

The Ancient Hawaiians

The ancient Hawaiians, like most other indigenous peoples, felt an incredible rapport and connection with nature. They believed that the forces that caused thunder and lightning, or created sunshine and rainbows, were the same elemental forces that allowed them to stand, to walk, and to chant. These godly forces were so powerfully alive in the experience of the Hawaiians that they were recognized as beings and identified with names. Thus, not so unlike the people of ancient Egypt or Greece, the Hawaiians perceived a pantheon of gods, goddesses, and demigods as the sources of fire, water, and snow, and as dwelling in fish, animals, and plants. Pele, Kū, Kāne, Lono, and Māui are some of the gods still remembered today.

The ancient Hawaiian taro farmer, canoe builder, and fisherman, through his craft, was in constant discourse with the gods, for the gods were everywhere. Plants, soil, wood, stone, wind, and light all held more than just material significance for Hawaiians. Theirs was a meaning-filled natural world that instructed them not to kill the 'ō'ō bird for its yellow feathers, but to trap it, pluck two feathers, and release it to grow new ones. Their reading of "the book of nature" gave the Hawaiians a practice of medicine and art of healing far advanced in comparison to that of the westerners who in the eighteenth century "discovered" the Hawaiian civilization. Their deep understanding of the natural world order produced in them, for example, the knowledge needed to develop and manage fishponds for productivity over many centuries. Their culture exemplified how the human community can enjoy a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship with nature.

Mythology

This direct relationship to nature was understood and orally transmitted by the ancient Hawaiians through living, imaginative stories—that is through myths and legends that told the tale of their culture. This traditional history presented the world in such a way that values, meaning, and morality were of greater importance than, or at least equal to, the physical events being chronicled. These legends imparted the knowledge that physical objects were the result of creative deeds, and that facts were the by-product of godly activity. Thus Pele, the red-haired volcano goddess, is credited with bringing the visual art of image making to the islands, perhaps because of the infinite form possibilities of lava rock structures. She was considered the goddess of natural sculpture, an artist of "earthworks."

The Kapu System

The social order of old Hawai'i was very clearly defined. The *kapu* system set down strict societal "do's and don'ts," and the transgressor paid with his or her life. All crimes were capital offenses, even fishing out of season, stepping on the chief's shadow, or eating bananas or pig (if you were a woman). Acquittal was possible for a *kapu* breaker if he or she could reach a *pu'uhonua* (place of refuge) and be cleansed and exonerated of the misdeed by a *kahuna* (priest) there. In times of war, the *pu'uhonua* was especially important as a refuge for warriors and women and children whose side had been defeated in battle.

The Ali'i

The focal point of the Hawaiian social order and *kapu* system was the *ali'i*, the royal class. From this high-born group came the ruler-caretakers of the islands. They spoke with the continuous voice of their ancestors and were protectors of the gods on earth. Some ruled well and others not so well. Some would only go out at night so as to diminish the possibility of their subjects unintentionally breaking various *kapu* against them. Others took advantage of the *kapu* system, killing or inflicting suffering without reason.

Kamehameha the Great (1758–1819) is remembered as a powerful as well as a wise ruler. He was responsible for uniting all of the islands' chiefly domains into one great kingdom under his leadership, but he was also the last to rule under the *kapu* system.

From: Ancient Sites of Oahu

by Van James

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Only months after his death in 1819, his favorite wife Ka'ahumanu and his son Liholiho abolished the old laws forever.

The *Kāhuna*

Chiefs such as Kamehameha had *kāhuna* as their advisors. These assistants were not just spiritual counselors, but were political advisors as well. In many cases the *kāhuna* provided the actual direction and vision behind the *ali'i* class.

