

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE ADMIRALTY ISLANDS: SOME EXCURSIONS

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The Admiralty Islands, the larger of which are grouped roughly 250 km west of New Hanover and 300 km north-east of the mouth of the Sepik river, are at the isolated western extremity of the Bismarck Archipelago and of Island Melanesia. In language, culture and physical type, the population of the group is diverse, and presents in microcosm features typical of Island Melanesia (Schwartz 1963), not the least of which is diversity itself. The prehistory of the Admiralties has only recently begun to be given serious archaeological consideration (Ambrose 1976, 1978; Ambrose, Bird and Duerden 1981; Ambrose, Duerden and Bird 1981; Kennedy 1979 a & b, 1980, 1981 a & b). In this paper, I shall discuss aspects of this research.

While the human diversity of Melanesia, manifest in language, culture and physical type, has been widely recognised, to account for this diversity is a problem that has as yet produced little consensus. Linguistic, archaeological and human biological studies of the region have commonly been held to show, separately and in synthesis, that modern Melanesia is the product of fusions of old and new elements (e.g. Howells 1973; Bellwood 1978). Ancient, inland-oriented hunter-gatherer populations, Australoid physical type and Papuan language have been contrasted with more recently intrusive coastal-oriented horticultural populations, Mongoloid physical type and Austronesian language, an intrusion which carried beyond Melanesia into the sparser islands of Polynesia.

If the hypothesis of cultural and physical fusions in island Melanesia has served to refine and clarify Polynesian culture history, by seeming to account well enough for the linguistic, physical and archaeological aspects of the similarities and differences between the two areas as seen from a Polynesian perspective, such a hypothesis has been notably less serviceable within Melanesia itself. Greater time depth, more complex interaction (White and Allen 1980:730), or social isolation (Bellwood 1978:96) have been invoked to account for the difficulties of resolving Melanesian culture history into a tidy synthesis.

Leaving matters of linguistic and physical variation aside, hypotheses of cultural fusion in Island Melanesia are as yet unsupported by archaeological data, to the extent that there is no agreement on the partitioning of major elements into sets of old and new. Thus, of a classic set of traits, including pottery and horticulture, once more simply ascribable to a Southeast Asian origin and reaching Melanesia only within the last five millennia (Bellwood 1978:135, 244; Shutler and Marck 1975), none stands unchallenged. For pottery and horticulture, both time depth within Melanesia and evidence

for direct Southeast Asian derivation are open to question (Golson 1977; White and Allen 1980; Yen 1980 and this volume). This is not to deny that such ultimate derivations for the population we now call Melanesian are virtual certainties: the problem is rather a complex one of resolving the time depth and the nature of human achievements within Melanesia.

I have outlined a case for primary colonisation of the Admiralty Islands about 3500-4000 years ago by a population whose pottery style incorporated the distinctive dentate-stamped ware known as Lapita (Kennedy 1981a). To the early sherds from Kohin Cave may be added a dentate-stamped rim sherd, collected by Wal Ambrose and me from the surface of a much-disturbed, undated inland hilltop site on Baluan, a small volcanic island south of Manus. My argument for primary Lapita colonisation of the Admiralties rests on both the absence of evidence for earlier settlement and the absence in the early Admiralties' pottery of other distinctive styles. While negative evidence is always vulnerable, this hypothesis is at least consistent with two relevant distributions. Firstly, obsidian from Lou Island occurs in Lapita and other sites only after 4000 BP (Ambrose 1976: 359-362; Ambrose, Bird and Duerden 1981; White 1979; White, Downie and Ambrose 1978). Secondly, with the dubious exception of some enigmatic New Caledonian dates (Bellwood 1978:250; Shutler and Marck 1975:102), there is no evidence in Melanesia for open sea crossings greater than 200 km prior to 4000 BP. Sites dated earlier than this in New Ireland (White, Downie and Ambrose 1978; White 1979:356) and New Britain (Specht, Lilley and Normu 1981) are separated from the New Guinea mainland by water gaps of only 50 km (Vitiaz Strait) or less. A gap of 160 km, but broken by intervening small islands, separates New Britain from Buka and the rest of the Solomons, in which there is as yet only a strong suspicion of such sites (Golson 1968; White 1979:357). Argument for the presence in the Admiralties of a population with different cultural affiliation, whether substantially earlier than 4000 BP or not, at present has no support.

