

The Development of Mounds and Platforms in Polynesia and their Cosmological Significance

Hajime Abe

Summary

Mounds and platforms distributed widely through Polynesia were originated from the 'house foundation-grave' mound of Fiji/Western Polynesia. In Tonga, house foundations were separated from graves, and the sacred areas fronting chiefly graves became places for religious ceremonies. This process corresponded to the emergence of Polynesian cosmology, in which the other world was clearly distinguished from this world. The Tongan complex of platform and open-air court was dispersed in Eastern Polynesia, where uprights like stone slabs were erected in the consecrated area. This process correlated with the connection between the sky and the chieftainship, which meant the emphasizing of vertical structure in the Polynesian cosmology.

Key Words: Polynesia; mound; platform; cosmology; archaeology.

Introduction

Mounds and platforms, which are constructed of earth and/or stones, are widely distributed throughout Polynesia except some areas such as New Zealand. Ethnographic reports by European visitors since the seventeenth century and archaeological researches during the twentieth century revealed that many of them were religious structures, which also served as graves.

In general, religious structures materialize the cosmological thought of the culture. Therefore, it is expected that Polynesian mounds and platforms reflect the cosmology that is fundamentally common in Polynesia. However, the features of the religious structures of Eastern Polynesia are considerably different from those of Western Polynesia. In Western Polynesia, such as Tonga and Samoa, the structures were mainly god-houses build on mounds, while in Eastern Polynesia, such as the Marquesas and the Societies, they usually consisted of platforms and open-air courts (Bellwood 1979). This difference is considered to reflect the emergence and transformation of cosmology in Polynesia, where people immigrated from the west to the east. In this paper, I describe the features of mounds and platforms in principal areas, provide a synthesis of their developmental process, and clarify the relation between those

structures and the cosmology.

Features of Mounds and Platforms in Principal Areas

Samoa

Samoaan mounds were basically constructed as house foundations. Most of them are rectangular, but some are round. They are made of earth or rough stones; those of earth are outlined with curbstones and paved with small pebbles; those of stones usually lack curbstones and pebble paving. The majority of mounds are the house foundations of ordinary people; large and high mounds are possibly foundations for chiefs' houses or god-houses, while large and low mounds seem to be those of community houses (Davidson 1979).

Among these mounds, the largest one is Pulemelei mound on Savai'i Island (Fig. 1). On the top are ten small cairns of tabular rock, which have a roughly circular distribution. Local informants say the cairns have been used as seats (Scott 1969).

Burials were found within some of the mounds (Jennings and Holmer 1980). They were in shallow pits beneath or near the house floor. The oldest example is of eleventh- to thirteenth-century, but the practice is regarded much older (Davidson 1979).

Another important type of Samoan mound is star shaped, with five to eleven protruding arms (Davidson 1979)(Fig. 2). They were constructed for pigeon snaring relatively late in Samoan history (Jennings and Holmer 1980). Ethnographical data suggest that chiefs divined their military success by netting wild pigeons on them. It is also reported that dead bodies were laid upon them (Davidson 1969).



Fig.1. Perspective sketch of Pulemelei mound (Scott 1969, p. 82).

Tonga

Numerous mounds were constructed for inhumation burials in Tonga. Many of them are unfaced earthen mounds. Others are faced with coral boulders or limestone slabs. The shape of mound is round or rectangular. Basically, round unfaced mounds are the burial places of commoners, while rectangular faced mounds are those of important people (Davidson 1979).

Burial mounds of the sacred chief *Tu'i Tonga* and his family were called *langi*, and those of other high-ranking people were called *fa'itoka* (Ferdon 1987). McKern (1929) says some *langi* could not be structurally distinguished from *fa'itoka*, and classifies *langi* into six structural types (Fig. 3). Ethnohistorical data show that there was a grave-house on top of *langi* and *fa'itoka*. It was built like a normal Tongan dwelling,



Fig.2. Perspective sketch of a star mound, Savai'i (Scott 1969, p. 73).

