

A millennium ago

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Aotearoa/New Zealand was the last major landmass to be colonised by people before the era of mercantile capitalism. A particular predilection of the geographer is to attempt to envisage what is happening in various parts of the world over a similar period of time. Historical geography, the geography of past times, through imaginative reconstructions of trading networks within chosen spatial contexts, sees emphases on both human ingenuity and the exercise of power and control over environmental resources.

When East Polynesian people arrived in Hawaii, Easter Island and Aotearoa/New Zealand it is interesting to contemplate the contemporaneous nature of proto capitalism in Islamic Central Asia as well as the contours of pre-capitalist geographies in the West Coast of North America and in Australia. Maori landfalls, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, up to a thousand years ago, are viewed through this prism.

One thousand years ago, just before the turn of a new millennium the Syrian geographer, al-Muqaddasi surveyed his world, part of which was Khurasan, a region that encompassed modern eastern Iran and much of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This region exported soap and sulphur; silk, sables and silver fabrics. Watermelons were despatched to Baghdad in lead caskets packed with snow. Khurasan supplied the most succulent meats, elaborate leatherwork, as well as fine porcelain from Shash (Tashkent) and exquisite paper from Samarkand, the source of paper for the entire Islamic world.

One thousand years ago, on the south-facing section of the California coastline, between the Santa Ynez Mountains and the Channel Islands, Chumash People were trading overland and by the means of sophisticated redwood, plank-built canoes. The sea-going canoes, or *tomols*, were typically 6–7 metres in length and could carry two tonnes of cargo or up to twelve passengers. They were sewn together with fibres of twisted red milkweed and caulked with local tar deposits mixed together with pine resin.

From neighbouring Gabrielino People, from Santa Catalina Island, they imported precious soapstone or



Maori canoe, Otago Museum, NZ
Source: Wikimedia Commons

steatite to be fashioned into cooking pots that would not fracture over fire, from the Yokuts of the San Joaquin Valley they traded sharp shards of obsidian or volcanic glass. And, from the Colorado Mojave transported pottery, woven cotton blankets and red ochre over the mountains and down to the coast. Island Chumash traded Olivella shell beads, (an effective currency) chert knives and blades, fish, sea otter and sea lion meat with mainland people that supplied chia (sage) seeds, wild cherry, acorns and pine nuts together with deer hide, rabbit skins and antlers for tools. Thousands of Chumash lived in this part of Southern California in hundreds of villages and scores of towns, made up of conical tule (bulrush) huts.

One thousand years ago, Australia was a patchwork of refined biophysical environments, an Aboriginal estate of altered forests, grasslands, vegetated belts and clearings shaped by firestick farming. According to Professor Jim Kohen, one thousand years ago fires became less frequent on the north side of the Hawkesbury River in what is now Dharug National Park, in the Sydney Basin. The vegetation changed from open woodland species to wet sclerophyll and rainforest species perhaps suggesting that kangaroo numbers had plummeted and that rainforest resources had become more valuable to Dharug People. It is argued that such changing impacts of Aboriginal people on the environment increased social networking, trading networks, inter-national marriages and sharing ceremonies. In arid Australia,

within the last one thousand years there was a dramatic increase in the manufacture of stone tools, with the stone being traded over long distances.

Diyari people, occupying the north-eastern sector of South Australia to the east of Lake Eyre, were at the epicentre of continental trade routes that revolved around nearby supplies of pituri, a native tobacco, and the most prized red ochre. People carried in stone axes from Mt Isa, bailer shells from Far North Queensland and pearl shells from the Kimberley; hook boomerangs from northwestern Queensland and softwood shields and wooden containers from southwest Queensland and axe heads were obtained from the southern coastlands. Australia comprised of 200-300 autonomous language groups, with an extensive trading system and associated networks of social interaction.

When Antarctic scientists return to Hobart they can smell eucalyptus far off in the Southern Ocean. One thousand years ago when perhaps Maori first voyaged to Aotearoa/New Zealand (Maori legends date the earliest landfall of canoes to CE 950) they were confronted by a symphony of bird song each and every sunrise, a chiming of tiny bells harmoniously ringing with 'the most tuneable silver sound imaginable' according to Joseph Banks as late as 1770. Perhaps there were indeed landfalls along the most northerly coastlines of Northland one thousand years ago but more recent examination of archaeological evidence suggests Maori colonisation in the 12th or 13th century and this conforms with current analyses of whakapapa (genealogies) that indicate 17-22 generations of ancestors traced back to the colonising canoes: 19 generations, for example, at 29.5 years would indicate arrival of Maori in CE 1290.

The kiore (Pacific rat), dog and sweet potato, kumara, survived the voyages to become dietary staples. Trading networks were rapidly established over the forthcoming generations with vast bird butchering sites stretching over 120 hectares in extent in South Island set up to harvest flightless moa; and, extensive culling of seals along the coastlines of both islands. Bird and seal meat preserved in its own fat was packed into taha (bottle gourd) and poha (inflated bull kelp) containers and transported back to home settlements. Obsidian, volcanic glass, was mined from Tuhua, or Mayor Island, off the Bay of Plenty coast and distributed throughout the two islands; silcrete butchering knives fashioned from deposits in South Island have been found in far off Taranaki, and, much prized Westland greenstone was traded all over Aotearoa/ New Zealand to make axes, chisels and fearsome weapons.

The contemporary geography of Aotearoa/ New Zealand is enriched by a curiosity about initial Polynesian settlement of the land of the long white cloud, the transformation of the land into 'a dynamic kaleidoscope of Maori tribes' that was encountered by Europeans in 1769 and, the proud continuity of Maori culture that informs current geographies of Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

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