The claim of primary Lapita colonisation of the Admiralties poses a problem: on the archaeological evidence, we have no basis for arguing that ethnic diversity in the modern Admiralty Islands is a result of fusions of an archaic Melanesian complex with an intrusive one of more recent Southeast Asian derivation, a fusion implying both greater initial heterogeneity and greater time depth than evidence can so far show for the Admiralties or for areas east of the Solomons. In fact, crudely put, we have in the Admiralties roughly the same start to the cultural sequence and roughly the same time depth as in Fiji (Frost 1979), an area of rather less cultural diversity.

On the basis of the pottery sequence from Kohin Cave, correlated with other collections of prehistoric pottery from the Admiralties, some dated independently, I have also suggested (Kennedy 1981a) that the overall sequence may be read as basically continuous, an argument to be pursued elsewhere. The point to be made here is that such

continuity is not to be taken as evidence for local isolation, against which external distributions of obsidian already argue, following initial settlement. I shall consider further distributional evidence against local isolation, in two sets of comparisons between the Admiralties and the island world beyond, the first looking mainly east, the second looking west.

Lapita pottery is now known to extend, rather patchily, from the north coast of New Guinea near Aitape (Swadling 1979: Plate 2), through the Bismarcks and as far east as Tonga and Samoa (Green 1979). Although there are variations (Green 1979:40-44) across this vast expanse, there is such close stylistic resemblance in Lapita wares that some sort of communicative linkage among makers of the pots is I think undeniable, although its nature remains a problem (White and Allen 1980). A further problem concerns the antecedents of this style, for which, in brief, I can see no strong candidates in Southeast Asia. In my view, there are at best only generic similarities, some of which are with Southeast Asian wares in the younger range or younger than the Lapita series (Bellwood 1978:214, 247; Golson 1974:577; Solheim 1961a, 1968) and none of which is strong enough to justify a claim for the development of Lapita style outside Melanesia. My main concern here, however, is to emphasize the distribution of Lapita style itself, a Melanesian distribution with a Polynesian extension, and to emphasize the association of Lapita style with evidence for first settlement across the first major water gap to the west of the large islands of the Bismarcks, just as, at about the same time, Lapita sites dominate the record of first settlement across the major water gaps to the east of the Solomons. The Admiralty Islands' data thus support the suggestion that the technology which allowed such settlement developed in the large islands of the Bismarcks (Green 1979:45).

A reading of current literature on Melanesian culture history easily leaves one with the impression that the decline of Lapita style in Melanesia marks the end of widespread pottery styles there, and by inference, the beginning or reassertion of Melanesian local isolation and resulting cultural diversity (Bellwood 1978:275). However, a close similarity has been noted between the Mangaasi style in central Vanuatu (Garanger 1972) and the Sohano style of the Buka sequence outlined by Specht (1969:195-199). Stylistically similar sherds also occur in the Admiralties, and are roughly dated there by their appearance in the Kohin Cave sequence about 2000 BP and later. The decorative techniques include incision, linear and wavy appliqué strips, punctation and fingernail impression, and the motifs are largely linear and geometric. Figure 1 illustrates a small sample of these sherds, from excavated and surface contexts (see also Kennedy 1981a: Figure 1, a & c; 1981b: Figures 4 and 5). Similar sherds are also known from Wuvulu, dated at 1500 BP and after (Swadling 1980). Stamped circles are absent from the collections, and comb incision very rare. This style in the Admiralties remains to be defined and secured by more excavated sites; it resembles the Sohano and Hangan phases of Specht's Buka sequence, in agreement with the outline chronology (Specht 1969:195-203, 213-215, 241), and recalls the older phase of Mangaasi (Garanger 1972:121); although in the Admiralties the style

