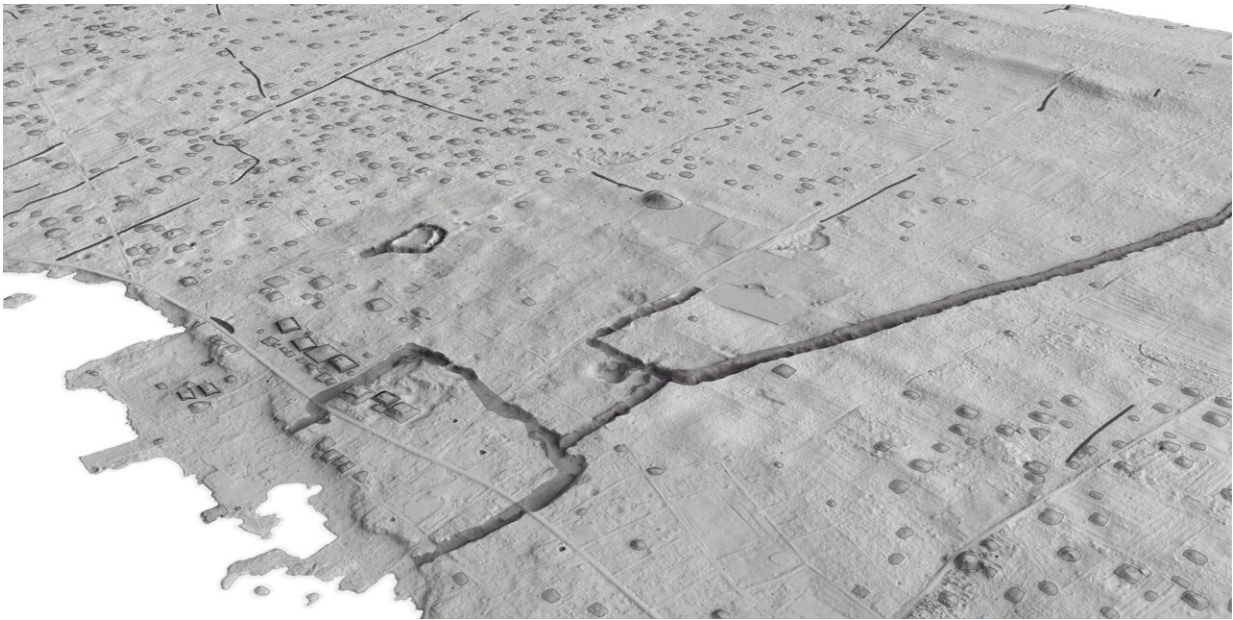


Pacific cities found to be much older than previously thought

April 11 2024



A view of the urban area at Mu'a. Credit: Phillip Parton/ANU.

New evidence of one of the first cities in the Pacific shows they were established much earlier than previously thought, according to new research from The Australian National University (ANU).

The study used aerial laser scanning to map [archaeological sites](#) on the island of Tongatapu in Tonga and has been published in the [Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory](#).

Lead author, Ph.D. scholar Phillip Parton, said the new timeline also indicates that [urbanization](#) in the Pacific was an indigenous innovation that developed before Western influence.

"Earth structures were being constructed in Tongatapu around AD 300. This is 700 years earlier than previously thought," Mr. Parton said.

"As settlements grew, they had to come up with new ways of supporting that growing population. This kind of set-up—what we call low density urbanization—sets in motion huge social and [economic change](#). People are interacting more and doing different kinds of work."

Mr. Parton said traditionally, studying urbanization in the Pacific has been tricky due to challenges collecting data, but new technology has changed that.

"We were able to combine high-tech mapping and archaeological fieldwork to understand what was happening in Tongatapu," he said.

"Having this type of information really adds to our understanding of early Pacific societies.

"Urbanization is not an area that had been investigated much until now. When people think of early cities they usually think of traditional old European cities with compact housing and windy cobblestone streets. This is a very different kind of city.

"But it shows the contribution of the Pacific to urban science. We can see clues that Tongatapu's influence spread across the southwest Pacific Ocean between the 13th and 19th centuries."

According to Mr. Parton, the collapse of this kind of low-density urbanization in Tonga was largely due to the arrival of Europeans.

"It didn't collapse because the system was flawed; it was more to do with the arrival of Europeans and introduced diseases," he said.

"This is just the beginning in terms of early Pacific [settlements](#). There's likely still much to be discovered."

More information: Phillip Parton et al, Low-Density Urbanisation: Prestate Settlement Growth in a Pacific Society, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10816-024-09647-8](#)

Provided by Australian National University

Citation: Pacific cities found to be much older than previously thought (2024, April 11) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-pacific-cities-older-previously-thought.html>

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