



**VOLUME 1**  
**INTRODUCTION,**  
**EXCAVATIONS,**  
**CHRONOLOGY**

**LAPITA** AND ITS  
**TRANSFORMATIONS**  
**IN NEAR OCEANIA**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL**  
**INVESTIGATIONS**  
**IN THE**  
**MUSSAU ISLANDS,**  
**PAPUA NEW GUINEA,**  
**1985-88**

**EDITED BY** **PATRICK VINTON KIRCH**





Cover Illustration: Margaret Davidson, Cover Design: Nicole Hayward

ISBN 1-882744-11-X



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LAPITA AND ITS  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
IN NEAR OCEANIA





Portion of a large vessel or cylinder stand, with anthropomorphic face design, from Zone C of Area B, Talepakemalai Site.

# LAPITA AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS IN NEAR OCEANIA:

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE  
MUSSAU ISLANDS, PAPUA NEW GUINEA, 1985-88

Volume 1

Introduction, Excavations, Chronology

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Editor

With Contributions by  
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Contribution No. 59  
Archaeological Research Facility  
University of California at Berkeley  
2001

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Archaeological Investigations in the Mussau Islands, Papua New Guinea, 1985-88

Volume I:  
Introduction, Excavations, Chronology

Volume II:  
Lapita in its Environmental and Ecological Context

Volume III:  
The Record of Material Culture, Conclusions

Number 59  
Contributions of the Archaeological Research Facility  
University of California, Berkeley  
2001

Kirch, Patrick Vinton  
Lapita and Its Transformations in Near Oceania:  
Archaeological Investigations in the Mussau Islands, Papua New Guinea, 1985-88

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 00-134802  
ISBN 1-882744-11-X  
(alk. paper)

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TO THE MEMORY OF  
EDWARD W. GIFFORD  
PIONEER ARCHAEOLOGIST OF LAPITA

THE PUBLISHER GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES  
THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY THE STAHL FUND,  
AND BY THE CLASS OF 1954 CHAIR FUND.



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## PREFACE

A preface affords an author or editor a privileged space wherein, side-stepping the narrow scholarly constraints of academic rhetoric, he may self-reflexively comment on the work he has created. The Mussau Project has filled—albeit intermittently—the hours and days of a decade and a half of my life. I take the opportunity thus presented to share a few of what, for me, were some of the more emotionally charged and remarkable moments, particularly the experiences of fieldwork in the remote, often physically challenging, but always exquisitely beautiful Mussau Islands. Unforgettable is my memory of first sight of Eloaua’s uplifted coral limestone cliffs and forested plateau, seen through a gray dawn from the rail of the *Dick Smith Explorer*. I recall the curious mix of emotions and thoughts racing through me as the ship pulled closer up the Malle Channel. How would we be greeted; with reserve and hesitation, even suspicion, perhaps, regarding our unusual work? Would Eloaua’s sites prove to be productive, yielding the sorts of materials we sought so as to answer a host of questions and competing hypotheses? Seemingly mundane problems loomed large for the moment: would we get all of our gear across the reef safely? What sort of lodgings might be found? Would our chloroquine supply prove an adequate defense against the infamously virulent malaria of New Ireland Province? Except for the latter (I myself came down with malaria at the end of the 1985 season), in the event it turned out I need not have worried, for we were warmly received from the first hour, and subsequent weeks and months of fieldwork based out of Eloaua Village were among some of the most enjoyable I have ever experienced in the Pacific. And, as this volume attests, the archaeological record proved rich beyond expectations.

Then too, it would be hard to ever forget the sequence of events on a baking hot Sunday afternoon—August 11, 1985 to be exact—when the first hint of the unique undisturbed deposits at Talepakemalai began to turn up 65 cm down in test unit 14. Trowelling in waterlogged sands that within a few days would yield the first evidence for a Lapita stilt-house settlement pattern, sherd after large sherd appeared, most covered

with classic dentate-stamped designs, and with them whole *Conus*-shell rings, a pig tusk pendant, and large obsidian flakes. Coming after days of tedious excavating in shallow, disturbed deposits where the sherds were highly fragmented and eroded, this turn of events was, as I penned in my field journal, “very exciting to say the least.” Later, when unit 14 had been expanded into a 12 m<sup>2</sup> excavation, it was the setting for another dramatic moment as Baua Sagila gently picked up a small piece of porpoise bone which had been lying face-down in the waterlogged sands, turning it over in his hands to reveal an exquisitely carved human representation. A sea deity of the Lapita people? And there have been sad memories too, as when we returned to Eloaua the next season, only to hear that Baua had passed away, having choked to death on a fish spine just a few weeks before.

