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# ROBERT CARL SUGGS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PACIFIC ARCHAEOLOGY: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

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**ABSTRACT:** The 1950s were a pivotal era in Polynesian archaeology, with the beginnings of stratigraphic excavations and application of radiocarbon dating. Robert Carl Suggs played a key role with his seminal work on Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands. Suggs's use of artefact seriation, and his focus on architecture along with portable artefacts, were key methodological contributions. Unlike other contemporaries, Suggs brought a holistic anthropological perspective to his interpretations of culture change. Even though the chronology he proposed for Marquesan prehistory has been revised, his sequence of cultural periods remains relevant to current discussions of the Polynesian past.

*Keywords:* Robert C. Suggs, Polynesian archaeology, history of archaeology, seriation, culture history, Polynesian origins

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Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, archaeological research in Polynesia and elsewhere in the Pacific was almost exclusively limited to surface survey and mapping of stone architecture; finding no pottery and lacking any means of direct dating, archaeologists despaired of constructing an independent chronology. Instead, indigenous genealogies and oral traditions provided the bases for estimating the time depth of Polynesian settlement. Building upon the foundations laid by Churchill (1911), Fornander (1878), Smith (1921) and others, ethnologists such as Handy (1930a, 1930b) and Hīroa (1938) interpreted Polynesian history in terms of a succession of migrations, each “wave” introducing distinct sets of cultural traits. Only Burrows (1938) offered an alternative model, in which the differences between Western and Eastern Polynesian cultures resulted from internal processes of cultural change and differentiation over time, but he too based his theory on ethnographic rather than archaeological evidence.

All this would change dramatically during the decade of the 1950s, a pivotal era in Polynesian archaeology. The decade opened with the release of Roger Duff's seminal monograph on the “moa hunter culture” of New Zealand, based on his excavations at Wairau Bar (Duff 1950). In 1951, Edward Gifford of Berkeley published the results of his 1947 expedition to Fiji, outlining a stratigraphic succession of ceramic styles (Gifford 1951); Gifford would soon report a radiocarbon date—one of the first

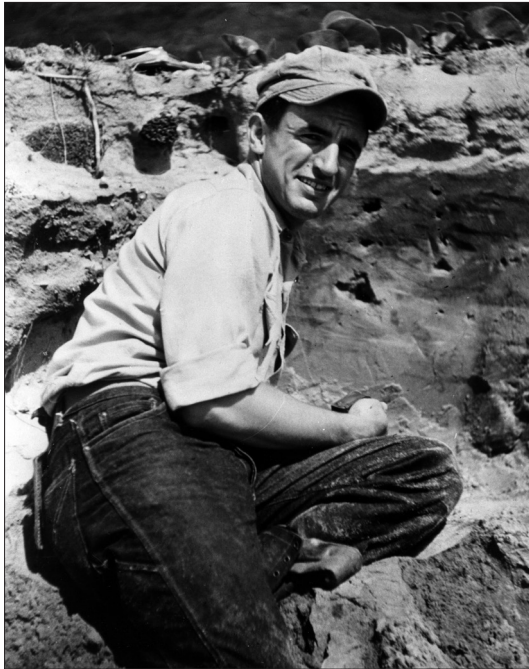


Figure 1. Robert Carl Suggs cleaning a stratigraphic section at the Ha'atuatua site. Nuku Hiva Island, in 1956. (Photo courtesy Robert Suggs)

from the Pacific—of  $950 \pm 300$  from site 17 on Viti Levu (Gifford 1952). Encouraged by these results, Gifford turned to New Caledonia in 1952, where he uncovered a ceramic sequence that included at its base what would soon come to be known as “Lapita” pottery (Gifford and Shutler 1956). On the western margins of the Pacific, Alexander Spoehr’s fieldwork in the Marianas Islands likewise demonstrated the potential of systematic excavations, augmented by ceramic seriation and radiocarbon dating, to develop cultural chronologies (Spoehr 1957). Although their results would not be published until the end of the decade, Emory and his students in Hawai‘i had also commenced a program of excavations, and were likewise availing themselves of the revolutionary new tool of radiocarbon dating (Emory *et al.* 1959; Sinoto 1959).

