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The First Millennium B.C. in Remote Oceania: An Alternative Perspective on Lapita

Jean-Christophe Galipaud

The first millennium B.C. in Near and Remote Oceania is largely the story of Lapita. There is now general agreement that Lapita, understood as an archaeological culture rather than just the distinctive pottery of the same name, triggered a vast dynamic which in a few centuries saw the discovery and colonization of most of Melanesia and western Polynesia. In this chapter, I discuss the nature of Lapita in the light of the past 20 years of research and propose an alternative view which integrates the different models and data available today. This view is premised on a skeptical approach to the ease with which Lapita researchers often seem to “jump” from pottery to potters and from potters to culture. Does Lapita pottery represent a potters’ diaspora or unaccompanied cultural diffusion? It is important to consider the people behind the pottery (Best 2002; Galipaud 1997) and realize that the artifact known as “Lapita” only partly represents the people who created “Lapita sites,” first in the Bismarcks and later elsewhere as they settled the islands of Remote Oceania. This chapter should be read in conjunction with those of Denham, Lilley, Pavlides, Sand et al., and Walter and Sheppard.

The Lapita Culture and the Lapita Cultural Complex

Following extensive work in the Santa Cruz Islands, Green (1979, 1982) developed the concept of the “Lapita Cultural Complex” (LCC) to describe an immense cultural network extending east as far as Samoa from a “homeland” in the Bismarck Archipelago. He saw the original far-flung settlers slowly becoming isolated in their archipelagoes and, after a millennium, those in Samoa and Tonga becoming culturally and biologically identifiable as the ancestors of present-day Polynesians. In Green’s model, Lapita ceramics and associated artifacts in early sites are evidence

for a large diaspora of Austronesian-speakers which ultimately originated in Southeast Asia and arrived in western Melanesia about 3500 B.P. to give rise to the Lapita phenomenon (Spriggs 1984).

Our knowledge of the Lapita expansion increased rapidly during the 1980s following the Lapita Homeland Project and its spin-offs (Allen and Gosden 1991; Walter and Sheppard, this volume). Its objectives were to test an alternative, "indigenist" model of Lapita origins, which posited the local development of the Lapita culture in the Bismarcks in continuity with earlier trajectories of cultural change in the region and with minimal input from Southeast Asia (Allen and White 1989). The project greatly increased the number of well-dated sites in the Bismarcks, which helped refine Lapita chronology, but the archaeological results did not in general support the indigenist model.

Both the LCC and the indigenist models agree that the development of the Lapita Culture coincides with the arrival in Near Oceania of a few innovations, the most prominent being (1) Lapita pottery and its distinctive decorative system using dentate-stamping (i.e., using a toothed tool), incising, and probably painting (Galipaud n.d.), (2) a distinctive stone-adze kit not known in earlier assemblages from the Bismarcks, (3) a distinctive range of shell ornaments, and, to a lesser extent, (4) the spread of Bismarcks obsidian east into Remote Oceania and back west into Southeast Asia.

Spriggs (1995) has tried to determine the origin of these innovations. He concludes that the intrusive elements far outweigh local ones and he rejects as unconvincing the idea of a predominantly Melanesian origin for Lapita. Others have used the possible pre-Lapita antiquity of pottery on mainland New Guinea proposed by Górecki and Swadling (Gorecki et al. 1991; Swadling et al. 1989) as an argument in favor of a local origin for Lapita ceramics. This has led archaeologists defending the orthodox "out of Asia" model to strongly reject old, pre-Lapita dates for ceramics. One should bear in mind that the proposition of a "Papuan" (i.e., non-Austronesian) pottery tradition earlier than Lapita is not new. It was proposed years ago by Christian Kauffmann (for a recent synthesis see Kauffmann 1999) following a thorough study of Austronesian and non-Austronesian pottery technologies in New Guinea, and his more recent hypotheses concerning the introduction to New Guinea of an Austronesian pottery technology earlier than Lapita should probably be considered more seriously. After all, pottery made by Austronesian-speakers is present in the Marianas in Micronesia at least as early as it is in the Bismarcks, without a direct link with Lapita (Rainbird 2004; see Rainbird, this volume, for discussion of other aspects of Micronesian prehistory).

