

Under the Mission Steps: an 800 year-old human burial from South Tanna, Vanuatu

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological excavations at the late-19th century mission house at Kwamera, south Tanna Island, Vanuatu uncovered an inhumation directly underneath the mission step. Radiocarbon dating of the context revealed this burial to date to the 12th or 13th century AD. In addition to providing new information about the deeper past on Tanna, this finding provides some interesting material for thinking about long-term relationships to ancestors and sacred places on the island and how these related to interactions with missionaries in the 1800s.

Keywords: Vanuatu, burial archaeology, missions

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Vanuatu Mission Archaeology Project (sv-MAP) is a survey of seven mission stations on the islands of Tanna and Erromango in Vanuatu (Figure 1). In addition to extensive recording of features including mission house sites, churches, outbuildings, and other landscape features, the project seeks to explore the Melanesian landscapes in which missions were established (Flexner 2013, 2014). This is a matter not only of space, recording Melanesian villages, rock art sites, nakamal (kava drinking and dancing grounds) and other kastom (traditional) sites, but also time, placing the mission era within a much longer historical trajectory of settlement in southern Vanuatu over the last 3000 years or so (Spriggs 1986; Bedford 2006). With this in mind, an 800 year-old human burial was a useful find from archaeological excavations at the mission station established by Agnes and William Watt in 1869 at Kwamera, in the south of Tanna Island (Watt 1896). Below, we report on the context of this burial, and the broader significance of this finding for our understanding of long-term habitation as well as relations to the dead in this area.

Among other things, this finding is a significant result from the most recent excavations on Tanna since the pioneering work of Mary and Richard Shutler in the 1960s. The Shutlers excavated at two cave sites on southwest Tanna, where they recovered a variety of shell and stone artefacts, as well as European materials in the upper layers. They also uncovered two human burials. One was a flexed

individual buried on its right side in an oval-shaped grave, the other was an extended individual. The former grave was undated, though it is possible that flexed burials are a marker of earlier time periods on Tanna (see below). A direct date on bone collagen for the extended individual

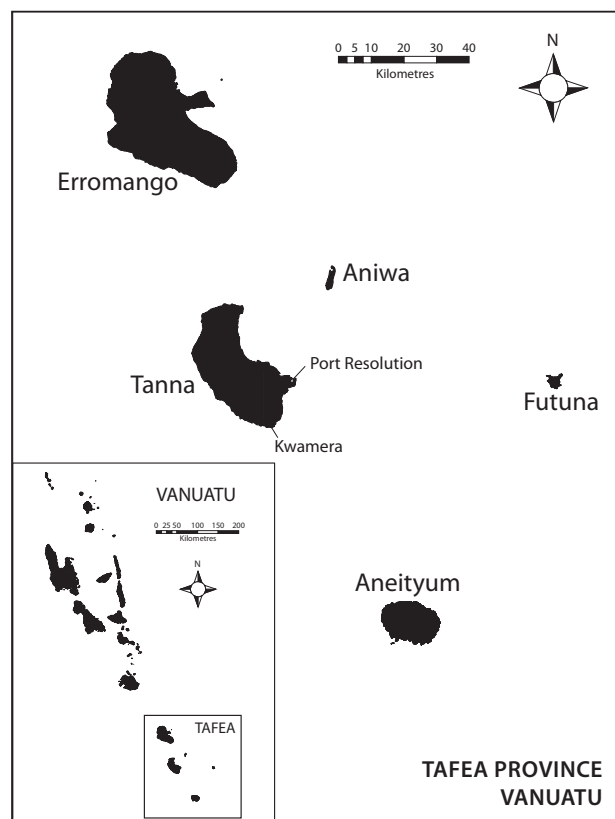


Figure 1. Map of Vanuatu and TAFEA province, showing the locations of sites referenced in the text.

