

## Numerous and revealing archaeological remains

The Valley of Opunohu is the largest and no doubt the most fertile of the island of Mo'orea; from Vaipohe to Amehiti, it occupies the collapsed crater of the former volcano.

Contrary to what can be observed today, the valleys of the Society Islands were often extensively inhabited prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

Numerous archaeological remains discovered sometimes far inland – this being the case of Opunohu – stand as testimony to this.

The archaeological structures that can be observed here were restored in 1969 under the direction of Dr. Y.H. Sinoto (B.P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu) and have been regularly maintained in proper condition ever since. They represent but a small part of a very large former habitation site.

The first archaeological surveys in this valley were undertaken by Pr. K.P. Emory as early as 1925. It was only 35 years later, in 1960, that archaeologist R.C. Green and his team were able to carry out more important and rewarding research.

After ten months of hard work more than five hundred structures had been recorded, which included:

- small family or corporative *marae*,
- large community *marae*,
- house sites (*fare haupape* or *fare pote'e*),
- large community houses,
- council platforms,
- numerous stone walls,
- agricultural terraces,
- as well as three archery platforms.

It must be pointed out that R.C. Green, thanks to his discoveries at the Opunohu site, was able to add to and express differences in the classification of archaeological structures and especially the existing typology for *marae* of the Society Islands. This typology, previously established by Pr. K.P. Emory, was based on the relation existing between the style of the construction and its geographical location, thereby establishing a distinction between the three main types of *marae*: the “coastal *marae*”, “inland *marae*” and “intermediate *marae*”.

During this visit you will be able to observe that *marae* Ahu-O-Mahine, built quite inland in the valley, remains nevertheless a perfect example of this “coastal” *marae* type architecture.

## **A large and strong population, far from the shore**

The study of these remains, their location, and their settlement pattern throughout time made it possible for R.C. Green to establish that the valley had been inhabited in a continuous manner for at least six hundred years.

The oldest habitation levels excavated in Opunohu date back to the XIII<sup>th</sup> century. Numerous shell fragments and fish bones discovered on excavated sites are a testimony to the fact that this valley always maintained relations with the coast. Its population, mainly comprised of farmers carried out terrace farming and preserved the fermented paste of breadfruit in pits.

The diversity and evolution of the architectural remains studied then disclosed the presence of a population, forever increasing in size, socially well organized and highly mixed. This growth and prosperity probably reached its apex during the XVII<sup>th</sup> and up to the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the population finally deserted the interior of the valley for good to join the religious missions established on the coast, for example in the village of Papetoai where the first protestant temple was built in 1827...

Here is a historical example of power of Mo'orea during the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century:

At the end of his second voyage, Captain Cook's departure was marked by a surprising scene:

In Tahiti, a flotilla of more than two hundred war canoes, carrying an army of some ten thousand men, were in the midst of preparing to launch an attack on Mo'orea; Cook estimated, at the time, that the population of Tahiti amounted to approximately two hundred thousand people. However, this impressive flotilla was not victorious...

When he returned in 1777, Captain Cook decided to visit Mo'orea. First of all, he dropped anchor in the bay which still bears his name today before mooring in the bay of Opunohu, where he was provided hospitality by the famous warrior Mahine, high chief of the Marama clan and winner of the fight he had seen under preparation three years earlier.

Oral tradition retained many other tales of the numerous wars which rocked Mo'orea, as well as a large number of marvelous legends still known to many Polynesians today.

## Open air sanctuaries and places of social life

In the Polynesian world, everything was centered on religion: political and social organization, family life, daily activities and major events.

The *marae* was not only a place of worship where the ancient Polynesians honored their gods and their ancestors. It also expressed property rights, social rank, and symbolized family organization. The *marae* had to be built around a stone coming from an older *marae*.

At the arrival of the Europeans, there were hundred of different *marae* in the Society Islands.

According to Tradition, there were:

- Private *marae*:
  - *marae* of the ancestors, build on the family land (place of worship, of burials)
  - corporative *marae* (where every group – sorcerers, healers, sculptors, tatoosers, outrigger canoe builders... - and sometimes women, prayed to gain the god's protection).
- Public *marae*:
  - international *marae* (*marae* Taputapuatea of Raiatea Island was the great political and religious centre of all the *maohi* population)
  - *marae ari'i* and district chief's *marae* (in which rituals engaging the social life of the populations were held).

In this civilization without writing, the religious treasure of the ancestors had been transmitted for several centuries by priestly experts, gifted with an excellent capacity of memorizing.

## Marae i Tetiioa

Titiroa is the name of the land upon which the marae was built. The enclosure wall was built with basalt blocks, the raised and partially paved court has 15 uprights, 2 backrest stones, and 3 rectangular cists lined with coral slabs.

