

LONG TERM TRENDS IN THE COLONISATION OF THE PACIFIC: PUTTING LAPITA IN ITS PLACE

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In 1971, in the context of a discussion of Lapita, Les Groube (1971) put forward the argument that the Polynesians only became the Polynesians within the Pacific in the last three millennia. Groube's idea was put forward to counter the proposition that the critical features of Polynesian identity were put together within Southeast Asia and transported by means of migration out into Oceania. In this paper I put forward a rather more contemporary solution to the problem of Pacific ethnogenesis: that the peoples of remote Oceania only became the Polynesians in the minds of Europeans between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Following this view, the sole origin we can seek for the Polynesians as such is within categories of European thought within the last few hundred years. However, past European views of the rest of the world are not the main subject of this paper, which rather concentrates on our contemporary understandings. The main point I wish to make is that the social forms of the Pacific have changed constantly over the last 30,000 years and those which Europeans saw when they entered the Pacific might have come into being relatively recently.

In charting the coming into being of social forms the crucial link I make is that between space and society. Spatial and social forms are seen to be mutually constitutive. All social relations have a spatial aspect to them and the relative positions of individuals and groups helps to determine the form and nature of the relationships between them. Spatial structures are made up of demographic structures representing differences in the density of populations between regions. Population density has effects on the level and nature of extraction from the environment, human reproductive rates and effects the possibilities of movement from one area to another. Within the overall demographic structures life is influenced by the arrangement of people in terms of settlement pattern. This effects the way in which the local environment is used and the flows of material within and between regions. The density and arrangement of human groups, plus the connections between them, underlie all aspects of life. Density, arrangement and

connection arise from the nature of past social structures and help create future social formations.

From this perspective the process of colonisation can be seen as the unfolding of new spatial and social arrangements, which affects both the groups in motion and those who stay behind. A new colonising move will take people to the edge of the known world and they will only have connections back to the area they came from. Future moves push the frontier on and those on the old frontier now have connections forward to the new edge of the colonised world as well as back the way they came. An expansion of population will influence spatial relations over a wide area and help to change social formations. Looked at archaeologically we should expect to see the effects of colonisation not only in areas of new settlement but also back in the "homelands".

Ideas linking space and society are particularly relevant when attempting to understand the process of colonisation which has taken place in the Pacific over the last 30,000 years. One of the main points of this paper is that when attempting to investigate the process of colonisation we should set up no discontinuities in either space or time. Over the last 30,000 years there have been a series of archipelagic cultures through the Southeast Asian islands out to the Solomons. For these people the sea was a bridge, not a barrier, and maritime movements have led to the continuous transfer of people, genes and language over large areas for a long period of time. Areas such as the Bismarck Archipelago and the Solomons island chain were never sealed off from other areas of the western Pacific. Rather they were part of the social flux washing through this area for tens of millennia bringing constant social change.

In recent attempts to understand the colonisation of the Pacific the Lapita assemblages dating from 3500-2000 BP have played a crucial role. Lapita sites have been seen to be evidence of an intrusive group, moving between Southeast Asia and the remote Pacific. Implicit in this view is the idea that superior maritime, subsistence and craft technologies allowed this group to colonise previously occupied areas and move into regions as yet uninhabited. I attempt here to sketch out a different story of the colonisation of the western Pacific which assigns a rather less central role to Lapita, seeing this period as one of a sequence of changing spatial and social forms and not as the period of crucial change. Lapita, however, as I shall argue, still remains central to our understanding of the process of colonisation.

What are these phases of colonisation? The new data from the Bismarck Archipelago allow us to propose a series of models with much more generous timespans than any previous attempts. To set Lapita in proper perspective I think we now need to start at 30,000 BP, the period of the first known movement on to Pacific islands; in this case New Ireland (Allen *et al.* 1989). At this stage the Papua New Guinean mainland was inhabited as well as the island groups of Southeast Asia. Shortly after the settlement of New Ireland people moved into the Solomons island chain (Wickler and Spriggs 1988). From the New Ireland and the Buka data we can postulate that there may have been small numbers of coastally orientated people (both known sites are on the coast), using sea transport to move between fairly dispersed resources, leaving a scant archaeological record. By 15,000

BP the character of the archaeological record has changed, with the sites already known having higher rates of deposition within them and new sites being used. Also, the character of the evidence within the sites has changed by this period, with the movement of obsidian on to New Ireland found from 20,000 BP onward, together with bones of animals such as phalanger found in the caves (Allen *et al.* 1989). This may (and we have to stress the conditional character of this statement on the basis of present evidence) indicate the alteration and enrichment of the local resource base, a crucial point which provides a strand of continuity with later prehistory.

