

LAPITA: ANCESTORS AND DESCENDANTS

Peter J. Sheppard, Tim Thomas,
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One outcome of the Lapita Homeland Project of 1984 was the initiation of a series of quadrennial Lapita Conferences, of which the seventh was held in Honiara, Solomon Islands, in July 2007. *Lapita: Ancestors and Descendants* includes twelve papers deriving from the Honiara Lapita Conference; as with previous volumes the contributions range from data-rich field reports to more considered synthetic essays. This volume is especially focused on the Solomon Islands, with seven of the twelve chapters dealing with Lapita or Lapita-related issues in the Solomons. This is certainly welcome, given that the Solomons have posed something of a lacuna in our knowledge of Lapita, and that the conference was hosted by the Solomon Islands National Museum.

The volume opens with a brief introductory essay by Sheppard, addressing the theme of ‘ancestors and descendants.’ This implicitly recognizes that Lapita is a tradition with some continuity in time and space, and that tracing both the deep time origins of Lapita, as well as what became of its varied descendant communities, are all part of the quest to understand the ‘who, what, and why’ of Lapita. Sheppard references recent theoretical discussions in evolutionary archaeology, as well as on-going debates about the respective contributions of archaeology, historical linguistics, and biological anthropology in tracing Lapita cultural lineages. In the end, however, Sheppard concludes that ‘evolutionary theory and methods are no panacea,’ and that advances will not be made by ‘applying cladistics to poor datasets’ (p. 6). Rather improvements in chronology and better sampling are required, as well as better data analysis, if the field is to advance, at least in Sheppard’s view.

Directly addressing these issues of chronology and sampling, Jim Specht in chapter 2 takes up the issue of Lapita ‘ancestors’ with the thorny problem of the aceramic to ceramic boundary in the Bismarck Archipelago. Despite the existence of a long record of human settlement in the Bismarcks – extending well back into the Pleistocene – the fact remains that ‘there is currently little evidence for continuity of site use and, by extension, of populations across the aceramic/ceramic boundary’ (p. 12). Obviously, this goes to the core of debates about Lapita origins. Specht provides a careful review of immediately pre-Lapita archaeological contexts, especially in New Britain,

including a review of the radiocarbon evidence. Specht is forced to conclude that ‘we know very little about this critical period’ (p. 24), with good evidence for continuity restricted to the Lolmo Cave site, and most other contexts showing clear discontinuity. Specht is guarded in his interpretation of what this means, hesitant to accept the widespread discontinuities as evidence of a ‘significant cultural shift.’

Chapters 3 through 9 address various aspects of archaeology and prehistory in the Solomon Islands. Richard Walter and Peter Sheppard introduce this part of the volume with a very useful review essay on Solomon Island archaeology, synthesizing research beginning with Davenport’s work in Makira and Guadalcanal in 1968, through the extensive field investigations of the Southeast Solomons Culture History Programme of the 1970s, to the most recent projects which have emphasized the Western Solomons. Curiously, the Pleistocene is still represented just by the single site of Kilu Cave, raising the question of how far down the Solomons chain human occupation or land use extended prior to the Holocene. The pre-ceramic archaeological record of the mid-to-late Holocene remains thinly documented, a time period calling out for more field research. Reflecting on the results of considerable survey through the main Solomons, Walter and Sheppard conclude that the absence of early Lapita sites through this region does not represent sampling error, as some had concluded. Rather, they propose a model of Lapita settlement in which (1) Lapita colonizers leap-frogged over the main Solomons, settling the Reef-Santa Cruz group directly from the Bismarcks; (2) the northern and western Solomons were then settled around 2700 BP from the west in the late Lapita period; and (3) the central and southeastern Solomons were then settled by newly aceramic populations moving westward out of the Reef-Santa group (p. 54).

Chapter 4, by Sheppard and Walter, offers a detailed discussion of the geotectonic context of inter-tidal archaeological deposits in the western Solomons which have yielded ceramic evidence of late Lapita settlement. They reject the notion that a region-wide geotectonic process might have destroyed an earlier Lapita record (p. 96), which lends support to their conclusion that early Lapita expansion leap-frogged over the main Solomons. Chapter 5, by A. M. Findlater and others, draws on chemical and petrographic characterization of late Lapita ceramics from Kolombangara Island in the western Solomons, to argue that while there was local ceramic production on the island, there was also some degree of interaction involving ceramic transfers.

