Ke Ali‘i Nui ‘o Kalaniʻōpuʻu

The High Chief Kalaniʻōpuʻu

By Holly K. Coleman

Honored in oral histories as a fierce warrior, Kalaniʻōpuʻu (1729–1782 CE) was one of the most illustrious military leaders of Hawaiian history, renowned for his military prowess and strategic acumen. Kalaniʻōpuʻu, a chief from the island of Hawaiʻi, was known for his valor and strategic brilliance during a time of turmoil and warfare in the Hawaiian Islands.

Timeline of Events

- **1729 CE**: Birth of Kalaniʻōpuʻu
- **1754 CE**: Death of Kaʻauʻulu, Kalaniʻōpuʻu becomes ruler of Hawaiʻi Island
- **1758 CE**: Birth of Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s nephew, Kamehameha
- **1776 CE**: Death of Captain James Cook
- **1779–1781 CE**: Kalaniʻōpuʻu captures Kaʻu district and gains control of the Maui district in 1779.
- **1781 CE**: Birth of Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s son, Kiwalu
- **1775 CE**: Kalaniʻōpuʻu raids Kaupō, Maui
- **1775–1779 CE**: Kalaniʻōpuʻu wages constant war on Kahelikī
- **1776 CE**: Slaughter of Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s elite ‘Ala‘ū force at the Battle of Kohala
- **1779 CE**: Death of Captain James Cook
- **1782 CE**: Death of Kalaniʻōpuʻu

In 1778-1779 CE, Kalaniʻōpuʻu was a key figure during the Mäla-Maʻōi-ō-Kea Expedition and the Mäla-Häna Expedition. He was known for his military campaigns and his role in the Unification of the Hawaiian Islands by Kamehameha.

Kalaniʻōpuʻu is remembered as a brilliant military strategist and a fierce warrior who led his people against many adversaries. His military campaigns were instrumental in unifying the islands of Hawaii under the rule of Kamehameha I.

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A Shark Chant for Kalani’ōpu’u

The following chant celebrates the ancestry and military skill of Kalani’ōpu’u, who had acquired authority over shark-gods and over other chiefs who served those gods (Pukui & Korn, 1979). Sharks as ‘aumākua (ancestral spirits/familial or personal gods) provided assistance and guidance to Native Hawaiians. This chant hails Kalani’ōpu’u for his power over creatures which are praised for their strength and beauty. Through the authority of his Kapu, Kalani’ōpu’u held the right to wear a chiefly feather cloak.

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Family and Ancestry
Kalani’ōpu’u was born around 1729 CE, during a time when many significant wars for political control were occurring in the Hawaiian Islands. Battles were especially fierce on Hawai‘i Island, which at the time was divided into six moku (districts) that were ruled by several ali‘i nui. These districts included Hāmākua, Hilo, Puna, Ka‘u, Kona, and Kohala.

Kalani’ōpu’u was the firstborn son of Kalaninui‘iamamao, a chief of Ka‘ū, and Kamaka‘imoku, a Hawai‘i Island chieftess who was living on the island of O‘ahu. Kalani’ōpu’u was the grandson of the great chief Keawe. His half-brother was Kalanikupuake‘oua, who was the father of Kamehameha the Great (Kamakau, 1956).

He Mele Manō no Kalani’ōpu’u

O Kalani’ōpu’u, the right to impose kapu on the land is yours: Of a coral reef to house a great stingray Of a koa‘e-bird to take wing for the upland Of an aku-fin to leap and plunge in the sea Of a certain stinging bird, a Swift snatcher, To pounce alike on the small billow and the huge And the right to bar and battle the pathway of Keapanilā, Streaked like a tattoo, sacred marked shark of Ka‘ū Island Now answer us, Kalani’ōpu’u, fierce Island-piercer!

This is your name chant: You are a white-finned shark riding the crest of the wave, O Kalani’ōpu’u: A tiger shark resting without fear A rain quenching the sun’s eye-searing glare A grim oven glowing underground: Towering Kawelo lit it searing glare Who caused Kalanikaualele, the Chosen, to blaze. Their child was flaming Kapülikoliko-kalani She with the shark’s face and flashing eyes She of the restless questing gaze. O Kalani’ōpu’u, stingray as fish, She of the restless questing gaze. O Kalani’ōpu’u: The shining feather cloak. By whose name you do inherit and wear by right Over the multitudinous children of Keakamahana Your sovereign sway surveys this island and beyond O Kalani’ōpu’u, stingray as fish, O ‘iwa, you do unite with hooked claw the royal kapu.
Death and Legacy
Kalani‘öpu‘u died in 1782 CE at Kā‘ili‘iki‘i at Waio‘ahukini in Pākini (Timoteo, 1861). His body was prepared and carried to Hale o Keawe in Hōnaunau, where the sacred bones of the rulers of Hawai‘i Island were kept.

