

# Monuments and People: The Longevity of Monuments: The Past in the Present - A Report of the State of the Pulemelei Site, Savai'i, Samoa

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## Abstract

Archaeological excavations at the Pulemelei mound on Savai'i in Samoa were made to examine the development and origin of monuments in West Polynesia. Scientific research at the site was a catalyst for varied types of social activity that has implications for understanding the complicated history of long-lived and significant structures. In this paper we outline how archaeological approaches and contemporary events can inform our knowledge of monuments, and prompt engagement between archaeologists and other current users.

**KEYWORDS:** Archaeology, Monuments, Cultural Heritage, Samoa.

## Introduction

The Pulemelei mound on Savai'i Island in Samoa is a substantial prehistoric stone structure, perhaps the largest in Polynesia, which has been the subject of a multi-year archaeological project. The work has revealed information about the mound's age, construction sequence and relationship to smaller structures in its vicinity (Wallin, Clark and Martinsson-Wallin 2002, Martinsson-Wallin, Clark and Wallin 2003, 2005, Martinsson-Wallin 2003, 2004a). Our investigations show that Pulemelei, like other prehistoric monuments in Europe and the Americas, was used and elaborated over several centuries, and has a presence in Samoan society today.

During the early phase of the archaeology project the dense vegetation covering the structure was removed, exposing the mound's monumental dimensions and leading to renewed interest in the site from different groups. Since archaeological work began at Pulemelei in 2002 the now highly-visible mound has focused indigenous attention on the area involving land issues, brought the first offer for prehistoric heritage support from the Samoan government, and been the venue for a large-scale purification ceremony. As a result tourist use of the site by local and foreign visitors is increasing, and is likely to adversely affect the mound if not managed appropriately.

This paper outlines how scientific research at Pulemelei has been a catalyst for different and unexpected kinds of contemporary social activity, which has implications for archaeologists working on monumental sites elsewhere. While the original meaning of monuments, like Pulemelei, needs to be investigated archeologically, contemporary social action is part of the mound's history, and might be considered to be evoked by the essence of a monumental structure—a potent cultural symbol physically expressing continuity with the past and able to manifest modern aspirations. How monuments are used in the present is unlikely, except in broad terms, to reflect prehistoric usage. What is significant is that contemporary behaviour illustrates the manifold role of monuments in a cultural system, a complexity that no doubt applied in prehistory, and which archaeologists need to consider when examining the use-history of monumental architecture. We begin by outlining two ways of studying monuments, briefly present some archaeological results from the Pulemelei Mound, before examining recent use of the mound.

## How to Study Monuments?

### Use-life versus biography

In archaeology reconstruction of artefact use-life in a flow model tracks its movement through a cultural system to the point where it becomes refuse (Schiffer 1972). Use-life models are useful as they clarify the locational and functional changes to items found in the prehistoric record. For instance, a use-history of a stone tool tracks separate stages involved in procurement of raw material, manufacture, tool use, refurbishment and eventual discard, elucidating in the process the geological procurement zone, technique of manufacture, tool function and discard motive (for example, Smith and Leach 1996).

The strength of use-life models is their application to commonly encountered portable utilitarian items like stone tools and ceramics, but it is important to recognize that a focus on physical transformations can neglect the social meanings embodied by material culture. A second limitation to the use-life approach, which is connected to a focus on portable material culture, is that use-life models end when artefacts leave a prehistoric cultural system and enter the archaeological context. The 'death' of an artefact occurs when an object can no longer perform its cultural function, and it is removed from social activity.

Monuments are non-portable artefacts, which by their nature are relatively permanent, highly-visible structures that continue to evoke a cultural response well after the demise or transformation of the individuals and society that constructed them. Implicit in the concept of 'monumentality' (physically 'grandly imposing'), is a longevity that supersedes a human lifespan. Although monuments are often seen as venues for communication with past and present ancestors and deities, their inbuilt capacity for temporal endurance and size cannot be ignored, which suggests a desire to participate with, and speak to, societies and groups of the future.

Monuments, then, do not 'die' in the conventional way that domestic artefacts do, as when visible and known, they have the capacity to generate a unique cultural response regardless of when they were built or what their original function was. Because of this many monuments have a complex use-history involving functional change by structure elaboration, reduction and termination. They are necessarily enmeshed in webs of multiple interpretations, not just in the past but also in the contemporary present. To understand the intricacies of monuments, use-life models are hampered by trying to ascertain a dominant prehistoric function, in the process potentially homogenizing the 'meaning' of monuments and neglecting the ongoing relationship between people and monumental structures. If one of the diverse purposes of monument construction was to participate in future social activity, as we suggest, then alternatives to the use-life approach need to be considered.

