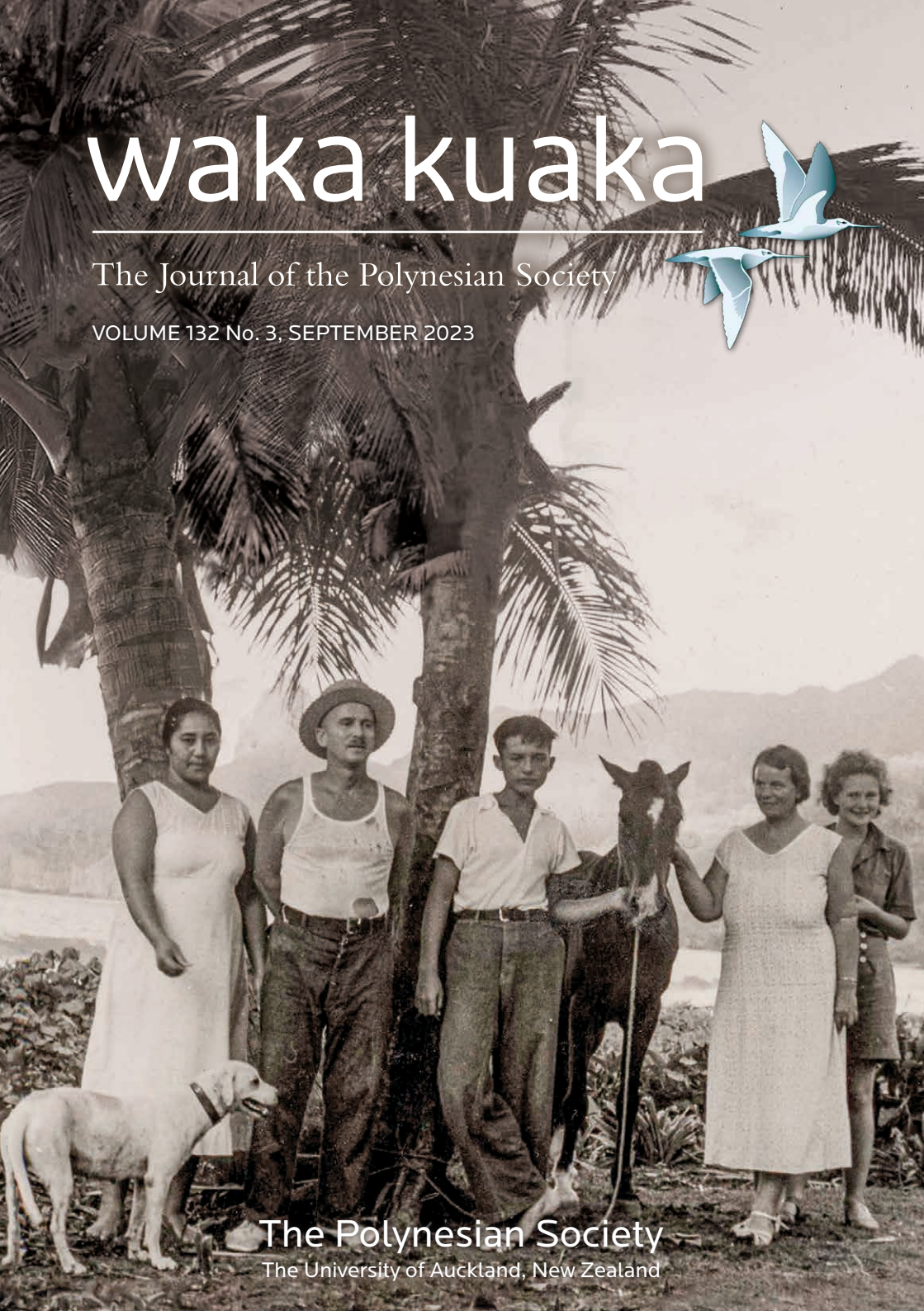
waka kuaka

The Journal of the Polynesian Society

VOLUME 132 No. 3, SEPTEMBER 2023



The Polynesian Society
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

KIRCH, Patrick Vinton (ed.): *Talepakemalai: Lapita and Its Transformations in the Mussau Islands of Near Oceania*. Monumenta Archaeologica 47. Los Angeles: UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2021. xxvi + 558 pp., abbr., ack., biblio., figs., index, contribs., pref., refs., tables. US$120.00/$72.00 (hardcover/e-book).

