

11 • The Pacific Basin: An Introduction

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Oceania, the Pacific Island world, is conventionally divided into three regions. Melanesia, originally named for the dark skin color of many of its people, comprises massive New Guinea and the islands extending eastward as far as Fiji. Micronesia is composed of comparatively tiny islands east of the Philippines and north of Melanesia. Polynesia, a multitude of islands large and small, is contained in a vast triangle bounded by Hawai'i on the north, Easter Island (now called Rapa Nui by its Polynesian inhabitants) to the southeast, and New Zealand (now called Aotearoa by its Polynesian inhabitants) to the southwest (fig. 11.1). This tripartite division was first suggested in the early 1830s by the French explorer Dumont d'Urville.¹

A way to conceptualize the Pacific Island world that makes more sense in terms of migration history and the distribution of seafaring skills is to divide it between Near Oceania and Remote Oceania, a distinction developed by the archaeologist Roger Green.² Near Oceania comprises the islands most accessible from Southeast Asia: New Guinea and its immediate outliers. The settlement of this region began perhaps as early as fifty thousand to sixty thousand years ago. At that time the great amount of water locked in the world's glaciers so lowered sea levels that the Southeast Asian mainland extended as far east as Bali, and Tasmania, Australia, New Guinea, and adjacent continental shelves were joined to form a Greater Australia. The consequent narrowed gap between this continental extension of Southeast Asia and Greater Australia, along with the existence of intervisible or nearly intervisible island stepping-stones strewn across this gap, made it feasible for precocious seafarers with perhaps nothing more than rudimentary rafts or dugout canoes to reach the uninhabited landmass to the east. Over the millennia that followed, however, their descendants do not seem to have pushed much farther into the Pacific than the Bismarck Archipelago and Solomon Islands, situated, respectively, immediately to the northeast and east of New Guinea.³ The settlement of the far-flung islands of Remote Oceania did not really get under way until the second millennium B.C. when people started moving eastward into the Pacific using deep-sea voyaging canoes, ways of navigating far out of sight of land, and a portable system of agri-

culture that could be transplanted to the oceanic islands. The immediate sources of this movement were almost certainly the Southeast Asian islands of what are now the Philippine and Indonesian nations. By at least 1500 B.C. seafarers, who can be traced from their distinctive pottery called Lapita, had reached the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago off the northeast coast of New Guinea. Within a few centuries they had moved eastward through Melanesian waters beyond the previous frontier of settlement, all the way to the islands of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa at the western edge of Polynesia. Although some archaeologists believe these seafarers kept moving eastward at the same rapid pace, or even faster, the archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests they may have lingered in this triarchipelago region long enough (five hundred to one thousand years?) for ancestral Polynesian culture and language to emerge from its roots in Lapita culture.⁴

From this region, which is now known as West Poly-

1. In an address before the Geographic Society of Paris and published in Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville, *Voyage de la corvette "l'As-trolabe" . . . pendant les années 1826–1827–1828–1829*, 5 vols. (Paris: J. Tastu, 1830–33), 2:614–16. For a generally useful summary of the peopling of the Pacific, see O. H. K. Spate, *Paradise Found and Lost* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1–30.

2. Roger C. Green, "Near and Remote Oceania—Disestablishing 'Melanesia' in Culture History," in *Man and a Half: Essays in Pacific Anthropology and Ethnobiology in Honour of Ralph Bulmer*, ed. Andrew Pawley (Auckland: Polynesian Society, 1991), 491–502.

3. Jim Allen, Jack Golson, and Rhys Jones, eds., *Sunda and Sahul: Prehistoric Studies in Southeast Asia, Melanesia and Australia* (London: Academic Press, 1977); Jim Allen, Chris Gosden, and J. Peter White, "Human Pleistocene Adaptations in the Tropical Island Pacific: Recent Evidence from New Ireland, a Greater Australian Outlier," *Antiquity* 63 (1989): 548–61; and Jim Allen, "The Pre-Austronesian Settlement of Island Melanesia: Implications for Lapita Archaeology," in *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, ed. Ward Hunt Goodenough (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 11–27.

4. Peter S. Bellwood, "The Colonization of the Pacific: Some Current Hypotheses," in *The Colonization of the Pacific: A Genetic Trail*, ed. Adrian V. S. Hill and Susan W. Serjeantson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1–59; Patrick V. Kirch, "Lapita and Its Aftermath: The Austronesian Settlement of Oceania," in *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, ed. Ward Hunt Goodenough (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 57–70; and Geoffrey Irwin, "How Lapita Lost Its Pots: The Question of Continuity in the Colonisation of Polynesia," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90 (1981): 481–94.

