

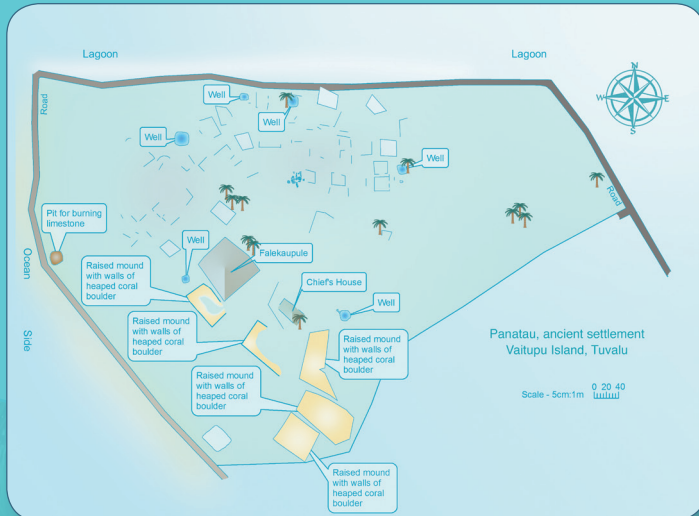


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Punatau

the ancient settlement of Vaitupu people

*Punatau on Vaitupu Island, Tuvalu, is
the ancient settlement of the people of
Vaitupu. Today the islanders live at Te
Fale in two villages – Asau and Tumaseu.*



Preserving Tuvalu's identity

The Endangered Cultural Heritage project encourages mapping of Tuvalu's cultural sites and practices to identify its distinctive heritage and the identity of its people today and for the future. The mapping of the ancient Punatau site on Vaitupu Island is one way of maintaining the identity passed down from the ancestors, which distinguishes the people of Tuvalu from other societies around the world. Paramount is the preservation of Tuvalu's heritage and identity in the face of the threat of sea-level rise and global climate change.

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Funded by: European Union (UN)

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SPC
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of the Pacific
Community



European Union





Punatau is the ancient settlement of the Vaitupu Islanders. Today they are settled at Te Fale, a site between two villages: Asau and Tumaseu

Why did the islanders shift from their original settlement at Punatau to Te Fale?

After the arrival of the London Missionary Society in 1865, a church and a pastor's residence were built at Te Fale. This was the main factor in the villagers' move to the new settlement. As the site became more settled, a playing field and traditional meeting hall were built next to the church. Two villages, Tumaseu and Asau, grew up on either side of these central features. Asau was named after a Samoan village and Tumaseu is the name of an indigenous clan. The establishment of the two villages generated a spirit of competition that contributed to the development of the church.

Another factor in the shift to Te Fale was access to a wider sea passage. This allowed efficient transportation of goods from ships, especially the copra boats of the traders, who established a station at Te Fale between 1882 and 1897. In addition, during the early British colonial administration, a local government facility was built at Te Fale so that the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Residential Commissioner did not have to make the long walk to Punatau when visiting the island.



The ancient settlement

Where is Punatau?

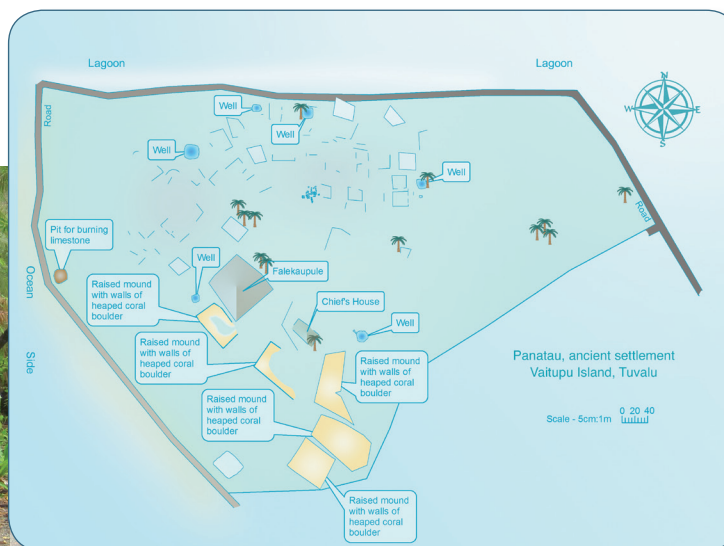
The island of Vaitupu was charted by Captain Obed Starbuck, who arrived on the whaling vessel, the Loper, in 1825. He named it Tracy Island. At that time, the islanders were settled at Punatau. According to the elders, their ancestral settlement extended from the northernmost end of the island to Te Gao Well.

What did Punatau look like

In 1931, Dough Kennedy, who was a New Zealand anthropologist teaching at Elisefou school on Vaitupu, sketched a map, identifying a traditional meeting house, the chief's house, the clan meeting place, some dwellings and water wells.

During the SPC-supported project funded by the European Union to map endangered cultural heritage sites, the settlement area was cleared and remnants of the foundations of the buildings that Kennedy had sketched were uncovered.

All the foundations and wells that were uncovered at the settlement have been mapped. These foundations are very close to each other — only one or two metres apart. They are clustered around the six wells on this ancient site. The closeness of the houses suggests how the indigenous people of the ancient settlement shared and cared for each other.



Map of building foundations and well at Punatau. Punatau –Te Fakai Taumua i o Vaitupu i ona aso nei

Plentiful water supply

According to the elders, water was plentiful at Punatau, which is probably why the people of Vaitupu settled there in ancient times. During droughts, people collected well-water from the site. Pits for pulaka, a taro-like tuber, were also located near Punatau. Cultivation of pulaka is still an important part of Tuvalu's traditional food and culture.

Sea access and security

The small lagoon close by at Punatau was used for fishing during rough weather and, in good weather, small canoes could pass through the narrow sea passage to fish in the ocean. The site is also some distance from the wider sea passage at Te Fale, through which invaders from Tonga and Samoa were able to sail their large canoes. The islanders believed that being at Punatau gave them sufficient time to prepare to defend themselves against invaders coming ashore at Te Fale.

These are some of the key reasons for Punatau being settled by the indigenous people before they moved to the current settlement at Te Fale.