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was returned as 1650 ± 100 BP, but as is often the case with radiocarbon dates from the 1960s, there is reason to doubt the precision of this date (see Shutler and Shutler 1966; Shutler 1973; Shutler *et al.* 2002). The next archaeological excavations on Tanna took place nearly 50 years later with SVMAP, and the presence of prehistoric remains shows the great potential for future investigations on the island.

THE BURIAL AND ITS CONTEXT

The burial was encountered during excavations at the Watt Mission, carried out over two field seasons, in 2013 and 2014. Household-level excavation has been an important component of field research for SVMAP, providing information about the everyday interactions between missionaries and Melanesians on Tanna and Erromango. The Watt Mission at Kwamera, south Tanna, was established in 1869, and inhabited through the early 20th century, though Agnes died of illness after 25 years in the mission field. The Watts split their time on south Tanna between Kwamera and Port Resolution on the other side of the island, where Agnes is currently buried. The Watt Mission complex consisted of a large house, attached church, and a variety of outbuildings in the back yard, including a chicken coop and storehouse (Watt 1896). Archaeological research on the house sheds light on a period of mission life in the New Hebrides, as Vanuatu was known in the colonial era, when Presbyterian missionaries were able to establish longer-term settlements, and when they had a greater degree of influence and success in converting local populations to Christianity. Mission success from the 1870s through the early 1900s may relate to changes in demography, notably dramatic reduction in local populations due to introduced diseases (Spriggs 2007) and the labour trade (Docker 1970; Shineberg 1999), as well as cultural changes in the ways that missionaries interacted with local people (Adams 1984; Guiart 1956).

The remains of the mission house at Kwamera consist of the ruins of a stone foundation with mortared steps on the side facing the sea (Figure 2). To better understand the construction of the house, a $2\text{ m} \times 2\text{ m}$ unit (TU 1) was excavated around this front step. One of the goals was to compare the construction of the Watt House with that of the contemporaneous mission house inhabited by Hugh Angus Robertson and his wife Christina at Dillon's Bay, Erromango, where excavations had revealed a massive, deep stone and lime mortar footing for the house, over 140 cm from the base of the footing to the top (Flexner 2013: 16–20). The Watt House exhibited significant differences in design and construction when compared with the Robertson House. While the two structures cover a similar surface area (150.5 m^2 for the Robertson House vs. 144 m^2 for the Watt House), the lime mortar and stone footings of the Watt House only extend to a depth of 20–30 cm below the surface (Figure 3), compared with well over 1 m in the Robertson House. While mission houses are not the focus

here, this fact is worth noting as it suggests it was unlikely that the burial encountered was disturbed significantly by the later mission-era construction activity.

Stratigraphic evidence further bolsters this interpretation. Four layers were interpreted in the stratigraphic sequence of TU 1 (Table 1). The topmost layer (I) consists of very dark greyish brown sandy loam mixed with pea gravel, as well as mission-era artefacts. There is some modern disturbance of the upper part of this layer, as it also contained some plastic and other contemporary materials. Below this was a layer (II) of sediment of similar colour, but without inclusions, suggesting that sand was possibly brought up from the beach to level the terrace upon which the Watts were to build their house, or alternatively, a natural sand deposit formed in the area. The next layer (III) consisted of black sand and water-rolled beach rock with some evidence for animal burrowing. At the transition from layer II to III, there was a lens of compact black sand and cobbles, identified as a feature during excavation but for stratigraphic purposes should probably be associated with layer III. Finally, there was a transition to a layer (IV) of very dark brown sand and pebbles, which is the layer associated with the burial, roughly 50 cm below the present ground surface.

The burial in TU 1 (Figure 4) was uncovered within the boundaries of the unit, but the bones were left *in situ* where possible. A few fragments of bone were removed during excavation of layer III deposits, which were likely displaced through the aforementioned animal burrowing activities. These were reburied in association with the skeleton when the excavation unit was backfilled. In addition, the burial location was marked by at least two flat stones placed in a horizontal position, and a number of limestone cobbles (Table 2). The limestone cobbles were identified as significant by local fieldworkers for their use in marking inhumations. The bones of the skeleton are fragmented and in some cases quite decomposed, though enough elements remain *in situ* to interpret the partial outline of the burial. The mandible was fairly intact, with most of the teeth in place, and large parts of the left and right arm were clearly identifiable. The burial was placed in a supine position, with the head towards the south (thus the sun would have risen over the right shoulder, which is on the seawards side of the body, and set over the left shoulder, which is on the inland side of the body).