Many new sites have been discovered in the past 20 years of Lapita research, underpinning a more accurate image of the Lapita diaspora. The increasing use of AMS dating has enabled further refinement of the chronology of dispersal and duration (Anderson et al. 1999; Burley et al. 1999; Specht and Gosden 1997; Spriggs 1990), greatly aided by the re-excavation of key sites in Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, New Caledonia as well as the much-anticipated publication of the Watom excavation (Green and Anson 1998). Nevertheless, our vision of Lapita is to some degree still balanced between the LCC model and the minimalist strandlooper hypothesis

Groube (1971) proposed decades ago, which posited colonization by beach-dwelling fisherfolk with a very faint "footprint" on the landscape. On one hand, Lapita, although short-lived as a form of pottery, must be understood as a long-term process with an evolutionary trajectory through time and space, as evidenced in the space-time "provinces" being delineated in different parts of the Lapita sphere (Kirch 1997; cf. Summerhayes 2000 and Sand et al., this volume) and the recognition that incised and applied pottery comprises part of the Lapita tradition (see below). On the other hand, Lapita, recognized primarily as a form of pottery, appears on beaches on previously uninhabited islands and represents the sailors who first visited those islands in search of marine products for their living and probably trade (Burley and Dickinson 2004). These two visions of Lapita culture contrast sea gypsies with horticulturists and raise the question of the duration of those initial occupations.

At first, the limited number of known sites and sparse material remains as well as the difficulty of precisely dating Lapita contexts led to the hypothesis that the Lapita period was long and that Lapita culture expanded gradually from west to east, on the way losing part of its stylistic character to become, in the east, ancestral Polynesian culture. Later, a more thorough focus on Lapita ceramic designs led to the definition of the previously mentioned "stylistic provinces," smaller stylistic areas or cultural spheres, linked in a vast maritime network. These provincial divisions somewhat contradict the LCC model both because they challenge the homogeneity of Lapita culture and because they limit the gradient of any west-to-east evolutionary process. Summerhayes (2000) brings us back to firmer ground in proposing to replace the time-space provincial division by a simpler time division (i.e., early, middle, and late periods). There is definitely a relationship between style and antiquity of settlement and because early as well as late Lapita (although in differing proportions) occurs in most areas, why should we not consider that there were several processes of colonization rather than just one, a network with more mobile elements than can be seen at the moment from current studies? General support for this proposition is provided by a recent genetic study of the distribution of the commensal Polynesian rat *Rattus exulans* (Matisoo-Smith and Robins 2004), which suggests that at least two populations were introduced by human migrants into Oceania. On this basis, the researchers argue for "multifaceted models incorporating a more complex view of the Lapita intrusion" (Matisoo-Smith and Robins 2004:9167).

There is no doubt that Lapita, seen as a period of rapid human expansion into the uninhabited islands of Remote Oceania, is a complicated cultural phenomenon which goes beyond the occurrence of its decorated pottery component. The probable diversity of origins of the actors in this large migration can only be recognized, however, if sufficient attention is paid to *difference*. By its nature, the LCC model necessarily promotes cultural homogeneity and simplification that may be leading us to overlook the richness of local adaptive strategies or developments. The study of Lapita pottery is critical here because it is the most abundant and distinctive artifact of this period, but for the same reason it is necessary to keep in mind the difficulty in linking the pottery with the wider culture and we should recall that the

study of ceramics will illuminate only a small part of a vastly more complex phenomenon.

Lapita Pottery and Lapita Potters

Green (e.g., 1992) has in several instances strongly defended the fact that Lapita is not "just pots." Even so, Lapita as pottery is the most visible part of, and often the only artifactual evidence for, Lapita history. Luckily for Pacific archaeologists, however, Lapita remains a rich domain of study because the material culture, and especially the pottery, with its elaborate forms and intricate designs, allows them to go further into the reconstruction of history than any later assemblage does.