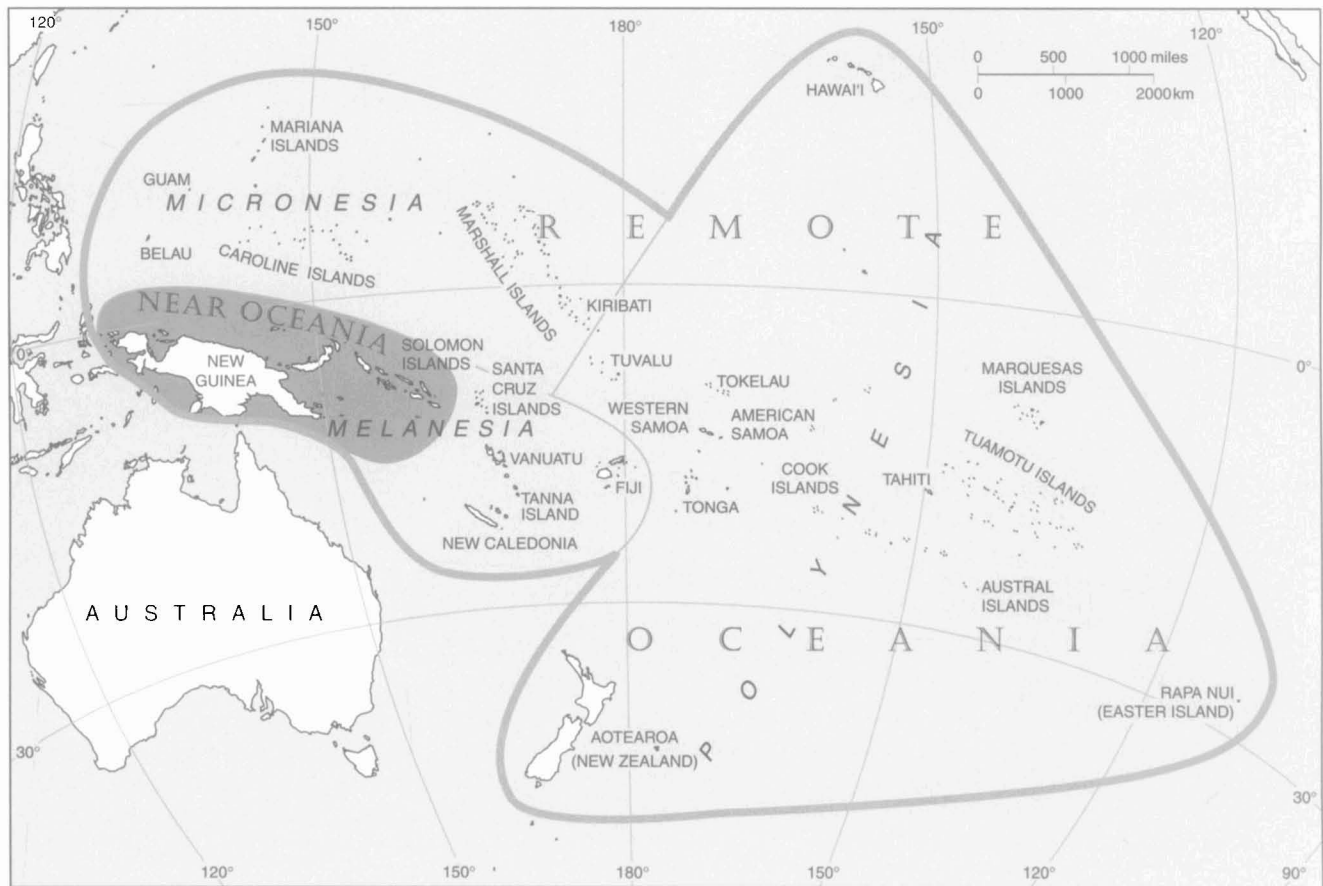


FIG. 11.1. OCEANIA, SHOWING GEOGRAPHIC DIVISIONS OF MELANESIA, MICRONESIA, AND POLYNESIA AND OF NEAR OCEANIA AND REMOTE OCEANIA. Since the 1830s the Pacific islands have been conventionally divided into the three regions of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Largely because this classification ignores cultural boundaries and complexities stemming from the Pacific's long settlement history, prehistorians have recently proposed that the islands be grouped into just two regions: Near Oceania, composed of New Guinea and adjacent islands, which was

first settled some fifty thousand years ago during the Late Pleistocene, when New Guinea was part of a Greater Australia; and Remote Oceania for all the islands farther out to sea, which did not begin to be settled until about 2000 to 1500 B.C. After Ben R. Finney, "Colonizing an Island World," in *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, ed. Ward Hunt Goodenough (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 71-116, esp. 72.