The intellectual excitement generated by these advances was palpable, encouraging other scholars and institutions to look to the Pacific as a new

field for archaeological research. Among these was New York's American Museum of Natural History, where Harry L. Shapiro held the position of Curator and Chairman of the Department of Anthropology. Shapiro, who had conducted physical anthropological research in Polynesia, saw the new opportunities for archaeological research and organised a short expedition to the Marquesas in 1956 (Shapiro 1958). Accompanying Shapiro was a young veteran of the US Marine Corps and Columbia University graduate student, Robert Carl Suggs.<sup>1</sup> The 1956 reconnaissance was sufficiently productive that Shapiro arranged funding for Suggs to return to Nuku Hiva Island for a year's fieldwork in 1957, the basis for Suggs's doctoral dissertation at Columbia, published soon thereafter as a monograph by the American Museum (Suggs 1961).

Although Suggs's foray into Polynesian archaeology was relatively brief (he soon left academia for a career as a military analyst), his influence on the field of Pacific archaeology was substantial, including not only his contribution to Marquesan prehistory but the first major synthesis of Polynesian culture history using archaeology in combination with emerging data from the allied fields of historical linguistics and physical anthropology (Suggs 1960a). He also published a popular account of his Marquesan expedition, a children's book about Polynesia, and a study of Marquesan sexual behaviour (Suggs 1962a, 1962b, 1966). In this article, I look retrospectively at Suggs's impact on Polynesian archaeology and prehistory during this pivotal era, with emphasis on his theoretical and methodological orientations and on his holistic anthropological approach to Polynesian culture history.

#### SUGGS'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO METHOD AND THEORY

Suggs explicitly rejected what he called the "traditionalist" approach to Polynesian prehistory, based on "comparative studies of the abundant oral traditions of the various island groups or through studies of the distribution of traits or trait complexes" (1961: 11; see also Suggs 1960b). Rather, his approach was fundamentally based on the material evidence obtained through stratigraphic excavation, with the chronological succession of cultural "periods" determined through the use of artefact seriation augmented by radiocarbon dating (1961: 19). Yet Suggs was also thoroughly grounded in the "four-field", holistic anthropology of the mid-twentieth century; he was consequently open to drawing upon research from other subfields such as linguistics and cultural anthropology in his interpretations of cultural change (see below).

While some of Suggs's excavation practices might seem outdated today (such as the use of five-foot squares, digging primarily with shovels rather than trowels, and screening through coarse ¼-inch mesh), other aspects of

his methodology were more advanced than those of his contemporaries. In particular, Suggs emphasised the importance of digging by “natural stratigraphic levels” rather than by “arbitrary levels” (although the latter were resorted to when natural strata were not evident; Suggs 1961: 17). In this respect his procedures were an improvement over those of both Gifford and Emory, who applied the University of California’s system of excavation by artificial six-inch levels, completely disregarding natural stratigraphy (Heizer 1949; see Kirch 1997 for further discussion of Gifford’s methods).

A cornerstone of Suggs’s approach was the application of “historical typology” to the artefact assemblages he recovered through excavation, and the use of the resulting typology for seriation, so as to order his site assemblages chronologically. Although Suggs availed himself of radiocarbon dating, the method was still expensive, with dates accompanied by large error margins (ranging from  $\pm 100$  to  $\pm 180$  years in the case of the Nuku Hiva dates; 1961: 20, table 1). Radiocarbon dates were obtained from just four of the more than twenty sites that Suggs excavated. Seriation of artefact types was therefore essential to placing all of these sites into a coherent chronological framework.

Suggs was well aware of the debates regarding artefact classification and “typology” that were ongoing in North American archaeology at the time (e.g., Willey and Phillips 1958); he likely was also influenced by interactions with James A. Ford, a master of ceramic typology and seriation at the American Museum, where Suggs worked up his Nuku Hiva collections. Indeed, Suggs references Ford’s seriations in the Lower Mississippi Valley and the Viru Valley of Peru as examples of the “historical type” concept. Lacking other than a handful of potsherds from Nuku Hiva, however, Suggs turned to fishhooks, coral files and adzes as the main artefact categories for which he developed his “historical types”.