The complex design system used by Lapita potters has been intensively studied and the occurrence of recurring motifs has allowed several models to infer the nature of the "Lapita phenomenon" itself. Depending on the scale of the analysis, it has been argued that stylistic similarities demonstrate that Lapita culture was very homogenous over a large geographical area or, using the same criteria at a different scale, that the diversity and degree of abstraction of some motifs could be linked with the movement of Lapita people into Remote Oceania. Later, the time-space "provinces" began to be tentatively identified, from a "Far Western Province" in the Bismarcks where it may have all begun, through "Western" and "Southern" provinces to an "Eastern Province" where abstract and simplified designs became predominant.

The thorough study of a highly visible but not necessarily prominent part of what the Lapita culture might have been could be misleading. Apart from anything else, we should never forget that pottery is primarily a *potter's* art, and thus that its stylistic properties might have as much to do with potters' or potters' clans' choices than with the culture as a whole (Galipaud 1997). In many traditional societies, styles have a general cultural meaning but specific designs are owned by a potter or a family who has "copyright" on them. In this connection, a good example of the limitation of the "stylistic provinces" approach is found on Tikopia (Kirch and Yen 1982). The few decorated Lapita sherds found on the island were initially classified into the Eastern Province stylistic group, which is well represented in Tonga, Samoa, and some Fijian sites. However, Tikopia lies geographically in the Western Province, among the Santa Cruz Islands in the Solomon Islands. The occurrence there of an easterly style was interpreted as a late settlement from the east. Twenty years later and after some new discoveries of sites in the Bismarcks, we now know that these supposedly Eastern motifs are also present in the Bismarcks, in the Far Western Province of the Lapita distribution (Summerhayes 2000).

Another example of the difficulty in using style analysis to explain broad cultural behaviors is given by Summerhayes (2000:119), who shows that the decrease in fine dentate decoration from adjacent sites in the Bismarcks is correlated with decreases in bowls and vessel stands. This again points to a cultural usage or potters' technical choices rather than to a chronological decline in decoration *per se*, as it has often been perceived. The complex shapes and designs, as well as localization

of decorated assemblages in well-documented sites, encourage the hypothesis that decorated Lapita had a religious or ritual function (Best 2002; Lilley 1999, 2004, this volume). We know, however, that the richly decorated ceramics are not the only ceramic component of the Lapita Cultural Complex and that plainware pottery in particular is slowly becoming recognized as a key constituent of Lapita assemblages (see Green 2003 for detailed discussion of such issues).

Lapita Potters and Plainware

Having discussed the limits of an approach focusing on pottery, we need to ask how we should define the Lapita period: as a horizon or a tradition (Anderson 2001)? Considering it as a horizon means that only sites with classic Lapita dentate-stamped decorated ceramics can be considered Lapita. Accepting it as a tradition implies that all pottery types and artifacts related in time or present in Lapita sites belong to the same cultural context. In the first case, we come back to the idea that the Lapita culture is primarily defined by its ceramics, and indeed a very particular element of those ceramics, whereas in the second case, we open Lapita culture to encompass all or most of what is contemporaneous with dentate-stamped pottery and can be somehow associated with it. Archaeologically, the limits of a Lapita horizon are easier to delineate than the limits of a Lapita tradition. Many archaeologists agree today that Podtanéan pottery from New Caledonia, Buka-style pottery from the North Solomons, and Arapus pottery from Vanuatu, to cite only a few examples, belong to the Lapita tradition despite not being dentate-stamped (Bedford 2000; Galipaud 1999; Specht 1969; also Sand et al., this volume). In agreeing to this, we extend the frame of the Lapita tradition, introduce a notion of continuity in evolution, and at the same time challenge the concept of persistence which is implied by dentate-stamped Lapita pottery. To suggest that such non-dentate pottery is culturally related to Lapita, which except for Podtanéan ware has yet to be experimentally demonstrated (see below), might mislead in that it promotes a false sense of cultural continuity when that might in fact not always be the case.