By 15,000 BP the former peripheral area of the Bismarcks and Solomons can be seen to constitute a new core of settlement, with an established population who had a good knowledge of local resources within the region as a whole and not just within their local patch, as the movement of obsidian between New Britain and New Ireland indicates.

What happens after the establishment of the new settlement core around 15,000 BP is a matter of speculation rather than fact at present. There is the possibility that new movements occur during this period. Any mention of the New Caledonian tumuli is controversial and it will be interesting to see if future work confirms or denies the validity of the early dates (Green 1988). Similarly, it will be of considerable interest to see whether future exploration on Vanuatu reveals pre-Lapita occupation there. We know that Manus has pre-Lapita occupation, although the exact date of initial colonisation still needs to be established. In the absence of any real data from this period, but bearing in mind the movements that took place between 30,000-15,000 BP, I think we should hold open the possibility that people may have moved off the Solomons island chain eastwards shortly after the glacial maximum.

The patterns of cave occupation established 15,000 BP on New Ireland stay much the same until 8-5000 BP, perhaps indicating that no real changes occur in social geographies during that period. However, come the mid-Holocene there are major changes in the archaeological record in the only area from which we have evidence, the Bismarck Archipelago. All the cave sites, with the possible exception of Balof, are abandoned by 6000 BP (Allen *et al.* 1989). Shortly after this period we see the first evidence of settlement on the smaller islands in the region. Lolmo cave, in the Arawes, dates to 6000 BP in its earliest deposits and the sites on Nissan contain the first evidence of human presence around 5000 BP (Gosden *et al.* 1989). What these changes imply for the structure of life in the region as a whole is unknown at present and more data are urgently needed from the larger islands within the Bismarck Archipelago concerning the shift in settlement that the lack of deposition in the Pleistocene cave sites may signal.

Further out into the Pacific, Best (1984) noted that the initial evidence from Lakeba in the Lau group of the Fijian islands may not derive from permanent settlement, but rather from temporary camps used by visitors to the island. This may be a hint that exploratory visits took place out to the more remote Pacific islands in advance of permanent settlement. We must at least countenance the possibility that exploratory moves were taking place far out into the western Pacific in the pre-Lapita period.

Where does this leave Lapita as a colonising movement? There seems little doubt that some colonising movements did take place within the Lapita period. There is no hint of earlier settlement on Samoa and Tonga and it is still probable that Fiji received the first permanent settlement within the Lapita phase. Despite longer sea crossings than those found previously, the unusual aspect of Lapita is not the scope of the new colonising movements, which fall into a pattern with those found from the previous thirty millennia, but rather their archaeological visibility. Lapita, because of its well-known pottery, its beach locations accessible to archaeologists and its connection to the Polynesian question, is far better-known than any previous or subsequent period of prehistory. Our relatively rich knowledge of Lapita period sites provides us with an analytical advantage we should not neglect. Lapita is at present seen to be a movement of people which is quite different in type from those which came before. However, if we change this view and Lapita is seen as fitting within the broader scope of Pacific prehistory and having elements of similarity with periods before and after we can use our knowledge of the Lapita period to illuminate other phases of Pacific prehistory. Here lies the major disadvantage of the idea that Lapita assemblages represent an intrusive group, as such a scheme cuts this relatively well-known period off from what went before.

Taking the line that there is some continuity through 30,000 years of colonisation in the Pacific, what can we learn from the Lapita evidence? The Lapita sites within the Bismarcks and elsewhere contain the earliest good indications of the modification of the landscape and the environment. In the Arawe islands of West New Britain, for example, there is evidence that both major sets of deposits excavated so far (beach sands and clays) might have accumulated under human influence and that much of the coastal area of West New Britain may be a human product (Gosden 1989). Examples of dramatic human intervention in landscape formation processes are well-known from elsewhere in the Bismarck Archipelago at this time, such as the Mussau group (Kirch 1988). Evidence for human manipulation of the environment is especially important as such changes appear to start in the Pleistocene and we have characterised the original inhabitants of New Ireland as having an active rather than passive attitude to their environment. The history of such changes, pre-Lapita and Lapita, needs systematic investigation as they are vital to understanding how people came to terms with living on small impoverished islands.

