

**Towards a Prehistory of the Koné
Region, New Caledonia:
*A Reanalysis of the Pioneering
Archaeological Excavations of
E. W. Gifford***

Edited by

Patrick V. Kirch, Marshall I. Weisler, and Eleanor
Casella

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*Prof. Edward W. Gifford seated in front of the small rockshelter at Site 17,
Navatu, Fiji, during his pioneering fieldwork in 1947.
(Courtesy of the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology)*

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Preface

The papers in this volume are the fruit of an experiment in pedagogy. In the spring semester of 1990, about a year after I had joined the anthropology faculty at Berkeley, I decided to teach an intensive laboratory course in the Analysis of Archaeological Materials (Anthropology 132). The course already existed in the Berkeley catalog, but had previously been taught more as a review of the main categories of archaeological remains, than as an actual laboratory methods course. I decided to experiment with a somewhat different format.

It is my contention that students learn best when they are engaged not in constructed "exercises" but when they are challenged to actually tackle a real problem in archaeology. My plan for restructuring the Analysis of Archaeological Materials course was thus to provide the class with a set of real archaeological assemblages--replete with all the "messy" variation such collections entail--and to assign each the task of carrying out a detailed analysis. This meant that each student would have to assess the specific research problems to be addressed, develop a "protocol" or research methodology including a database structure, capture the necessary data through intensive work with the assemblages, and then carry out appropriate statistical and qualitative manipulations of the resulting data.

Fortunately, an ideal set of archaeological assemblages were available for use in this course: the vast collections excavated from several prehistoric sites on the island of New Caledonia in 1952 by Professor E. W. Gifford of the University of California at Berkeley. As described in further detail in my Introduction, Gifford pioneered modern archaeology in Oceania, with a series of important expeditions to Fiji, New Caledonia, and Yap between 1947 and 1956. Although Gifford was emphatic about publishing his results, changes in archaeological method and theory since 1952, as well as a vastly increased understanding of the key problems in Oceanic prehistory, suggested that a reanalysis of these early collections might be productive. Fortunately, Gifford had also been a great believer in the value of museum collections, and had devoted considerable effort to seeing that his New Caledonian and other Pacific island materials were thoroughly cataloged and deposited for safe-keeping in the Robert Lowie Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley (now the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology).

With the enthusiastic support of Prof. Burton Benedict, then Director of the Lowie Museum, the Gifford Oceanic collections were moved out of "dead" storage from a warehouse in Oakland, and into accessible quarters in the archaeology storage ranges of the Museum. An initial "reconnaissance" of these vast materials (they include more than 40,000 cataloged "lots" of material) suggested that for the purposes of my laboratory course, those from three sites on New Caledonia would provide an especially good set of materials for teaching students the essentials of artifact analysis. These sites (13, 14, and 26 in Gifford and Shutler's [1956] numbering system) were all in close geographic proximity on the west coast of the island, and between them appeared to span much of the New Caledonian prehistoric sequence.

To ensure a modicum of structure in the course, I subdivided the materials by major artifact classes and by site, letting the students choose from among these according to their specific interests. Fortunately, many of the students taking this course had taken my class on Archaeology of Oceania and thus were already familiar with the key culture-historical issues that might be addressed through a reanalysis of the New Caledonian collections. Others did the necessary background reading and quickly caught up. A certain enthusiasm was evident as the students realized that they had an opportunity not merely to learn about laboratory methods in archaeology, but to

produce a set of integrated studies that had the potential to add useful knowledge to New Caledonian and Oceanic prehistory. Indeed, as the semester progressed the class devoted an amazing amount of energy to their projects; visits to the lab in the evenings or weekends almost always found several students hard at work measuring and describing sherds and lithics, entering data, or puzzling over computer printouts.

By semester's end, ten of the students had produced papers that not only displayed their newly-acquired grasp of how to design and carry out a successful analysis of an archaeological collection, but which in aggregate also added significantly to our understanding of the details of New Caledonian culture history. It was evident that with a little editorial polishing these papers could--indeed should--be published, and the *Kroeber Anthropological Papers*, as a student-edited and run scholarly journal, seemed the appropriate outlet. Regrettably, it has taken a few years longer to produce this volume than originally envisioned. I mention this delay only because in the interim a number of new studies of New Caledonian prehistory have been undertaken and published by French scholars, as summarized in the Introduction. These works were, of course, not available to the 1990 class, and the students have not been able to revise their papers in light of them. Fortunately, this does not impinge on the value or quality of the reanalyses of the Gifford collections presented below.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank the students of Anthro 132 for their boundless enthusiasm and interest in this course. I hope that publication of this volume, delayed as it has been beyond initial expectations, nonetheless provides each of them some gratification in a job well done.

I must also thank Prof. Emeritus Burton Benedict, formerly Director of the P. A. Hearst (then Lowie) Museum at Berkeley, for his support of this project. Prof. Benedict arranged to have the Gifford collections made accessible again, and put not the slightest obstacle in the way of their being used for this class.

Prof. Roger Green (University of Auckland, New Zealand) happened to be in residence at Berkeley for part of the semester during which this course was running, and graciously gave of his time to work with several students and to answer their seemingly endless questions about Gifford, New Caledonia, and Oceanic prehistory.

Prof. David W. Steadman agreed to examine and re-identify a set of archaeological bird bones from the Gifford collections, and to contribute a brief report on them for this volume.

I particularly thank Dr. Marshall Weisler (University of Otago, New Zealand) who at the time served as the Graduate Student Instructor assisting with the Anthro 132 course, and who certainly devoted far more time to working with the students than he was compensated for! Dr. Weisler, along with Ms. Eleanor Casella (one of the original Anthro 132 students, and now a doctoral candidate at Berkeley), have assisted in the editing of the papers and preparation of this volume, for which I am grateful. Kroeber Anthropological Society Editor David Kojan gave the final draft a careful editorial reading, for which we are grateful.

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