Deconstructing ‘Micronesia’: an Archaeological Perspective

The validity of the three-fold division of Oceania into Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia has been the subject of critical review from a variety of sources. There is also a growing dissatisfaction among archaeologists with boundaries derived from the synchronic timelessness inherent in ethnography and historical accounts coloured by political concerns which are inappropriate to a diachronic portrayal of cultural dynamics. Attempts to create more appropriate analytical units and refine the existing categories have led to adoption of a division between Near Oceania which includes all islands with pre-Holocene settlement, and the remaining islands of Remote Oceania. While this boundary has been useful in Island Melanesia, it oversimplifies prehistoric population movements and identities in Micronesia where there are marked differences in the settlement trajectories of island groups in the west and east as well as within these regions. The implications of divergent settlement histories within Micronesia for cultural boundaries is discussed and alternatives to the existing divisions are examined.

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