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A southern Māori perspective on stories of Polynesian polar voyaging

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Abstract

As Ngāi Tahu (southern Maori), we take issue with widespread reference in scholarly publication to Polynesian voyagers reaching the Antarctic, an idea that originated in the translation of Rarotongan traditions in the nineteenth century. Analysis of those indicates that they contain no plausible reference to Antarctic seafaring. Southern Māori interests have extended into the Subantarctic Islands for 800 years but there is no reference to Antarctica in our historical traditions. Our archaeology and history document a southern boundary to Māori occupation at Port Ross (Auckland Islands), despite habitable islands existing further south. We think it is very unlikely that Māori or other Polynesian voyaging reached the Antarctic.

Introduction

Narratives of pre-European Polynesian voyaging to Antarctica are appearing with increasing frequency in scholarly publications where they are presented, without qualification or critique, as marking the beginning there of human activity (e.g. Headland, 1989; Hongi, 2016; Hull & Bergstrom, 2006; Jackson, 2021; Martin, 1996; O'Reilly, 2017; Soper, 2018; Wehi, et al., 2021; Wickham, 2016). Most are based on Rarotongan (Cook Islands) and Māori traditions. In part, at least, this reflects a cultural turn in Antarctic studies which brings literary exegesis and imagination to bear on a “smorgasbord” of sociocultural interests (Leane, 2011, p. 150; Nielsen & Philpott, 2018). Although contextualised in this broad field, our focus here is upon the specific issue of whether certain Rarotongan (Cook Islands) and Māori traditions, taken as describing voyages to Antarctica, are reliable textually and plausible historically. As Ngāi Tahu (<https://ngaitahu.iwi.nz>), the southernmost Polynesians, we draw on familiarity with Polynesian traditions and long association with New Zealand's Subantarctic region to argue that the traditions in question are flawed in translation and interpretation and that stories asserting Polynesian polar voyaging are implausible.

Rarotongan voyaging traditions

The notion that prehistoric Polynesian voyagers reached a frozen sea began with a translation in 1897 by Percy Smith of an 1860s manuscript about Rarotongan chiefly traditions. One story is about Hui Te Rangiora who was said to have built the first oceangoing canoe. Except for wooden outrigger booms, “the whole of it was built of men's bones” (Walter & Moeka'a, 2000, p. 142). Her name, *Te Ivi-o-ata*, refers to bones (ivi) – a metaphor for ancestors – and dawn (ata). These points, absent in modern repetition of the tradition, indicate that it is an allegory about the legendary opening of the eastern horizon by the first migrants from Hawaiki, the mythical Polynesian homeland. Other legendary Polynesian voyagers encountered perils and wonders, such as canoe-swallowing clams and giant octopuses, but none occur in the Hui Te Rangiora tradition and neither does it refer to anything of possible Antarctic origin (Smith, 1899, p. 10; Walter & Moeka'a, 2000, p. 142).

In fact, it is only in translation of a tradition about Te Aru Tanga Nuku, his descendant some 300 years later, that Hui Te Rangiora is associated with such things. In Smith's translation (Walter & Moeka'a, 2000, p. 144) these were as follows:

The rocks growing out of the sea beyond Rapa Island; the monstrous waves; the female dwelling in those waves, with her hair waving and floating on the surface of the ocean; and the tai-uka-a-pia [the frozen sea], the deceitful animal seen on the sea which dived below the surface; a very gloomy and dark place where the sun is not seen. There is also there [a kind of] rock whose summit pierces the sky with steep bare cliffs, where vegetation does not grow.

Smith (1899, p. 11) interpreted the female tresses as bull-kelp, the diving animal as a seal, the dark place as polar and the bare cliffs as icebergs. The polar allusions hang on his translation of “tai-uka-a-pia” as the frozen sea (tai-uka), white as the flesh of pia (Polynesian arrowroot). This is improbable.

Rarotongan has no pre-European words for ice or frozen; “uka” means foam or froth, and “ukātai” sea-foam or spume (Buse & Taringa, 2006), as also in the primary Māori meaning of “huka-tai” – sea foam or white-caps. Sir Peter Buck (1954, p. 116) concluded that “tai-uka-a-pia” meant, “sea covered with foam like arrowroot.” If the sea was rough rather than frozen then the putative location was sub-polar at most; bull-kelp, sea-lions and elephant seals, high, bare cliffs, gloomy weather and sometimes icebergs (Anon, 1967) occur at 40–55° South. By the mid-nineteenth century, many Polynesians were familiar with these features through involvement in the sealing and whaling industries. Buck (1954, p. 116) perceived so much European influence in the Rarotongan traditions, “that I cannot accept them as accurate or ancient.” In our opinion, they do not refer plausibly to pre-European Antarctic voyaging.

Maori voyaging traditions, archaeology and history

If there were Polynesian ventures into the Southern Ocean they probably would have originated in southern New Zealand, from where the distance to Antarctica is only half that from Rarotonga or Rapa. There is a nineteenth-century Māori version of the Hui Te Rangiora story, also recorded by Smith (1915, pp. 13–18). It is about eastward migration and set before the time of Maui, the mythical Polynesian ancestor. It does not include any of the supposedly polar observations of the Rarotongan version. Despite that, recent Māori references to Hui Te Rangiora accept Smith’s (1899) Antarctic conjecture (e.g. Jackson, 2021; McFarlane, 2008; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2004: p. 40). Another legendary figure, Tamarereti, was associated with Antarctic voyaging in 1925 by Henry Stowell who, writing as Hare Hongi (2016), was known for colourful recounting of Māori traditions. Smith (1915, p. 21) notes that Tamarereti, like Hui Te Rangiora, was credited with building the first canoe and exploring eastward but there are no connections to him in Māori genealogy or historical traditions, and no reference to Antarctic voyaging. He is usually regarded as a celestial being whose canoe is represented by the constellation of Scorpio (Prendergast-Tarena, 2008, pp. 219–220).

