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*Unearthing the Polynesian Past. Explorations and Adventures
of an Island Archaeologist* by Patrick Vinton Kirch (review)

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Book Reviews

Kirch, Patrick Vinton.
*Unearthing the
Polynesian Past.
Explorations and
Adventures of an
Island Archaeologist.*

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Review by Thegn Ladefoged,
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Unearthing the Polynesian Past is a unique memoir that shares Kirch's journey from a barefoot four-year-old roaming the Hawaiian hills of Mānoa to becoming the leading archaeologist in the Pacific. The book provides insights into Kirch's development, but goes beyond mere personal reflection to explore some of the larger themes in Pacific history. Written in an accessible style, Kirch conveys the sheer adventure of doing island archaeology. He documents dramatic changes in the practice of fieldwork from his childhood days in Hawai'i in the late 1960s, to landing by boat on isolated Anuta in 1971, to jetting into Maui in 2013. During his five decades of research, Kirch and others have documented the culture history of a vast area and developed insight into the complex interactions between humans and the natural world. In addition to taking readers on his personal journey through the Pacific, Kirch expertly notes theoretical shifts and methodological innovations, presenting a select history of who's who in Polynesian archaeology.

The book is organized chronologically, with the first three chapters focused on Kirch's childhood and apprenticeship with Yoshio Kondo in the Malacology Department of the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum. Kirch credits Kondo with taking a chance on a "precocious" 13-year-old and indoctrinating him in empirical science. Kirch entertainingly retells his early archaeological adventures in Hālawā, Kahikinui, and elsewhere. What is remarkable is the level of detail that Kirch brings to reliving these and other early "expeditions". Relying on his field notebooks and memories, he weaves the early history of Hawaiian archaeology with amusing anecdotes of fieldwork with an array of erudite and eccentric characters, including Roger Green and Doug Yen, Kirch's next set of mentors.

After finishing his BA in 1971 at the University of Pennsylvania, Kirch enrolled in a PhD program at Yale

and spent the next five years working on remote Pacific islands. It was there that he refined his interests in dynamic island environments, subsistence strategies, and socio-political organization. In recounting these years, it becomes abundantly apparent that Kirch enjoys fieldwork and that living amongst the descendants of the people who created the material culture he studies has helped him craft rich processual explanations of ancient behavior. While his tales of rites of passages, (some marked by tattoos), and the trials and tribulations of fieldwork are humorous, it is Kirch's ability to convey the archaeology of the islands while telling remarkable stories that educate the reader. During the early 1980s Kirch worked at the Bishop Museum, meeting notable figures such as Margaret Mead and collaborating with Marshall Sahlins and Matthew Spriggs on the Anahulu project. These experiences undoubtedly contributed to Kirch's theoretical sophistication while reinforcing his life-long affection for the Museum. His feelings for the Museum, however, are ambivalent. As fond of it as he is, Kirch expresses his disappointment in the Museum for falling short of his expectations.

In his mid-thirties, Kirch spent several years at the University of Washington in Seattle, before being hired by the University of California Berkeley, where he has remained for the duration of his career. Several chapters document his time at these institutions, providing glimpses into the intricacies of university bureaucracies and the politics of academic egos. While at Berkeley, Kirch developed several large interdisciplinary projects in Hawai'i, Mo'orea, and Mangareva. These are marked by collaborations with ecologists, soil scientists, and modellers in an effort to understand the ecodynamics of island life. While the fieldwork experiences during many of these projects might have been less rigorous than Kirch's earlier expeditions, his accounts are no less amusing and interesting. In several of these projects, indigenous land owners and caretakers are integral to the success of the projects, and Kirch recounts how working with these individuals enriched both his experiences and understanding.

It is clear that history matters to Kirch. *Unearthing the Polynesian Past* traces the substantive and intellectual development of Polynesian archaeology. Kirch is quick to point out the links between substantive knowledge, theoretical developments, and methodological innovations, all set within globalization and the changing academic world. Kirch's prolific academic career can be seen as a product of his culturally diverse upbringing, his education at elite schools, a series of mentors, colleagues, and students, his intellect, and an ambitious desire to succeed. In sharing his journey, Kirch enlightens, entertains, and prompts reflection; all hallmarks of an excellent read.