There were no grave goods found during the uncovering of this inhumation. It is likely that there would have been various perishable materials interred with this individual, though these do not survive. Ethnographic accounts of burial on Tanna indicate that graves were typically lined with coconut leaves, and marked with a handful of ashes placed on the surface above the head of the deceased (Humphreys 1926: 90). These kinds of materials are unlikely to survive archaeologically. Stone surface markers or cairns were apparently not known at the turn of the century. It is interesting to note that there was a slight

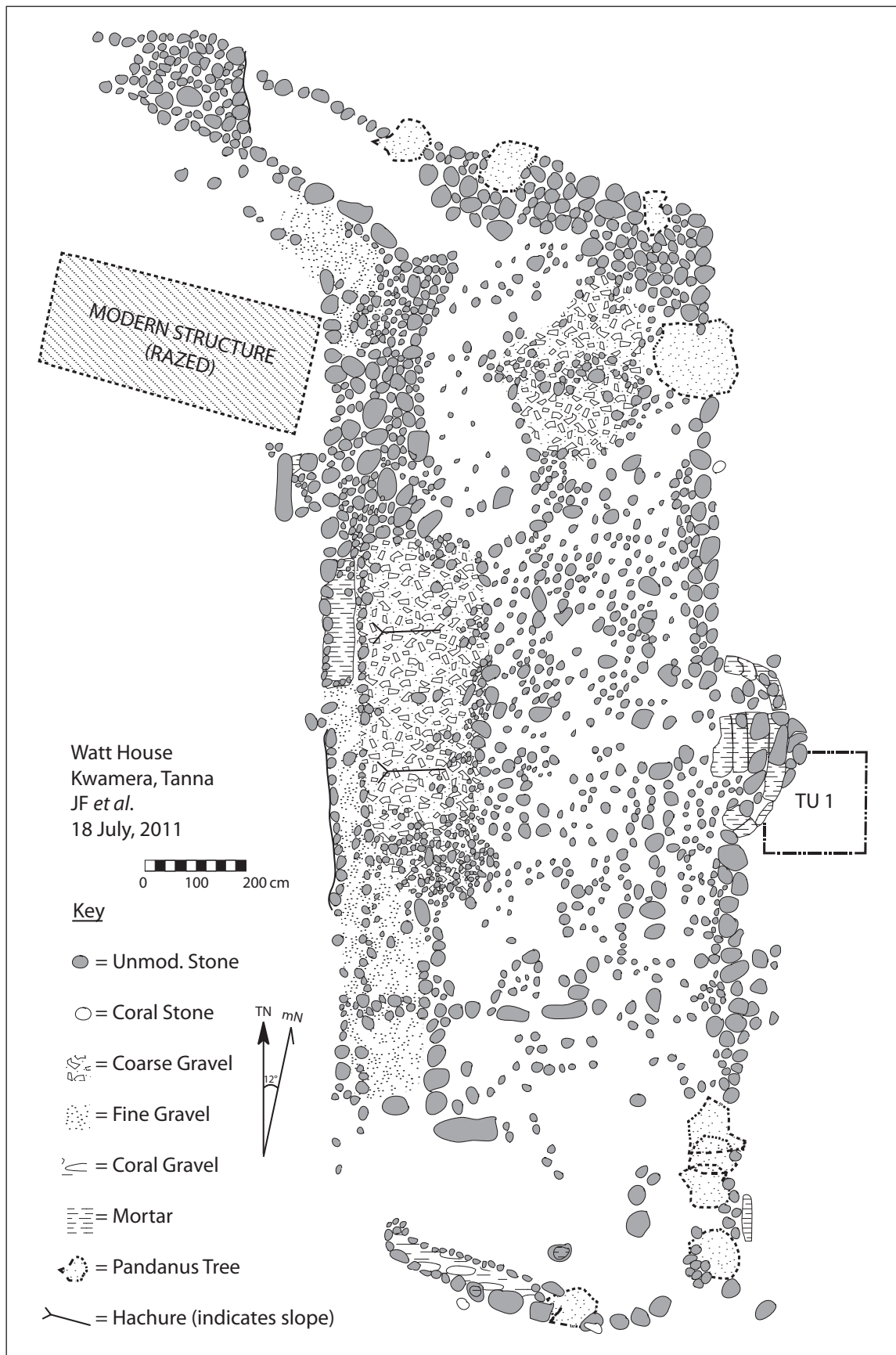


Figure 2. Plan map of the stone foundation of the Watt mission, showing the location of TU1.