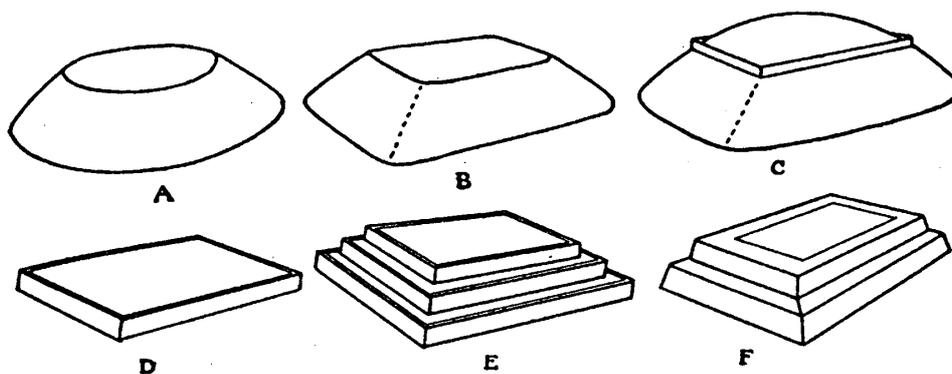


Fig.3. Six structural types of Tongan chiefly tombs (Mckern 1929, p. 35).

and carved wooden figures were resting in it (Ferdon 1987).

The Tongans also constructed flat-topped mounds for pigeon snaring and chiefs' resting. Many of pigeon mounds have a central pit. Around the top a series of little cabins were placed. Each cabin held one hunter, and attendants who had attracted wild pigeons concealed themselves in a central pit. Mounds as chiefly resting-places are called *'esi*. According to local traditions, the height of the mounds offered chiefs a view and fresh breezes (Ferdon 1987).

The Marquesas

There are sacred places called *me'ae*, which basically have platforms. The platforms consist of a core of earth with rubble and are faced with boulders as those of dwellings do. They have one or several levels and there are no enclosing wall around *me'ae*. On the northern islands, *me'ae* are often known as *ahu* (Handy 1923).

Me'ae were originally burial places for chiefs and priests. On the platforms were houses, which held dead bodies and wood or stone human figures. It is also reported that there were escutcheons composed of reeds, one of which bore the figure of a bird at its top. Other records say that there stood tall bamboo-framing obelisks decorated with palm leaves and white bark-cloth streamers (Ferdon 1993). On some platforms or in the ground, stone slabs were set up to serve as backrests for the priests and old men (Handy 1923).

A dead body was extended on a bier, which stood in the middle of the platform. After the flesh had disintegrated, all or some of the bones were buried into pits, which were made in the platforms. When a rite in the *me'ae* was finished, all structures including houses were destroyed and only the images were left. Except at the time of a rite, *me'ae* were deserted (Handy 1923).

The Societies

There are a number of religious structures called *marae*. Basically, a *marae* constitutes of a rectangular court and a platform known as an *ahu*, which is set across one end of the court (Fig. 4). The court is usually enclosed by a low wall, and the interior is often paved with flagstone or cobbles. The *ahu* is made of a mass of stone, flat on top, and faced with cut slabs (Ferdon 1981). On or in front of the *ahu* are upright slabs, which probably marked the position of the deities invoked (Emory 1979). Upright stones were also placed in the court to mark where chiefs and priests sat. The larger ones served as backrests. On the *ahu* of a *marae* for human sacrificial ceremonies, lattice-like carved boards, or *taputapu*, were set up (Ferdon 1981).

Marae have many variations in size. In very small *marae*, there are only upright stones (Fig. 4a). In the western islands the *marae* are not enclosed, and the *ahu* is a single-stepped platform except for some two-stepped ones. In the eastern islands such

