
Reviewed by Atholl Anderson, Australian National University

The papers in this volume are from two small symposia on the settlement of the Pacific, evidently built around a distinguished lecture by Ben Finney, from which the main article stems. Delivered in 1993, but updated for publication, they are state-of-the-art surveys of several of the central themes of Pacific colonization, although in a slightly unexpected combination. There are three papers that deal primarily with colonization prehistory in the Pacific: Finney’s review of island discovery in the light of experimental voyaging, Jim Allen on Quaternary settlement of the western Pacific and its significance for understanding the Lapita phenomenon, and Pat Kirch on the nature of Lapita culture and its distribution. The other articles focus on the origins and relationships of the Austronesian language phyla in various ways: Robert Blust on the cultural inventory of early Austronesians, Kwang-Chih Chang and Ward Goodenough on the archaeology of southeast China and the origins of Austronesian cultures, and Blust again on the more distant relationships of Austronesian languages in continental Asia.

Taking the latter group first, the Chang and Goodenough paper is a data-rich and lucid review of the likely archaeological correlates in south China and Taiwan of the proto-Austronesian speaking populations. On the matter of why these populations should have eventually expanded southward, Chong and Goodenough reject Bellwood’s agricultural-demographic hypothesis in favor of an argument about luxury trade. Interesting as this is, however, and complemented as it is by Pamela Swadling’s recent study, Plumes from Paradise (1996, Papua New Guinea National Museum), it is difficult to see why Austronesians would expand so far and so fast, with so little sign of the return of products. Other archaeological examples of expansion in this manner, for example the eastern Vikings (Rus), are replete with material evidence in both directions, despite much of the trade being in perishable goods (in the case of the Rus, slaves, silk, honey, wax, and so forth). An expanding Austronesian trading system is a fair proposition, but it remains far from demonstrated by the archaeological evidence.

Blust’s first paper is a brief and somewhat casual argument for cultural devolution as Austronesians advanced south and east. It asserts the advantages of comparative linguistics over archaeology for reconstructing the cultural inventory of early Austronesian speakers, but it needs to be balanced by the counterargument from archaeological evidence of innovation in material culture and settlement patterns. Blust’s second paper, which looks again at Schimdt’s “Austric” and Benedict’s “Austro-Tai” hypotheses, is situated more
remotely from Pacific prehistory, but it is a thoughtful analysis of where Proto-Austronesian languages evolved—the middle Yangtse valley—as well as their relationships with other languages of southeast Asia that spread down the major river valleys from a broadly common source.

Turning to the Pacific papers in this volume, Allen reviews his argument for a largely indigenous origin of Lapita culture in western Melanesia. The tide is moving against an emphatic statement of this opinion, as Allen recognizes, but it does not hurt to be reminded that much of the content of Lapita culture could have multiple origins or could have been significantly rearranged during an Asian sojourn in Island Melanesia. Clearly many incomers also remained behind. It is worth noting that the rates of natural increase of island colonists can be extraordinarily high, up to 4 percent per annum, as on Pitcairn Island. Even at half that figure, a colonizing population of 1000 would have exceeded 100,000 in little more than two centuries, leaving ample scope both for continuing rapid expansion eastward within the Lapita timescale as well as for extensive colonization of western Melanesia—the two propositions are not contradictory.

Kirch’s paper is a fairly brief but masterly summary of the prevailing hypothesis of Lapita origins. In this, as in Pacific prehistory generally, descriptive models, in this case Green’s Triple I formulation, are more prominent than testable explanations about why things happened. I do not find the trade argument entirely convincing, partly for reasons already alluded to, nor propositions about developing maritime technology or preadaptation of agriculture. Why Lapita colonization breached the western boundary of remote Oceania, after people had lived so long in such close proximity to it, is a matter that eludes us yet.

In his paper, Finney reviews the accomplishments of his project in experimental archaeology, particularly in the construction and voyaging of the Hokule‘a. These are so extraordinary and have provided such an impetus to the renewed analysis of Oceanic voyaging, including by Geoff Irwin and others, that they need no encomium here. In writing about the project, however, Finney does rather gild the lily here and there. I doubt very much that there is an authentic Maori tradition (that is, of probable pre-European origin) that states that the passage from the Cooks or Tahiti to New Zealand should be started in early spring. The argument that Nainoa Thompson navigates in a traditional way but for his inability to rid himself of the concepts of miles and degrees is highly dubious too. From modern maps, Thompson knows all about Pacific geography, the disposition of all the islands, the directions and strengths of the winds and currents, and the sequences of weather systems and their likely effect on planned passages. The Hokule‘a team uses satellite images and other meteorological data to plan its voyages. It is doubtful indeed whether any prehistoric navigator ever had even a fraction of that background knowledge to go on. Experimental voyaging in the Pacific has contributed immensely to current ideas and needs no exaggerated estimation of the verisimilitude of its procedures.

