Wood Charcoal Analysis, Sacred Woods, and Inter-Site Variability in the Late Prehistoric Society Islands

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Anthropological studies have been under-utilized in Polynesia for building social interpretations and this paper addresses how such data can be used, particularly as a means for documenting inter-site variability related to status difference, site function, and site specialization. The case study provides identifications of wood charcoal recovered from posthole features excavated at prehistoric house structures in the windward Society Islands. The study tests whether late prehistoric house sites of varying social status and function differed in the types of trees used in their construction. Comparative analyses of ethnographic data demonstrate that the choice of wood used in house post construction reflects differential access to certain economically important and symbolically charged tree species. The archaeological data provides empirical support that variation in the wood used in prehistoric Society Island house structures has social relevance and can be used as another line of evidence to infer social status and site function. Anthropological studies in Polynesia then provide insights into the political economy and demonstrate how the materialization of status distinction served as a legitimation of power, in addition to their more traditional use as a means for assessing human-settlement systems from an ecological point of view.

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