If passages by Māori toward Antarctica were made at all, they are likely to have involved southern Māori who had experience of sailing and living below the Subtropical Convergence zone. There is no reference to Antarctica, however, in Ngāi Tahu traditions. Origin stories about how the New Zealand islands were shaped mythologically by Rākaihautū and later explored by the *Takitimu* canoe under Tamatea (Ngāi Tahu Cultural Mapping Project, www.kahurumanu.co.nz) refer to nowhere south of Stewart Island (Rakiura). Analysis of multiple Ngāi Tahu clan histories has shown fidelity of historical information up to about 20 generations (ca. 600 years) prior to AD 1800 (Tau, 2003, pp. 17–20; Prendergast-Tarena, 2008, pp. 13–27). Covering, thus, the entire period of pre-European human occupation (Tau, 2003), these data also contain no reference to Antarctica or the Southern Ocean.

Turning from traditions to a material perspective, the historical and archaeological evidence of southern Māori provides the only case in which Polynesian voyaging toward high latitudes can be evaluated. People first arrived in New Zealand during the thirteenth century (long after the supposed Rarotongan voyages) and southern exploration at that time left archaeological traces on Stewart Island, the Snares Islands and Enderby Island (50° S), the northernmost of the Auckland group (Anderson, 2009), about 500 km south of mainland New Zealand. If voyaging further south was part of that early dispersal, or occurred later, then typical

archaeological evidence of it (fireplaces, earth ovens, stone and bone tools and bone middens) should be similarly visible. It has been sought by archaeological exploration of the east coast of Auckland Island, including excavation in a large cave containing occupation debris in Carnley Harbour (Anderson, 2009). No evidence of Polynesian habitation was found. The Antipodes and Bounty islands, 500–700 km southwest of the Chathams, also lack any sign of Polynesian occupation. Archaeological research on Campbell Island, 260 km southeast of the Aucklands, found no pre-European archaeological traces (Prickett, Bagley, & Judd, 2012) nor have any been reported from Macquarie Island 600 km south of the Aucklands. A wreck seen on discovery in 1810 was found in 1811 to be European (McNab, 1909, p. 176). Sedimentary coring and analysis of pollen and charcoal has also failed to disclose any sign of pre-European occupation in the Subantarctic south of Enderby Island (McGlone, Wilmshurst, & Meurk, 2007; Wilmshurst, McGlone, & Turney, 2015).

The pattern of pre-European Maori occupation was repeated historically. A group of 60 Māori and Moriori (Chatham Islanders) moved to the Auckland Islands in 1843 and established settlements on Enderby Island and in Port Ross, but no further south. They remained until 1855, seeing the European colony under Charles Enderby (1849–1852) come and go, before themselves returning to New Zealand. No historical Māori occupation occurred further south on the Auckland Islands or on Campbell Island, except at commercial whaling stations. This evidence suggests that the long-term limit of Polynesian habitation south of New Zealand was at about 50° South.

It is possible that voyages much further south left no traces on more southerly islands or that traces will eventually be found. In addition, Polynesian polar exploration might have originated far to the east of New Zealand, leaving traces only in Antarctica. Those possibilities need to be considered against formidable impediments to Antarctic voyaging in Polynesian built and rigged sailing canoes. Those had low, open hulls with little protection from wave or weather and almost no dry storage or accommodation. There is no evidence that Polynesians made closed, weather-proof clothing, footwear or gloves, even in southern New Zealand. Unrelenting high winds and heavy seas in the circumpolar westerlies offered a stern test of canoe fastenings, rigging and sails. The double-hulled canoe was relatively stable but vulnerable when forced to run before gales. In that situation, two such canoes broke apart in 1823 and drowned more than 40 people in Foveaux Strait (Anderson, 1998, p. 67). Southern Māori were well-aware of the limitations of their sailing vessels and were careful to pick settled weather for offshore passages. By the 1830s, they had European sealing and whaling boats with superior sea-keeping and sailing qualities and ventured occasionally to the Auckland Islands, but it was only in European shipping that Māori reached the Southern Ocean (beyond 60°S).

Conclusions

Analysis of the Rarotongan traditions from which Antarctic voyaging is inferred indicates that translation of tai-uka as frozen sea is implausible and that the features associated retrospectively with Hui Te Rangiora are sub-polar phenomena and could be post-European accretions to the original tradition. There is no tradition of Antarctic voyaging by Te Aru Tanga Nuku, and the Tamarereti story is a modern flight of fancy. In our opinion, no case exists in Polynesian traditions for voyaging to the Antarctic. Historical and material evidence of Māori occupation in the Subantarctic islands

(47°-54° S) suggests that at no stage was there indigenous occupation beyond about 50° South. If this reflects limitations in Māori maritime capability then it is implausible to think that, at the same time, there were passages much further south into the Southern Ocean. Overall, we think it is most unlikely that Antarctic history began with pre-European Polynesian voyaging.

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