
REVIEWS

Traveling Prehistoric Seas: Critical Thinking on Ancient Transoceanic Voyages

Edited by Alice Beck Kehoe

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Alice Kehoe is an important albeit underappreciated voice in American archaeology. In this volume, she considers prehistoric sea travel and evidence for (and against) transoceanic, intercontinental contacts. Most directly relevant to California is her consideration of possible contact between Polynesians and the Chumash of the Santa Barbara Channel. This is a topic that my colleague, Kathryn Klar, and I have written about since 2005 (Jones and Klar 2005; Jones et al. 2011; Klar and Jones 2005) and I have discussed it with Alice on multiple occasions, so I admit to being a bit biased in my consideration of her treatment of that particular topic. Many others have not been so kind (see Anderson 2006; Arnold 2007; Lawler 2010).

However, this book is about much more than prehistoric Polynesian contacts with the Americas. The introductory theory chapter offers excellent reading for graduate students, although I wonder how many of them (or their professors) will fully appreciate Kehoe's no-nonsense, empirically rigorous, but politically conscious approach to archaeological thinking. Unlike most of her generation (she received her Ph.D. from Harvard in the 1960s), Alice Kehoe has never been overly enamored of the "new" archaeology, hence her willingness to think about transoceanic diffusion, which is a topic that was essentially thrown under the bus by processualists in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Kehoe defends diffusionism, inductive reasoning, critical thinking, political awareness, and empiricism. This combination is unusual among American scholars, but it provides a refreshing contrast to the politically correct archaeology currently being advanced on many American campuses. She is interested in getting as close as possible to scientific truths, and she discusses at length the ways in which she believes politics and culture can impinge on that process. Kehoe is intellectually curious, and she is interested in trying to wring the truth out of the material record; this differs profoundly from politically

correct archaeology which often is conducted with a lack of intellectual or scientific curiosity, the goal being only to promote preconceived ideas with the archaeological record as a backdrop.

Following her theoretical introduction, Kehoe begins with a thorough consideration of the historic and prehistoric facts of sea travel. As would anyone who is willing to think critically about the possibility of transoceanic diffusion, Kehoe wisely begins with Australia, which was colonized by people using watercraft around 45,000 to 50,000 years ago. This is such a salient fact because it establishes a minimal date for the use of boats that for many scholars in the twentieth century was almost unthinkable old. Consider that as recently as the 1980s, California archaeologists thought that Native Californians had neither the means nor the incentive to invent boats until the mid-Holocene. In reality, people were using watercraft in the Old World tens of thousands of years before the New World was even colonized, so it is highly likely that it was in use from the very beginning in California. This reality sets the stage for the series of cases for contact that follows.

Kehoe first considers the Polynesians whose exploits on the Pacific frontier are probably familiar now to most California audiences. As noted above, I am prone to agree with Kehoe that this constitutes the strongest case for trans-Pacific diffusion, given the well-documented abilities of Polynesians to build boats, sail, and navigate, and their long-established presence on islands southwest of California. The rest of the book considers cases that are probably much less known to Californians, many of which were relegated to obscurity by archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s but have been kept alive by a small but dedicated band of geographers (e.g., Jett 2017).

The remaining cases are intriguing; most involve possible contacts between the civilizations of Asia or Malaysia and Mesoamerica, although trans-Atlantic contacts are considered as well. As Kehoe notes, these cases are based on the presence of plants and/or animal remains endemic to one continent and found in archaeological contexts on another. Stylistic similarities in ceramics, other artifacts, and monumental features (including pyramids) across the oceans are another main source of evidence, along with certain linguistic and/or textual similarities (e.g., names for days in the Aztec and Chinese lunar months).

When I first started looking into these cases on my own nearly two decades ago, I was disturbed to discover that many of the scholars interested in transoceanic diffusion seem to have a near-fatal tendency to take too seriously virtually any form of evidence. Most have well-developed chips on their shoulders that they have acquired as the result of being dismissed by

mainstream academia for so many decades. Kehoe herself is not necessarily one of these, and she is right that mainstream academicians have often gone to great lengths to dismiss transoceanic diffusion. The bar for establishing transoceanic contact as fact has been set impossibly high, while the bar for arguments dismissing it is disturbingly low. Against this background, Kehoe rates the various cases by degree of probability, and I generally agree with most, but not all, of her assessments.

I am not, for example, overly enamored of the case for signs of cocaine, nicotine, hashish, and marijuana in the stomachs of Egyptian mummies dating from 3,000 to 1,600 BP. This would have required contact between Egypt and at least two (and likely three) different continents prehistorically (Asia, North America, and South America), two of which would have required long-distance, two-way voyaging across either the Atlantic or Pacific. Other cases that seem equally implausible include apparent Roman cement at a Mesoamerican site dating post-AD 600 and a Roman figurine recovered from a Post-Classic Toltec site in central Mexico. Issues related to dating, context, and reporting raise serious questions about both of these cases for trans-Atlantic diffusion.

On the other hand, Kehoe's case for the introduction of ceramics into north-eastern North America across the northern Atlantic seems much less wild-eyed and more plausible—but I would have liked to see some illustrations. Evidence for inter-civilizational contacts between China/India/Cambodia and Mesoamerica are in some cases startlingly provocative, including the ceramic wheeled toys that have been found in Mesoamerica (where the wheel was unknown) and resemble similar items from India, as well as certain ceramic motifs (such as guardian dog figures).

Perhaps of more interest to California archaeologists is Kehoe's brief recounting of the recent recovery of two bronze objects from a precontact house feature in northwest Alaska. The objects almost certainly indicate contact across the Bering Strait at or before 1,400 cal BP (Jarvis 2015). Could this provide an answer to the long-unresolved question of the origin for the bow and arrow into North America? Long ago as a graduate student, I remember D. L. True, who was never really known for wild speculation, suggesting that the bow probably came to North America across the Bering Strait late in the Holocene after Beringia had disappeared. He did not say anything specifically about boats, but the inference was obvious.

Readers can make up their own minds about this and the dozens of other cases that Kehoe discusses in this volume. Most of these are ultimately going to need more archaeological evidence to confirm or deny. Geographers have only gotten so far with these ideas and more work with advanced techniques

(e.g., ancient mtDNA) needs to be done in Mesoamerica, California, and South America, although in some cases the odds that any type of solid evidence has actually been preserved are very slim. Nonetheless, Kehoe's book will perhaps at least open some minds to these possibilities. Open minds are valuable, if not necessary, assets for good archaeology.

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