Hawaiian oral tradition speaks of Pā'ao, a light-skinned *kahuna* who came to the islands in the tenth century, some say from Upolu, Samoa, others from Kahiki (Tahiti). Arriving on the Big Island of Hawai'i, he engineered the overthrow of the harsh ruling chief, Kamaiole. The lesser chiefs wanted Pā'ao to become the paramount ruler, but instead he sent to his homeland for a suitable *ali'i* who could renew the Hawaiian royal class. Pili Ka'ai'ea was brought to Hawai'i to become the new high chief, and it is from him that Kamehameha descended. Along with introducing the new line of *ali'i*, Pā'ao also strengthened an emphasis on the war god, Kū, and probably initiated the practice of human sacrifice. Tradition also indicates that Pā'ao introduced the religious use of *ki'i*, or images, as well as more elaborate *heiau* designs than had been previously known.

A *kahuna*, however, might not only be a spiritual and/or political leader. A *kahuna* might also be a doctor, an artist, a craftsman, or a farmer. Specialists in many fields were in fact *kāhuna*. Long and disciplined training under a master was required to become a *kahuna kalai* (master carver), a *kahuna niho* (dentist), a *kahuna 'upena hana* (master fishnet maker), or a *kahuna ho'o o ulu'ai* (agricultural expert). These skills and talents were passed from generation to generation, from master to apprentice, through internships that began often at a very early age and involved primarily imitation and repetitive practice. No books, charts, or other written materials were used in training the *baku mele ula* (master of chants and music), and yet thousands of lines of verse could be recalled and chanted. No compass, no sextant, no radar was available to the *kahuna ho'okele* (navigator), and yet by reading the flights of birds, the size, shape and color of clouds, the wave movements, currents, and

stars, this *kahuna* could safely guide his canoe, or a fleet, through thousands of miles of ocean (a feat doubted by western scholars until only recently). Such disciplines as the *kāhuna* class had developed prior to the mid-eighteenth century and western contact indicate a civilization which, although technically resembling the stone age, demonstrated very highly developed human capabilities.

Ancient Sites

The *kahuna* accepted their creative skills as an inheritance from the *'aumākua* (ancestral spirits) and the higher gods. Together with the *ali'i* and the commoners, they showed their gratitude and reverence by presenting offerings at shrines and *heiau*, and by worshipping before sacred *pōhaku* (stones) and wooden *ki'i* (images). What exists today as the ruins of ancient Hawaiian religious places, as well as the seemingly mundane remnants of aquacultural activity, petroglyphs, and the like, are but the bare bones of a once flourishing culture. Still, these bare bones of the archaeological record, together with mythology and traditional history, provide us with a glimpse into the rich cultural past of Hawai'i.

Most of the ancient sites of the Hawaiian islands are several hundred years old, according to scientific dating methods. As these methods are improved, the suggested time of settlement of the islands is continually pushed back. The latest estimates now point to the third century A.D. However, neither dating techniques nor the archaeological reconstruction of ancient sites are exact or final, as speculation based on limited evidence is often involved. What we consider to be true today is not what many thought was true yesterday or what may be recognized as true tomorrow.

This introduction to the ancient sites of O'ahu deals only with *heiau* (temples), *pōhaku* (stones), petroglyphs (engravings in rock), cave shelters, and fishponds of the island. Additional structures mentioned only in passing include house sites, animal pens, walls, agricultural terraces, irrigation ditches, wells, salt pans, paths and roads, *hōlua* (sled courses), and *pu'uhonua* (places of refuge). These latter sites are not of lesser importance, for they all contribute to an understanding of the old Hawaiian culture; they simply lie beyond the scope of this book.