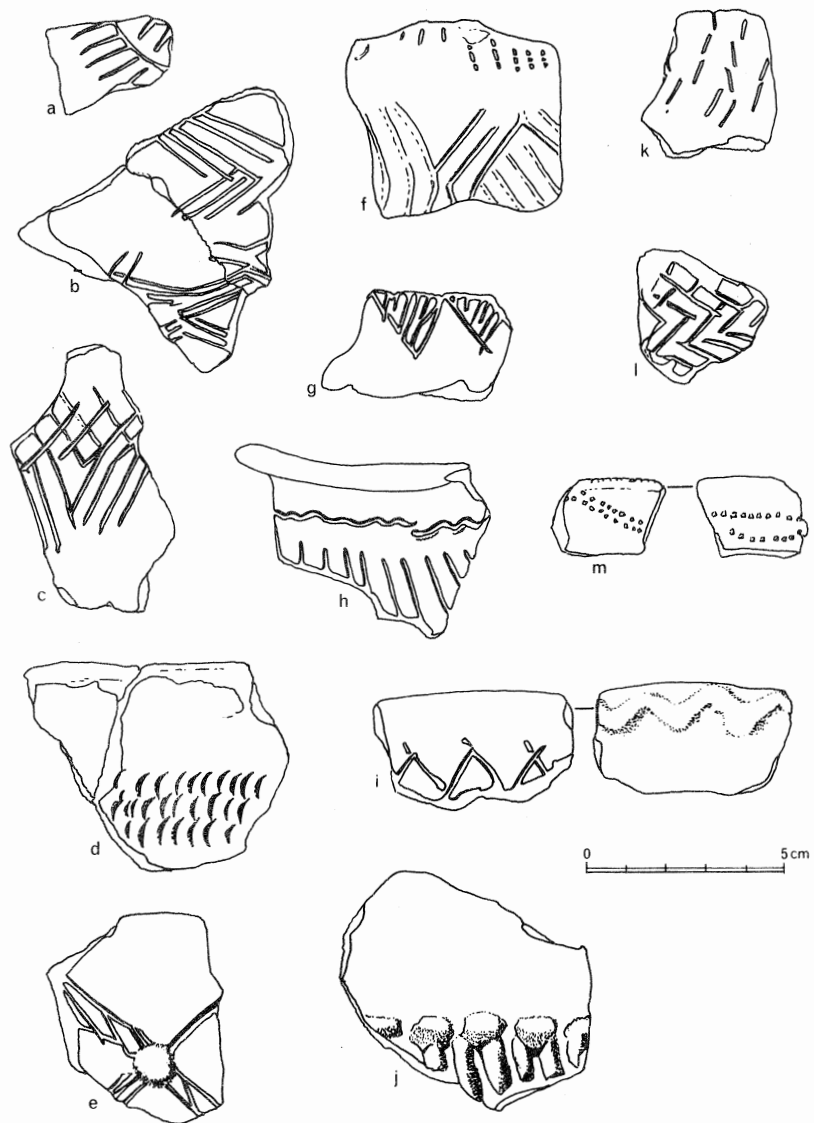
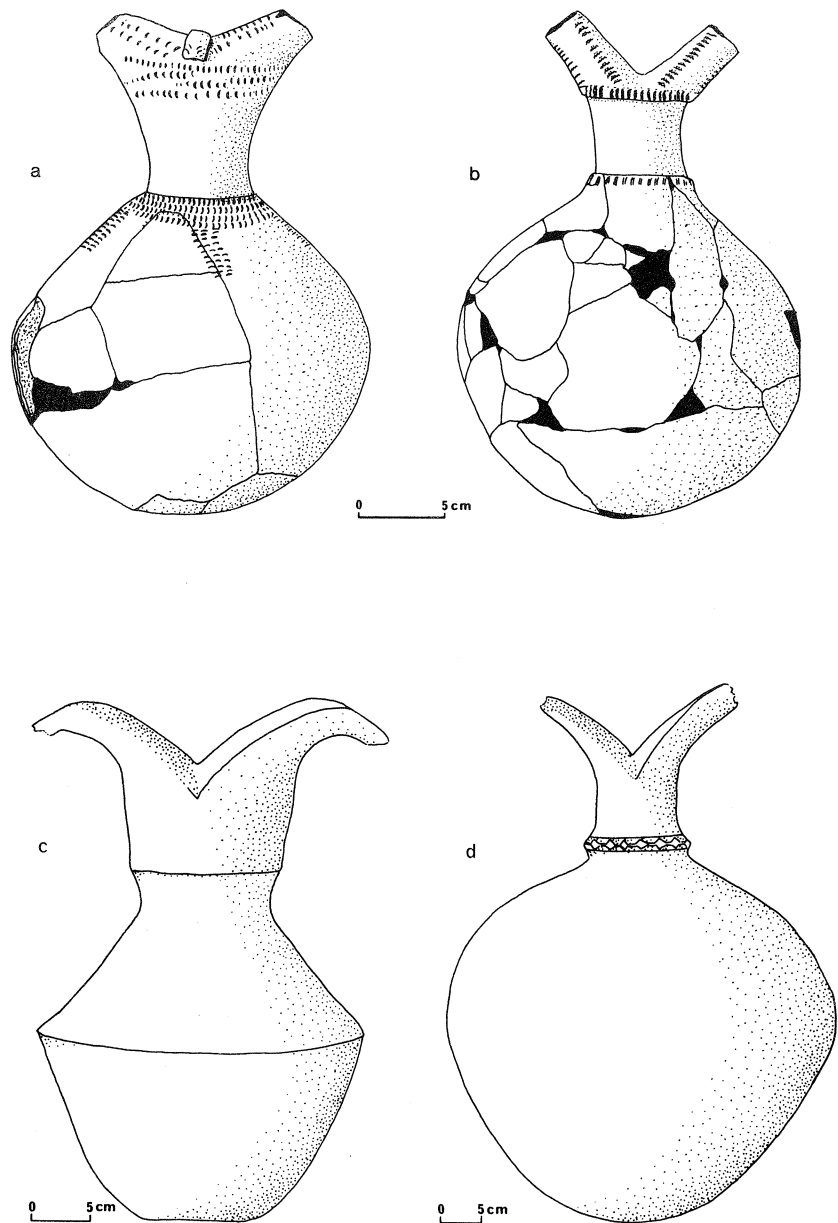