The *ahu* is detached from the enclosing wall and the upper course of its front face was probably decorated with thin coral slabs. This row of thin pieces of coral is peculiar to the inland *marae* of the Windward Islands.

Close to the *marae*, archeological excavations showed that the place was occupied since the end of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and several features of domestic life: charcoal, houses postholes or food storing pits, were dated from the XVII<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, other remains, dating from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century correspond to the period of construction of the *marae*.

During the restoration of the *marae*, two incomplete human skeletons were discovered in a corner of the enclosing wall outside the *marae*.

## Marae Ahu o Mahine

The original name of the *marae* is lost, but tradition kept the name of Mahine, a great warrior chief ruling over the Opunohu valley at the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century.

Due to the style of its construction, which is in fact that of the coastal *marae* of the Society Islands, *marae* Ahu-O-Mahine is a unique example of its kind in the Opunohu valley.

One can note the regularity of the basalt stones used for the courses of the three-stepped *ahu* and the facing of the entire platform which constitutes the court of the *marae*. The front face of these round worked stones is convex, while the inner part is a four rough side, rectangular cone, which improves the stability of this dry masonry construction.

On the paved court, one can see two backrest stones and ten uprights. Outside the court on the left, a small paved area, at ground level, is probably associated with the *marae*.

Ahu-O-Mahine is probably the last *marae* built in this valley. The construction, typical of the Tahitian culture of the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, corresponds to the last period of development of the Opunohu community.

15<sup>th</sup>

## Marae i Afare'aito

One of the best preserved of the valley before restoration work, this *marae* was, according to the tradition, erected after the victory of the *ari'i* of Ha'apiti, the Marama, over those of Opunohu, the Atiro'o. The name Afareaito means "Warriors House".

The double-faced enclosing wall delimits a paved court which has 5 backrests stones and 13 uprights. The *ahu* is detached from the enclosing wall and its front face has two courses of basalt blocks separated by one course of coral slabs.

Two small paved platforms with uprights are attached on the left side of the enclosing wall.

The proximity of two archery platforms could be an indication that the cult to the archers' god, Paruatetavae, was possibly celebrated at *marae* Afareaito, so we can imagine that bows, arrows and ceremonial suits were preserved there.

## **Fare for the God**

This mobile ark carried the worship material. Among these: the *to'o*, in basket work, symbolized one of the gods to whom the *marae* was consecrated: Ta'aroa, the Creator – Tane, the demi-God – Oro, the God of War.

## **Priest in mourning attire and bier for the dead**

At the death of a chief, his oiled corpse was exposed under shelter on the *marae*. During the funeral rituals, the mourning priests wore an impressive costume made from mother of pearl, feathers and *tapa*. They held a ceremonial staff adorned with shark's teeth.

## **Offerings on the *marae***

Vegetables, fruits, fishes, but also dogs and pigs were put on elevated altars. Human sacrifices - men only, killed before the ceremony - were necessary only for the greatest rituals held on the *marae ari'i* dedicated to Oro.

## The archery platforms

The architectural style of archery platforms is very special. It is characterized by a concave shape in front and a somewhat closed angle at the back formed by the sides.

Within this truncated triangle is found a T-shaped access marking the limits of areas showing different types of finishing, with or without paving. Raised stones sometimes sculpted, were positioned in the platform angles and the main one, in the middle of the re-entrant arc, indicated the archer's station.

In the valleys, such platforms were always facing a cleared hillside and on the coastline were oriented in the axis of the shore.

Usually built with basalt stones, more infrequently with coral blocks, this type of construction is a low rise one: from one or two stone beds for the lowest to less than one meter for the highest.

There are at least three platforms of this type in 'Opunohu Valley on Mo'orea, and five in Papeno'o Valley on Tahiti. A number of archery platforms were found in Tahiti's Peninsula and in various islands of the Society Archipelago. No similar platforms were discovered elsewhere in Polynesia and the practice of archery was apparently restricted to this archipelago, with the exception of Mangareva, where there was a warrior tradition of using bows and arrows.

## The Game of an elite

Archery as it was practiced in the Society Islands when they were originally discovered by the early European navigators, was neither a warrior practice nor a game of skill. This sacred game, strictly intended for the masculine elite of the *ari'i* and *raatira*, was subject to a religious ritual and original rules.

Before a contest was started, and until the closing ceremony on the *marae*, no fire was allowed on the neighboring lands. During the contest, armed guards would check the access to the shooting area and cross their spears to keep passersby away.

Bows, arrows and quivers as well as archers' uniforms left the *marae* where they were kept only for the duration of the contest. The participants took possession of them in the course of a ceremony probably dedicated to *Paruatetavae* – the God of archers – and returned them to the *marae* once the contest was over.