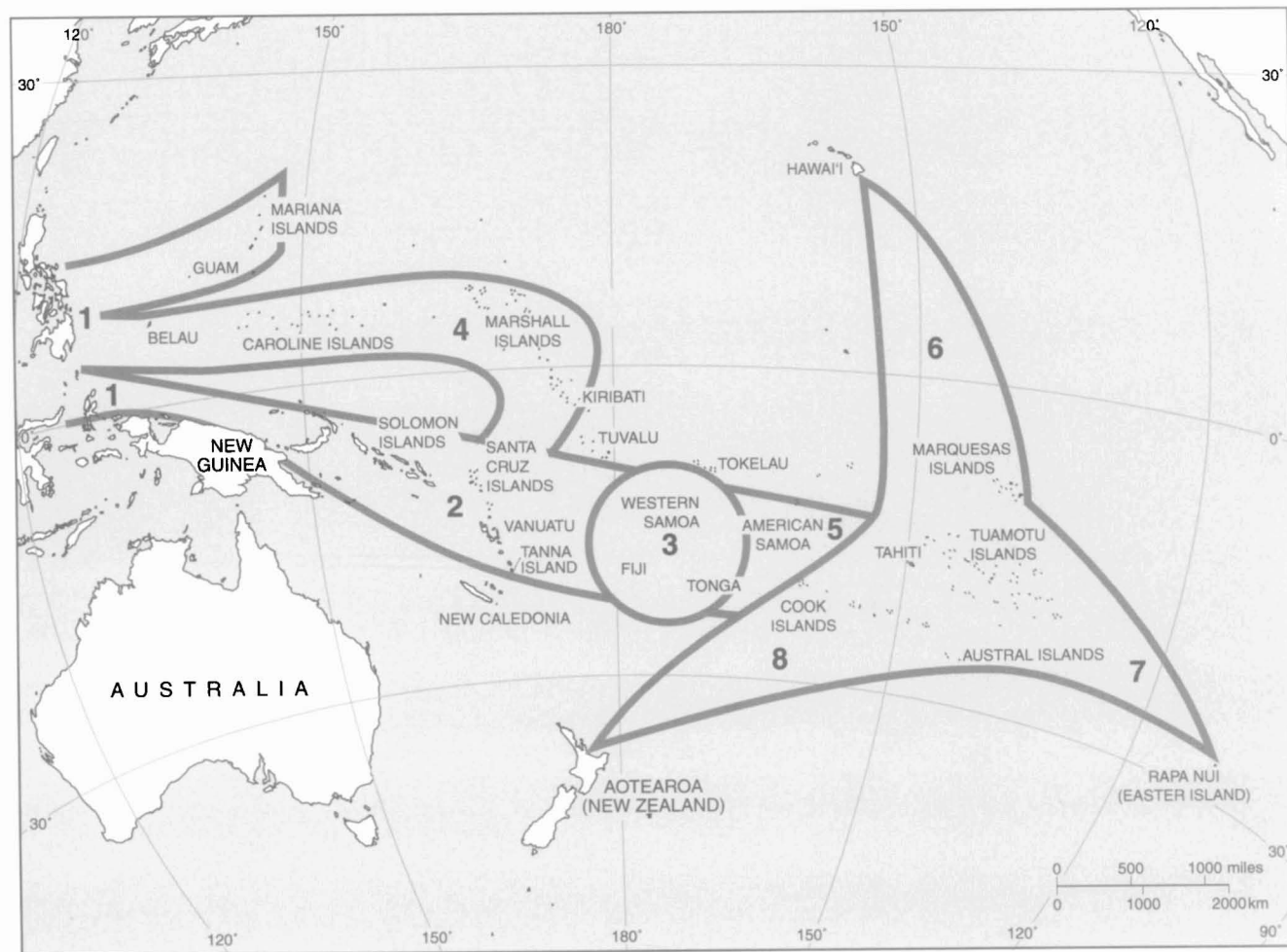


FIG. 11.2. MAIN MIGRATION SEQUENCE OF THE SETTLEMENT OF REMOTE OCEANIA. Estimated dates for each move are: (1) 2000 to 1500 B.C., Austronesians first venture into the Pacific, moving along the north coast and offshore islands of New Guinea, and to Belau (Palau), Yap (Uap), and the Marianas at the western edge of Micronesia; (2) 1500 to 1000 B.C., Austronesians move from the Bismarck Archipelago off the northeast coast of New Guinea to the archipelagoes of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa at the western edge of Polynesia; (3) 1000 B.C., ancestral Polynesian culture begins to take form in eastern Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa; (4) 1000 B.C.,

