

Prehistory of Mangareva, French Polynesia

by Patrick V. Kirch

The Mangareva, or Gambier Islands, lie in southeastern Polynesia at the eastern terminus of the Austral Ridge, and are thought to have formed a key steppingstone in the initial colonization of Eastern Polynesia. They may well have been the jumping-off point for the voyage which led to the settlement of Easter Island (Rapa Nui). Surface survey of archaeological sites by Kenneth P. Emory of the Bishop Museum, 1934, suggested that most sites on the main islands had been destroyed during the missionary period, although a remarkable set of marae structures remained on the nearby atoll of Temoe. In 1959, Roger C. Green carried out the first stratigraphic excavations in a series of rockshelters on Kamaka, Aukena, and Mangareva Islands within the main group. Green's work remained unpublished for many years, although it is now being gradually completed through a cooperative effort by OAL affiliate Marshall Weisler and Green.

As one outcome of the December 2000 international conference on Eastern Polynesian Archaeology, co-organized by Prof. Kirch and Prof. Eric Conte, and held at the Richard Gump Research Station in Mo'orea, it was proposed that renewed research should be carried out in the Mangareva Islands, as a high priority. The Government of French Polynesia, in particular the Minister of Culture Prof. Louise Peltzer, responded by providing a grant of 50,000 CFP to support a field season in late 2001. Participants in this expedition were: (1) Prof. Eric Conte of the Université de Polynésie Française and the University of Paris; (2) Prof. Kirch of the OAL, Berkeley; (3) Prof. Atholl Anderson of the Australian National University; and (4) Prof. Marshall Weisler of the University of Otago. Three weeks were spent in the main archipelago carrying out work on Mangareva, Akamaru, and Kamaka Islands, and an additional three weeks on the atoll of Temoe. Results of this work are now in preparation for publication in 2003; details will be provided in future up-dates to this website.