Types of Sites

Heiau

(Temples) and Shrines



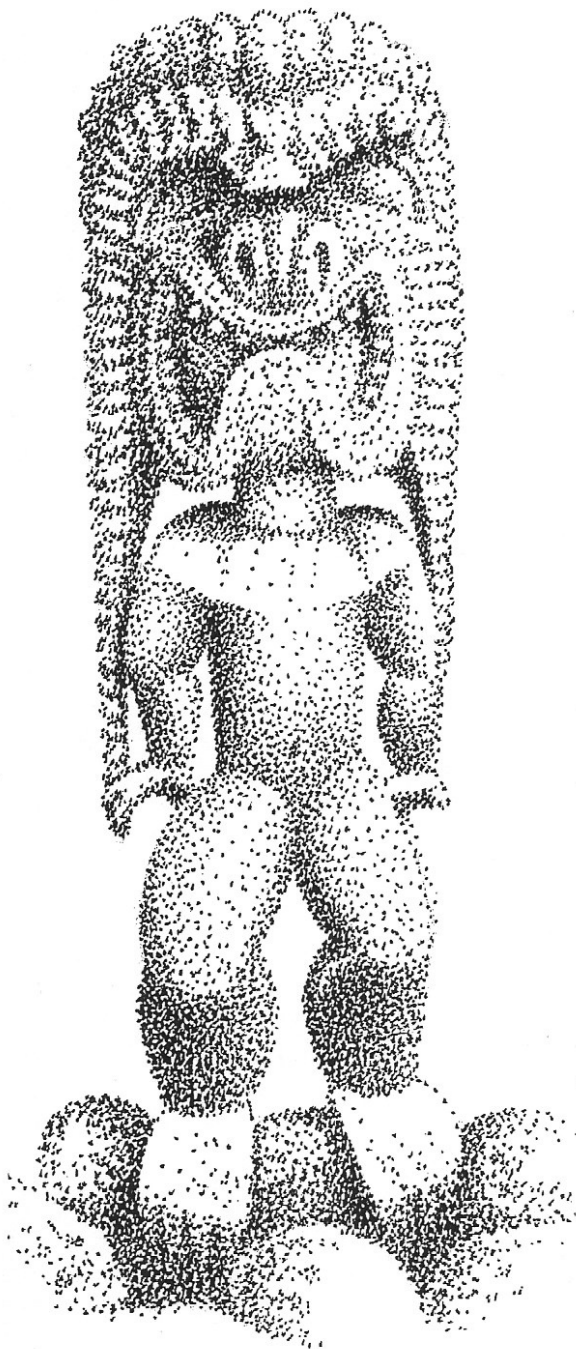
A *heiau* is a Hawaiian temple, a place of worship, offering, and/or sacrifice. It is not only the most enduring architectural form from pre-Christian Hawai'i, but it is also the most important architectural form from the perspective of Hawaiian religion. As with most ancient civilizations, the temple architecture well represents and expresses the people and their culture. With an intense and immediate experience of the forces in nature and an intuitive relationship with their gods, the ancient Hawaiians looked to the *heiau* and their *kāhuna* (priests) for order, understanding and guidance in the ways of the universe. This was the case right into practical everyday matters, such as ascertaining the times for planting and harvesting, fishing and refraining from fishing, healing illness and mending broken bones, giving thanks and being at peace with one's neighbors, and going to war and taking another's life. The *kahuna* was responsible to the people as a mediator between them and their gods. Each chief always had at least one *kahuna* to consult, particularly on questions dealing with the maintenance of power, and the *heiau* was the main center for *kāhuna* activity.

According to oral tradition, Pā'ao was the first priest to bring from Kahiki a new religious impulse promoting the gods Kū and Lono, but particularly Kū, the war god. It is believed that during his era, human sacrifice in connection with the worship of Kū superseded a more peaceful form of religious practice. Pā'ao is said to be the *kahuna kuikuhipu'uone*, or architect, behind the tenth century *heiau* Waha'ula and Mo'okini on the Big Island of Hawai'i, both of which were of the *luakini* (human sacrifice) type.

Ancient Sites of Oahu

by Van James

Greatly revered by Kamehameha I, Kū was usually depicted in a threatening pose with toothed grimace and flared nostrils, as shown in this illustration of the sculpture that stands at the Kāneʻāki Heiau in Waiʻanae (Site 39, pg. 88). Such *akua kiʻi*, carved wooden images, stood within and sometimes along the approach to temple precincts. These images embodied the *mana* of certain gods and spirits; they were not taken to be the gods themselves, but rather to be channeling posts for divine intervention, similar to the ancestral totem poles of the Pacific Northwest. Few authentic *akua kiʻi* survived the purging of the old religion that was carried out by the *aliʻi* themselves in the early nineteenth century.



Kū and Lono, who ruled over agriculture and was a god of peace, were already revered in Hawaiʻi at the time of the arrival of Pāʻao. Kāne, god of fresh water, and Kanaloa, god of the ocean, were also worshiped.