Austronesians move north from eastern Melanesia to colonize the Kiribati (Gilbert Islands), Marshalls, and eastern and central Carolines of Micronesia; (5) 500 B.C.–0, Polynesians begin the colonization of central East Polynesia; (6) A.D. 200 to 750, Polynesians reach Hawai'i; (7) A.D. 400 to 800, Polynesians reach Easter Island; (8) A.D. 800 to 1200, Polynesians reach New Zealand.

After Ben R. Finney, "Colonizing an Island World," in *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, ed. Ward Hunt Goodenough (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 71–116, esp. 76.

nesia, the main archipelagoes to the east—the Cook, Society, and Marquesas groups—were settled beginning perhaps as early as 500 B.C.–0. From these central East Polynesian outposts, canoes reached the more peripheral islands, including those that define the Polynesian triangle: Hawai'i, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and Aotearoa (New Zealand). As in the previous stages of this movement eastward across the Pacific, estimates for the settlement dates of these islands are disputed. Some writers focus on the earliest possible signs indicating human disturbance of pristine island ecosystems, and others judge that colonization has occurred only when there is more widespread and certain evidence of human settle-

ment in the form of habitation sites and shaped artifacts. Accordingly, the estimates for settlement of Hawai'i range from about A.D. 200 to 750; for Rapa Nui, A.D. 400 to 800; and for Aotearoa, A.D. 800 to 1200 (fig. 11.2).⁵

Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that Micronesia was colonized in two broad movements. About 1500 to 1000 B.C., seafarers apparently sailed di-

5. Matthew Spriggs and Atholl Anderson, "Late Colonization of East Polynesia," *Antiquity* 67 (1993): 200–217; Patrick V. Kirch and Joanna Ellison, "Palaeoenvironmental Evidence for Human Colonization of Remote Oceanic Islands," *Antiquity* 68 (1994): 310–21; and Atholl Anderson, "Current Approaches in East Polynesian Colonisation Research," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 104 (1995): 110–32.