In this context, it is useful to consider the case in New Caledonia, where dentate-stamped Lapita ceramics are always associated with paddle-impressed Podtanéan material (but not the reverse). Mineralogical analysis has confirmed that the two wares were made from the same clay (Galipaud 1990). However, Lapita ceramics do not last very long in the archaeological record while Podtanéan ceramics were widely used for nearly a millennium. Thus in many respects the number and distribution of Podtanéan sites in New Caledonia have more to tell us about the colonization of this large island than does Lapita (Galipaud 2000; for another perspective, see Sand et al., this volume).

I have proposed associating Lapita and Podtanéan in a cultural phase or tradition I call the Koné period (Galipaud 1992), keeping in mind that Podtanéan ceramics sometimes occur in contexts where Lapita does not (e.g., caves) and that the duration of Podtanéan ceramics does not obviously indicate that "Lapita" as a horizon was long-lasting. Considering the evident temporal and geographical

relationships of Lapita and Podtanéan pottery, one could speak of them both as belonging to the Lapita tradition. I strongly believe, however, that the complexity and diversity of this period of initial colonization are better preserved by linking these pottery styles as I have done rather than merging them into a single tradition named after only one (and the archaeologically more ephemeral) of the two, which gives a false impression of dominance (Galipaud 1999:539-540). Sand (Sand et al. 2000:105, also this volume) has recently hypothesized from my work that the occurrence of two pottery types could be interpreted as evidence for population replacement in New Caledonia, but that was not a conclusion I drew. The view that a type of pottery, defined by a set of physical and stylistic characteristics, should directly correspond to a discrete and identifiable population is obsolete. It is now widely understood that pottery styles are only an indirect marker of cultural changes and as such cannot be a good indicator of population replacement (Arnold 1984).

In New Caledonia, the two types of pottery are constituents of the same tradition or culture and the early disappearance of one of them is an important sign of the evolution of this tradition. In this instance it has been indirectly demonstrated that people are the same, whether they made dentate-stamped Lapita or paddle-impressed Podtanéan pottery. On Watom, similarity in pottery raw material and technology has also been demonstrated by Anson (1983:263, 278-279) between dentate-stamped Lapita on one hand and applied-relief and fingernail-incised on the other. The inferences drawn from the New Caledonian and Watom examples can be extended to include the pottery styles generally referred to as "plainwares," which usually occur in the Lapita sites of Near and Remote Oceania within the time frame of dentate-stamped Lapita, the distinctions between the pottery styles probably reflecting functional and perhaps social differences (Galipaud 1999:540; Kirch 1997:146).

The definition of "plainware" needs some attention as the term has been used in diverse situations over the past 25 years, even for decorated pottery. It was initially used instead of "lapitoid" to describe simple Lapita forms present in western Polynesia. It was later extended to the non-decorated component present in all Lapita sites but only recognized when data from larger excavations became available (Green 1979). It has recently been associated with incised pottery styles thought to represent an evolution of Lapita in some islands (Bedford 2000). Study of the Lapita decorative system in the late 1970s suggested "an overall west to east trend indicative of distance decay in the Lapita design system, from the rather ornate curvilinear and fairly elaborate rectilinear design patterns of the western Lapita to the more simplified and generally rectilinear forms of the eastern Lapita" (Green 1979:42). The end product of this evolutionary process, called Polynesian Plainware, has been dated to around 500 B.C. in western Polynesia. It is characterized by its simple forms, which unlike "classic" Lapita are devoid of any shoulder or carination, and without any decoration except for simple dentate stamping on flat rims. As its description suggests, it is an integral part of Lapita in western Polynesia.

Much earlier in time and present in "Far Western" as well as "Eastern" Lapita assemblages is another simple plain pottery which fully deserves the label

"Plainware." Its usual form is a large globular jar with flaring notched rim and its presence is attested in early Lapita contexts as well as later ones without the dentate pottery component. It is difficult to decide at the moment whether these two types of Plainware, which appear at opposite ends of the Lapita tradition, should be considered the same thing.

