

*A Shark Going Inland is My Chief: The Island Civilization of Ancient Hawai'i*, by Patrick Vinton Kirch, 2012.  
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Ross Cordy

Pat Kirch has worked in the Pacific for 40+ years. He is one of the most prolific field workers and authors in Pacific archaeology, and internationally he is probably the best known of Pacific researchers. This book is Kirch's overview of ancient Hawaiian history for the non-professional. As he notes,

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Hawaiian history is relevant to human history, for kingdoms arose in these islands, often termed archaic states. These kingdoms were similar in population size, stratification and elite power to early Mayan and Near Eastern city-states, and similar polities elsewhere in the world. Since the 1970s these Hawaiian kingdoms have been of interest to anthropologists and historians studying the rise of the state, largely due to Sahlins' 1958 work (*Social Stratification in Polynesia*) and his 1970s archival research program in Hawai'i. Archaeologists have studied this topic, beginning with the 1970s PhD theses of Tim Earle, Robert Hommon and myself. There has been considerable work since then, often not widely known outside the Pacific and Hawai'i, work by Hommon, myself, Kirch, Jane Allen, Michael Kolb, Boyd Dixon, Dennis Gosser, Kehau Cachola-Abad and others. Recently Kirch and his colleagues have re-focused on this topic.

In writing this book, Kirch uses a style that interweaves archaeology and oral history, as others have done. The book contains a wealth of interesting information. But a major concern upon reading the book is that one gets the impression that Hawaiian history is fully known and is the picture that Kirch presents. This makes me very uncomfortable, for Hawaiian history is far from fully known. This book is only Kirch's hypothesis of how that history unfolded. There are other hypotheses, some placing the rise of kingdoms and 'god-king'-like rulers back to the AD 1400s, and not the 1600s as he claims. Some interpret archaeological information very differently. Kirch's rendition of oral history has weaknesses, and for many key political changes, we simply do not yet know when they occurred.

Kirch suggests that Hawai'i was settled in the AD 900s, and he presents a fictional, quite plausible account of the settling voyage. He argues that the islands of O'ahu and Kaua'i with flowing streams and irrigated taro fields became early population, economic and cultural centres. By the AD 1400s–1500s he argues that O'ahu and Kaua'i had developed 'irrigation-based kingdoms' on the threshold of statehood, each with 50,000+ people, the 'centers of population and chiefly high culture' (pp. 131, 152, 294). In these years, he believes that Hawai'i and Maui kingdoms with extensive rainfall fields had lower populations, smaller economic surpluses and less power. However, there are no reliable population estimates for any island prior to European contact, so we cannot yet determine which islands had a higher population. (The Kaua'i estimate far exceeds the 30,000 given by the Kaua'i king at the end of the 1700s.) We also have no idea of actual differences in agricultural surplus production among islands at points in time. Further, the oral histories<sup>1</sup> show 'chiefly high culture' was on all the islands in these years — regardless of their type of agricultural fields. Hawai'i and Maui had famous early kings and courts, just as did O'ahu and Kaua'i.

The book considers Mā'ilikūhāhi, ruler of the O'ahu Kingdom in the early 1500s (following most researchers' chronology), pivotal in the rise of these 'irrigation-based kingdoms' — claiming that oral histories document his unification of O'ahu and his establishing a landownership change from kin-based to control by chiefs. However, the book's Mā'ilikūhāhi story has many weak points, making an oral historian very uneasy. The book states that O'ahu

was not united in the time of Haka, the king preceding Mā'ilikūhāhi. Yet the famous stories of the fall of Haka (Fornander 1880; Kamakau 1991) seem to clearly have Haka as ruler of a unified O'ahu kingdom. Other researchers read the histories to indicate that the island had been unified in the 1400s, one or more generations before Mā'ilikūhāhi (e.g. Cordy 1996; Cachola-Abad 2000). The oral histories also only say that *ahupua'a* (community) land borders 'were in a state of confusion' and that Mā'ilikūhāhi clarified them, not created non-kin owned *ahupua'a* (Fornander 1880, 89; Kamakau 1991, 54–5). Only one story briefly says that 'chiefs were assigned' to the lands (Kamakau 1991, 55). These stories have been interpreted differently. Perhaps the land changes were established by Mā'ilikūhāhi, but others have suggested they occurred much later (Dixon *et al.* 2008), or that we do not know when (Cordy 2004).<sup>2</sup> Other parts of the book's Mā'ilikūhāhi story do not match old oral histories. The accounts do not mention one council of chiefs over all three earlier countries on O'ahu. Haka is said to be appointed nominal leader by this council when another chief was captured and held on Kaua'i. But Haka is at least two generations after the capture of Huapouleilei, and there is no mention of Haka being appointed by a council of chiefs. In the histories, Mā'ilikūhāhi is indeed taken to Kapukapuakea *heiau* (temple) to undergo ritual installation as king, but the book calls this 'the most sacred temple of all ... [comparable to] Westminster Abbey' (p. 137). There is virtually no old information on this *heiau*, and no old sources claim it was 'the most sacred temple'. Mā'ilikūhāhi was a renowned ruler, but his story is not quite as presented in this book.

