

## THE LAPITA HOMELAND PROJECT

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The Lapita Homeland Project aims to explore the prehistory of the Bismarck Archipelago, concentrating on New Britain, New Ireland, St Matthias group and Manus (Fig. 1). Not only is the development of human occupation in the area a fascinating study in itself, but it is also relevant to broader questions of Pacific prehistory, a major theme of which is provided by the Lapita complex and its origins.

Enough work has been undertaken in the Bismarck Archipelago to indicate a series of questions which may be addressed through this project and future archaeological work.

The first question concerns the length of human occupation within the region. The earliest date so far obtained is that from Misisil cave in West New Britain. Misisil is a massive limestone cave, which contains evidence of two sets of occupation. The earlier one is dated to  $11,400 \pm 1200$  B.P. and is the first evidence of Pleistocene occupation east of mainland New Guinea (Specht, Lilley and Normu 1981). These early deposits contain obsidian from the Talasea region, which indicates extended contacts within the New Britain area at an early date. This evidence of contact and hints of far earlier occupation on the nearby mainland on the Huon Peninsula point to the probability that people first moved into this area well before the 11,000 B.P. date obtained from Misisil. The Lapita Homeland Project will attempt to test this idea through excavating a series of shelters which may contain early material.

Developments within the region subsequent to the Misisil occupation have been uncovered by work at Balof cave on New Ireland. Excavation revealed eight levels; the earliest date ( $6800 \pm 410$  B.P.) comes from bone spread through levels VII and VIII and thus provides some general idea of the age of the initial occupation, rather than dating it with any exactitude. Outside contacts are again revealed by the presence of obsidian in all levels of the site except the earliest. Obsidian from both Talasea in West New Britain and Lou Island in the Admiralties occur at the site, with Lou obsidian predominating in the upper levels (Downie and White 1979).

Evidence from Balof that widespread contacts and probably regular sea travel took place at an early date is amplified by finds from Manus. Kohin cave on the main island of Manus has yielded a date of  $3450 \pm 100$  B.P. (Kennedy 1979, 1980) from layer 10. Layers 7, 8 and 9 have produced four Lapita sherds which connect Manus to the main Lapita development, albeit tenuously at present. Of even greater implication for the region as a whole is evidence of