All in all, this a worthwhile and stimulating volume. It is up-to-date, written by scholars of undoubted standing, and neatly but unobtrusively edited by Goodenough. It points to both the achievements of Pacific prehistory in the modern era and the continuing areas of difficulty. It will be valued by students of Pacific prehistory as well as their teachers and it is written sufficiently plainly to be accessible to the interested general reader.

Reviewed by Richard Shutler Jr., Simon Fraser University

Since the first edition of Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago was published in 1985, a significant amount of new research has been reported in many of the areas considered in this book. This information provides new insights into the prehistory of the region over the past two million years. At the same time, some of the recently reported data make long-standing disputes more controversial. Bellwood clearly states that the objective of this book is to present "a multidisciplinary reconstruction of the prehistory of the modern nations of Indonesia and Malaysia as viewed from the perspective of the whole Southeast Asian and Australasian region."

Chapter 1, "The Environmental Background: Present and Past," covers the influence of climate, landforms, soils, sea levels, volcanoes, fauna, and flora over the past two million years. Since 1891, when Dubois discovered the first bones of Pithecanthropus erectus on the Solo river at Trinil, Java, the time of the first arrival of the first hominids in Java has never been clearly defined, and has remained extremely controversial. On page 30, Bellwood mentions the recently reported 1.6 million year date for the Pithecanthropus mandible C from Pucangan at Sangiran, and the argon date of 1.8 million years for the Mojokerto skull from the Pucangan deposit at Peming, east Java. If these dates are correct, the entire story of Homo erectus in east Asia as we understand it today will have to be rewritten. A number of experts in the field challenge these dates for a variety of reasons. First, the sediments from which the dating material was obtained contain forms that are time-transgressive, some dating back to the Eocene. Second, Java is known for mud volcanoes that create lahars (mud flows), which mix sediments from different time periods, confusing the stratigraphy. Third, none of the fossil hominids found have a definitely known provenance (personal communication, Geoffrey G. Pope, Dec. 4, 1997). I can personally vouch for the latter, as I have been to Peming twice and was shown a different location each time where the Mojokerto skull is supposed to have been found. The dating of Homo erectus in Java is far from resolved.

On page 45, Bellwood cites a claim for a hominid mandible and possible stone tools dating to almost two million years at Longgupo Cave in Sichuan, China. Again, there is a need for caution in accepting this early claim for a hominid in east Asia. Pope (personal communication) expressed the opinion that the mandible is not of a hominid. It is clear that Bellwood fully understands the implications of the dating of Homo erectus wherever it is found, when he sums up the dating problems saying, "There are big problems of chronology concerning the radiation of Homo out of Africa, and I see no easy resolution at the moment" (p. 45).

In pages 47-49 Bellwood presents a well-balanced discussion of the Pucangan and Kabul hominids of Java. While the jury is still out on the exact age of the Ngandong skeletal material because of stratigraphic problems, Bellwood sees it as dating somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 years ago. He sees the DNA evidence favoring an "out of Africa" model for all anatomically modern humans. However, on page 53, he clearly states that the issue between continuity and replacement is far from settled. In this same chapter, on the issue of whether or not Homo erectus made tools, Bellwood accepts the two small cores, five flakes, and two blades found at Sangiran as having been made by Homo.
erectus, thereby accepting as fact that Homo erectus did make tools in Java. These lithic specimens apparently came from valid Kabul deposits at Sangiran. Here Bellwood has made a definitive statement about a controversial subject. Claims for stone tools associated with a Pleistocene skull at Sambungmacan depend on the correct dating of that skull, and a clearly demonstrated association of the tools and skull. I have been to the site, have seen the lithic specimens, and am convinced that the lithics are tools, but I am not convinced that the tools and skulls came from the same level, if indeed the spot I was shown is the true location of the finds.