PETER SHEPPARD
Waipapa Taumata Rau University of Auckland

The origins of this impressive volume can be found in the Pacific Science Conference held in Dunedin in 1983. Following on from the success in the early 1970s of the Southeast Solomons Culture History Project, a large-scale multidisciplinary project led by Roger Green and Douglas Yen that had discovered and dated the initial movement of Lapita into Remote Oceania, plans were made at the conference to investigate the apparent homeland of Lapita in the Bismarck Archipelago. Led by Jim Allen, the Lapita Homeland Project created 19 separate research projects across the Bismarck Archipelago to investigate a series of questions concerning the origins and potential development of Lapita, which at that time were very poorly known. Patrick Kirch, who had worked with Green in the Southeast Solomons project, was assigned the Mussau Group on the northeast margins of the Bismarck Archipelago. Through fieldwork in 1985, 1986 and 1988, he and his team were able to survey eight islands of the group. A series of excavations on these islands included extensive excavation of the very large site of Talepakemalai (ECA), which provided almost unique anaerobic conditions, preserving organic materials and the wealth of archaeological data reported in this volume.

The Lapita Homeland Project effectively created the first comprehensive prehistory of the Bismarck Archipelago, but importantly, it was also responsible for the training of a new generation of archaeologists. In the Mussau Group team members involved in fieldwork and/or data analysis included Terry Hunt, Marshall Weisler, Melinda Allen, Dana Leposky, Virginia Butler, Nick Araho and more recently Scarlett Chiu. All of them have gone on to make their mark in Pacific prehistory, and many contributed chapters to this volume.

As Kirch describes in his overview of Lapita in Chapter 1, the Mussau research revolved around a series of questions or topics arising from the understanding of Lapita in the early 1980s. In the years following the fieldwork, a series of analytical papers, a monograph and theses derived from the Mussau data wrestled with these issues. The topics included the origins and chronology of Lapita development, patterns of material distribution potentially reflecting trade and exchange, the nature of Lapita economic adaptation, the character of Lapita society and the transformation and relations of Lapita at the end of the ceramic sequence or Lapita period. The contents of this volume, and available online supplementary files,[1]

pull together much of this work and provide some summary conclusions, the overall context of fieldwork and data summaries for those looking for comparative data. This is the most comprehensive report of a Lapita project we have to date, although Kirch's (1997) *The Lapita Peoples* provides a general overview. The only other significant data-rich study that focused on Lapita is that by Christophe Sand (2010) for his New Caledonian work in *Lapita calédonien: Archéologie d'un premier peuplement insulaire océanien*.

The question of origins and chronology has been particularly important in the Mussau work as it has provided some of the earliest Lapita dates. Following chapters dealing with the regional physical and cultural setting and describing the excavations, Chapter 5 provides a detailed analysis of the 75 radiocarbon dates from the excavations. This includes a suite of recent AMS dates and Bayesian analysis of the chronological sequences. The question of how old Lapita in the Bismarcks is has been somewhat contentious. Kirch concludes that the oldest settlement is at the small EHB site on Emananus Island, where were found very fine dentate stamped pottery and an elaborate suite of pot forms sitting at the bottom of the ceramic seriation, reported in Chapter 11 by Kirch and Chui. Unfortunately, there are no charcoal dates from this site and only four shell dates, including one AMS date, which have been calibrated with a marine correction created from samples from sites on nearby Eloaua Island (ECA, ECB). The date range produced by these four dates at 1 sigma is 3881–3525 and 3691–3335 BP and not occupied later than 3350 BP. This result will most likely be debated with comparison made to dates on other sites with similar ceramic styles which are undoubtably old. What these results do strongly support, however, is the argument that Lapita arrives in the Bismarck Archipelago fully formed with no local developmental sequence, at least not in Mussau.