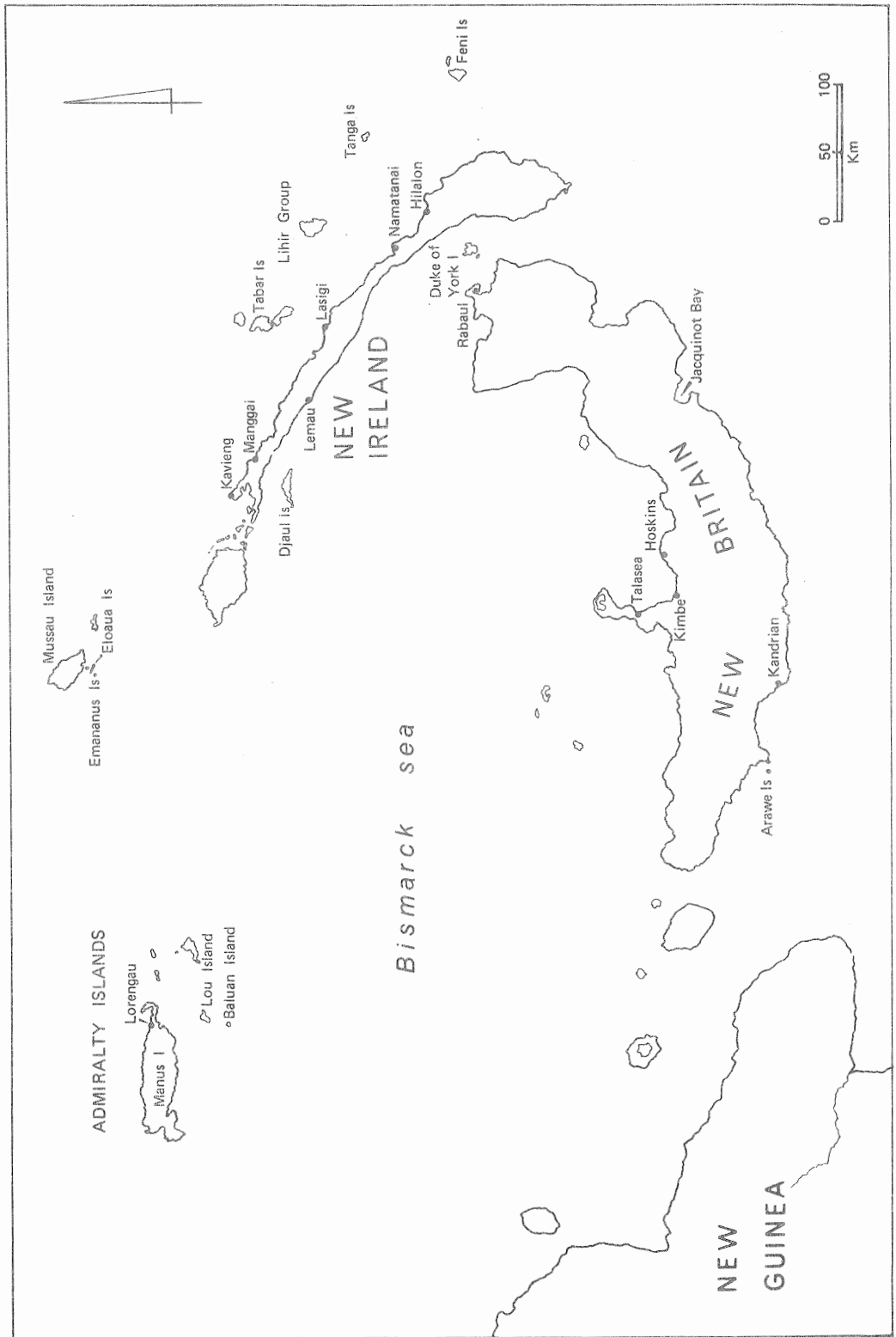


Figure 1. The Bismarck Archipelago.

probable pre-Lapita occupation of Manus from the sites of Peli Louson and Father's Water. The former has a date of  $4610 \pm 90$  BP from a lower unit of excavation, whilst a  $4290 \pm 100$  BP date was obtained from the lowest of five levels at Father's Water (Kennedy 1983). While both these dates come from shell, presently available correction factors indicate that the Peli Louson date is slightly older than any charcoal dates associated with Lapita sites elsewhere, while Father's Water is of the same age as the oldest known Lapita sites. These two sites provide indications, however slight at present, that people were capable of the lengthy sea voyages needed to reach Manus at a period prior to the first appearance of Lapita.

Therefore in the pre-Lapita phase in the Bismarck archipelago there is evidence of Pleistocene occupation, extensive contacts involving the movement of raw materials, and sea voyaging. The material from Balof has also been interpreted as indicating a change from the use of a broad spectrum of resources in the early period to the more intensive use of a narrower range of raw materials and foodstuffs later in the occupation. This may indicate that the landscape was filling up with different groups during the occupation of Balof and this led to greater pressure on resources.

Investigating the development of society between the initial Pleistocene occupation and the appearance of Lapita may enable us to eventually answer the question of whether Lapita pottery and the movements of population associated with it originated within the Bismarck Archipelago, as well as the reasons for this development. Obviously this is a different question from whether pottery technology was independently developed in Melanesia. On present evidence this is not considered likely. Green (1979:45) put forward the idea that the New Britain-New Ireland area might provide the point of origin for Lapita and associated human groups. The evidence that he adduced in favour of this idea was the fact that raw materials, particularly stone and obsidian which have their sources in the Bismarcks, move over long distances into southeast Melanesia (Ambrose 1978; Ambrose and Green 1972). Analysis of decorative systems on Lapita pottery indicate close stylistic similarities between this region and areas to the east, again suggesting close and continuing contact. The more recent evidence of a long history of occupation with extensive contacts during an early phase and a long tradition of sea voyaging in the Bismarcks lend support to Green's suggestion.