It is evident from Suggs’s discussion of “typology” (1961: 17–19) that his method was not that of *classification* (either in the sense of paradigmatic or of taxonomic classification) but rather that of *grouping* (see Dunnell 1971). That is to say, through an ad hoc process of trial and error, Suggs grouped and regrouped sets of artefacts until he arrived at sets of fishhooks or coral files that exhibited patterns of temporal change. “Trial types of fishhooks and coral files were established”, after which the frequencies of these types were arranged to see if the resulting order of sites matched that provided by the key radiocarbon dates (1961: 18). The method worked, as such grouping often does, although it had the drawback of not being replicable to other sites or assemblages. In this regard Suggs’s fishhook “types” are quite different from the fishhook classification developed at the same time for Hawaiian collections by Emory *et al.* (1959). Nonetheless, Suggs’s application of typology and seriation was an important and novel contribution to Polynesian archaeology.

A second important methodological contribution was the integration of architectural styles into this chronological sequence. Whereas contemporaries such as Duff in New Zealand or Emory in Hawai'i were focused almost exclusively on portable artefacts to define cultural periods or sequences, Suggs regarded non-portable architecture as an important aspect of culture change. Even though many of these sites, such as *tohua* 'dance platforms', *paepae* 'house platforms' and fortifications, did not yield extensive arrays of fishhooks or other artefacts as did the coastal dune sites and rockshelters, Suggs devoted considerable effort to their excavation. Consequently, temporal changes in architecture, such as the development of the "transitional paepae" and the "megalithic paepae" figured prominently in Suggs's interpretation of Marquesan culture history, allowing him to infer processes of social and political change.

It is also informative to note what Suggs did *not* do in his Marquesan fieldwork. A glaring omission was the lack of any zooarchaeological analysis of faunal remains. Although he mentions the presence of vertebrate and invertebrate remains in his sites (his coastal sites and rockshelters were undoubtedly rich in such materials), and evidently collected such fauna (1961: 17), the only data presented in his monograph are the presence/absence of pig, dog, rat and cat bones by site (1961: 195). Suggs was not alone in this regard; Spoehr (1957) in the Marianas, and the Norwegian Expedition archaeologists on Rapa Nui (Heyerdahl and Ferdon 1961), also largely neglected faunal remains. Gifford, in contrast, went to great lengths to have zoological specialists identify and analyse both vertebrate and invertebrate materials from his Fijian and New Caledonian excavations. Given the presence of numerous specialist zoology curators at the American Museum who could have aided him in identifications, it is surprising that Suggs did not make more of an effort to glean economic information from his faunal remains.

A second omission from Suggs's methodology was that of a "settlement pattern" approach, which was then emerging in North American archaeology, largely at Harvard University under the direction of Gordon Willey (1956). While Suggs reports a variety of site types in his Nuku Hiva monograph and emphasised changes in architectural styles in his analysis of the Marquesan cultural sequence, the distribution and spatial organisation of sites over the landscape was not part of his research strategy. It was thus not until Willey's student Roger C. Green began work on Mo'orea Island in 1960 (also under the aegis of Harry Shapiro and the American Museum) that the settlement pattern approach was introduced to Polynesia (Green 1961). This difference in approach may be more reflective of the mentoring that Suggs received at Columbia (primarily under Shapiro) than of any intentional neglect of the new settlement pattern paradigm.

SUGGS'S INTERPRETATIONS OF MARQUESAN AND POLYNESIAN  
CULTURE HISTORY

Turning from Suggs's methodology to his interpretations of Marquesan prehistory similarly sheds light on this critical period in the history of Polynesian and Pacific archaeology. As with other fieldworkers in the 1950s, one of Suggs's main objectives was to determine the timing of initial settlement of the Marquesas, as well as the homeland from which the first settlers originated. While most scholars of the time accepted that Polynesian origins lay in the western Pacific, whether this had been via migration routes through Micronesia or Melanesia was debated (Hiroa 1938). Moreover, Thor Heyerdahl's arguments for an American origin of the original populations in Eastern Polynesia (Heyerdahl 1952), popularised by the *Kon-Tiki* voyage, had thrown the older theories into question. The Norwegian Archaeological Expedition, concurrent with Suggs's own Marquesan fieldwork, was organised by Heyerdahl in an effort to prove his theory.

