

SEA PEOPLE OF THE WEST*

GREG DENING

ABSTRACT. Two thousand years ago, or thereabouts, a double canoe sailed on a northeast tack (or maybe a southeast tack) from a Homeland (Hawaiki) among the islands of Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. After a voyage of 7,000 kilometers, which bypassed the many as yet uninhabited islands of the central Pacific (such as Tahiti) and the stretch of the seventy atolls of the Tuamotu that spread umbrellalike across the eastern entry of the Pacific, the canoe landed on islands that the Spaniards in 1595 were to call “the Marquesas.” The descendants of these first settlers call their islands “Fenua’enata” (Land of the People). Here I tell the story of this first beach crossing after what I consider to be the most remarkable voyage of discovery and settlement in all of human history. These first settlers (shall we say a dozen adults?) brought the animals and food plants that would make their island inhabitable. More mysteriously, these voyagers were—in body, mind, and spirit—all that we have come to call “Polynesian” in the great triangle of Hawai‘i, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and Rapa Nui (Easter Island). “Sea of Islands” is the name the descendants of this first voyage prefer to call that great triangle. I here celebrate a Sea People’s mastery of their Sea of Islands. *Keywords:* *Marquesas, Polynesia, prehistoric navigation, va’a, voyaging.*

I take the liberty of inventing a name, the “Sea People of the West.” Such a name is not really mine to invent, either by right of scholarly knowledge or by right of a historical past that is mine. Scholars with far more knowledge than I have other names for my Sea People of the West: “Austronesians,” “Archaeo-Polynesians.” The present-day islanders, whose ancestors the Sea People of the West were, as yet have no name for them, although I ride a wave of their energy as they seek a name in the past that will give them identity in the present. They seek a name for the ocean habitat that is theirs. “Pacific,” “South Seas,” “Polynesia,” even “Oceania” are not theirs. “Sea of Islands,” they are suggesting, is a name that taps a mythic consciousness of themselves.¹ Both the “Sea” and its “Islands” inspire poetry, song, dance, story, history, and politics in them. My story, with all the clumsiness with which I enter somebody else’s metaphor, is how a sea people of the West became a Sea People in full and made a Sea of Islands out of a sea of islands. My story is of how a Sea People encompassed their Sea and their Islands. Encompass: to walk a boundary with measured step; to circumnavigate; to envelop a space with knowledge and the human spirit.

Three thousand years ago, or maybe six thousand, the Sea People of the West stood on the last headlands of a string of islands—a “voyaging corridor,” it has been called—that reaches 1,000 kilometers into the southwest Pacific. Papua–New Guinea, Bismarck Archipelago, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Santa Cruz are

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✪ DR. DENING is a professor emeritus of history at the University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia, and an adjunct professor at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University, Canberra 0200, Australia.