Other scenes that fill my memories of Mussau have nothing to do with archaeology, but are just as precious. They include chasing after a school of tuna fish in the dugout canoe *Two Mile*, kilometers off Cape Forster in a running sea, salt spray stinging our eyes as one of the most dramatic sunsets I have ever witnessed gilded the western horizon. Or the wonder of a school of bottle-nosed porpoises chasing up the wake of my tiny Metzler inflatable boat as we rode across the Malle Channel to Boliu Island, breaking to either side so close that we could reach out and touch their backs as they leaped passed. Or our nocturnal “expedition” to Ekaleu Island to hunt the massive coconut crabs, swarming about under towering coconut palms of an abandoned plantation dating to the early German colonial period. I think also, of watching mesmerized as more than a hundred great Frigate birds glided low over our house late one afternoon headed for their roost on tiny Enusagila Island.

The people of Eloaua, too, have left their mark with me. Ave, John, Baua, Eric, and other members of the impromptu “Giaman Club” that convened under our makeshift lab tarp in the evenings to drink my tea and tell tales of Mussau in the “time belong ol tumbuna,” as well as the remembered upheavals of the German colonial period, and of World War II, enriched

my appreciation of their world immensely. Nor will I forget our pre-dawn parting in 1988, shivering on the beach at Eloaua, as Ave, John, Meis, and the others prepared to launch *Two Mile* on a 200 kilometer voyage to Manus, John holding a battered World War II U.S. military compass in which he had utter faith. Invited by the Manus people to come for a time and teach them the Mussau technique of cutting large dugouts from a single log, they saw this as a great adventure, a way of recapturing—I suspected—something of their cultural past handed down in traditions of elaborate exchange networks between these archipelagoes in the days of their ancestors. They literally stood between two worlds, these Eloaua friends of mine, bent on continuing the voyaging traditions of their ancestors while guided by a surplus military compass! (I have not seen them since, but I had word from Ave that the trip was successful.)

Most of all I remember their eager participation in our project, their openness to my patient explanations in pidgin English of such bizarre concepts as radiocarbon dating, and their amazement that the very ground they knew so intimately—that they had dug and gardened for generations—could yield such material witnesses of their own deep past. Their own cultural interpretations of that material record often differed from mine, as when the first preserved wooden house posts were revealed in Area B at Talepakemalai, and Aimalo and Ave pronounced these to be the foundations of a famous “haus matmat” (burial house) that their grandfathers had said once stood on this spot. The event was nonetheless as symbolically charged for them as for me, perhaps more so, as each man knelt to lay his hands on the post and touch a piece of this world that had been brought back from the past. Nor does it particularly

concern me that each of us makes of this material evidence what we will, according to our own cultural canons, for I have accepted enough of the “postmodern turn” to know that there is always scope for multiple histories, different ways of knowing the past.

Much has been written of the “people without history,” which is in reality only a Western intellectual conceit, dependent on the assumption that history requires written texts. Colonial education schemes and missionary teachers extended and promulgated this view, as in the Seventh Day Adventist text I was shown in which the “history” of Mussau begins with the arrival of the first SDA missionaries in 1930! All that came before was presumably not worth knowing (or unknowable), a void of history-less, pagan “savagery.” Yet our Mussau friends had clearly never quite accepted this Western view of their past, and still valued the oral and aural “texts” through which generations of their people had constructed and passed down their own histories. I think it was the unexpected excitement at the realization that here was yet another, previously unperceived material “text” of their past—the archaeological record—that so fired the interests of John, Ave, Meis, Baua, Eric, and the others. Without their help, encouragement, interest, and most importantly, their friendship, that world would lie buried still. I hope that this volume, along with the carefully curated collection of artifacts to be deposited in their country’s National Museum, in some small way helps to repay the debt we owe them, providing a firmer basis for making them a people *with* history.