One of the analytical benefits of working in the Bismarcks is the presence in New Britain and the Admiralty Islands of extensive deposits of high-quality obsidian, which have been exploited since the Pleistocene. Lapita people would appear to have found this material almost immediately, as it appears in quantity in the sites of the region and was transported from this homeland into the earliest sites of Remote Oceania. Characterising and sourcing obsidian has been one of the most successful methodological developments in Lapita archaeology. Roger Green very quickly established that both New Britain and Admiralties obsidian was transported into the Reef/Santa Cruz sites, indicating either direct connections to both source regions or to sites exploiting them both. Sourcing of the Talepakemalai obsidian by Allen (Chapter 14) and Ross-Sheppard (Chapter 15) shows that the majority of samples comes from the nearest source in the Admiralties, 275 km directly to the west; however, a significant percentage comes from the Willaumez

Peninsula on New Britain 430 km to the south, indicating high degrees of mobility. Ross-Sheppard argues, based on the variable quality of some of the obsidian, that its distribution is a function of patterns of social interaction and not purely of economic demand. This pattern of high mobility is also shown by the results of ceramic temper analysis by Dickinson (Chapter 17), which shows what is an atypical pattern for Lapita sites of great diversity in tempers, indicating contacts into all neighbouring islands to the south and west to the Admiralties, but not into the New Britain obsidian source region. A similar diversity is also found in the lithic manuports studied by Dickinson in Chapter 17.

The nature of the Lapita subsistence economy has been the source of some debate, especially during the expansion period in Remote Oceania. It is generally understood that the Lapita economy included domesticated plants and animals, which facilitated initial movement from origins in Southeast Asia and settlement of the comparatively depauperate islands of Remote Oceania. The Mussau data makes very significant contributions to our knowledge as the anaerobic preservation at Talepakemalai provides unique data on the exploitation of plants. Domesticated dogs, pigs and chickens are present in the faunal assemblage (Chapter 6) but make up a comparatively small presence. The focus seems to be on collecting easily harvested wild resources, especially sea turtles, which were likely found on nesting beaches, netting near-shore fish such as parrotfish and emperor fish (Chapter 7) feeding on or near the reef, and collecting large amounts of bivalves and gastropods (Chapter 8) from the reef and in the extensive lagoons that encompass Emananus and Eloaua. The abundant preserved plant remains include a number of probable domesticates including *Canarium* and coconut shell (Chapter 9) as well as a variety of wild food and industrial plant species, suggesting an important arboriculture. Unfortunately, the flesh of domesticated tubers such as taro or breadfruit is not preserved; however, the shell tool assemblage includes large numbers of scrapers, including distinctive cowrie-shell peelers (Chapter 13) historically used in the peeling of taro and breadfruit.

The nature of Lapita society has been a source of considerable speculation. The Mussau data confirms a settlement pattern of small hamlets with perhaps one or two structures and considerably larger sites like that at Talepakemalai where we have evidence of stilt structures over the intertidal zone. The elaborate pottery design and forms, which are here reported and illustrated in great detail (Chapter 11), suggests a rich symbolic and ritual life. Considerable effort has been made at Talepakemalai in the manufacture of a great range of shell rings and perforated shell units that we now know, from work at the Teouma burials in Vanuatu, to have been worn as components of composite anklets. Kirch has argued that these materials

may have been manufactured at Talepakemalai for trade as part of the long-range trade network which included obsidian and ceramics. Whether this is trade or exchange or simply markers of social interaction, it is certainly true that the people of Mussau were very highly mobile out on the northeast edge of Melanesia and fully capable of sailing down the Solomon chain and returning using the seasonal north–south winds. We now know, from recent genetic and archaeological evidence, that this movement involved a leapfrog expansion across the main Solomons (unfortunately not illustrated in Figure 1)—possibly the sort of sudden long-range expansion that originally brought Lapita to the Bismarck Archipelago.

This volume is an extraordinarily rich source of data for those interested in the culture history of Mussau and in Lapita archaeology. It provides a detailed picture of the nature of those who went on, perhaps from Mussau, to settle Remote Oceania.

Note:

1. Supplementary online material can be accessed here: https://dig.ucla.edu/talepakemalai/.

References Cited:

Kirch, Patrick Vinton, 1997. *The Lapita Peoples: Ancestors of the Oceanic World*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Sand, Christophe, 2010. *Lapita calédonien: Archéologie d'un premier peuplement insulaire océanien*. Paris: Société des Océanistes.

https://doi.org/10.15286/jps.132.3.375-378