

Special section

Early settlement of Island Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific

It was a quarter of a century ago that ANTIQUITY first announced the 'Pleistocene colonization of Australia', when Mulvaney (1964) reported secure dates before 12,000 b.p. from Kenniff Cave, Queensland. The last three years alone have seen dates from New Guinea of around 40,000 b.p., early dates from the offshore islands of the Bismarck Archipelago, and dates from Australia itself that show a rapid colonization of both the arid central desert and cold, wet Tasmania – environments very different from the tropical islands of Southeast Asia, whence the first Australasian populations must surely have come. It is a record with great implications for early settlement elsewhere, most plainly of the American continents.

Equally remarkable has been research in the later periods, particularly concerning the 'Lapita complex', the Pacific cultural grouping which bears comparison with European Bell Beakers in its definition by distinctive ceramics, in its very widespread distribution and in the question that follows, what human and social phenomenon is encoded in that pattern of material culture?

Ideas concerning connections between Lapita and Neolithic events to the west of New Guinea in Island Southeast Asia have proved controversial. Allen & White (1989) have argued for the essential independence of events in the 'Lapita Homeland' of the Bismarck Archipelago. Others, such as Bellwood (1985), have long stressed a close connection between the spread of Austronesian languages from Island Southeast Asia into the Pacific and the spread of pottery-using Neolithic culture. Parallel debates on Indo-European languages and the Neolithic of Europe are pertinent.

The Pacific region is of great archaeological interest in its own right, of course. It is a significant part of the planet's surface: from

Sumatra to Easter Island is 16,000 km, while from Taiwan to southern New Zealand is nearly 10,000 km, a staggering 70 degrees of latitude. Many of the islands are archaeologically unexplored. The recent surge in research is sure to provide new insights into human colonization and adaptation within environments that go from equatorial to glacial.

A major boost to archaeological research in the western Pacific has been the Australian National University's Lapita Homeland Project of 1985, which brought together many archaeologists working in the region and targeted the Bismarck Archipelago as the 'gateway' to the settlement of the Pacific.

In the special section:

The paper by **Allen, Gosden & White** describes the Pleistocene occupation of New Ireland, another newly documented Pleistocene adaptation from the region.

Gosden, Allen, Ambrose, Golson, Spriggs, Anson, Green, Kirch & Specht present a major statements of findings from the Lapita Homeland Project.

Spriggs' paper, a reaction and a contribution to the debates over Lapita origins generated by the mass of new field data from the area, clarifies the chronology of the region's Neolithic.

The research reported by **Bellwood & Koon**, not itself part of the Lapita Homeland Project, demonstrates for the first time contact between Island Southeast Asia and the Bismarck Archipelago during a period when the Lapita complex was in full swing.

Terrell's commentary centres on the issue of what 'Lapita' actually is or is not.

MATTHEW SPRIGGS
& CHRISTOPHER CHIPPINDALE

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