Patrick Vinton Kirch  
El Sobrante

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Modern archaeological work is expensive, especially when conducted overseas. The Mussau Project could not have been carried out without the generous financial support provided by the National Geographic Society's Committee for Research and Exploration (both to the 1985 Lapita Homeland Project, and to the Mussau Project specifically through Grant No. 3304-86 in 1986), by the U. S. National Science Foundation (through Grant Nos. BNS-8615147 and BNS-8996182), and by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant No. 4687). Additional financial support, as well as critically important equipment and laboratory space, were provided successively by the Burke Museum of the University of Washington (1985-88), and the Archaeological Research Facility of the University of California at Berkeley (1989-1999).

Prof. Jim Allen, of the Department of Archaeology, La Trobe University, deserves special mention for having organized the Lapita Homeland Project in 1984-85, and for inviting me to participate, thus launching my foray into Mussau prehistory. Jim and I have at times argued long and hard about our respective interpretations of Lapita (once to the point of sheer hoarseness), but always with mutual respect.

Archaeological research in the Mussau Islands was conducted under Research Permit Nos. 14 and 30, and export of archaeological materials for overseas study under Loan Permit Nos. 74, 87, 101, 129, and 131, all issued by the National Museum and Art Gallery of Papua New Guinea. The staff of the National Museum were at all times most helpful with official arrangements, and I would especially like to thank the Director, Dr. Soroi Eoe, and the Curator of Prehistory, Ms. Pamela Swadling. Mr. John Saulo, Assistant Curator of Anthropology, and Mr. Nick Araho, Assistant Curator of Prehistory, were both able to join us for periods in the field and added materially to the success of the Project.

Other individuals who aided us in Port Moresby include Mr. Rex Okona and Mr. Jacob Simet of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, who assisted with research visas and immigration matters. At the University of Papua New Guinea, Dr. Les Groube and Dr. Jean Kennedy were both welcoming and gave us

useful advice, as well as sharing the results of their own fieldwork in PNG.

In New Ireland Province, Mr. Ezekiel Waisale, Minister for Finance, Planning, and Public Service, of the Policy and Planning Department of the N. I. Provincial Government facilitated our requests for permission to conduct research in the Province. Mr. Ellison Kalasar, Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning, and Mr. Eli Wanera, Assistant Secretary for Education were also most helpful with official arrangements. For additional assistance, we also acknowledge Mr. Esekia Tomon of the N. I. Provincial Government, and Mr. Herman Sole, the elected Member from Mussau.

Arranging an archaeological expedition to islands as remote as Mussau requires a great deal of forward planning, as Eloaua and Emananus lack trade stores, requiring all equipment and supplies to be furnished externally. Logistical arrangements were greatly facilitated by Mr. Roger Dixon, General Manager of Haus Toksave Pty., Ltd. in Kavieng, who acted as our local agent for supplies, aircraft charter, and shipping, and who allowed us to store equipment in his shed between field seasons. Roger's efforts on our behalf went beyond those of normal business, however, entertaining us in his Kavieng home while we were en route to and from Mussau, and sending us small packets of fresh vegetables, cheese, or other delicacies via the irregular small plane to Eloaua.

In the Mussau Islands, official support was provided by the District Manager, Mr. William Sibia, who also gave us use of the government Land Rover for a reconnaissance of the E coast of Mussau Island. The local Council member for Eloaua and Emananus, Mr. Eric Kop, was at all times supportive and helpful. Mr. Aimalo Lavatea of Lomakanauru, the landowner of the ECB Site, was likewise generous in his assistance, and shared much traditional information regarding clan history and Mussau culture. Baua Sagila was a valued friend during our 1985 field season, and it was with great sadness that I learned of his passing just before our return in 1986. Saupa of Emananus Island, owner of the EHB Site, also gave his permission to excavate and helped with the work. Our excavations at ECA and other sites were carried out by a highly enthusiastic