Figure 1. Incised and relief sherds, Admiralty Islands. a-e dated circa 2000 BP, a, c, e from Lou Island, b and d from Kohin Cave. Remainder from surface collections, g, h, i, j, l from Baluan, f from Lou, k from Mbuke, m from Hus. e, h, i, m, are rims, f is badly eroded.

seems to be later. This comparison may be extended further west to the New Guinea coast, where sherds from an undated collection (Specht 1969:231-232, Plate XI-50) bear perhaps an even closer resemblance to Admiralties' incised and relief style than to Sohano style, and perhaps further east (Golson 1974:564-576; Specht 1969:242-247). Thus, despite poor coverage of the area and the rarity of secure, dated sequences; there seems to be more similarity in Melanesian ceramic style after the decline of Lapita than is usually recognised. The province of similarity of incised and relief wares is almost as extensive as that of Lapita style: it is once again a province centred on Melanesia, without clear external parallel or antecedent, and once again I suggest that the similarities imply a widespread network of communicative links.

Two pieces of evidence from the Admiralties call for comparisons to the west. A pair of highly distinctive double-spouted pots (Figure 2, a and b; Egloff 1977:4; Mitton 1979:23-24, Plate 7) from Lou Island almost certainly derive from the occupation layer buried about 2000 BP (Ambrose, Bird and Duerden 1981:5). Nearly identical in dimensions and form, these two pots have their only close parallels in a much larger collection from Niah Cave (Harrisson 1971; Solheim 1974:513-14; Solheim, Harrisson and Wall 1961). In extension of the spouts from a constricted cylindrical neck, the Lou pots are most like Harrisson's Type I (Figure 2, c and d), for which he suggests a maximum age of 3000 BP (1971:44-55, 69). Unlike Niah Type I, the spouts of the Lou pots are nearly symmetrical and straight, subtending an obtuse angle, rather than asymmetrical, outcurved and acute angled, and both spouts of the Lou pots are round rather than angled in cross-section. The Lou pots have bands of impressed fingernail and shell decoration at shoulder, neck and spout, whereas the Niah Type I pots are plain, red-slipped and burnished. On of the Lou pots (Figure 2a) has an impressed appliqué strip across the saddle between the two spouts, and bands of horizontal nail impressions extending vertically down the upper body.

