



Waimea Valley, occupied in more recent times by plantation workers, cowboys, soldiers, and operators of tourist attractions, conceals most of its indigenous past underground and in hard-to-reach hillside caves.

## FIELD NOTES

# Kahuna Chronicles

*An archaeologist traces a sacred Hawaiian valley from myth to modern times.*

By Joseph Kennedy

The Waimea River flows westward into the Pacific, on the northwest coast of the island of O'ahu. About 900 years ago, according to Hawaiian lore, a chief named Kamapua'a (the breath mark is pronounced as a glottal stop) recognized the rugged valley formed by the river and its tributaries as a special, spiritual place and awarded its oversight to high priests of the Pa'ao lineage. The priests, members of one of the ancient Hawaiian ruling classes, were known as *kahuna*, and the elite members of this group were known as *kahuna nui*, or "big kahunas"—a label that (stripped of its respectful meaning) has found its way into colloquial English. Among the religious structures they erected in and around the valley was Pu'u o Mahuka. Situated on a cliff overlooking the valley, it was O'ahu's largest *heiau*, or temple. The

valley was also witness to human sacrifice, the darkest element of the indigenous religion.

For forty generations Waimea Valley and its sacred precincts stood as one of Hawai'i's principal cathedrals. Yet little more than a century after 1778, the year of the first European contact, the native Hawaiians were all but swept from the valley. Much of that pre-contact past now lies buried along with its former residents, whose bones rest in caves on the valley sides. The reconstruction of that past has fallen to historians and archaeologists. As an ar-

chaeologist who has reviewed what is already known about the valley, I think its grounds offer tremendous potential for revealing details about past lives.

There are just a few tidbits of ancient lore about the importance of the valley, recorded during the early contact period. One tale about Waimea Valley is set in the bay at the mouth of the river. It seems a man named Kane'aukai transformed himself into a stone the size of a human head and a log the size of a body. Local fishermen pulled his two parts from the sea



Etching based on a sketch by the Protestant missionary Hiram Bingham shows Bingham preaching in Waimea Valley in 1826. Seated near him are the Hawaiian queen, Ka'ahumanu, and, in all likelihood, Hewahewa, the last of the valley's high priests.