On page 67, Bellwood describes two finds of stone tools in apparent association with stegodon in Flores. The first one was in 1970, and the most recent in 1991–1992. If these claimed associations of stone tools and Pleistocene fossil fauna are verified, Bellwood points out two important possibilities: first, “that contemporaries of the Ngandong hominids may have been able to venture along the Lesser Sunda chain,” and second, that “... it would put a possible presence of middle Pleistocene Homo erectus in striking distance of the Australian continent.”

In Chapter 3, “Indo-Malaysians of the Last 40,000 Years,” after discussing the modern populations of the Indo-Malaysian region, Bellwood refers to the work of one of his students, D. Bulbeck, who has carried out extensive studies of these modern populations. Bellwood states that Bulbeck “has considered the whole question of local evolution within Southeast Asia in great detail in order to provide stronger support for a continuity hypothesis.” Bulbeck sees the main problem as how to explain the obvious modernization that has taken place within Southeast Asian populations. After examining a large amount of Southeast Asian cranial material, Bulbeck stresses that there is “nothing in the evolutionary record of recent Southeast Asia that demands a migration of Southern Mongoloids from the north” (page 91).

In pages 100–101 (Chapter 4), Bellwood defines linguistic terms used by linguists, anthropologists, and archaeologists. The section is very useful for nonlinguists. I highly recommend that anyone who is not fully versed in linguistic terminology and who has reason to discuss Oceanic/Southeast Asian prehistory read pages 100–105. Following detailed discussions related to Austronesians, on page 110, Bellwood clearly states his position that Taiwan was the “location of the proto-Austronesians,” that is, “the place where the first split within reconstructed proto-Austronesians occurred.” At the same time, he makes it clear that the “true homeland” of the proto-Austronesians was on the mainland of southern China. On page 123, Bellwood acknowledges the Bismarck Archipelago as the immediate homeland of the Oceanic languages. In the rest of this chapter and in Chapter 5, Bellwood discusses language, culture, and migrations.

Chapter 6, “The Hoabinhians, and Their Island Contemporaries,” contains useful summaries of the prehistoric cultures of the preceramic and early Holocene period of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago, a large area to cover. One new site reported is the Balobok rockshelter, located in the Sulu Archipelago. Bellwood places this site in the Indo-Malaysian pebble and flake repertoire. In my view this site has other potential importance. Balobok has red-slipped and lime-impresse decorated pottery. There are radiocarbon dates of 7000–8000 B.P. from this site; however, which artifacts the dates are associated with is unclear. If further excavations at the site resolve this problem, and the dates turn out to be associated with the pottery, then there is a possibility of Balobok figuring in the ancestry of the proto-Austronesians.

In Chapter 7, “The Archaeological Record of Early Austronesian Communities,” Bellwood begins by presenting a brief version of his overall model for the later stages of Indo-Malaysian prehistory, which serves as an introduction for his discussion of the later prehistory of China, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. On pages 235–236, Bellwood presents a summary of the Lapita pottery culture. This chapter is very important reading for Pacific archaeologists.
Chapter 8, "The Archaeological Record of Early Agricultural Communities in Peninsular Malaysia," is a new title, and is concerned mostly with mainland Southeast Asia. Chapter 9, "The Early Metal Phase: A Protohistoric Transition toward Supra-Tribal Societies," begins with a discussion of the Dong Son culture of Vietnam, followed by a brief outline of the metal culture of mainland and island Southeast Asia, with reference to India.

One could write a book reviewing this one. In my view, Bellwood has accomplished the objective he stated in his preface in a grand manner. This book represents a monumental effort on the part of the author and his helpers. The subject matter of this book is current up to the time it went to press. I took the trouble to count the number of references in the bibliography: there are 1231 references, of which 417 date after 1985; thus, roughly one-quarter of the references postdate the first edition. To me this indicates an up-to-date effort by the author. For anyone interested in the prehistory of the Indomalaysian Archipelago and the Pacific, whether academic or layman, this is a must-read book. It will surely be the standard reference on the subject for years to come.

The book contains very few errors. In fact, it is the only book I have read that contains no typographical mistakes. At least I did not find any, and I read every word. One thing puzzles me, though. On page 169, "(Zuraina 1994)" and "(Zuraina 1991)" should be "(Majid 1994)" and "(Majid 1991)." Neither Zuraina nor Majid appears in the index. In the bibliography she is listed as "Zuraina, Majid" instead of "Majid, Z." Finally, some of the maps, charts, and tables, when reduced for publication, have lettering too small to be read easily. These are minor problems, however, and they in no way detract from the great value of this book.