The line of Big Island chiefs, leading down to Kamehameha, stressed and ultimately spread the preference for Lono and the aggressive Kū over the other two gods. Kāneʻāki Heiau in Mākaha is known to have celebrated Kū as its central deity during its later period, but its name could be interpreted to suggest that Kāne was the god honored there at one time. Some archaeologists believe Lono was the god presiding over Kāneʻāki before Kū became more powerful.

Only high chiefs, through their *kāhuna*, could consecrate *heiau* of the *luakini* type, where sacrifices ensuring the chiefs' power were carried out in honor of Kū. The preferred human sacrifice was a captive enemy, a warrior with much *mana* (spiritual power), *aliʻi* having the greatest *mana*. A second-class sacrifice would be of a criminal, and the lowest grade would be a *kauā* (outcast), a person considered to have no *mana* and to be capable of robbing *mana* from others.

Human sacrifice occurred late in the development of many ancient civilizations. Perhaps human lives were taken in order to limit population growth. However, in Hawaiʻi, the *kāhuna* may have demanded human sacrifice in order to maintain a "fresh" connection to the *aumākua* at a time when the spiritual vision of the *kāhuna* was felt to be failing and in need of the help of a mediator.

Although human sacrifice figured in only a small part of the religious practices of the ancient Hawaiians, the *luakini heiau* nevertheless seem to be the most numerous and are usually larger in size than other types. This seems due, in part, to the tradition that only a few paramount chiefs held the privilege of establishing and using *luakini heiau*. Ulupō Heiau in Kailua and Puʻuomahuka in Pūpūkea served as *luakini heiau*, as well as for other functions.

At another type of *heiau*, known as *lapaʻau*, healers were trained and illnesses cured. Herbal remedies and spiritual healing gave rise to the ancient Hawaiian medical arts, practiced at sites such as Keaīwa

Heiau, the most important site of this kind on O'ahu. The *heiau* surroundings served as the natural pharmacy for plant remedies of all kinds. Still practiced by some Hawaiians today, this natural approach to medicine was extremely effective until westerners introduced pathogens against which the Hawaiians had no immunity.

All but the *luakini* type of *heiau* could be dedicated by lesser chiefs. Some of these other *heiau* were the husbandry type, such as Pāhua in Hawai'i Kai, where the promotion and increase of livestock and agriculture were fostered. The *heiau ho'oulu'ai* were devoted to increasing the general food supply. *Heiau ma'o* were designed to promote rainfall and abundance in time of drought. Many *heiau* were quickly constructed over a period of roughly three days and used to fulfill a specific need, then abandoned. Sites were reused only if the need arose.

No two *heiau* seem to have been the same, as far as ground plans are concerned. Though often built on a rectangular rock platform, some *heiau* were terraced or stepped with one or more levels, while others were square in shape, and a few were even round. The stone foundations are the only part of these temples that we see today. Wooden fences usually surrounded the temple precinct and grass huts stood within the enclosure. At some sites, such as Hale o Lono on the North Shore and Kāne'ākī in Wai'anae, these perishable structures have been reconstructed. One of the huts would have been the *hale mana* (place of spiritual power) or the house of the resident god. Sometimes a *hale pahu* (drum house) and an oven house were also present. Wickerwork structures, such as the *ōpū* tower or the *'anu'u* tower, sometimes called the oracle tower, stood near the *lele* or banana altar. *Akua ki'i* (wooden images) guarded the entrance to the compound and watched over the altar. Although burials have been found within a *heiau* precinct, a *heiau* should not be thought of as a cemetery in the contemporary sense. Burials were likely aids for a *kahuna* in his practice as a mediator between this world and the other, and often were only temporary until a cave or other more appropriate burial site was found.

Little is known about the actual *heiau* rituals, as they were already being abandoned by the time

foreigners arrived in the early nineteenth century. No first-hand accounts exist concerning temple procedures, though many misleading second- and third-hand reports have been circulated.

The smaller, common places of worship were the *ko'a* (fishing), *'aumākua* (family god), and roadside shrines. These shrines were numerous throughout the islands and sometimes consisted of a single upright *pōhaku* or perhaps a rock structure the size of a small *heiau*.