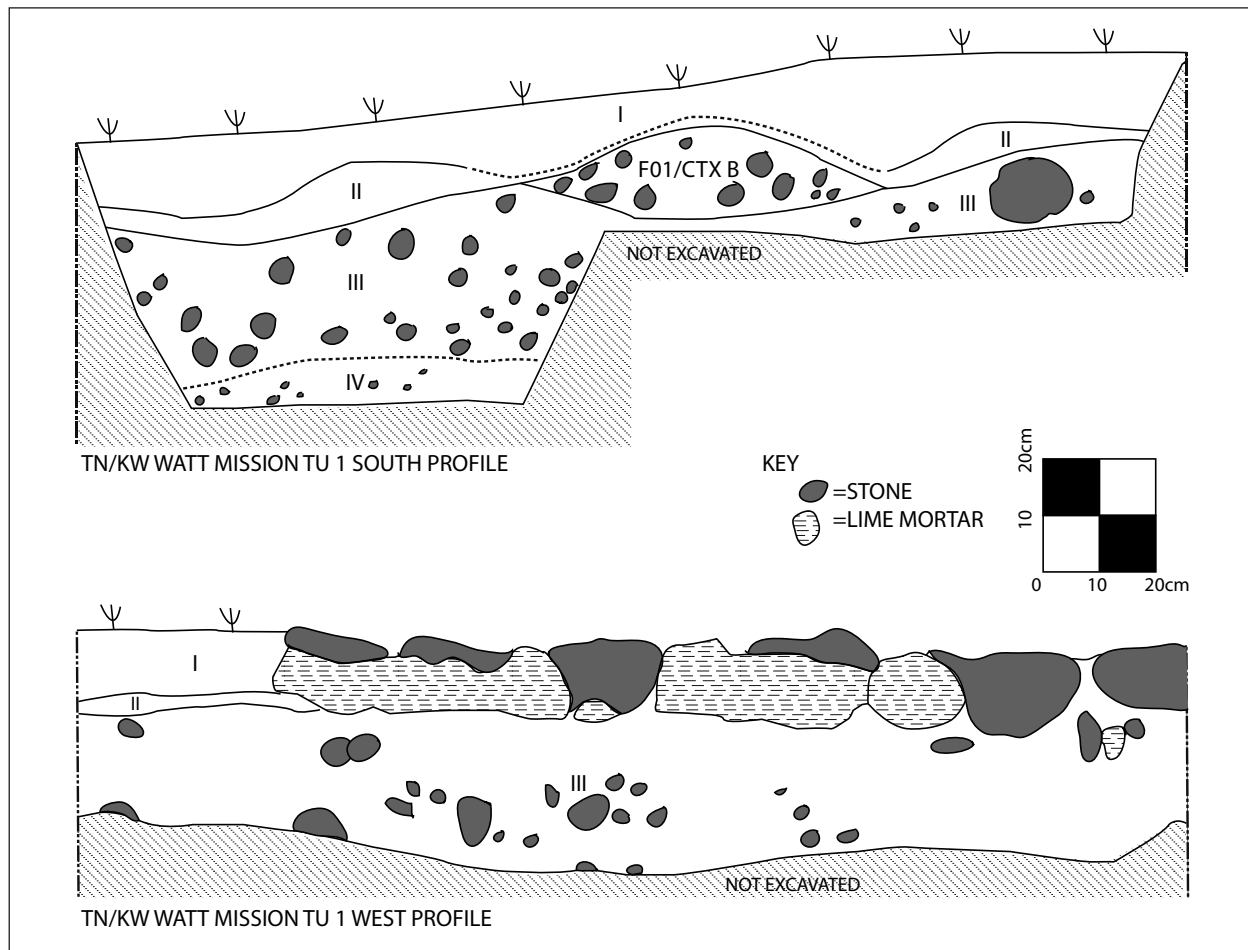


Figure 3. Stratigraphic profiles from TU1. The burial is associated with Ly IV.

Table 1. *Sediment descriptions and stratigraphic interpretations of the TU1 layers.*

Layer	Description / Interpretation
I	A very dark greyish brown (Munsell soil colour [10YR3/2]) sandy loam with 40% small gravel inclusions of volcanic rock and limestone, which is the layer dating to the mission period, with the inclusions representing possibly stones brought to the site to pave a walkway in front of the building.
II	Very dark greyish brown (Munsell soil colour [10YR3/2]) sandy loam with no inclusions, possibly a construction layer from the levelling of the beach terrace upon which the Watt Mission was built, or a naturally “clean” layer from when the site was uninhabited.
III	Black (Munsell soil colour [10YR2/1]) sand with 25% waterworn pebbles and cobbles. This is interpreted as pre-mission sediment, though there has been some mixing of these sediments from burrowing animals, and several recent burrow holes were found in this layer.
IV	Very dark brown (Munsell soil colour [10YR2/2]) sand, 5% waterworn pebbles. This was the layer where the burial was encountered, and later uncovered for analysis. Excavation was not continued below this layer.

discoloration in the sediment around some of the limestone cobbles to a lighter colour, suggesting the possibility of other materials bundled with these stones, though this also may be a result of reaction of the minerals in the black sand with the limestone. Samples of the different sediments were taken, so future analyses could shed some

light on this. Charcoal was recovered throughout layer III. A piece of coconut shell was recovered in association with the bones of the skeleton. While direct dating of the bone would provide a more secure date for this burial, this was not possible because of local concerns about removing skeletal material from the site. However, this short-lived