It will obviously be a major aim of the project to test this idea further, by seeking evidence not only from the Lapita period itself but also from times prior to the first appearance of Lapita pottery. Another aim will be to try and gain some information on what happened in the area after the Lapita demise, and to chart developments up to the present day.

#### PRELIMINARY WORK

During 1984 four of the principal participants in the project made a reconnaissance trip throughout the area to be studied (Allen *et al.* n.d.). This visit was partly to secure support for the project from various local agencies and individuals, but also to survey for sites of potential interest to be looked at during the main field season in 1985. A number of new sites were located (Fig. 1); further details on all the sites found are contained in Allen *et al.* n.d. One focus of research will be a series of limestone shelters along the east coast of New Ireland presenting good possibilities for excavation. Work is also planned in the St Matthias group where several new Lapita sites were found, together with a large number of possible site locations. New Britain was found to contain more diffuse possibilities. Work next year is planned in the volcanic area of Talasea, with the help of a geomorphologist; the Kandrian area from which Lapita sherds are known and the Arawe islands which have been inhabited by trading groups still active in recent times were also found to present definite possibilities. Manus and neighbouring islands were also visited and these again will provide a major focus of attention in 1985. As well as straight archaeological work, Yen undertook a preliminary survey of the plant use within the area and noted a range of possibilities which future work will explore.

#### THE 1985 FIELD SEASON

During 1985 it is planned to co-ordinate the operations of around twenty professional researchers in the Bismarck Archipelago area. Archaeologists from Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, USA and the UK will take part in the project. The project will use the Sydney based Oceanic Research Foundation's ocean-going yacht for survey, to transport teams and supply them with equipment and food in the field and to transport archaeological finds back to Australia. The boat will also house a library of material relevant to the area and provide some basic research facilities. The boat's captain, David Lewis, will undertake his own research on the technology of canoe making and the possible influence of tides, wind and currents on early voyaging in the Bismarck Sea.

Each archaeologist has been directed to a research area and a problem. Beyond this each team will be largely independent and responsible for their own research and analysis, although a good deal of post-fieldwork interaction is planned. Thus the initial function of the project organisers will be to enable work to take place as efficiently as possible, and later they will help compile basic information on the sites excavated in a standardised fashion. The archaeological data can then be stored in an easily accessible and comparable form on a computer. This will help members of the project in assessing regional trends and provide an invaluable

resource base for future workers in the area. Ultimately individual and joint publications are envisaged, with at least one volume covering all individual projects being produced.

The main aim of the project is thus to pursue questions derived from previous work in the Bismarck Archipelago in a relatively short space of time and in a co-ordinated manner. Much of the research done in Papua New Guinea to date has been by isolated teams with little overall planning. The Lapita Homeland Project hopes to provide a means by which a large number of professional researchers can examine questions of interest to them in a manner which is relevant to themes of the prehistory of the area, as well as tackling wider issues concerning Pacific prehistory. The results from the 1985 field season will be used to define areas for future study in greater detail than has been possible until now, as well as further demonstrating the importance of Melanesia to world prehistory.

It is also expected that the project will stimulate an interest in the past within the region itself. During the 1984 reconnaissance trip the team took a booklet containing a rundown of Bismarck prehistory which stated the aims of the project, as well as casts of prehistoric artefacts from the region. This exercise was a great success and generated much interest locally. Thus, the results of the project will also be made available in accessible forms, such as booklets, poster displays and artefact casts which can be housed in schools, community centres and local meeting places in the region, in order to give an idea of the history of this part of Melanesia and the way in which this has helped to shape the present.

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