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Book Review

Lapita: Ancêtres Océaniens (Oceanic Ancestors)

By Christophe Sand and Stuart Bedford (eds.)

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As evidence of the first human expansion to the Pacific world, Lapita culture represents a major focus of Pacific archaeology. Knowledge of Lapita has grown exponentially as the number of investigated Lapita sites has increased in recent decades. These discoveries have continued to enrich and shape understanding of this early Pacific culture. The latest knowledge, brought about by advancements in Lapita archaeology particularly over the last 10 years, is the subject of Christophe Sand and Stuart Bedford's *Lapita: Ancêtres Océaniens (Lapita: Oceanic Ancestors)*. The book was published for a special exhibition by the same name at Musée du quai Branly in Paris that ran from 9 November 2010 to 9 January 2011, which was curated by the editors.

Sand and Bedford's introduction provides geographical context for and an overview of trends in the Lapita phenomenon. Greater detail follows in the book's 16 chapters and 7 short columns written by 22 contributors—all actively involved in the investigation of Lapita culture. Text appears in French (on the left, or even pages) and English (on the right, or odd pages). Following text on one side only while checking figures that are sometimes on the opposite side may be difficult initially, but this proves trivial as the tightly summarized review articles and numerous illustrations and color photographs provide the reader with a clear picture of Lapita culture.

The book is divided into four sections: (1) The General Setting; (2) The Lapita Expansion and Development; (3) Lapita Traditions of Remote Oceania; and (4) Lapita Cultural Dynamics and Diversification.

The first section, "The General Setting," provides a historical and cultural background of the Lapita. The first chapter and the following column (both by Sand) give a history of research on the Lapita tradition, beginning with the discovery in 1909 of the first Lapita pottery piece. Some

readers may enjoy the story of the term “Lapita,” which describes its origins in a local place name, “Xapeta’a” in New Caledonia, wrongly transcribed by an archaeologist. The next three chapters and a column summarize, respectively, the Pleistocene settlement of Melanesia (Chapter 2, Allen and O’Connell); the Neolithisation of Island Southeast Asia (Chapter 3, Spriggs); Lapita canoes and navigation (Column, Irwin); and the origin and diversification of Austronesian languages, whose speakers were the bearers of the Lapita culture (Chapter 4, Pawley).

The second section, “The Lapita Expansion and Development,” covers the emergence and development of the Lapita cultural complex in the Bismarck Archipelago (Chapter 5, Summerhayes), the distribution of New Britain obsidian (a column by Summerhayes), and Lapita sites in the southeast Solomon Islands marking the movement of human populations into the world of the great ocean (Chapter 6, Sheppard). It also includes an overview of Lapita pottery in the Reef/Santa Cruz Islands (Chiu).

The third section, “Lapita Traditions of Remote Oceania,” describes the expansion of the Lapita further southeast, to the archipelago of Vanuatu, to New Caledonia, and finally to Fiji and west Polynesia. Specific regions reviewed in this section are: northern Vanuatu (Chapter 7, Bedford and Galipaud), with a column on Makué and Shokuraon sites (Galipaud); Teouma site in central Vanuatu showcasing a rare discovery of a Lapita cemetery and intact pots of various designs (Chapter 9, Bedford et al.); New Caledonia (Chapter 11, Sand), with a column on the excavation and reconstruction of Lapita pots at the site WKO013A on Foué (Sand et al.); and, most remote, Fiji-West Polynesia (Chapter 12, Clark). A good summary and discussion of Lapita burials and funerary practices (Chapter 9, Valentin) follows. Genetic evidence of Austronesian expansion and the Lapita (Chapter 10, Matisoo-Smith) reflects recent findings and developments in this field of study.

These chapters highlight recent activity in the field. Above all, with discoveries of well-preserved Lapita sites in multiple areas of Vanuatu where the nature of Lapita settlement had remained largely unknown, it is now possible to draw a much more detailed picture. Accordingly, two chapters describe the Lapita settlement in Vanuatu, something that would not have been possible if the book had been written a decade ago! Valentin’s chapter also draws on burials recently found in Teouma, where 80 individuals were interred, and other locations. Molecular anthropology is another recent development, with a growing number of DNA studies being conducted in the Pacific region over the past 20 years or so. It is unfortunate that Lapita skeletal remains at Teouma were too degraded to yield ancient DNA; however, current biological evidence suggests that the Lapita were likely a mixed population of both Asian and Near Oceanic origins, the latter of which is shown in Y chromosome lineages representing the male line. Genetic studies have also been made of domestic plant and animal species, providing another line

of evidence indicating population movement from Island Southeast Asia into the Pacific.

