Contact clues. This Araucana chicken and these New Zealand sweet potatoes (below) may be legacies of Polynesian contact with South America.

Northern Exposure in Doubt

In the 1930s, famed anthropologist Alfred Kroeber noted that the Chumash Indians of Southern California made sophisticated sewn-plank boats remarkably like those constructed in Hawaii more than 4000 kilometers to the west. He suggested prehistoric Polynesian contact as the source of the Chumash technique. Now an archaeologist and a linguist are seeking to prove that old theory. But while researchers are making strides in demonstrating a connection between South America and Polynesia (see main text, p. 1344), the idea that California Indians learned from Hawaiians faces an uphill struggle. Questions about timing make many archaeologists skeptical.

The sewn-plank boats built by the Chumash reached more than 8 meters in length and could carry a dozen people, shuttling between the California coast and the Channel Islands, 30 kilometers offshore. Although smaller than the oceangoing boats built by Polynesians, they surpassed the technology of all other natives along the North American coast prior to the arrival of Europeans. The first hard evidence for the Chumash vessels appears circa 700 C.E., around the time that some say Polynesians were settling the central and eastern Pacific.

Terry Jones, an archaeologist at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, believes that the appearance of the boats as well as Polynesian-style fishhooks in the same era provides convincing evidence for contact. And some linguistic evidence backs up that view. His collaborator Kathryn Klar, a linguist at the University of California (UC) Berkeley, has cataloged several Chumash words, including *tomalo*—the word for canoe—that appear to be closely related to Polynesian languages. Woodworking terms are also similar.

But others aren’t yet convinced. For example, it’s possible those words are not ancient and arrived with Europeans who had traveled in the Pacific in the 18th and 19th centuries. “Corned beef in a can has an indigenous Polynesian name,” archaeologist Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii, Manoa, points out. And an increasingly influential group argues that Polynesians didn’t arrive in the eastern Pacific until 1000 C.E. (see sidebar, p. 1346), which would make the earlier Chumash innovation necessarily indigenous. “If they don’t arrive by 700 A.D., then it doesn’t fit,” says Patrick Kirch of UC Berkeley. Jeanne Arnold of UC Los Angeles adds that there is “zero archaeology for a Polynesian incursion” in North America. Finding Polynesian artifacts “would be wonderful,” Arnold says. “But I want to see the evidence.”

The work by young researchers like Clarke, Storey, and Matisoo-Smith is a sign that the taboo put in place a half-century ago in the wake of *Kon-Tiki* has lost its power. Clarke, for example, is eager to push on to study the bottle gourd, the tomato, soapberry, the cocoonut, and other plants that may have moved across the Pacific before European ships arrived. But that work still holds little interest to most scholars who focus on the Americas. “There’s been a glass wall separating the two regions,” says Hawaii’s Bayman.

That is changing, says Ramirez-Aliaga, who experiences less resistance among his South American colleagues to the idea of contact than in the past. Trade clearly was a two-way street, “so this takes nothing away from native American groups,” says Matisoo-Smith.

Skeptics like Anderson and Gongora insist that much more data is necessary before they will accept the idea of seafaring Polynesians trading with ancient South Americans, and that scenario remains for now absent from world-history textbooks. Bayman cautions that overthrowing entrenched views will require additional lines of decisive evidence. But many Pacific Rim scientists say it is only a matter of time before a once-heretical notion becomes accepted wisdom. “When you put all of it together, I don’t see how you can interpret this any other way,” says Jones. “This is moving from compelling to accepted truth.”

—ANDREW LAWLER