As at Niah, where Type I double-spouted pots are followed by elaborations of Types II and III (Harrisson 1971:69-71), the Lou pots seem also to have some local descendants, though these are unlike the later Niah examples. Spherical bodied water pots with double orifices were made in recent times in the Admiralties (Egloff 1977:82; Mitton 1979: Plate 31). One such pot, illustrated by Specht (1969:184, Figure X-33) and almost certainly from Mbuke (Admiralties) rather than Buka (Solomons), also has a decorative band between the two mouths. Pots with multiple orifices are also recorded from the north coast of New Guinea (Parkinson 1900; Specht 1969:184; Swadling 1979:80). In the Admiralties' prehistoric sherd collections, a few neck or rim sherds of very small diameter might also be spouts. Only one of these fragments suggests a double rather than single spout: the lip is at a pronounced angle across a circular section. The sherd is plain, red, possibly burnished and derives from a layer dated about 2000 BP in Kohin Cave, about the same age as the Lou pair.



**Figure 2.** Double-spouted pots from Rei Village, Lou Island, and Niah Cave, Sarawak.  
 a, fingernail impressed, b, shell impressed, from Lou. National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby.  
 c, Jeragan No. 1, d, Jeragan No. 3, from Niah.  
 (after Harrisson 1971: figures 3 and 4, plate 2)

A close, but singular similarity thus exists between Niah Cave and the Admiralties, but separated by a chronological and spatial void. More complex, possible related forms are known from Sumatra (Solheim 1961b: Plates II-III) and the Philippines (Fox 1970:149, Figure 45), the last, though different in form, having decoration similar to that on the Lou pots. I do not think the similarity is close enough to show any direct link between Niah and Lou, and suggest rather that there are many unknown links in-between. Nonetheless, a parallel with island Southeast Asia in the Admiralties at about 2000 BP does not stand entirely alone. A closer identity of distinctive pots, at a somewhat later date, links Collingwood Bay with the Philippines (Bellwood 1978:266-67; Egloff 1979:113-115).

Direct links between Southeast Asia and the Admiralties have previously been proposed, notably by Bühler (1935) and more recently by Badner (1974), who argued at length for Dongson influences in the art of the Admiralties. Ironically, his case rested on elements of the ship-of-the-dead motif in Admiralties' carving, in the absence of a complete example. Figure 3 shows that his reconstruction was correct: the carving, in wood, is an elaborate and beautiful representation of a ship-of-the-dead, which warrants much more detailed description than I can attempt here. The piece is modern, was carved in Bipi, a small islet just west of Manus, was presented to Michael Somare and is now in the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery. Though the attribution Dongson is dubious, there is no question of its Southeast Asian heritage, which is even more striking than for other ship-of-the-dead carvings known from elsewhere in Melanesia (Badner 1974; Spiegel 1971). This said, the significance of such a heritage in the Admiralties remains as obscure as the void between the Lou Island and Niah double spouts. Although Badner found many examples in Admiralties' wood carving of curvilinear motifs, especially the double spirals and scrolls that suggested to him Dongson parallels and particularly the ship-of-the-dead motif, such motifs are not found on Admiralties' pottery, prehistoric or modern, only rarely on other durable materials (Mitton 1979; Nevermann 1934), and are unknown archaeologically in the Admiralties. But such absence is not evidence for recent intrusion. By contrast, in Southeast Asia such motifs, whether or not associated with the ritual complex of the ship-of-the-dead (Golson 1974:582-6) are very widespread, almost pervasive, and in isolated form are a commonplace on archaeological pottery older than any known in Melanesia (Solheim 1974:523), and much older than the Dongson complex (Bellwood 1978:185,191). Thus, it is possible, though archaeologically untestable, that the direct heritage of the Bipi carving extends back to the first settlement of the Admiralties and before. It is equally possible that the derivation is much more recent. Like the Lou pots, the carving pinpoints no useful temporal or spatial coordinates beyond the Admiralties, but merely turns us west.