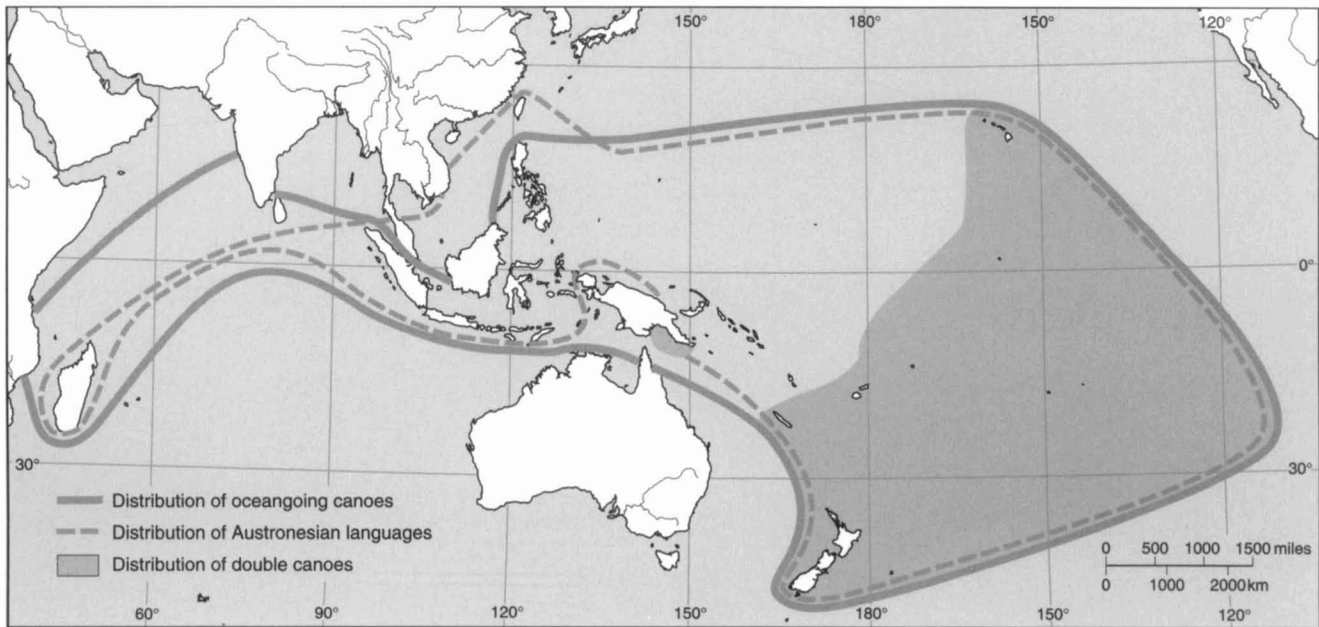


FIG. 11.3. OCEANIC EXPANSION OF THE AUSTRONESIANS. This map shows the distribution of Austronesian languages and oceangoing canoes over two oceans. The development of outrigger and double canoes and ways of sailing them far out to sea enabled Austronesians to spread along the shores of Southeast Asia and to the region's many islands. From Southeast Asia, Austronesians expanded far into the Pacific to find and occupy the islands of Remote Oceania. They also sailed into the Indian Ocean, where they apparently traded with the populations along the shores of South Asia and

eastern Africa and then settled the island of Madagascar, where Austronesian languages are still spoken. The presence of outrigger sailing canoes along the coast of southern India, Sri Lanka, and eastern Africa probably bears witness to the visits of Austronesian traders who introduced their craft (but not their languages) to these long-settled areas.

After Ben R. Finney, *Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey through Polynesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 16.

rectly east from the Philippines to the Mariana Islands, Belau (Palau), and perhaps Yap (Uap), all of which are along the western edge of Micronesia. Then, some centuries later, canoes sailed north from eastern Melanesia to Kiribati (Gilbert Islands) and the Marshall Islands at the eastern end of Micronesia. Some of these pioneers, or their descendants, then turned west to settle the Caroline Islands as far as the already occupied islands of Yap and Belau, thus completing the colonization of this part of the Pacific.⁶

The colonization of Remote Oceania was part of the oceanic expansion of peoples speaking Austronesian languages. A number of linguists and archaeologists trace this expansion from the shores of southern China, whence Austronesian speakers moved first to Taiwan, then south to the Philippines, Indonesia, and the shores of Vietnam and the Malay Peninsula.⁷ Those Austronesian pioneers who sailed east to explore and colonize the Pacific did so in canoes made stable by adding an outrigger float to one side of a long, narrow hull to make a single outrigger canoe, or by lashing two such hulls side by side to make a double canoe. Early in the Christian era, other Austronesian voyagers from western Indonesia, probably employing double outrigger canoes stabilized

by placing outrigger floats on both sides of a single hull, sailed around the northern periphery of the Indian Ocean (or less probably straight across it) to colonize the then uninhabited island of Madagascar, where the national language, Malagasy, still attests to the Austronesian roots of this migration. This canoe-borne expansion across two oceans made Austronesian the most widespread language family in the world until Western Europeans developed their own seafaring technology and spread Indo-European tongues beyond Eurasia (fig. 11.3).⁸

Three chapters in this volume covering the Pacific Basin recognize elements in both these systems of division. Near Oceania, which comprises the islands most accessible

6. Robert Blust, "The Austronesian Homeland: A Linguistic Perspective," *Asian Perspectives* 26, no. 1 (1984–85): 45–67, and John L. Craib, "Micronesian Prehistory: An Archeological Overview," *Science* 219 (1983): 922–27.

7. Blust, "Austronesian Homeland," and Kwang-chih Chang and Ward Hunt Goodenough, "Archaeology of Southeastern Coastal China and Its Bearing on the Austronesian Homeland," in *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, ed. Ward Hunt Goodenough (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), 36–56.

8. Ben R. Finney, *Voyage of Rediscovery: A Cultural Odyssey through Polynesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 15–17.

from Southeast Asia–New Guinea and its immediate outliers—is addressed by Eric Kline Silverman in chapter 12, which for the most part concerns Papuan or non-Austronesian societies. Chapter 13 by Ben Finney, on Pacific navigation, covers Remote Oceania, comprising

parts of Micronesia, the eastern part of Melanesia, and Polynesia. New Zealand, although normally regarded as part of Polynesia, is treated here in a separate chapter by Phillip Lionel Barton (chapter 14).