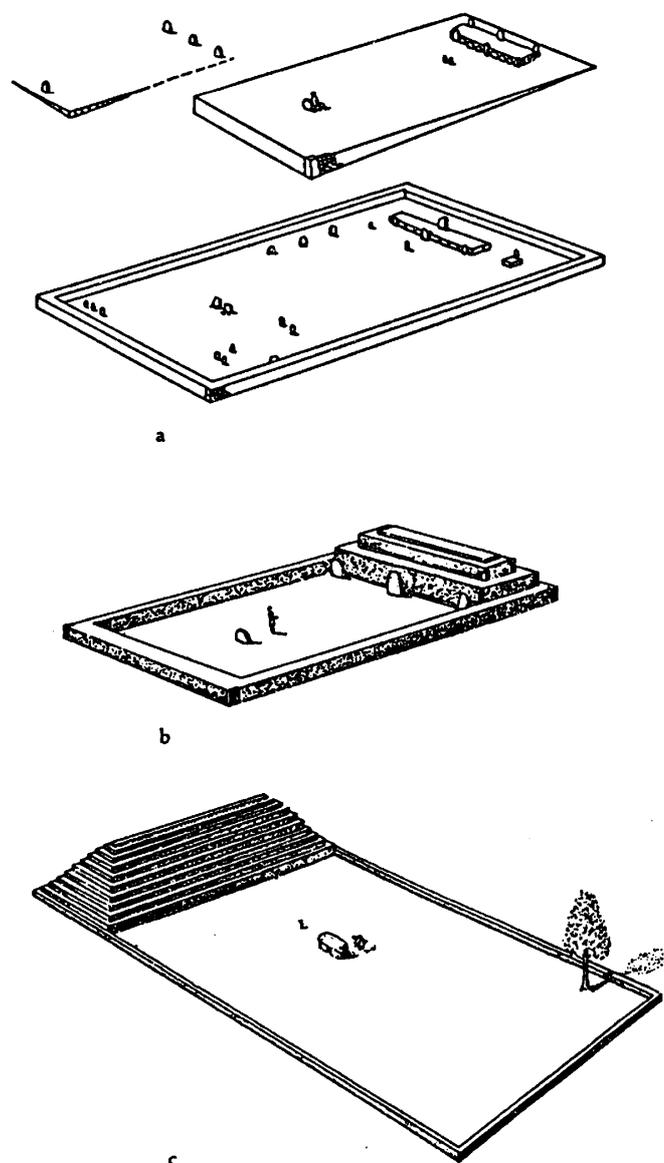


Fig.4. *Marae* types in the Societies (Emory 1995, p. 206);
 a, the simplest version; b, the stepped-platform *marae*;
 c, Mahaiatea *marae*.

as Tahiti and Moorea, the *ahu* is stepped, and upright slabs are along it rather than on it (Fig. 4b). The *ahu* has no more than five steps except for the Mahaiatea *marae* on Tahiti, built in 1769, which has ten steps (Emory 1979)(Fig. 4c).

Marae were burial places for the chiefly class. The body of the highest chief was exposed on a bier located in the vicinity of a *marae*. After the flesh rotted away, the bones were buried in the court. Also, *marae* were worship places for gods. Within the court and the sacred ground surrounding *marae*, there were offertories on which foods were placed for the deity.

Easter Island

There are religious structures called *ahu*. The term of *ahu* refers only to the platform in the Societies, while on Easter Island, as in the northern Marquesas, it is applied to the entire structure (McCoy 1979).

In a large number of *ahu*, monolithic stone statues (*moai*) were set up on the platforms. *Moai* are equivalent to the upright slabs on the platforms of *marae*. The typical *ahu* consists of a central platform and a rectangular court area. The platform is made of rubble and faced with fitted stones. On one or both sides of the platform are lateral extensions called wings, and behind the platform is a stone-paved ramp. An earthen embankment occasionally bounds the three sides of the court. The number of statues on the platform range from one to fifteen (McCoy 1979).

Ahu were primarily constructed as places for burials. Each of kin groups (*wre*) that traced descent to a common ancestor had its own *ahu* in which deceased members were buried (McCoy 1979).

Hawaii

There are religious structures called *heiau*. The *heiau* can be classified into two types: platform *heiau* and walled *heiau*. But there are many intermediate forms and combinations of the two types (Stokes 1991).

The platform *heiau* are enclosed by the paling fence, and in the house on the platform rites were carried out. In the walled *heiau*, which stone walls enclose, there are several pavements on the ground. They served as the foundations of ceremony houses (Tuggle 1979).

The difference between the platform type and the walled type seems to have had no connection with the type of worship. Both types of *heiau* were used for the most important rite, where human sacrifices were offered, and also for the lesser ceremonies (Stokes 1991).

The platforms seem to have been primarily constructed as burial places. In some areas there were burial platforms, and it has been suggested that platform size be connected with the buried chief's rank (Tainter 1973, 1976). On the other hand, the walled *heiau* were basically temples where gods were worshiped. As walled ceremonial structures were developed in the Societies, it is inferred that the concept came from the region as the result of a secondary migration to Hawaii (Linton 1925).

The 'House Foundation-Grave' as the Archetypal Mound

Austronesian-speaking Lapita peoples reached Tonga and Samoa via Fiji, the eastern tip of Melanesia, by 1000 B.C., and in the Tonga/Fiji/Samoa province an Ancestral Polynesian Culture emerged (Burley 1998). From the province, Polynesian peoples dispersed eastward to the Marquesas by A.D.300 and possibly to the Societies

shortly after. From the Marquesas went two groups, one to Easter Island and the other to Hawaii (Jennings 1979).