My excursion west from the Admiralties is not merely a set piece of idle speculation. I have above drawn attention to two distinctly Melanesian distributions of ceramic styles. Closely

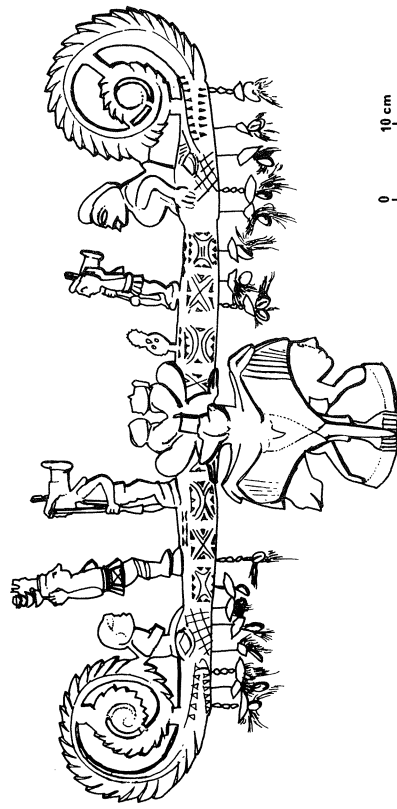


Figure 3. Ship-of-the-dead, modern carving in wood, Bipi Island, Admiralty Islands.  
National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby.



related in time and space, they remain to be clarified in terms of local sequences, geographical extent and stylistic relationships. In the Admiralties we also have two pots with their closest parallels in Southeast Asia, and a single modern carving, a complex iconic outlier of the same area that is at present both chronologically and culturally vacuous in its Admiralty context. Thus, the weight of evidence clearly defines the Admiralty Islands as part of a fundamentally Melanesian past.

While this is unsurprising in terms of modern distributions, the far western position of the Admiralties in Island Melanesia ought to have increased its chances of receiving a significant impact from Southeast Asia. Thus, if such external impact is to be invoked as a major determinant of early Island Melanesian culture, especially in island groups isolated from the larger land masses, early phases of settlement in the Admiralties should show this more clearly than islands far to the east. Instead, the early archaeological evidence in the Admiralties aligns only with evidence to its east and furthermore is not substantially earlier. This pattern of Melanesian linkage continues through later periods of the sequence.

On present evidence, Southeast Asian influence in the Admiralties may be interpreted as the result of contacts after initial settlement, or as the survival of a much older complex, or both. Neither proposition is at variance with the hypothesis that Lapita colonisation follows lengthy adaptation in Melanesia of a parent Southeast Asian complex (Green 1976:264) and neither will contribute usefully to further research in the Admiralties until and unless we examine much more closely the Melanesian complex of which the group has always been a part. We might then see Melanesia as less a passive recipient of influences than an active participant in contact with a Southeast Asian world of islands, also poorly understood.

I conclude by recalling the contrast in diversity exemplified by the Admiralties and Fiji, a contrast not easily to be attributed on archaeological grounds to a difference between the two groups in primal heterogeneity. There is, however, a subsequent difference. The widespread similarity in incised and relief pottery in Melanesia suggested by others and extended by the Admiralties' data may signal, as does the distribution of Lapita style, a complex intercommunicating world. If such a world consists initially of small social units held together by a network of communication that is continuously reworked over time, both the frequency and the diversity of external contacts any one such unit may have are likely to be largely a function of its distance from large land masses. Even if links between individual social units in the network are transitory, the possibility of social units within an island group having multiple links beyond the immediate area must be much higher in most parts of western Melanesia than in the east. Thus, the Admiralty Islands are much closer to the north coast of New Guinea and to the New Ireland - New Britain area than the Fiji group is to any such landmass. The possibility of

greater frequency and diversity of prehistoric contact, much higher in the Admiralties than in Fiji, suggests a contrast in the local social environments: whereas individual social units in Fiji interact largely amongst themselves in a nearly closed environment, social units in the Admiralties have other possibilities. They may interact individually in a social environment that is open to the world outside.

Turning from passive geographic probability to the active seeking of local competitive advantage by any one social unit, and assuming that such advantage is related to the number of external links, the resulting network, consisting in transitory links, competitively forged, contains within it a powerful mechanism for maintaining social autonomy. Thus, perhaps, the smaller the world of other social units and the greater the difficulty of reaching them, the more attenuated the external network becomes, and in consequence, the less the pressure for the internal maintenance of social boundaries. In short, if social autonomy is a cause of Melanesian diversity, it is also a result.

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