and energetic crew of Eloaua and Emananus islanders, who included at various times: Meis Talogu, Susuvin Matonge, Riller Sagila, Deliah Sagila, Lien Kavigona, Milu Kavigona, Benta Kavigona, Melin Ave, Holson Aite, Kelvin Susuvin, Kevin Susuvin, Bila Ave, Reslin Sagila, Ave Male, John Male, Kavigona Tambu, Mata Sagila, Baua Sagila, Rillinter Hurald, Solly Joshua, Milan Solon, Liah Aite, Naomi Kavi, Bronwyn Meis, Dixy Joshua, Marren Baua, Delwyn Susuvin, Asa Ave, Ellen Ani, Lennae Tamangei, Mobilly Ave, and Rachael Mosoke. I could not have wished for a better archaeological team. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of those who accompanied and assisted me during the three field seasons in Mussau: Sally Brockwell and Pru Gaffey (1985); Terry Hunt and Marshall Weisler (1986); and, Dana Lepofsky and Jason Tyler (1988). John Aini, Carla Catterall, Holly McEldowney, and Mike Ritchie also joined us for periods in the field, and their help was inestimable.

Various colleagues in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and PNG have generously assisted with aspects of data analysis, provided comparative materials or shared unpublished reports and drafts, and in various other ways facilitated our Mussau research. Among them I would particularly like to thank Jim Allen, Melinda Allen, Gwen Bell, Roger Bird, Deborah Cembellin, Emily Dean, Bill Dickinson, Scarlett Chiu, Chris Gosden, Jack Golson, Mark Hall, John Head, Roger Green, Elizabeth Manning, Holly McEldowney, Steve Midgely, Rob Schmitt, John Sinton, Jim Specht, Matthew Spriggs, David Steadman, Daris Swindler, Christy Turner, Andrew Wright, Douglas Yen, and Alan Ziegler.

The superb line drawings of ceramics and portable artifacts which grace this and subsequent volumes are the work of Margaret Davidson, whose patience

and accuracy are both remarkable. Thérèse Babineau printed all of my black-and-white field photographs from often rather difficult negatives, and also took a number of the artifact photographs.

The final writing and editorial compilation of this monograph was accomplished while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto. The Center provided wonderful library and clerical support, not to mention a highly stimulating intellectual atmosphere. My tenure at the Center was supported, in part, by a grant from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9601236). Roger C. Green most kindly read and critiqued the manuscript; Matthew Spriggs offered valuable comments on Chapter 10. Tanya Smith, Editor of the Archaeological Research Facility, gave the manuscript a careful copy edit. I am especially grateful to Lisa Holm, of the Oceanic Archaeology Laboratory, who expertly handled the complex task of formatting this volume, as well as preparing a significant number of the line illustrations.

I have reserved for last the acknowledgment of my very substantial debt owed to brothers Ave Male and John Male of Eloaua Island, senior members of the clan which holds the Talepakemalai (ECA) Site. They not only granted permission to carry out excavations at ECA (despite some early skepticism on John Male's part regarding the nature of our work), but became enthusiastic supporters of the Project as a whole, working closely with us in the excavations, helping in reconnaissance, and in general facilitating our life in their village. Ave Male put his house at our disposal, and in a thousand countless ways made our life there productive and enjoyable. The success of the Mussau Project is in large part due to the support of Ave and John Male, and on behalf of all Project participants, I extend our sincere thanks.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

~	approximately
asl	above sea level
bd	below datum
BP	years before present (radiocarbon)
bs	below surface
cal	calibrated
$\Delta R$	delta-R, the ocean reservoir factor in radiocarbon calibration
E	east
ha	hectare
km	kilometers
kyr	thousands of years
LHP	Lapita Homeland Project
m	meters
m <sup>2</sup>	square meters (area)
MNI	minimum number of individuals
N	north
NISP	number of identified specimens
PNG	Papua New Guinea
$\phi$	phi, unit of the Wentworth grain-size scale
$\sigma$	standard deviation
S	south
W	west
XRF	X-Ray fluorescence