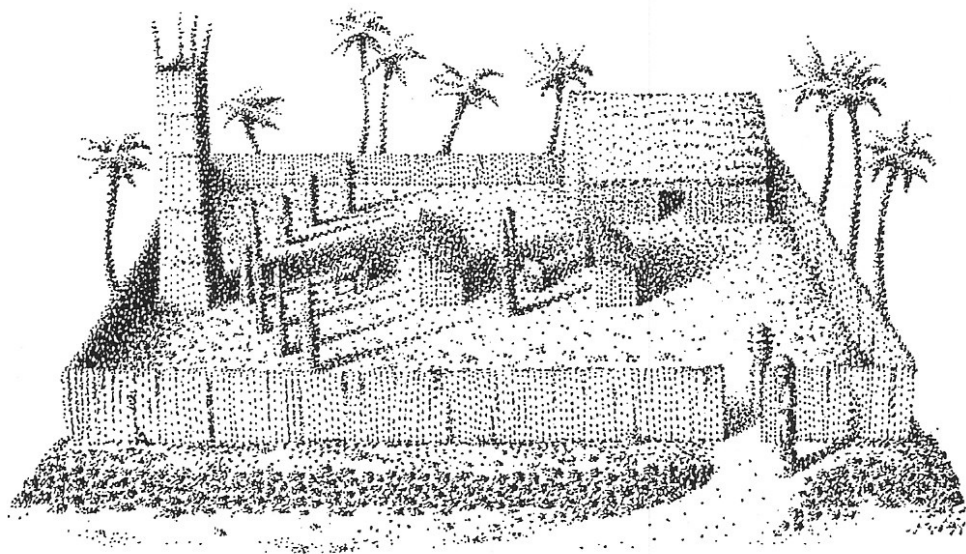
Ko'a were the most important small shrines, and remained in use long after more formal *heiau* functions ceased on O'ahu. The first catch was offered at such shrines, which were usually located near the water. Some *ko'a* were sacred to specific fish and were known to attract certain species. A *ko'a* might be one or more stones, naturally situated or artificially placed, often in an upright position and sometimes featured on a rectangular or oval rock platform or enclosure. Platforms of this kind, as well as most *heiau*, often contained bits of white branch coral, even if the sites were located a great distance from the ocean.

It is believed that family shrines were an important part of every household. These shrines took the form of a single stone "idol" or an altar made up of many stones. Sometimes a special grass hut was built to house the *akua*, or guardian spirit; otherwise, the *akua* stood in the common living quarters or just outside in the open.

Road shrines often marked the boundary between one *ahupua'a* (land division or district) and another. There, travelers may have made offerings for a safe journey or left district tax payments, as was the custom. Today it is often difficult for us to imagine that a shrine, a sacred site, could be as simple as a single *pōhaku*.



The Waimānalo *ko'a* (fishing shrine) just off-shore at Makapu'u was destroyed by a tidal wave in 1946. Having served the needs of ancient fishermen who lived at Kaupo (also called Ko'onapou) village, the *ko'a* honored the fish goddess Malei, who provided an abundance of *moi* (threadfish) and *uhu* (parrot fish) to the faithful. The *ko'a*, an uneven stone pile measuring fifteen feet by twenty-five feet and rising about ten feet above the surface of the water at low tide, may have been related to the nearby fishing shrine, Pōhaku Pa'akiki (Site 11, pg. 46), which was also damaged by the same tidal wave. Bishop Museum photograph. 1930. (18/25-255)



Typical features of the
luakini type *heiau* were,
 from left to right: the
 'anu'u (oracle tower),
 which was entered only by
 the *kāhuna*; *akua ki'i*
 (wooden images of the
 gods); the *lele* (altar) for
 offerings; the *hale pahu*
 (drum house); more *akua*
ki'i; the *hale waiea* (house
 of the ceremonial *a'ha*
cord); the oven house; the
hale mana (house of spiri-
 tual power) for the *ali'i*;
 and more images at the
 entrance of the precinct.