The relationship between Kalani‘öpu‘u and his nephew Kamehameha had been strong. When Kalani‘öpu‘u believed Alapa‘i to be responsible for his brother Keōua’s death, he sought to steal his newborn nephew Kamehameha, who was prophesized to be a great warrior. Kala‘i‘akane was distinguished general in Kalani‘öpu‘u’s army and was almost killed. Kamehameha was eventually raised in Kalani‘öpu‘u’s court.

In later years, Kamehameha became a distinguished general in Kalani‘öpu‘u’s army and was described as a punahele (favorite) and an aikāne koa (favored warrior) of Kalani‘öpu‘u (Kamakau, 1996). When Kalani‘öpu‘u was dying, he bequeathed his lands to his son Kïwala‘ö (Kamakau, 1996). When Kalani‘öpu‘u was dead, Kamehameha sought to depose his cousin. During the Battle of Moku‘öhai, Kïwala‘ö was killed, and Kamehameha fought to dispose his cousin. During the Battle of Moku‘öhai, Kïwala‘ö was killed, and Kamehameha fought to dispose his cousin.

The Unification of Hawai‘i
After Kalani‘öpu‘u’s death, Kamehameha gained the support of many chiefs who were dissatisfied with the distribution of lands by Kiwala‘ö, including the five warrior chiefs of Kona (Kalākaua, 1888). With these chiefs, Kamehameha fought to dispose his cousin. During the Battle of Moku‘öhai, Kïwala‘ö was killed, and Kamehameha gained control of Kohala, Kona, and Hāmākua; he was able to consolidate his rule over the island of Hawai‘i in 1791 CE. From there, he waged military campaigns and conquered the Maui group (including Kaho‘olawe and Lāna‘i) and Moloka‘i before gaining control of Kaua‘i in 1795 CE. From there, he wagged military campaigns and conquered the Maui group (including Kaho‘olawe and Lānā‘i) and Moloka‘i before gaining control of Kaua‘i in 1795 CE. From there, he waged military campaigns and conquered the Maui group (including Kaho‘olawe and Lānā‘i) and Moloka‘i before gaining control of Kaua‘i in 1795 CE. From there, he waged military campaigns and conquered the Maui group (including Kaho‘olawe and Lānā‘i) and Moloka‘i before gaining control of Kaua‘i in 1795 CE. From there, he waged military campaigns and conquered the Maui group (including Kaho‘olawe and Lānā‘i) and Moloka‘i before gaining control of Kaua‘i in 1795 CE.

Peleiöhölani
Kalani‘öpu‘u was considered to be a po‘ōlua (“two heads”), a child with two fathers (Pukui & Elbert, 1986). Such a child was believed to be especially sacred, as he or she could claim three genealogies as sources of mana (Kame‘elehiwa, 1997). Kalani‘öpu‘u’s mother, Kamaka‘imoku, lived in close succession with Peleiöhölani, an ali‘i of O‘ahu, and Kalani‘u‘i‘amamao, an ali‘i of Hawai‘i Island. Kalani‘öpu‘u was conceived by Kamaka‘imoku and Peleiöhölani in the waters of ‘Āle‘ele, in the uplands of Waipahu in Waieke on the island of O‘ahu (Kamakau, 1996).

In recognition of Kala‘i‘i‘akane’s parentage, he was named Kalei‘öpu‘u, which refers to the necklace that was a royal symbol of O‘ahu chiefly families. Known as an ‘opu‘u, the necklace was made using a central piece of whale’s tooth that was carved in a flower bud, as opposed to the tongue or hook shaped whale ivory ornaments) were royal objects of the chiefs of O‘ahu (Kamakau, 1996). Kalani‘öpu‘u’s mother, Kamaka‘imoku, lived in close succession with Peleiöhölani, an ali‘i of O‘ahu, and Kalani‘u‘i‘amamao, an ali‘i of Hawai‘i Island. Kalani‘öpu‘u was conceived by Kamaka‘imoku and Peleiöhölani in the waters of ‘Āle‘ele, in the uplands of Waipahu in Waieke on the island of O‘ahu (Kamakau, 1996).

Adoption
In the early 1700s, the high chief Keawe ruled over Kohala, Kona, and Ka‘u. Before his death, Keawe passed the lands of Ka‘u and the chiefly kapu (sacred restrictions) to his son Kalani‘u‘i‘amamao. When Keawe died, the chief Alapa‘i maukuasua returned to Hawai‘i from the island of Maui and started warring in Kohala and Kona. Kalani‘u‘i‘amamao was killed and Alapa‘i adopted the slain chief’s sons, Kalani‘öpu‘u and Kalani‘u‘i‘amamao (Kamakau, 1996). Both Kalani‘öpu‘u and Keōua were raised in Alapa‘i’s court and were trained as warriors. They became commanders of Alapa‘i’s armies and accompanied him on many military campaigns on Maui, Moloka‘i, and O‘ahu.