As well as peoples' relationships with their local areas we need to understand connections over longer distances. On the one hand, we know that movements of materials such as obsidian can be traced back to the Pleistocene. On the other hand, there is evidence that the Lapita period may have been unusual in the scope of its contacts.

A systematic investigation is needed of the ways in which Lapita social relations were different from, but also similar to, those of previous periods. Here there are two immediate lines of investigation. Firstly, that of obsidian. What, for instance is the pre-Lapita distribution of obsidian both within the Bismarck Archipelago and elsewhere? What forms of reduction and use of obsidian can be seen to occur together with different

patterns of distribution. Here the project of Specht, Fullagar and Torrence (1988) in investigating production of Talasea obsidian from the pre-Lapita period onwards will be vital. Another vital avenue of research is into the role of pottery as a conveyor of social meaning. The possibility exists that people were able to deal more flexibly with problems of social identity and social structure once they had such a plastic medium for conveying meaning at their disposal. Social and spatial relations can be seen partly to be the result of the forms of material culture available to people through which to create and maintain relations both within and between groups. If pottery has to do with social and spatial groupings can we see the divisions in the forms of decoration on pottery made by Anson as providing any reflection of underlying social formations? The further question we then need to ask is whether the social role pottery played had any parallels in pre-Lapita times?

This paper has concentrated on spatial relations at their most extensive level, spanning the western Pacific. However, broader social geographic regions are composed of a mosaic of local areas, in which problems of provisioning particular social forms meet local circumstances and constraints. Elsewhere, I have put forward the idea of the social landscape as a means for investigating local social forms. Now that we have fairly large amounts of material from a number of regions from the Lapita period we need to think about the question of how far local social circumstances influence wider social relations and to what extent the broadest set of connections influences what happens at the local level.

Returning briefly to the Polynesians we can say that around 3000 BP Fiji, Tonga and Samoa formed a core from which the rest of the Pacific was colonised, which was then a vast new frontier. Movements into the remote Pacific have links with the Pleistocene past, but set up social relations of a novel kind as new areas are colonised and this alters the structure of life within older core areas. The social structures, settlement plans and use of material culture labelled as Polynesian and witnessed in the last few centuries derives from a period lasting only for 1000 or 1500 years in which the Pacific has been fully settled. Although these recent ways of life have roots in the deep past we must be wary of transferring our pictures of the present too far back. The nature of continuity and change in the societies colonising the Pacific are problems to be addressed in terms of past circumstances, rather than providing answers constructed around concepts such as the Polynesians, derived from the present.

CONCLUSION

Whether the exact details of the model I have proposed here are right is less important than its overall emphasis, which is to stress a degree of continuity in the colonisation of the Pacific which has not so far been noted. In this view Lapita is part of a process with some continuity, which sees the unfolding of a series of unique spatial and social forms over the western Pacific starting around 30,000 BP. All of these moves have some common features, the chief being the modification of local resource bases to benefit human communities. But each movement is also unique in its spatial and social structures

and Lapita cannot be seen as more or less foundational than any other. There is every reason to believe that regular movements between Island Southeast Asia and the Bismarcks and beyond have been taking place since the late Pleistocene, leading to interchanges of language, genes and material culture. It needs to be demonstrated, rather than assumed, that such interchanges took place at a higher rate or in a different form during the Lapita period.

Lapita is special, however, as an episode of unusual archaeological visibility compared with periods before and after. It provides an obvious starting point for complex modelling of other periods: how exactly shifts from core to periphery took place, what sorts of contacts between communities were set up in previous phases of colonisation and what forms of land and resource alteration were practised are all questions which can be tackled in detail with the data from the Lapita period. Such data then form a point of comparison and contrast for other periods, earlier and later. If Lapita is seen as a special event, brought about by colonists of a superior caste of mind, technology and social structure, such comparisons are ruled out. By stressing continuity as well as change, however, different periods within Pacific prehistory become comparable case studies which together form a body of material on colonisation and attendant social change without parallel anywhere else in the world.

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