Foremost among these is to examine how objects accrue social meaning to reveal the relationship between people and things, by constructing an artefact 'biography' (Kopytoff 1986). In it artefacts play an active role in culture being connected to, and transformed by social activity during the course of their life, with the capacity to effect human behaviour (Gosden and Marshall 1999). Artefact biography, like use-life, shares a common concern with charting the longitudinal stages of cultural objects, but the interplay between material culture and specific social relations is a central goal. Because of a concern with social relations much material culture 'biography' is underpinned by text and print media to examine how objects continue to operate in contemporary cultural and cross-cultural settings (Saunders 1999; Walter et al. 2004).

It should be clear that 'use-life' and 'artefact biography', then, represent complimentary avenues to explore material culture items, like monuments, that do not 'die' or permanently retire from social life. A division between the two approaches is becoming increasingly apparent, however, with monumental architecture interpreted largely in functional terms as the materialized ideology of a dominant group-to communicate on a grand scale and provide a symbolic focus of a polity (Kolb 1994; Blanton et al. 1996)-contrasting with the creation of a monument'biography', as Holtorf (1999) has done for Neolithic monuments in Germany, from construction around 6,000 years ago to the present. Holtorf (1999:34) makes the point that: "Megaliths are thus not merely of the Neolithic, but of many different periods since the Neolithic."

Contemporary transformation to the Pulemelei mound and its environs include landscape change as vegetation was cleared and field monuments were exposed, archaeological investigations

that have affected several structures, and the incorporation of the mound into modern Samoan culture. Monuments are powerful symbols able to be mobilized in the service of groups, reflecting local, regional and national concerns and are venues for political and cultural activity. By charting these dimensions at Pulemelei we seek to further understand the variation and meaning of prehistoric monumental architecture in Samoa.

### **Pulemelei in the Past**

From past experience working with ceremonial sites like the ahu of Rapa Nui and *marae* of the Society Islands (Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1999, 2000; Martinsson-Wallin and Crockford 2002; Wallin and Solsvik 2002) and issues related to megalith graves in Scandinavia (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin 1986, 1997) we see several challenges when excavating and understanding the temporal status and function of prehistoric monuments. Often the search for a specific monument function is elusive as we find evidence of monument use in prehistoric, historic and contemporary periods involving rebuilding and re-use. A fruitful way to investigate and analyse the complicated history of monuments is to examine qualitative and quantitative data together by multivariate techniques (Wallin 1993; Martinsson-Wallin 1994). Such analyses can be used to create new hypotheses about social organization and power relation that can be tested by excavation. Traditional history and ethnohistorical accounts add further density to monument history.

An extensive area of the prehistoric settlement at Letolo Plantation was surveyed in the 1970s and the data used in reconstructions of the prehistoric settlement pattern (Jennings et al. 1982; Green 2002, Asaua 2005). In an effort to further understand the specific context and meaning of the Pulemelei monument within the settlement pattern at Letolo we have carried out a correspondence analysis. This can be thought of as an example of archaeological 'reuse'. We used survey data from three areas, referred to as 'Wards' (Jennings et al. 1982:84). The 'Ward' concept has been discussed and criticized by Asaua (2005) and Green (2002), but refers to a cluster of households that included a high-status domicile that may be the house of the lineage head. The main purpose of the correspondence analysis is to create new hypotheses (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Benzecri 1992) about the nature of settlement. The material is currently analysed by the aid of this relational statistical method and the results will be published elsewhere (Wallin and Martinsson-Wallin nd.).

### **Pulemelei in the Present**

The foundation of Samoan prehistory was established by Green and Davidson and colleagues in the 1960s and later by Jennings and associates in the 1970s, when an extensive survey of prehistoric remains at the Letolo plantation was made. Later on the plantation went out of use and the mound was overgrown with a thick cover of tropical vegetation that hid the monumental dimensions of the structure to the point that visitors to the site were often unaware they were standing on the top of an artificial stone mound 12 m high with base edges 60 m long. During archaeological excavations of the Pulemelei mound by our team in 2002-04 the vegetation was cleared. Improved monument visibility, access and the interest in the scientific research increased renewed interest in the site. A large purification ceremony of the mound was carried out on the initiative of the landowners before excavations in 2003 (Tamasese 2003; Martinsson-Wallin 2004b). The ceremony had many dimensions, including communication with past and present Samoan and Polynesian people as Pulemelei is seen as a central point (Hawaiki cf. Sava'i'i) of Polynesian colonists who settled distance islands such as Aotearoa, Rapa Nui and Hawaii. The local and international dimensions of the ceremony reinforced ownership and land-rights but at the same time emphasized the commonality of Polynesian descent, and the bridging of "spoken" traditional Samoan knowledge with the scientific perspectives of archaeology (Tamasese 2004).

In 2004 a cultural heritage study of the Letolo Plantation and Pulemelei Mound was initiated and carried out by students from Gotland University in Sweden (Bredholt and Vuijsters 2004). The study suggested that management of the prehistoric remains at the Letolo plantation be supported by the Samoan government and landowners. The importance of Pulemelei heritage values was

recognized by the current Samoan government, which has offered financial support and help in setting up a heritage precinct-the first time prehistoric structures have received recognition in Samoa. However, the renewed interest has also brought conflict over land-rights raised by the *matai* (chiefs) of Vailoa village.