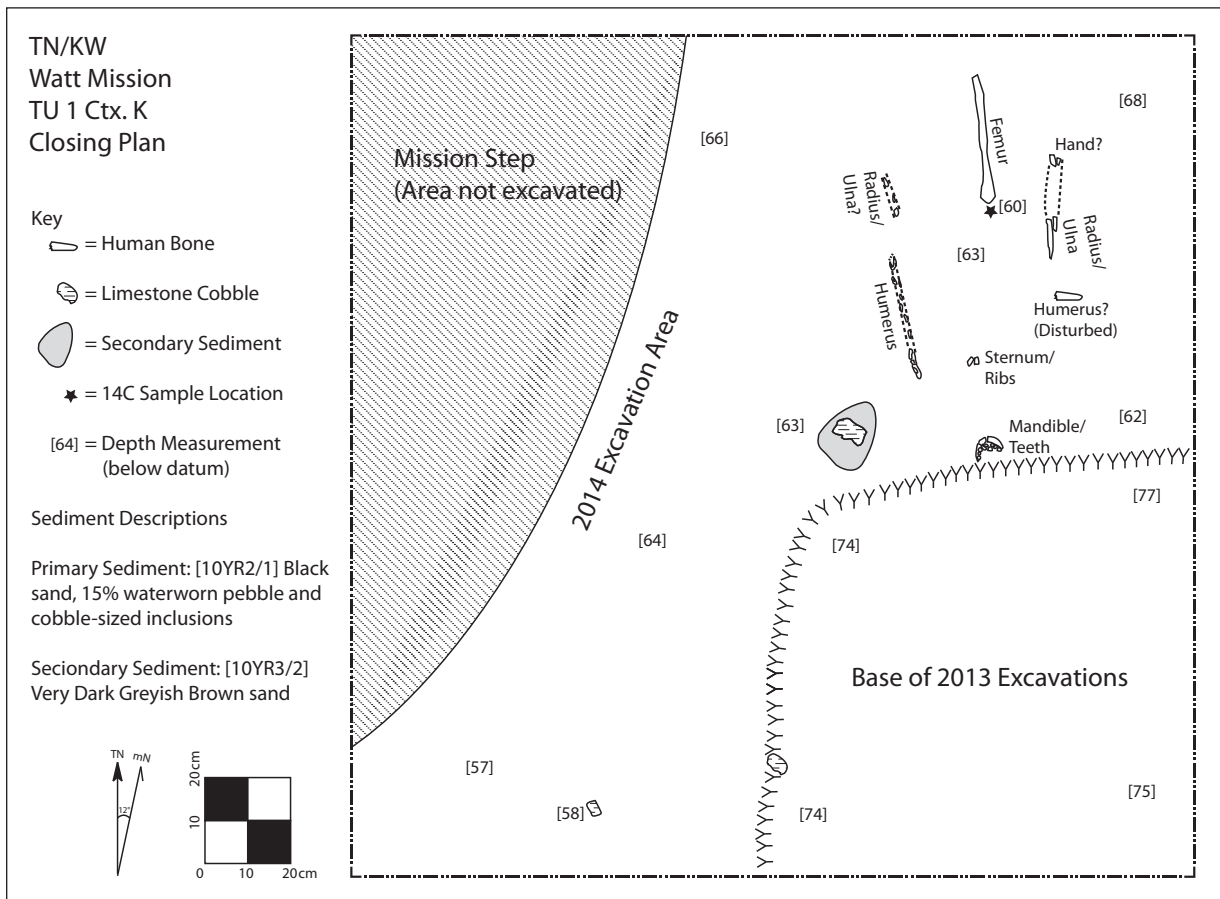


Figure 4. Closing plan of TU1 Context K, showing the extent of the burial uncovered before the unit was backfilled with the remains preserved *in situ*.

Table 2. *Stones and bones removed during excavation (returned in backfill).*

Material	E	N	Z (below surface)
Bone	97	103	40
Bone	126	162	55
Bone	104	176	51
Coral	167	129	44
Coral*	120	130	45
Coral	140	166	52
Coral	181	169	51
Coral	140	167	51
Flat Stone	87	104	41
Flat Stone*	145	45	50
Burned coconut shell	151	158	50

*Location approximate

specimen was recovered in association with the right femur, which was the most intact bone on the skeleton aside from the mandible. We are confident that this area has not been significantly disturbed compared with other

parts of the upper layers in TU 1. The radiocarbon date indicates the inhumation occurred around 1155–1210 calAD (Beta389340, at one standard deviation/68%; at 2σ/95% calAD 1055–1225; conventional ¹⁴C age 910 ± 30 BP).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDS

This is only the third archaeologically-recorded human burial from Tanna Island, and one of only a handful from the southern part of Vanuatu, which is a critical regional hub in Island Melanesia (e.g. Spriggs 1986). Previous archaeological research from the 1960s sampled a number of sites from around southern Vanuatu, with the focus largely on rockshelters (Shutler and Shutler 1966; Shutler *et al.* 2002). While SVMAP is focused primarily on mission sites, archaeological research always has the potential to turn up unexpected results, and this project is no exception. Archaeological survey on Tanna and Erromango has recorded a variety of sites relating to traditional culture in these islands, notably in the realm of rock art (Flexner 2013:21; Flexner 2014). The presence of an 800 year-old burial directly under the mission steps in Kwamera is another useful indicator of the potential for archaeological research in southern Vanuatu to answer all kinds of ques-

tions about long-term settlement and interaction in the region. Burial sites, rock art sites, and early settlements from the region are still largely unknown outside of Erromango and Aneityum (Bedford 1999, 2006; Spriggs 1981, 1986, 1999; Wilson 1999). Quite a lot remains to be discovered about the human past in southern Vanuatu, and hopefully future research will address many as yet unexplored topics.