In Chapter 6, Tim Thomas turns to the theme of Lapita ‘descendants’, in this case the emergence of the Munda Tradition in the New Georgia, Rendova, and Tetepare islands from about 700 BP onwards. This tradition merges

into the 'ethnographic present' of the 19th century with its well-documented head-hunting and ancestor cults. Thomas uses the concept of 'community of practice' to interpret the archaeological evidence for an emerging set of regional cultural practices, including trade and head-hunting, which he believes 'set up collections of structured relations which separated parties into defined wholes – creating identities' (p. 141). The whole complex system evolved gradually over time, at times contracting and at others reconnecting, but 'ultimately guided by a common understanding of practical ways for negotiating relations.'

The late Roger Green and Douglas Yen were the co-principal investigators on the National Science Foundation funded Southeast Solomon Islands Culture History Project, which put teams of investigators (not just archaeologists, but linguists and material culture specialists as well) into the field in two phases throughout the 1970s. In Chapter 7 they offer an overview of the various results achieved. This is organized as a series of topics, and is heavily bibliographical in nature. An appendix gives the locations and current status of various collections generated by the project. As someone who participated in the Project, in both of its phases (in 1971 on Kolombangara and Anuta, in 1977–78 on Tikopia and Vanikoro), this chapter comes as rather a disappointment. Not that the bibliographic summary is not useful (especially for a new generation of scholars), but because I would have liked to have seen these two eminent researchers address the big questions around which the project was originally organized. Rather than telling us the main results of this pioneering inter-disciplinary project (and there were many), this chapter reads more like a detailed check-list to a granting agency, to justify the expenditure of public funds (see their Conclusion, p. 167). Yen's separate summary of the ethnobotanical results from the Project, in Chapter 8, is much more satisfying in this regard. While discussing site-specific results, Yen nonetheless hits on the big themes of Pacific paleoethnobotany, such as the origins of the region's distinctive arboriculture, and the disjunct distribution of irrigation.

In Chapter 9, Moira Doherty treats archaeological datasets from several sites excavated by Roger Green in the Reef-Santa Cruz islands, in order to trace post-Lapita developments in that region (the chapter evidently summarizes material from her unpublished Ph.D. thesis on the same topic). Doherty discusses chronology, evidence for architecture, subsistence, ceramics, and non-ceramic artifacts from these sites. Her ultimate conclusion is that the post-Lapita record reflects continuity, with some additional inputs 'from diverse sources,' but not 'cultural replacement' (p. 208). She sees this as wholly congruent with evidence that the languages of the Santa Cruz and main Reef Islands are Oceanic.

The Teouma Lapita site on Efate Island, Vanuatu, has occasioned much excitement, with the discovery of an intact Lapita cemetery. Chapter 10, by Stuart Bedford and

others, offers a useful summary of the first three field seasons of excavation at the site, including details of stratigraphy and chronology, the pottery assemblage (including excellent drawings of some of the dentate stamped vessels), and the burials. This chapter only whets one's appetite for a full and detailed monograph on this impressive site.

Chapter 11, by Patrick Nunn and Tony Heorake, is a review of the geomorphological contexts of a number of previously studied coastal Lapita sites, and as such mostly goes over ground already well traveled in the Lapita literature. Finally, the volume concludes with Chapter 12 by John Terrell, which as in some of his earlier writings on this subject, ranges (some might say lurches) widely over ground ranging from philosophy, to culture theory, to recent molecular evidence on the genetic diversity of Oceanic peoples. I found his discussion sufficiently tortured that it was difficult to follow, although I presume that his fundamental message is one he has pushed for a long time: that Oceanic deep-time history is a 'tangled bank' from which it is impossible to discern any signals of homology. I remain unpersuaded.

In sum, this is a valuable contribution to the literature on Lapita and southwestern Pacific archaeology and prehistory. The many detailed contributions on the Solomon Islands are especially welcome in helping to fill previous gaps in our knowledge of that important region.