Suggs reviewed the radiocarbon dates from the Ha'atuatua site NHaa 1 in the context of the limited number of other Polynesian dated sites then available, including Wairau Bar in New Zealand (Duff 1950), South Point Dune Site in Hawai'i (Emory *et al.* 1959), Vailele in Sāmoa (Golson 1961), and from sites in the western Pacific (Fiji, New Caledonia and the Marianas)—ultimately advancing the case for initial settlement of the Marquesas around 150 BC. In hindsight, it is evident that Suggs's two earliest dates (of  $1910 \pm 180$  and  $2080 \pm 150$  BP) were not accurate indications of initial Polynesian arrival; most likely, the dated samples were of old driftwood, with substantial "in-built age". (Suggs's other two dates from Ha'atuatua, of  $1090 \pm 180$  and  $1270 \pm 150$  BP, more accurately reflect the true age of initial Marquesan settlement.) In those pioneering days of radiocarbon dating, however, the dates seemed reasonable, especially in light of Suggs's discovery of pottery and adze types that appeared to demonstrate a link between Sāmoa (where Golson had also uncovered pottery at Vailele dating to the first century AD) and the Marquesas.

Bringing to his argument evidence from the seminal linguistic work of Grace (1959) on "Malayo-Polynesian" (Austronesian) languages, Suggs proceeded to outline what he called "a broad picture" of the expansion of Austronesian-speaking peoples into the Pacific:

By at least 2000 B.C. the islands east of the Philippines had already been penetrated and settled by exploring groups moving eastward. The Melanesian islands on the western fringes of the Polynesian triangle were settled by 1000 B.C. or earlier. Sometime, possibly in the middle of the first millennium B.C., the Western Polynesian islands were settled. By the second century B.C. one settlement had definitely been established in Eastern Polynesia, in the Marquesas Islands. (1961: 176)

With the exception of that final claim for Marquesan settlement by the second century BC, this scenario has proved to be remarkably prescient. In addition, Suggs pointed specifically to the pottery uncovered by Gifford at Site 13, Lapita, and its similarities to pottery in Fiji and Tonga, tentatively suggesting that both New Caledonia and Fiji were settled by 1000 BC. Once again, a remarkably accurate prediction.

With respect to the settlement of the Marquesas and Eastern Polynesia, Suggs directly challenged the then-recent thesis of Andrew Sharp (1956) that the Polynesian islands had been settled mainly by “accidental” voyages rather than as a result of intentionally navigated voyages. Decades before the experimental voyages of the *Hōkūle‘a* and other replicated canoes were to stimulate a rethinking of Polynesian “wayfinding”, Suggs argued from archaeological evidence that the initial settlers of the Marquesas arrived via “well-equipped expeditions” carrying with them domesticated plants and animals (1961: 180). “[A]lthough the ultimate destination of the migration may not have been foreseen, the expedition was apparently quite well conceived and planned” (1961: 181).

Having addressed the fundamental questions of the timing and origin of the first settlers to the Marquesas, Suggs then turned his attention to “the culture history of the Marquesas as reconstructed from the archaeological remains” (1961: 181). It is in this regard that Suggs’s work stands out as particularly innovative when compared to that of his contemporaries. Whereas Gifford, Spoehr and Emory were content to confine their reconstructions of “culture history” to sequences of changes in artefact styles, Suggs’s goal was to write an *anthropological* account of Marquesan cultural development over time. Thus, he writes: “The periods of Marquesan prehistory were established on the basis of four factors: socio-political organisation, settlement patterns, economic base, and technology, to the extent that these can be inferred from the archaeological data” (1961: 21). Suggs explicitly rejected an approach in which temporal periods were defined on “a technological history”, opting instead for “a developmental terminology based on socio-political, demographical, economic, and technological factors” (1961: 21). His Marquesan culture history was thus defined by the following periods: Settlement (150 BC to AD 100), Developmental (AD 100 to 1100), Expansion (AD 1100 to 1400), Classic (AD 1400 to 1790) and Historic (post-AD 1790). Although subsequent revisions to the radiocarbon-based chronology of the archipelago have required a shortening of the time scale (especially a shortening of the Developmental Period), it is noteworthy that subsequent generations of archaeologists working in the Marquesas have found it useful to retain the period sequence (e.g., Allen 2004).

