their new lands by accident. Chapter two explores adaptation and change through the themes of new environments and subsistence, placing attention on the adoption of more sustainable practices when it became clear that the resources of their new lands were not limitless, as the devastating consequences of moa overhunting demonstrates. The last chapter's focus is on complexity and culture through the lens of conflict, architecture, and settlements and art.

Williams feels that the real challenge of global history is to write about other places from other perspectives, not from your own particular world view. Non-Western sources of knowledge, she says, cannot be understood using Western perceptions. Her book gives us a glimpse of how South Polynesians viewed their world from 900 to 1600 CE.

According to Maori tradition, there are three baskets of knowledge: *te kete tuauri* (sacred knowledge/light), *te kete tuatea* (ancestral knowledge/darkness), and *te kete aronui* (knowledge in front of you/pursuit). These baskets are thought to never be full and should not be separated. All forms of knowledge are equally essential. Williams' book is an invitation to see not only Polynesia but indeed our world through another lens.

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