Clip from Episode 7: Origins of Complex Societies Transcript

Host: David Christian, historian, founder of Big History, and emeritus professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

Guest: Peter Bellwood, archaeologist and emeritus professor of archaeology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University.

Mysteries of Oceania Migration

David Christian: Peter, can I end by asking you, returning to the idea of mysteries, what big questions about the evolution of social complexity still really puzzle you? And do you think there are any mysteries that you have taken a part in solving?

Peter Bellwood: Well, the one that I've taken a part in solving, is the one of where Austronesians, including Polynesians, actually come from. I was quite deeply involved in establishing that over many years of research. Cut a long story short, they come from southern China, but they spent a period of about a thousand years in Taiwan. And then they migrated through the Philippines and into the Pacific, across the north side of New Guinea, into Melanesia and Polynesia. And by about three thousand years ago, they reached the central Pacific, the islands of Tonga and Samoa. And three thousand years ago, they were living with agriculture, domesticated pigs and dogs. They had yam and tarot, they built villages, they made beautifully decorated pottery. But then the migration stopped, and it stopped for two thousand years.

David Christian: Two thousand years?

Peter Bellwood: And it wasn't until 1,000 CE AD, after Christ, that they reached the islands of the Eastern Pacific, like New Zealand, Hawaii, Tahiti, and French Polynesia, the Cook Islands. And that's often been an interesting mystery. That is very clearly demonstrated from archaeology- you know- dating of sites and linguistics, the relationships of the languages. The eastern Polynesian languages are much younger.

David Christian: And New Zealand's a bit of an outland, because it's a sort of west.

Peter Bellwood: Yes, but New Zealand has a language, Māori, is very close to Tahitian, and Cook Island, Rarotongan. Why did they stop for two thousand years? And one of the suggestions, which I think is probably correct, is that in the central Pacific there are many atolls. Coral is a living creature and when the sea level rose, the coral had to grow to keep up with it, and it didn't reach the surface to form the atolls, until about a thousand years ago. And once the coral reached the sea surface and made available land, that people could stop at and start to build, soil, and inhabit, that allowed the secondary migration two thousand years later to occur. Because the distances were very great, several thousand kilometers, that is one possibility. But that is a mystery. Yeah, why were Tahiti, and Hawaii, and New Zealand settled

two thousand years later than Tonga and Samoa in the central Pacific? And it may be because of the availability of land, because of- you know- the growth of coral in the central Pacific.