

Pu'uhonua o Honaunau

On land | USA (Hawaii) | about 1500s CE | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

In old Hawaii, a person who broke a sacred law could escape death by reaching this place of refuge.

Read the story

In ancient Hawaii, life followed the kapu system, a set of sacred laws. Breaking a kapu, like walking in a chief's shadow or eating certain foods, could be punished by death.

But there was hope. If a lawbreaker could reach a pu'uhonua, a place of refuge, before being caught, a priest would perform a ceremony and they would be forgiven. Pu'uhonua o Honaunau was one of the most important. Sometimes people swam across the bay to reach it.

Around 1550, a great stone wall about 3 meters high and 300 meters long was built to separate the refuge from the royal grounds. The Hale o Keawe temple held the bones of chiefs, which gave the place spiritual power called mana.

How it ended

In 1819, the kapu system was ended by Hawaii's rulers, and pu'uhonua were no longer needed. The temple was taken apart, and the place became quiet, until it was protected as a national park in 1961.

Key words

- kapu: sacred laws and rules in ancient Hawaii
- refuge: a safe place to escape danger
- mana: spiritual power in Hawaiian belief

Wow facts

- The great wall was built without mortar, using lava rocks fitted together.
- People sometimes swam across the bay to reach safety.
- Carved wooden ki'i figures guard the rebuilt Hale o Keawe temple.

Talk about it

1. Why might a society with strict laws also need a place of forgiveness?

2. How do we give people second chances today?

Try this

Draw a map of Pu'uhonua o Honaunau as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. **What was a pu'uhonua?**
 - A. A place of refuge
 - B. A fishing boat
 - C. A volcano
 - D. A school
2. **What were Hawaii's sacred laws called?**
 - A. Kapu
 - B. Mana
 - C. Hula
 - D. Lei
3. **What animals do visitors often see here?**
 - A. Green sea turtles
 - B. Penguins
 - C. Camels
 - D. Kangaroos

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/puuhonua-o-honaunau/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. It was a place where lawbreakers could be forgiven.
2. A. The kapu system was a set of sacred laws.
3. A. Green sea turtles rest on the rocks.