It seems that two sides at least were opposed in turn, and that the contest would take place from the same shooting platform with drums beating nearby. There was no specific target: front the front of the platform, on one knee, the archer would take a near-vertical axis and endeavor to shoot his arrow as far as possible in the direction of the hill.

The shooting path, approximately three hundred meters long, was carefully cleared of all vegetation. Young men were positioned on the top of trees on each side and tracked the arrow until it fell, while shouting to report when they saw the arrow pass by.

There were several referees on the spot to validate the shooting and announce the results to the archers on the platform by waving flags. Two small white flags, probably made of *tapa*, were used to mark off the qualifying distance to be overshoot by the arrow. If the arrow could not reach this limit, they would lower their flags and while raising a foot, they would shout "*Ua Pau*" (defeated).

The desired result was therefore entirely dependent on the archer's strength, and especially the quality of his gear. Bowstrings in particular broke quite often during the contest. Arrows, good or bad, and archery vocabulary still held an important place in the Tahitian language in the early XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the ritual ended by a bath before archers put on they ordinary clothing and resume another activity which was namely to share in the festivities that took place inevitably afterward at the expense of the losers, of course.

## The quiver

Cut in the section between the two knots of a 5 cm diameter bamboo, the quiver is one single piece. The bottom is capped by a small finely polished and regular shaped coconut fastened to the quiver with a rope going back inside the case. Painted or engraved, quivers were often elegantly shaped.

## Tea, the arrows

The length of the arrow varies from 50 cm to 90 cm, strong and lightweight, they were cut from a type of young bamboo named *Ha'a'ava*; this was also the name given to an arrow an archer can trust. Sharp-pointed, these arrows were not feathered.

The added tip, less than 10 cm, was made of *'aito* (iron tree). The lower end of the arrow was bevel-edged and tied, to prevent bamboo splitting.

At the time appointed for shooting, the arrow was coated with the resinous gum of the *'uru* (breadfruit tree). Arrows were often richly coloured. They were shot to a distance of up to 250 m.

## Fana, the bow

*Fana*, the bow is cut from strong lightweight wood: the core of the *purau* tree. It stays perfectly straight when the string is not on it; this string was made of several woven *roa* strands.

Carefully polished and sometimes adorned: surrounded on the tip by finely woven human hair or by *nape* (strings made of coconut husk fibers) in alternate spirals. The length is approximately 150cm and 2.5 to 3cm diameter.

*Puipuirima* was the name of the protection sleeve made of the scales of the *maratea* fish and positioned by the archer on his forearm as a protection against the backlash of the bowstring.

## An episode of Pai's legend

Pai is a legendary hero whose fame was great in Tahiti and Mo'orea. It is common knowledge that the hole in the "Moua Puta", the Pierced Mountain, above 'Opunohu Bay is due to his spear.

But Pai's legend includes many more amazing adventures and one particular refers to the practice of archery.

"Pai was not just an ordinary mortal; even before he was born, the murderous wrath of the king of the Peninsula was lying heavily on him and his family.

In order to save him, his mother placed him in the hands of the gods.

Several exciting episodes in the realm of the gods later, Pai returned home and took up the challenge put to him; face one at a time nine champions in loyal combat in order to re-establish his family and restore dignity to his defunct father.

The day before the tournament, Pai tried his father's bows and arrows but all of them broke. He made a new bow with *purau* wood but it broke too. So he decided to make a huge bow with *toa* wood and used the same wood for the arrows.

Then he went to the *marae*, said the ritual invocations to receive the blessings of the gods and entrusted the priest with his weapons until the next day due for the fight.

In front of the king himself, in the presence of a large crowd, Pai refused to use other than his own weapons and confronted his nine opponents successfully. He avoided all their arrows while his own never missed their targets: a number of champions were killed, others wounded.

Pai took the last one of his arrows and shot it very far away. The arrow fell right in front of the royal *marae* and was immediately crowned by a magnificent rainbow. Cheered by the crowd and the king, Pai was honored as a victorious warrior... and that is not the end of his story".

Apparently this legendary tale is the only one to mention the use of bow and arrows as a weapon in the Society Islands. In this tale, it is more of a deadly tournament where honor is at stake than an actual war fight.

If we consider that this weapon is really dangerous, much more than a spear or a club as it is able to kill by surprise, it can be speculated, as did some European observers, that Polynesian chiefs had perhaps a good deal of wisdom when they decided one day to restrict the use of bows and arrows to a sacred game for the elite.

## Useful words

**MANA:** Aura of supernatural power radiating from certain people, places and things. For the *ari'i*, this power was hereditary.

**TAPU (TABU):** Prohibition attached to all things possessing *mana* such as people, places and things.

**ARI'I:** Temporal and spiritual chief possessing *mana*.

**TI'I (TIKI):** Representation of a lesser spirit, often threatening. About 1815, most of these wooden or stone statues were destroyed or buried by the people.