Other examples of weaknesses in the presentation of oral histories occur throughout the book. Pi'ilani and his son Kiha, Maui rulers of c. 1580–1620, are described as having a royal centre and residence at Pi'ilanihale Heiau (pp. 206, 211). I did the survey of this *heiau* years ago, and Kolb (1999) dated the temple's large expansion back to the late 1200s–early 1400s. It stayed large until European Contact. There is no old oral history for who resided at or used this *heiau*, no note of use by Pi'ilani or Kiha. It could have been used by any ruler between about AD 1300–1779. The name could be modern or symbolic. Another example is Wākea and Papa, noted as siblings associated with the cosmology of royal incest marriages (p. 220). These individuals were not brother–sister, and the union of Wākea and Ho'ohökūkalani (his daughter from Papa) is the famous case. Another example, Alapa'i of Hawai'i being responsible for the death of Kalani'ōpu'u's father (p. 244) (it was said to be Alapa'i's mother and his older half-brother). More examples exist. While maybe not critical to the overall hypothesis of the book, these numerous inaccuracies are disconcerting to an oral historian.

In the late 1500s/early 1600s, it is argued that the dry-side rainfall fields of Hawai'i and Maui were expanded, with vast surplus production brought under control by the overlord chiefs. The stories of 'Umi of Hawai'i and Pi'ilani and Kiha on Maui are presented, arguing that these rulers start this surplus control, unify their islands, establish a separate class of chiefs and their retinue, and become 'divine kings'. This is said to mark the origin of the archaic states, led by the Hawai'i and Maui kingdoms. But much here too has problems. The book says oral historical references to

the kings as gods now begin, but such descriptions extend back to O'ahu kings and high chiefs born at Kūkaniloko in the 1400s–1500s, chiefs that were like 'a god, a blaze of heat' (Kamakau 1991, 38). Kō'ele are said to be invented — plots of land that commoners cultivated for their overlord chiefs — but oral histories say this began in the 1300s (Fornander Collection 1917, vol. 4(1), 136–7). Separation of chiefs' genealogies are said to begin at this time, but the *hale naua* and the associated *aha ali'i* begin in the 1300s, apparently to make this separation (Fornander 1880, 28–30, 63). The rise of the feather cloak as a god-like symbol is cited, but we have no idea when feather cloaks began to be made. There is one late 1800s story (Nakuina 1998) describing the first cloak made, taking place in the reign of Kaka'alaneo, a Maui ruler of the early 1500s, not the 1600s. Human sacrifice is noted, but when it began and changes in scale are not clear. While these are all important elements in the history of the kingdoms, we do not know when many of them began; or if we have some idea, they seem to begin at different points from the AD 1300s on.

Last, the book says that in the late 1600s the Hawai'i and Maui kingdoms saw crop surpluses reduce in dry-side, rainfall fields and they started to view conquest war as a strategy to gain land, people, and their surplus, with a powerful Kū warrior cult developing. While conquest war did begin in the late 1600s, the reasons as yet seem far from clear. The book has interesting findings on soil-nutrient depletion in leeward Kohala rainfall fields of Hawai'i. But, the primary gods of the O'ahu kingdom, noted back minimally to Kalanimanuia's reign c. 1600–1620, were Kū gods, said in one account to have been the oldest Kū gods (Kamakau 1991, 8, 60) — perhaps contradicting the rise of Kū warrior gods out of Maui and Hawai'i. Also, the first kingdom to successfully expand was O'ahu in the early 1700s, inheriting Kaua'i and conquering Molokai. Indeed, in the 1600s and 1700s, the courts of O'ahu kings Kākuhihewa, Kūali'i and Pele'iohōlani remained powerful and famous, equal to those of Maui and Hawai'i. The picture seems different and more complicated than hypothesized.

In brief, this book is one person's, Kirch's, hypothesis on the rise of kingdoms in the Hawaiian Islands. It is important — as a hypothesis with interesting information and ideas. But the reader needs to be aware that there are other hypotheses. The reader needs to be aware that there are weaknesses in the presentation of the oral histories. Also we are far from knowing when key changes occurred, such as when kin control of land ended, when feather cloaks began to be worn by the elite, and when kings and high chiefs were indeed verbally and behaviourally treated as 'a god, a blaze of heat', as an all-powerful sacred king. What little we do know suggests key variables appearing or changing at different points from the 1300s on. It seems that we might all agree that important changes begin in the 1400s with island-sized kingdoms forming. Beyond that there are clearly differing views.

## Notes

1. Oral histories began to be widely recorded in the 1840s–1870s by Native Hawaiians and foreigners from older Hawaiians

who had lived in traditional times. These often were in Hawaiian language newspapers and manuscripts. Common references from this period are Malo (1951), Kamakau (1961; 1991), Fornander Collection (1916–1920) and Fornander (1880), but many others exist. After 1880, stories began to be mixed and retold for new audiences. Thus, older 1840s–1870s stories are a key core for historical reconstruction and for careful use of later stories. These 'old' oral histories are what I use here for my comments.

2. Multiple contemporaneous religious structures within the *ahupua'a* community may be relevant to this problem of change from lineage to chiefly land ownership, as seen in work on Maui in Kula (Kolb *et al.* 1997) and Kahikinui (Kirch's work), as well as the cited work of Dixon *et al.* (2008) in Lualualei on O'ahu. All date well after Mā'ilikūkahi.

Ross Cordy  
 Professor, Hawaiian-Pacific Studies  
 University of Hawai'i - West O'ahu  
 91-1001 Farrington Highway  
 Kapolei, HI 96707  
 USA  
 Email: rcordy@hawaii.edu

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