In the Tonga/Fiji/Samoa province appeared the archetype of Polynesian mounds, that is the 'house foundation-grave' mound. Such a mound is found in Samoa and Fiji, and it is inferred from the Fijian mounds that the archetypal mound reflected the primordial cosmology before the common Polynesian cosmology was formed.

In Fiji, as in Samoa, dead bodies were buried in the foundation of a house (Toren 1995). The house foundation, called *yavu*, is a flat earthen mound and faced with stones built up (Capell 1991). People having the common ancestors' *yavu* constitute kinship called *yavusa*. The members of *yavusa* are the descendents of one originator (*vu*) and worship an originating god called *kalou-vu*, who is usually believed to be the *vu*'s father (Capell 1991).

Yavusa was originated when a founding ancestor (*vu*) discovered the land and made the *yavu*. According to one tradition about *yavu*, a founding ancestor as a stranger, who carried a hundred huge chestnuts hung from his arm, took firewood from a local god to roast some chestnuts to eat. The local god recognized the power of the stranger who could carry the heavy firewood, and handed the country over him. The founding ancestor built his *yavu*. The local women, who used to sing on their way home from net fishing, ceased to sing at the place of the *yavu* (Toren 1995).

The huge chestnuts are the embodiment of the land's immanent power, and the ancestor-god who held and ate them denotes the nature's fruitfulness. Furthermore, the women's ceasing to sing at the spot of his *yavu* implies that they became his wives and, therefore, bore many children (Toren 1995). Thus the ancestor-god is the land's fruitfulness itself and the source of human's productiveness. His fruitfulness and productiveness is inherited through *yavu*. Dead bodies buried in *yavu* refresh the fertile power of *yavu*, which regenerate the life of humans and the land.

In Fiji, the living and the dead were very close, for dead bodies were buried under house floors and believed to become one with the land of this world. Therefore, the idea of the other world where the dead finally go has undeveloped. The souls (*yalo*) after death are believed to go to 'jumping-off' place on or near each island, usually facing west or northwest, and call for a wave or a canoe that transports them. However, there are conflicting beliefs concerning their destination, and often it is not known (Thompson 1940).

With the development of a class system, burial in the *yavu* became the privilege of the chiefly class. A chief was the direct descendent of the founding ancestor and inherited the fertile power. Therefore, when the chief was buried in *yavu*, the fruitfulness of the *yavusa*'s land was ensured. As chiefs' bodies were buried in the foundation, an old chiefly house could become a god-house (*bure kalou*) where the ancestor god was worshipped. Once a chiefly house and a god-house were distin-

guished, new house was built as a god-house (Hocart 1912). Also in Samoa, a house was set aside or built as a god-house (Grattan 1948).

The Emergence of the 'Grave-Temple'

Tongan graves also served as house foundations, for grave houses like normal dwellings were constructed on the tops of the *fa'itoka* and *langi*. Furthermore, 'consecrated houses' where gods could be invoked were built, as 'god-houses' in Fiji and Samoa. However, Tongan dwellings were separated from their graves, and the chiefly grave with adjoining court functioned as an open-air temple. This emergence of the 'grave-temple' reflected the development of the cosmology, which was accompanied by the strengthened power of the chiefly class and the formation of highly stratified society.

When a chief rules different kinship groups beyond his own group, the legitimacy of his power should be founded upon a god who is higher in the position than his group's ancestor god. This led to the stratification of gods' world, which corresponded to that of this world. In Tongan society, there were at least four basic classes of people, the top of which was the chiefly class. Similarly, the gods were divided into classes. The highest gods were 'original' gods, and what could be called 'soul' gods were in the second class. Below these were a series of craft gods and a group of spirits (Ferdon 1987).

The 'original' gods, who had no beginning and no end, lived in *Pulotu*. The paramount chief *Tu'i Tonga* was thought to be a direct descendant of the god *Hikule'o* who was the ruler of *Pulotu*. The 'soul' gods were the souls of the chiefs and priests after death. Their souls were believed to go to *Pulotu* and lived forever with the 'original' gods (Ferdon 1987).

The spatial relation between this world and the other world, *Pulotu*, constituted the cosmology. Tongan cosmos was illustrated by a coconut cleaved in two. The upper half of the coconut is the sky ruled by the god known as *Tangaloa*. The sky constitutes of seven or nine layers of heaven, the number of which varied with the mythology (Williamson 1977; Gunson 1990). The heavens were solid and their lower edges rested on the horizon. Therefore, a voyage to a far island was thought to be a visit to a part of the heavens (Williamson 1977). The lower half of the coconut is the ocean, on which rises the island of the living. Far to the west or northwest of the island is *Pulotu*. Under the ocean is the underworld, the realm of the god known as *Maui* (Gunson 1990).