In the final section, “Lapita Cultural Dynamics and Diversification,” the editors have included discussions on the shell-working technology (Chapter 13, Szabó) and stone tool technology (Chapter 14, Sheppard) associated with Lapita culture. Consideration of the Lapita ecology and subsistence strategies (Chapter 15, Kirch) with a column describing the impact of Lapita colonization on native fauna (Anderson) follow. The final chapter, “The End of an Era” (Chapter 16, Sand), summarizes the transformation and diversification of Lapita traditions in each of the island groups.

Chapters on shell-working and lithic technologies are valuable contributions, since studies of these artifact types are limited in contrast to those conducted on Lapita ceramics. Interestingly, both Szabó and Sheppard pose questions regarding the Lapita exchange. Shell ornaments were once considered valuables and circulated between islands on trading networks. The recent increase in the number of Lapita sites with evidence of local shell ornament production, however, necessitates reexamination into whether such stable trading networks existed. In the case of lithic raw materials, identification of sourcing is clear-cut. It is evident that Talasea (New Britain) obsidian is widely distributed and transported all the way to Fiji. Sheppard suggests “that the travel was not directed at procurement of obsidian or that the obsidian was an especially valuable commodity, but that it was a secondary benefit of travel for other reasons” (p.243). Keep this phrase as the original, since this is the direct citation. For pottery, Bedford et al. (Chapter 8) state that two vessels at Teouma were possibly imported from New Caledonia and that another large carinated vessel could be from the Solomon-Bismarcks region, while most pots were locally made. Further studies have to be done on all available materials ranging from pottery to shell artifacts in order to reassess the nature of Lapita exchange and interactions between archipelagoes in Remote Oceania. These will in turn contribute to better understanding of the post-Lapita diversification.

As Kirch and Spriggs point out, the Lapita are associated with the spread of an agricultural lifestyle. Although earlier evidence of an agricultural component of Lapita culture relied heavily on linguistic reconstruction, there is now increased direct archaeobotanical evidence of crop species in the form of starch residue and phytolith. It should also be noted that it is now likely that New Guinea played a considerable role in the domestication of certain plant species and that these spread westward to parts of Island Southeast Asia. This fact adds further complexity to the process whereby agricultural practices in Island Southeast Asia came into Island Melanesia to develop into what we find as Lapita. While the linguistic origin of the Austronesian languages can be confidently traced back to Island Southeast Asia and eventually to Taiwan, and while genetic studies of humans, domesticated animals, and plants also point to their origin in Island

Southeast Asia, archaeological connections between the Lapita and regions west of New Guinea remain unclear. In this respect, Spriggs' summary of the Island Southeast Asian Neolithic reflecting recent findings in Taiwan, the Batanes, and northern Luzon, as well as evidence of dentate-stamping decoration techniques, is particularly informative and furthers any discussion of the expansion of Austronesians into Melanesia and the origin of the Lapita. The evidence remains sparse, but there are ever-growing expectations that archaeological investigations in these regions will provide considerable insight into the emergence of Lapita in northwest Melanesia.

In the end, we need to focus our arguments on what we know. Recent discoveries of Lapita sites in Vanuatu have changed our understanding of Lapita settlement in Remote Oceania. What about the main Solomons chain? Based on available archaeological evidence and on recent evidence from linguistic and biological studies, Sheppard proposes a two-stage model of Lapita settlement to the Solomons: (1) a direct movement from the Bismarck Archipelago into Remote Oceania around 3200BP, leap-frogging the main Solomon Islands chain; and (2) a later movement into the western Solomons around 2600 BP. This theory may be accurate, because unlike Vanuatu, where the Lapita became the first settlers, the Solomon Islands were already occupied by non-Austronesian populations. Yet there remains plenty of room for further investigation in locating Lapita sites in Near Oceanic Solomons. At the same time, we know very little about the non-Austronesian settlement that was contemporaneous to that of the Lapita in Near Oceania, including the Bismarck Archipelago. Some 60 years of archaeological investigations on Lapita provide considerable knowledge of the first settlers to the Pacific, but many unresolved questions remain. This book describes the latest knowledge of the Lapita and the impressive amount of work that has been achieved thus far. Moreover, it provides opportunities for future research.

Considering that this volume was compiled for a museum exhibition and therefore intended for a wider audience, an independent chapter on Lapita pottery would have made an appealing addition, even though it is referenced in many chapters. The bibliography does not provide a thorough compilation of all references, but it does list recent publications that can guide the reader to further exploration if desired. Archaeologists may be familiar with recent developments in the field of Lapita study, but for non-archaeologists working in the Pacific, this is a very good introductory book. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to know about the first human settlement of the Pacific. Copies of the book may not be widely distributed, but can be purchased at the Musée du quai Branly website, or Les Boutiques de Musées.