

Southeast Solomons Fieldwork

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THE SOUTHEAST Solomons fieldwork began with my making a brief reconnaissance survey of the district lasting from late May until August 1970.

During late November and early December 1970, Dr. James Allen from the University of Papua-New Guinea excavated a site at the head of Graciosa Bay on Santa Cruz thought to be Mendaña's settlement of A.D. 1595. Burials, pottery, and a spearpoint were found. The pottery, which included some glazed pieces, was of Spanish origin. Allen also found a square house floor which is quite unlike the typical round house floor of coastal villages from the 16th and 19th centuries A.D. Sections were also excavated through a defensive ditch that was part of a fortification around the site.

In January 1971 we excavated at one of four Lapita pottery sites on Ngawa Island in the main Reef Island group. One figure among the usual geometric designs on the pottery showed a human face in the form of a typical Pacific-style mask. Also found were the remains of earth ovens, the postholes from former houses, and pits. Many objects were made in materials not found in the Reef Islands and showed that several thousand years ago people in the Reefs had been trading widely with other islands several hundred or more miles away.

We tested two other Lapita sites, one at Ngamanie village on Lomlom in the Reefs and one at Nangu village on Santa Cruz. The site on Ngawa covered 1100 square m and that at Nangu 14,000 square m. At the Nangu site a bird's head fashioned in pottery was found, the first on record.

Further excavations were carried out in the Southeast Solomons from June to August 1971. The first was of a site on the southern end of San Cristobal Island in the Star Harbour region. Having completed a reasonably thorough survey of sites in this area on the first reconnaissance trip, I picked a site for excavation on the government land at Na Mugha. The object was to assemble excavated material from a village known to date to the period just prior to European contact, as well as from underlying levels of earlier date. This would provide data from the southern

end of San Cristobal which could be compared to that recovered by Miss Pam Swadling in her work on Santa Ana, the small raised coral island some 14 miles away.

Our excavation defined an old shoreline to the rear of this settlement with a burial ground adjacent. This was followed by a new shoreline in its present position and deposits from a much expanded village of the period just prior to contact. We also recovered a good selection of midden material useful for dietary and ecological analysis along with a large number of portable artifacts.

The second excavation concerned the presence of Spanish pottery from Pamua on the central northeast coast of San Cristobal. The exact provenience of the pottery, or a site with which it could be associated, was uncertain. The question was, Could we, by finding the site, determine how the pottery got there?

Two sites with Spanish pottery were located. One is a hilltop settlement of fair size that includes a stone outlined fireplace but no permanent structures. From this site are represented over 400 pieces of Spanish pottery, of every type previously recovered either at the Mendaña site at Graciosa Bay or in the collections in the Otago Museum from Pamua. The collection considerably expands the range of the pottery. Also recovered were a handful of metal objects and some local stone objects. The evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that the site was not a native settlement, while a few local items in the site suggest that the inhabitants were in contact with the native peoples and used items from their culture.

We have also identified a typical local settlement on the flat part of the peninsula below the hilltop settlement. It is here and in the flat garden areas to one side of the hilltop that the pottery in the Otago Museum had been found. It is hoped that Carbon-14 dating will show the native settlement to have been in existence throughout the time of the much shorter occupation on the hilltop.

The information to date allows one to reject the possibility that the objects derive from some unrecorded incident in the journal of the first Mendaña voyage, when a small locally built boat paused briefly while passing through this area in A.D. 1568. It is even less likely that they have anything to do with the voyage of A.D. 1605, which did not come within 300 miles of the site. Rather one must account for a settlement atypical of a local village, containing Spanish pottery identical with that on the historically known Mendaña site of A.D. 1595 at Graciosa Bay, as well as metal, etc. This settlement, of short duration, is situated on a hilltop which possesses natural defense and a clear view out to sea to the north and west. One is also forced to account for additional Spanish pottery in a prehistoric village with typical local artifacts that is below this settlement. The pottery occurs as well in the garden flats and stream to one side of the hilltop settlement. The possibilities are either a Spanish ship wrecked on this coast unrecorded in any historical documents or the ship of the A.D. 1595 expedition known to have gone missing only some 285 miles away. Moreover, this ship was on a latitude course, which if carried on in the same track would have led to a first landfall approximately where a settlement has been found.

For these and other reasons, I believe I can now say that one ship of the A.D. 1595 Mendaña expedition, the Santa Isabel, did indeed return to the Solomons. People from it made a settlement on the hilltop for a short while before dying, being absorbed into the local population, or setting off again to meet some unknown fate.

The excavation on the island of Ugi adjacent to Pamua took place in a native

village about a mile back from the coast. The most recent levels were historic, but the deposits proved to be 1.8 m deep, and mainly prehistoric. They were very rich in portable artifacts and exhibit a continuity of culture which must have considerable time depth. The exact amount will not be known until Carbon-14 samples are processed. It was also extremely rewarding archaeology because the oldest men among the local people were able to identify the function and use of nearly everything we found. Because of the richness of the site on Ugi, work was not completed. I plan to return there in January of this year to do so. This promises to be a key site in defining time depth and change for the cultural pattern encountered in the San Cristobal region at contact.

AGE OF SETTLEMENT IN THE EASTERN SOLOMONS

Davenport (1968) has already published dates for Poha Cave on Guadalcanal that place its time of occupation before about 800 B.C. He has published other results which date occupation with pottery in Feru Cave, Santa Ana, at about the time of Christ's birth. We now have dates between 800 B.C. and 1100 B.C. for sites near Nenumbo, Ngawa Island, and between 400 B.C. and 600 B.C. for one near Ngamanie, Lomlom.

The Reef Island and Santa Cruz dates are associated with people who made decorated pottery, stone adzes, and shell ornaments of a kind which are assigned to the Lapita cultural complex. Other people like this settled near Nanggu on Santa Cruz and across the channel on the island of Te Motu Noi (Lord Howe). At present these are the oldest Carbon-14 dated settlements in the Solomons.

We have also received Carbon-14 dates for a piece of burnt wood from a post at the Mendaña site at Graciosa Bay. This result indicated an age in the late 16th century to early 17th century. As we know that Mendaña came to Santa Cruz in A.D. 1595, this Carbon-14 dating fits our expectations reasonably well and suggests along with other evidence that the post belonged to the settlement.

As a result of these Carbon-14 dates, it appears that people have occupied the eastern Solomon Islands for more than 3000 years. How much more it is not possible to say, for at present this reflects only when *prehistory* begins in the Reef and Santa Cruz group. Recorded *history* there begins with Mendaña in A.D. 1595. Historical records, however, fail to tell the whole story of either the local or the European settlers in the Southeast Solomons from that date. Consequently, it will be necessary to depend almost entirely on archaeology for the history of the area until well into the 20th century.

REFERENCE

DAVENPORT, WILLIAM H.

1968 Anthropology in the British Solomon Islands. *Expedition* 11(1):31-34.