

HIRI: ARCHAEOLOGY OF LONG-DISTANCE
MARITIME TRADE ALONG THE SOUTH COAST
OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By Robert John Skelly and Bruno David. 2017.

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This impressively illustrated and detailed monograph presents recent archaeological research and a newly developed cultural sequence spanning the last 3000 years for the Kouri Lowlands (Gulf Province) on the South Coast of Papua New Guinea. The sequence is based primarily on excavated and surface collected pottery, the most abundant type of material culture found in this region, which has been defined within a robust radiocarbon chronology from 12 archaeological sites excavated by the authors in 2007 and 2010. The research is aimed, as the title suggests, at tracing the origins and subsequent development of the *Hiri*, a late prehistoric maritime trade network which once connected many linguistically and culturally different coastal communities over a distance of ~500 km between Caution Bay area (Near the modern capital of Port Moresby) in the east and the Gulf region in the west. It is a thoroughly researched, logically structured and substantive book that adds significantly to the understanding of *Hiri* trade, the long-term settlement dynamics of prehistoric people in the Gulf Province, and to studies of prehistoric exchange systems generally.

The content of the monograph is by and large based on the excavations and analyses undertaken by Skelly as part of his PhD (Submitted in 2014), combined with excavations previously undertaken by David in the same region. It is clear from the outset that the authors have done extensive amounts of research into the historical and archaeological accounts of the *Hiri*, and more broadly into the various prehistoric cultural milieus which characterise the South Coast of New Guinea. The cultural sequence they present is considered from the perspective of recipient non-pottery producing *Hiri* trade communities in the Gulf Province, but the authors also draw upon the larger suite of archaeological data from the eastern pottery producing end of the *Hiri* network. The result is a balanced and much needed synthesis of the Late Holocene prehistory for this little studied region of New Guinea, with the significance of their research extending well beyond the immediate study area.

The monograph opens with a preface which briefly outlines the academic rationale and the major research aims for the project. Following this, a section on methods details how the archaeological investigations and oral

histories were combined into a complementary analytical approach. The methodological procedures for excavation, radiocarbon dating and the laboratory analyses of pottery are also presented here. These two sections essentially form a long preamble to the core chapters that follow and provide necessary details for anyone seeking to incorporate these results into future analyses.

The monograph is then divided into 17 chapters, the first four of which are directed at getting the reader well acquainted with the project area and contextual background. Chapter 1 offers brief historical and modern perspectives of *Hiri* which both guide the reader to the central investigation of the research and reiterate the academic objectives in the preface, but within a more captivating narrative. Chapter 2 provides an informative and in-depth historic account of the social and environmental factors that led to *Hiri* trade voyages. Chapter 3 then presents a detailed review of previous archaeological research undertaken along the South Coast, which is somewhat convoluted due to the sheer bulk of data it covers, but is very useful and forms the comparative basis for the authors' research. Chapter 4 goes on to describe the geographic characteristics of the Kouri lowlands, relevant aspects of the modern inhabitants, and outlines their ancestral origin story which ultimately guided the archaeological site survey.

The rest of the monograph is based on the field research. Chapters 5–14 present the cultural context, stratigraphic details and material culture analyses for each of the excavated archaeological sites. The sites are presented in chronological order based on their earliest cultural deposits, with the older sites located further inland as was hypothesised in the previous chapters. The excavations at each site were small in scale (0.25–3 m²) but with a meticulous methodology employed to gain high temporal resolution within strata and therefore of the recovered material culture. Chapters 15 and 16 are the crux of the monograph as here all the primary data is considered together to develop a six-phase pottery sequence for the Kouri Lowlands which is well presented and illustrated. The sequence is then contextualised in the form of a meta-narrative which addresses the project aims and incorporates the findings into existing models for South Coast prehistory. Finally, the *Hiri* is placed within a broader regional perspective to illustrate how it is articulated with other coastal and island exchange networks.

Skelly and David's research builds on 50 years of systematic archaeological work that has previously been undertaken along the South Coast. The approach and conclusions are therefore not developed in isolation but expand on existing, and in some cases long standing, archaeological models and debates. Interestingly, dentate stamped pottery dating to 2450–2750 BP is stylistically attributed to the Lapita Cultural Complex which adds to the emerging corpus of data for the presence of Lapita on

the New Guinea mainland. The chronological differences between subsequent pottery phases/styles have been, for the most part, clearly demonstrated and correlated to the established pottery sequences reviewed in Chapter 3. It is unfortunate that no geochemical analyses were undertaken on the excavated pottery to determine if it was locally made or imported, and to model the technological aspects of the different pottery styles. The authors do state, however, that this work is now underway. The results of these analyses will be eagerly awaited, and will build on the foundational work achieved here.

What really makes this monograph stand out is the combination of the geomorphologically and ethnographically informed approaches to the archaeology. The Kouri Lowlands, and the Gulf Province as a whole, is a difficult place to work due to a rapidly prograding shoreline that is continually changing, making undisturbed cultural deposits with any significant time depth inherently difficult to find. The authors have done well to adapt the survey approach developed by previous archaeologists for the region and have made it work to their advantage by tracking ancient coastal beach ridges that are now located up to 5km inland. From an ethnographic perspective, the monograph takes a different tone than most as many of the excavated archaeological sites are also significant ancestral sites relating to the origin stories of the Kouri people. Indeed, it was at the invitation of the local communities that the authors pursued the archaeology of the *Hiri* by tracing the known sequence of their ancestral villages— a gesture of mutual trust and respect. The authors were suitably cautious when relating the archaeological findings to the oral history, with the historical importance of the sites adding to the significance of the longer-term patterns of settlement.

Given the data rich nature of the chapters and detailed reviews, this monograph is squarely aimed at archaeologists rather than those seeking a general overview of regional prehistory. However, the meta-narratives in the last two chapters would certainly appeal to a wider audience. Upon first flicking through the 570 pages of the monograph I was expecting that having all the raw data incorporated into the excavation chapters would break up the flow of the text and make for cumbersome reading. On the contrary, the chapters flowed well and it was useful to be able to cross reference and critically assess the conclusions made by the authors by consulting the well laid out figures and tables. The analysis of the pottery is detailed, consistent and of a high quality, perhaps overly detailed in some cases given that each unit of contiguous trench excavations at some sites (OJV and OJS) are presented separately which added considerable bulk to the excavation chapters. However, given the audience this monograph is directed at, the added detail is of some benefit.

In sum, this monograph is a fantastic contribution to the archaeology of coastal New Guinea. In its entirety, the authors present a compelling culture history, with each of

the chapters suitably self-contained which can be easily referred to individually as valuable sources of information. I have no doubt that it will be a well-used reference volume as the prehistory of the South Coast continues to develop. I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the history, traditions and/or archaeology of the Pacific region.