According to Ward and Ashcroft (1998), 67 per cent of Samoa's land is customary land and belongs to the villages. This land is under the control of the village *matai* (chiefs) and can only be leased to other Samoan *matai*. However, a trend towards more individual forms of land control over the last two decades has taken place with individuals accumulating relatively large customary land holdings. This trend according to a report from the Department of Statistics and Agriculture in 1990 is not accepted by the Land and Title Court as legitimate (Ward and Ashcroft 1998:69-70). The general control over the use of customary land still rests with the village *fono* or chiefly council. It is difficult for central government to intervene over land issues since the traditional land tenure system is closely related to *fa'asamoa* (the Samoan way of life) which is based on identity and indigenous power structures.

Letolo Plantation has been freehold land for more than 100 years and the history goes back to the colonial era and German time. Eventually it came into the hand of Swedish merchant August Nelson and his Samoan wife, a chief's daughter from Safune. Today it is run as cooperation, Nelson Inc, and the various family branches are represented by a board of directors. Only seven per cent of all land in Samoa is currently considered freehold (Ward and Aschcroft 1998). A longstanding dispute between Vailoa *matai* and the owners of the Letolo Plantation over land ownership recently involved violent actions by *matai* and the issue has been taken to court. The *matai* have been fined, but in turn they have sued the current land owners for rent of the land over the past 100 years. The *matai* claim that the Pulemelei area is an ancient burial ground and customary land of the Vailoa people and the freehold status of Letolo is not legal. In such an environment archaeological research on Pulemelei has significance beyond academe and is embroiled in contemporary events.

The land dispute difficulties are understandable from a cultural aspect considering the change toward individually-owned land in Samoa constitutes a threat to the authority of the *matai* and the Samoan way of life. Regardless of whether these changes are generated from within Samoan society or derive interaction with the global system, it is now important to protect and manage the cultural heritage of prehistoric remains on Samoa.

The first steps were taken in 1987 with a proposal for a national museum and cultural centre (Neich 1987), although the proposal was not implemented. In 1994 the National Environment and Development Management Strategy was approved to protect four heritage buildings in Apia-the Supreme Court Building, the Customs House, Samoan Trust Estate Corporation Building and the Head of State's residence at Moto'otua. Restoration plans were developed but nothing was done due to lack of funds and the Customs House has since been demolished to make way for the high rise Development Bank of Samoa. Samoa ratified the World Heritage Convention in 2001. A National Heritage Conservation Policy was approved by the government in 2005 and implemented by The Ministry of National Resources and Environment (MNREM). It pointed out that it is important to increase awareness and understanding of significant cultural and natural sites and that these are "among the priceless and irreplaceable possessions not only of each nation but also of mankind as a whole" (Heritage Policy 2005:2). A Heritage Coordinating Committee has been established with

members from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESOC), Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, Ministry of Work, Transport and Infrastructure, Samoan Tourism Authority, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National University of Samoa, UNESCO and relevant non government organizations in Samoa.

Tourism to Samoa is increasing and the growth of this sector is one of the main sources of national income. In 2001 this sector accounted for 25 per cent of GDP. During interviews in 2005 about the general attitude and awareness of cultural heritage it was clearly thought that prehistoric material remains such as mounds, fortifications, old settlements, and archaeological finds are not seen as particularly important to conserve and manage compared to oral traditions and the *fa'asamoa* including the *matai* system (Litsfeldt 2005, Nord 2005). Some individuals thought that prehistoric structures were "evil" from pre-Christian times and should not be studied or actively preserved. Others thought the remains were unimportant or potentially threatening since knowledge about them might

conflict with information in oral traditions, which underpin Samoan society. Interest about prehistoric remains was found among individuals and organizations involved in tourism and among government officials working in education.

The heritage project at Letolo is supported by the World Monument Funds (a UNESCO related organization) and the site is included in the 2006 watch list of the most endangered monuments in the world. To strengthen understanding of archaeology and the value of prehistory at Letolo and Samoa, a teacher exchange between The National University of Samoa and Gotland University, has recently been granted through the Swedish International Development Organization, sponsored Linnaeus-Palme exchange during 2005-07. We agree with the Tongan scholar Helu (1999:8) when he states that academics and students have an active part to play in civil society.

In summary, we have discussed how a monument built in the past is viewed and used by contemporary society. Our archaeological investigations were the catalyst for the re-emergence of the mound in cultural life after a long period of inactivity. Modern use of the mound led us to consider how a monument can be a venue for local and international messaging, a centre of ceremony and dispute, and a structure of national significance. The manifold uses of Pulemelei today hint at functional variation in the past meaning that although monuments are relatively static structures the social activity associated with them was both varied and complicated. As archaeologists we recorded changes made to the Pulemelei mound in prehistory reflecting temporal variation in use. The challenge is to not only relate these changes to past behaviour, but also to be aware of the effects of research, so that the heritage values of monuments are recognized and valued by those who use them today.

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