The kingdom of Tonga devastated by a megatsunami in the mid-15th century

Franck Lavigne¹²³, Julie Morin⁴, Wassmer Patrick², Weller Olivier⁵, Kula Taaniela⁶, Ana V. Maea⁶, Karim Kelfoun⁷, Fatima Mokadem², Raphael Paris⁷, Mukhamad N. Malawani¹²⁸, Faral Audrey¹², Mhammed Benbakkar⁷, Ségolène Saulnier-Copard², Céline M. Vidal⁴, Tu'I'ahai Tu'I'afitu⁶, Gomez Christopher⁹, and Fuka Kitekei'aho¹⁰

¹Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne University, (franck.lavigne@univ-paris1.fr)
²Laboratory of Physical Geography, UMR 8591 CNRS, Meudon, France
³Institut Universitaire de France, Paris, France
⁴Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
⁵Trajectoires, UMR 8215 CNRS, Paris, France
⁶Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, Natural Resources Division, Nuku'alofa, Kingdom of Tonga
⁷Laboratoire Magmas et Volcans, Université Clermont Auvergne, CNRS, IRD, OPGC, France
⁸Faculty of Geography, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
⁹Laboratory of Sediment Hazards and Disaster Risk, Kobe University, Japan
¹⁰Geocare & Petroleum Consult Ltd, Nuku'alofa, Kingdom of Tonga

The pre-colonial history of Tonga and West Polynesia still suffers from major gaps because its reconstruction is essentially based on legends left by oral tradition, and by archaeological evidence somehow difficult to interpret. By the fourteenth century, the powerful Tu'i Tonga kingdom united the islands of the Tongan archipelago under a centralised authority and, according to tradition, extended its influence to neighbouring island groups in the Central Pacific. However, some periods of deep crisis were identified, e.g. in the mid-15th century, marked by an abrupt cessation of inter-archipelago migration on the deep seas in the Pacific, significant cultural changes, and a decrease in accessible natural resources. The origins of these disturbances are still debated, and are usually assigned to internal political problems or loss of external influence vis-à-vis neighboring states. However, the hypothesis of a major natural disaster was never suggested up to now.

Drawing on a body of new evidence from sedimentary signatures and radiocarbon dating of charcoal and marine bioclasts, geomorphology, and sedimentology, in support of previously published archaeological data, we argue that the Tu'i Tonga kingdom was severely impacted by a megatsunami in the mid-15th century. We also discuss the likely sources of this event, which happened in an isolated region of the world before the European maritime “great discoveries”. This tsunami could be the source of vivid local myths that strongly suggest that a giant wave covered almost the entire island of Tongatapu at one time.