Between this world and the other world, the souls of chiefs and *Tu'i Tonga* mediated. Tongan people preyed the gods of the other world in the sacred area fronting the chiefly burial mound. The typical ceremony was the *'inasi*, which was carried out in the *mala'e*, or open area, near the tomb of *Tu'i Tonga*. The *'inasi*, or a

ceremonial distribution, was basically held twice a year, and the first-fruits *'inasi* ceremony was the most important religious event of the year. The ceremony was an offering of the first products of the land and other foods to the all gods through the divine chief *Tu'i Tonga*. In the ceremony, the gods in general and the soul of the late *Tu'i Tonga* were thanked for giving the land the expectation of a good harvest (Ferdon 1987).

The Dispersion of the 'Grave-Temple'

The Tongan complex of platform and adjoining court, which served as the 'grave-temple,' was dispersed in eastern Polynesia, where uprights such as tall obelisks and stone slabs were erected in the consecrated area. The setting up of these uprights, which can be interpreted to have connected earth (this world) and heaven (the other world), reflected the cosmology that regarded the sky as the high gods' abode.

In the cosmology of Eastern Polynesia, as in that of Tonga, the sky was a solid dome and joined the ocean at the horizon, or some distance beyond it. However, the number of heavens was supposed to be ten, and the other world was believed to be in the sky and underground rather than on some island. In the Marquesas as well as in the Societies, members of the upper class went to the other world in the sky and the lower-class people went to underground (Williamson 1977).

The belief that the other world of chiefly class was in the sky implies that the legitimacy of the chiefly power was founded upon the gods of the sky. The connection between the sky and chieftainship was clearly shown in Tahiti of the Societies, where the kingdom was formed. There the sacred position of the supreme chief was displayed by the special loincloth, or *maro'ura*, which symbolize the god *Oro*. The successor was invested with it at the coronation ceremony (Ferdon 1981). The god *Oro*, who was a little below the supreme god *Tane*, was said to be a son of *Tangaroa* living in the highest heaven. And *Tane* was believed to be a husband or a son of *Tangaroa* (Williamson 1977). The supreme chief claimed to inherit the power of these sky gods.

Gods in the sky were evoked through the uprights connecting heaven and earth, such as escutcheons, obelisks, *taputapu*, and stone slabs. In addition, birds played the role as a mediator between them. In the Marquesas the figure of such a bird was seen on the top of the reed escutcheon. In Tahiti, the bird frequently seen in *marae* was called the 'god bird,' which was believed to be a messenger of the gods (Ferdon 1981). The gods descending from heaven seem to have stayed in *marae* using the upright slabs as their backrests. The Easter Islanders replaced these slabs by stone statues (Bellwood 1979).

The tendency to connect the sovereignty of the supreme chief and the sky was emerged also in the classical kingdom of Tonga, which was influential in Western Polynesia. In Tonga, the burial mounds of the divine chief *Tu'i Tonga* were called

'*langi*,' which means sky or heaven (Churchward 1959). The use of pigeon mounds, which are found in Samoa and 'Uvea as well, implies that pigeons were thought to be the gods' messengers. Tongan *esi* mounds seem to have materialized the supremacy of the chieftain by the heavenward exaltation (McKern 1929). In Samoa it is inferred that a mound with ten seats on the top like Pulemelei mound was connected to *aitu langi*, or gods of heaven (Scott 1969).

Conclusion

The developmental process of mounds and platforms in Polynesia and their cosmological significance can be summarized as follows.

- (1) The archetype of Polynesian mounds is supposed to be the 'house foundation-grave' of Fiji/Western Polynesia. The dead bodies (especially those of the chiefs), which were buried in the house foundation and became one with the land, were believed to refresh the fertile power of the kinship and the land. In this stage, under the close relation between the living and the dead (gods), the idea of the other world was undeveloped.
- (2) In Tonga, the grave was separated from the foundation of a dwelling house. The supreme chief ruling different kinship groups emerged, and the legitimacy of his power was founded upon the highest god living in the other world, the idea of which constituted the fundamental Polynesian cosmology. As the souls of chiefs mediated between this world and the other world, the sacred area of chiefly graves had a function as an open-air temple.
- (3) Tongan complex of platform and adjoining court, which served as the 'grave-temple,' was dispersed in Eastern Polynesia. With the dispersion, uprights connecting symbolically earth and heaven were set up in the consecrated area, which reflected the emphasizing of the vertical structure in the cosmology. Heaven became the other world of the chiefly class, and the legitimacy of the chiefly power was founded upon the sky gods.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Toyo Women's College for having given me a sabbatical leave, which enabled me to write this paper. I am grateful to Professor Kensuke Suzuki and Professor Peter Drysdale for introducing me to the Australian National University. I also express my gratitude to Dr Elspeth Young and Professor Ron Duncan for accepting me as a visiting fellow in the National Centre for Development Studies.