Beyond its implications for future research into regional prehistory, the context of this burial directly underneath a 19th century mission house is of equal interpretive significance. Turn of the century ethnographer C.B. Humphreys had the following to say about death and burial on Tanna:

Disposal of the dead in Tanna resolves itself, on the whole, into one form with variants; that is, extended burial, in the ground, on the back, with or without the knees flexed, precisely in the same form that is found in the Loyalties [New Caledonia], notably in Lifu, where it seems to be done to prevent, by flexing the knees of the deceased, the ghost of the departed from wandering about (Humphreys 1926: 89).

There is ethnohistoric evidence for significant connections between the islands of southern Vanuatu and New Caledonia (e.g. Aubert de la Rüe 1938; Spriggs 1997: 219–220). Returning to local beliefs, presumably fully extended burials, such as the one found at Kwamera, contained individuals who were thought to be less likely to wander around after death, causing illness or death among the still-living. Depositing ashes above the head of the deceased was seen as a way to detect their return, as they would leave footprints or otherwise disturb the ash (Humphreys 1926: 92). Of course, Humphreys based his knowledge on early 20th century ethnography, and the burial described here is considerably older. However, these beliefs were likely still very much alive during the colonial era. Further, living people on Tanna remain concerned about the return of the deceased, and remains were left *in situ* in part out of respect for local beliefs that the spirits of the dead will not rest while their bones lie above ground. In the 1800s, dozens of Presbyterian missionaries descended on the New Hebrides (e.g. Adams 1984; Flexner 2013; Miller 1978). Beginning in the 1870s, longer-term mission footholds were established beyond the initial Christian stronghold on Aneityum. A close reading of Agnes Watt's published letters dating from 1869–1894 reveals the persistence of a Melanesian 'dividual' personhood on Tanna during this time, though this was being quickly complicated by sustained contact not only with missionaries but also traders and other European visitors from the late 1860s onwards (Lindstrom 2013; see also Adams 1984; Guiart 1956). 'The Tannese when describing mutual personhood talk in terms of shared blood, shared name, shared place and shared spirit' (Lindstrom 2013: 263). The remains of ancestors and their associated spirits are part of this

shared heritage, as much a part of present and future tense as they are of the past.

This would have been the case during the Watts' time as well. One aspect of local resistance to missionary settlement in the New Hebrides during the 1800s was to place missionaries on spiritually dangerous ground, essentially forcing a contest between the missionaries' deity and local spirits and gods. Jon Paton dug a freshwater well and planted crops on the 'poisoned' ground of the local snake god on Aniwa, and his survival proved the Christian God was the more powerful, inspiring mass-conversion on that island in the 1870s (Paton 1907). Where missionaries suffered illness or death, responsibility would likewise have been attributed to the potency of local spirits and deities. At the same time, the missionaries caused considerable confusion by insisting that their God was the sole cause of these phenomena, unwittingly casting themselves as a new kind of sorcerer landed on Tanna (Adams 1984). While we doubt people would have remembered the location of an 800-year old burial well enough to direct the Watts to build their house directly above the skeleton, this location may have been known generally as a place of supernatural power, where the barrier to the spirit world was particularly permeable, and thus the location was somewhat perilous. Perhaps when Agnes Watt died in 1894, and periodically when she had been ill previous to that event, local people saw the causes in the risks that *Misi Bran* (a local term literally meaning 'missionary woman') took in her dangerous engagements with the supernatural. Finally, it is certainly possible that this burial is not an isolated find, but part of a larger burial area that was used for some time, perhaps several centuries. Resolving this will be an issue for future research as excavation work is expanded on south Tanna.

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