It is beyond my scope in this brief essay to fully parse Suggs’s arguments regarding the development of Marquesan society; however, a few points deserve mention. One is Suggs’s engagement with the theory of Polynesian



“status rivalry” that had been initially outlined by Irving Goldman (1957), an example of how Suggs brought anthropological theory to bear in his interpretation of Marquesan culture history. In the archaeological record of the Classic Period, Suggs saw evidence for marked “status and prestige differences”, for example in ornaments and in elaborate architecture. “The ostentatious facades and the poorly built rear portions of these imposing [megalithic paepae] can have no other meaning” (1961: 185). But Suggs went beyond Goldman to draw a causal chain between prestige rivalry, demography and resource limitation:

The cause of the intense prestige rivalry may be seen in the relation of the population to the habitable land. As the population increased beyond the point at which all possible ecological niches became filled, intergroup conflicts over land would have increased. ... The need to acquire and hold the land necessary for existence and to increase the areas held to accommodate population increases intensified to an extreme the rivalry apparently present in most Polynesian societies. (1961: 185–86)

This is not to suggest that Suggs merely borrowed anthropological theory unquestioningly. Indeed, he specifically took issue with the hypothesis presented by Marshall Sahlins (1958) that “ramage” type social organisations in Polynesia emerged where resources were too scattered to be exploited by single households. While acknowledging that Sahlins’s model had “great interpretive value”, Suggs averred that “the Marquesas may also be added to the exceptions to his hypothetical relationship” (1961: 189).

\* \* \*

In retrospect, some six decades after his seminal work was published, Robert Carl Suggs occupies a fascinating cusp point in the history of Pacific archaeology, indeed in the larger history of archaeological theory and practice. While his methods were firmly anchored in the “culture historical” paradigm of North American archaeology as advocated by mentors such as James A. Ford, for example using ad hoc typology and seriation as key tools, Suggs differed from those mentors and other contemporaries in his broad, holistic vision of an anthropological archaeology (even before that term had come into use). A year before Binford (1962) published his famous “archaeology as anthropology” polemic, Suggs had advanced sophisticated interpretations of Marquesan and Polynesian prehistory that drew upon theories of sociopolitical processes (status rivalry), economic factors (resource limitation) and demographic change; he was not afraid to venture beyond the limited models of technological change that characterised most archaeological interpretations of his time. In this respect, Suggs anticipated much of what would become core tenets of the “New Archaeology”.

For his own reasons, Suggs chose not to continue in the field of Polynesian archaeology.<sup>2</sup> One can only speculate as to what further contributions he might have made had he kept his hand in the game. Regardless, during the pivotal years of the late 1950s, Suggs's contributions helped to transform Pacific archaeology in ways that continue to resonate to this day.

## NOTES

1. Robert Carl Suggs was born 24 February 1932 and passed away 17 April 2021. I had the pleasure of meeting Suggs in the mid-1990s when he and his wife, Rae, visited Berkeley, California. He was engaging and personable; I recall that we talked long into the evening about the Marquesas and Polynesian archaeology.
2. The late Prof. Irving Rouse told me many years ago that after Suggs completed his PhD at Columbia, Yale University attempted to recruit him to the Anthropology faculty. Rouse claimed that Suggs declined the offer on the grounds that he was able to earn a substantially higher salary using his well-known linguistic talents translating Soviet military intelligence, this being the era of the Cold War.

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