References Cited

- Bellwood, Peter S. (1979). Settlement Patterns. Jesse D. Jennings (ed.), *The Prehistory of Polynesia*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, pp.308-322.

- Burley, David V. (1998). Tongan Archaeology and the Tongan Past, 2850-150 B.P. *Journal of World Prehistory* 12(3): 337-392.
- Capell, Arthur (1991; orig. 1941). *A New Fijian Dictionary*. Government Printer, Suva.
- Churchward, Clerk Maxwell (1959). *Tongan Dictionary*. Government Printing Press, Tonga.
- Davidson, Janet M. (1969). Settlement Patterns in Samoa before 1840. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 78:44-82.
- Davidson, Janet M. (1979). Samoa and Tonga. Jesse D. Jennings (ed.), *The Prehistory of Polynesia*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, pp.82-109.
- Emory, Kenneth P. (1979). The Societies. Jesse D. Jennings (ed.), *The Prehistory of Polynesia*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, pp.200-221.
- Ferdon, Edwin N. (1981). *Early Tahiti as the explorers saw it, 1767-1797*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Ferdon, Edwin N. (1987). *Early Tonga: as the explorers saw it 1616-1810*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Ferdon, Edwin N. (1993). *Early observation of Marquesan culture, 1595-1813*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Grattan, F. J. H. (1948). *An introduction to Samoan custom*. Samoa Printing and Publishing Co., Apia, Western Samoa.
- Gunson, Niel (1990). Tongan historiography: shamanic views of time and history. Phyllis Herda, Jennifer Terrell and Niel Gunson (eds.), *Tongan culture and history: papers from the 1st Tongan History Conference held in Canberra, 14-17 January 1987*. Dept. of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Australian National University, Canberra, pp.12-20.
- Handy, Edward Smith Craighill (1923). *The native culture in the Marquesas*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 9, Honolulu.
- Hocart, A. M. (1912). On the meaning of Kalou. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological society* 42:473-49.
- Jennings, Jesse D. and Holmer, Richard N. (eds.) (1980). *Archaeological excavations in Western Samoa*. Department of Anthropology, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu.
- Linton, Ralph (1925). *Archaeology of the Marquesas Islands*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 23, Honolulu.
- McCoy, Patrick C. (1979). Easter Island. Jesse D. Jennings (ed.), *The Prehistory of Polynesia*. Australian National University Press, Canberra, pp.135-166.
- McKern, Will Carleton (1929). *Archaeology of Tonga*. Bishop Museum Bulletin no. 60, Honolulu.
- Scott, Stuart D. (1969). Reconnaissance and some detailed site plans of major monuments of Savai'i. Roger C. Green and Janet M. Davidson (eds.), *Archaeology in Western Samoa Volume 1*. Bulletin of the Auckland Institute and Museum, Number 6, Auckland, pp.69-90.
- Stokes, John F. G., edited and introduced by Tom Dye (1991). *Heiau of the Island of Hawaii: a historic survey of native Hawaiian temple sites*. Bishop Museum Press, Honolulu.
- Tainter, J. A. (1973). The social correlates of mortuary patterning at Kaloko, North Kona, Hawaii. *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 8:1-11.
- Tainter, J. A. (1976). Spatial organization and social patterning in the Kaloko cemetery, North Kona, Hawaii. *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania* 11:91-105.
- Toren, Christina (1995). Seeing the Ancestral Sites: Transformations in Fijian Notions of the Land. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (eds.), *The anthropology of landscape: perspectives on place and space*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp.163-183.
- Thompson, Laura (1940). *Southern Lau, Fiji: An Ethnography*. Bulletin of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum 162, Honolulu.
- Williamson, Robert Wood (1977; orig. 1933). *Religious and cosmic beliefs of central Polynesia*. Ams Press, New York.