When Alapa‘i and his armies sailed to O‘ahu, the chiefs of O‘ahu sent for the ali‘i vai Peleiöhölani on Ka‘u to try and avoid war. A chief of Wai‘anae named Nä‘ili asked if he could meet with Alapa‘i’s commanders K a l a i n i ‘ o p u ’ u a n d Keōua. Because Nä‘ili was the brother of Kamaka‘imoku, (Kalani‘öpu‘u and Keōua’s mother) and Peleiöhölani was said to be their father, the warrior brothers ceased their fighting. At Nāo‘ne‘ala‘a in Kāne‘oh, Peleiöhölani and Alapa‘i were able to meet while their armies waited. The ali‘i established peace and would become allies (Kamakau, 1996).

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Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s Wars

Kalaniʻōpuʻu had care of the war god Kūkāʻilimoku: part of his mana (sacred power) as a chief derived from his ability to be victorious in war. During the mid and late 1700s, Kalaniʻōpuʻu engaged in countless battles, particularly with Kehekili, an aliʻi nui of Maui (Kealoha, 1862). In the 1750s, Kalaniʻōpuʻu was able to take control of the Hāna district of Maui by raiding Kaʻūiki, the site of a massive fortress. Kalaniʻōpuʻu then mercilessly raided Kaupō, and a battle known as Kalaeokaʻiilo (1775 CE) was fought. Though Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s armies were routed, it was at this battle that the warrior Kamehameha distinguished himself as a favorite of Kalaniʻōpuʻu, earning the nickname “Paiʻea” (“hard-shelled crab”) for his deft avoidance of spears. In another battle, Kalaniʻōpuʻu sent a heavily trained force of warrior chiefs known as the ‘Ālapa and Piʻipiʻi, which consisted of 800 men who were expert spear point breakers. All but two of these men were killed by Kehekili’s forces, and the battle was known as “Ahulau ka Piʻipiʻi i Kakanilua” (“the slaughter of the Piʻipiʻi at Kakanilua”; 1776 CE). Losing battles at Waikapū and Wailuku, Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s forces were decimated. He sent his sacred son Kiwalaʻō through the battlefield to appeal to Kehekili for peace; Kiwalaʻō’s kapu was such that warriors of both sides of the conflict had to cease fighting and prostrate themselves; Kalaniʻōpuʻu was spared when Kehekili agreed to peace (Kamakau, 1996).

Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s Ruthlessness

Kalaniʻōpuʻu was well-known for his ruthlessness. In addition to plundering the people of Kaupō on Maui, his forces ravaged the island of Lānaʻi. The people of Lānaʻi were massacred, and their crops and access to water were destroyed. Suffering from starvation, the people of Lānaʻi were forced to eat the root of a plant called kāpaka (Sicyos pachycarpus), and the war and subsequent decimation were known as Kamokuhi (land of loose bowels) (Fornander, 1878).

Rise to Power

After a battle at Mahinaakäka, Kalaniʻōpuʻu became the ruler of Kaʻū and Puna. Alapaʻi died in 1754 CE, leaving his lands to his son, Keaweʻopala. When Keaweʻopala failed to award lands to some of the chiefs, Kalaniʻōpuʻu gained many powerful allies. Although they struggled in battle at first, Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s kahuna (priest) Holoʻae revealed that if they were able to kill Keaweʻopala’s kahuna (priest) Kaʻakua, they would be victorious. Kaʻakua was killed, and so Kalaniʻōpuʻu’s warriors were able to kill Keaweʻopala in a fierce battle at Kuapehu. Thereafter, Kalaniʻōpuʻu became the ruler of the island of Hawaiʻi (Kamakau, 1996).

Kalaniʻōpuʻu and Captain Cook

Kalaniʻōpuʻu was the mōʻi (supreme ruler) of Hawaiʻi Island and was on the island of Maui when Cook first landed on Kaauai (1778 CE) in (Kalākaua, 1888).

In 1779 CE, Kalaniʻōpuʻu hosted Cook and his crew when they arrived at Kaawaloa on Hawaiʻi Island. In addition to provisioning the ship, Kalaniʻōpuʻu gave items which demonstrated his wealth and power as a ruling chief, including ‘ahuʻula (feathered capes) mahiole (feathered helmets), kähili (feathered standards), kapa (barkcloth), and finely woven mats (Kamakau, 1996).

Specific details of the events surrounding the death of Cook (February 14, 1779 CE) are the subject of debate. Cook had departed the island but was forced to return because of a storm. Tensions rose after a theft; according to some accounts, a chief Kalimu was killed by some of Cook’s men (Kuykendall, 1938; Westervelt, 1923). Although Kalaniʻōpuʻu had been preparing to board Cook’s ship, he turned back after hearing of the murder. Cook is said to have grabbed Kalaniʻōpuʻu, which led a chief named Kalanimanookahōʻowaha to strike Cook. Many Hawaiians and four other members of Cook’s company were also killed. However, friendly relations were reestablished after the incident, and the voyage continued without Cook (Dibble, 1843).