

The British  
Museum

# *Pathfinders*

Outrigger Pacific Canoes



Object in focus

9 August 2018

Room 3

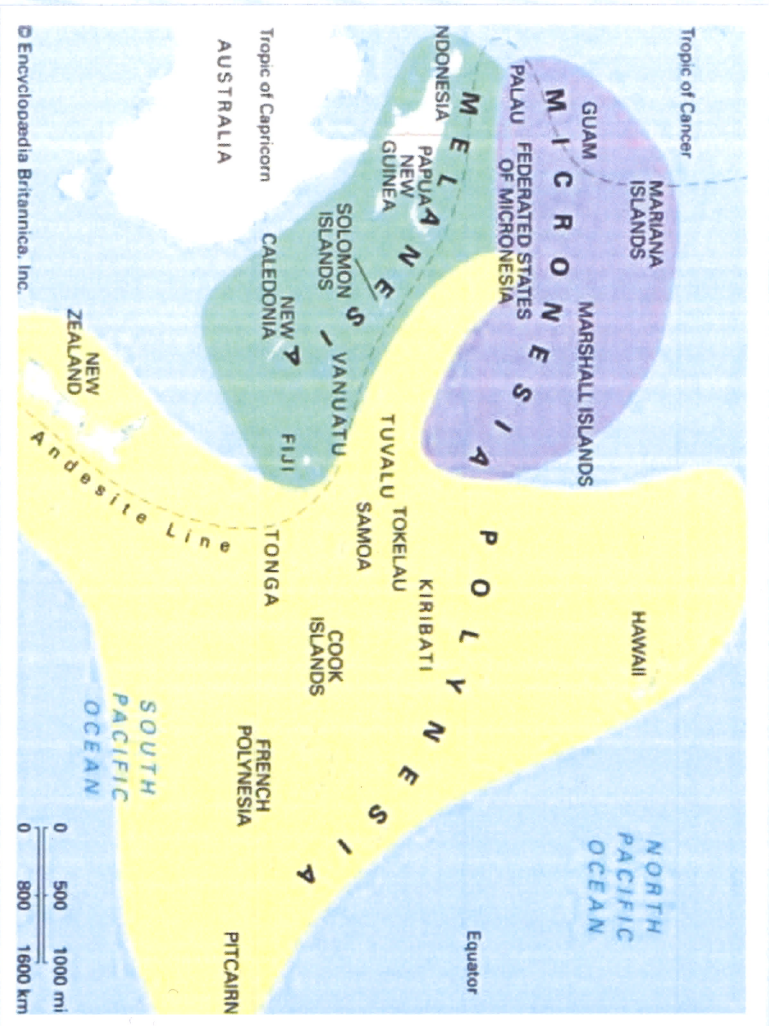
#MCanoes

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# Pathfinders: Enigmatic stories of Micronesian canoes

*The Canoe was the lifeline of Micronesia, a working rather than a ceremonial craft.*



Micronesians have been known since early recorded history as supreme navigators and canoe builders, with the ability to build swift, seagoing canoes and navigate across hundreds of miles of open ocean. Canoes of Micronesia are of the outrigger type. Among the canoe types of the Pacific the outriggers of Micronesia are unique in their high speed and performance in the open sea. Though these Micronesian canoes lack the elaborate decoration of Polynesian and Melanesian canoes, but in Micronesia they emphasized the primary requirements of speed and performance in any sea conditions.

The Pacific was the world's first ocean to be explored and its history involves countless voyages to discover and settle thousands of unknown islands. During later episodes of migration, sometimes widely separated in time, people gradually moved on through the vast region of Oceania, which comprises Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. The method of construction of canoes used in these diverse journeys was well thought out and has been perfected by centuries of observation and experience. Pacific Canoe builders tested the merits of their work by the buoyancy of the canoe when it was in the water.



*The discovery and settlement of the islands of the Pacific is the last and greatest story of human migration.*



### **Micronesian model outrigger canoe**

Kiribati, Oceania

1940-1959

Micronesians stayed on course with their fast and manoeuvrable single outrigger canoes, which admiring western sailors called 'flying proas' (probably from *prahu*, a Malay term for canoe).

These floating canoes are one-man craft for fishing in the lagoon. Lashing done with coconut fibre, the tools required for canoe building were axes and

adzes, files and polishers as well as drills. The method of construction of these canoes is well thought out and has been perfected by centuries of observation and experience.

This model made out of wood and vegetable fibre is by Tony Atkinson who collected this object while he was in colonial service in the Gilbert (now the Republic of Kiribati) and Ellice (now Tuvalu) Islands between 1956 and 1959. It came to museum in 2012.

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