To summarize the argument thus far, decorated Lapita pottery is part of a tradition that comprises several other pottery types and related artifacts. Plainware ceramics are now attested in early contexts with and without "classic" Lapita and its study will enhance our understanding of the whole Lapita tradition in the years to come. When dating the Lapita phenomenon we need to take into account the recognized diversity of the pottery component.

Chronology and Continuity

For many years, the few radiocarbon dates from a limited number of sites that were available and the apparent homogeneity of Lapita ceramics were good reasons to see it as a long-lasting cultural development in the islands of Remote Oceania. The increase in excavation and dating with more accurate methods starting in the mid-1990s has led us to revise the chronology for the Lapita period as a whole.

Initial settlement dates differ in Near and Remote Oceania, confirming a west-to-east migration front. The pace of dispersal through the islands of Remote Oceania was very quick: 1300 B.C. in the Bismarcks, 1200 B.C. in Vanuatu and Fiji, and 1100 B.C. in New Caledonia. The speed of the spread of Lapita pottery implies either a rapid rate of initial colonization of the uninhabited islands of Remote Oceania or the rapid diffusion of a cultural item in an already-discovered island world. But what are we really dating when trying to set out a chronological framework for Lapita? We are dating a context in which decorated Lapita pottery is predominant, taking for granted that other cultural items are just additions to this prominent feature of the Lapita tradition. Looking at early non-decorated ceramics can increase the precision of our analysis.

Early Plainware as identified above has been recently found in the Bismarcks, Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Samoa. It is dated to 1550 B.C. at Balo rockshelter in New Ireland and to 900 B.C. at Feru rockshelter in Santa Ana (Spriggs 1997:25). In the Talepakemalai site in the Mussau Islands near New Ireland, a red-slipped Plainware was concentrated on the beach terrace and recently dated to at least 1200 B.C. (Kirch 1997:147). In Vanuatu, the recently identified Arapus Ware on Efate Island is dated to 1100 B.C. as well (Bedford 2000), while a red-slipped ware dated to 1150 B.C. is characteristic of the earliest Lapita level in the newly discovered Makue site on Aore Island, near Santo (Galipaud 2001). Although it can be described as decorated, paddle-impressed Podtanéan pottery from New Caledonia is comparable to Plainware ceramics in other archipelagos because the paddle impressions are simply manufacturing marks that are wiped off to make the other wares plain. It has been dated to about 1100 B.C. in seven

sites and I suggested some years ago that Podtanéan pottery might represent the earliest arrival on the island (Galipaud 1999). Plainware sites contemporary with the earliest Lapita are known in Samoa (Smith 2002), while data from the To'aga site in that same archipelago (Kirch 1997:148) suggest a continuity in Plainware pottery from as early as 1100 B.C. up to A.D. 300–400, with gradual change from a thin, fine ware to a thick, coarse-tempered one.

This issue of the antiquity of Plainware ceramics should be seriously considered because it has important implications for our understanding of the dynamics of the initial colonization of Remote Oceania. Plainware pottery is easily traceable to Southeast Asian Neolithic cultures and its early appearance in Oceania could be an indication that "the elaborate and extensive decoration of Lapita ceramic wares in Near Oceania are not brought in by migrants from elsewhere, rather they developed out of a largely Southeast Asian Neolithic red slipped plain ware assemblage in situ" (Burley, 2003:180). Alternatively we could hypothesize that these first migrants to Oceania had diverse origins in Southeast Asia and that the appearance of decorated Lapita at one stage in the early prehistory of the remote Pacific is an indication of a migration which followed the tracks of earlier ones still unknown, one of which entailed the spread of Plainware pottery. If debate on the origin of the Lapita ceramics is not yet closed off, the early presence of plain, red-slipped pottery in a few key sites of Remote Oceania indicates to my mind that the early process of colonization stems quite directly from Southeast Asia rather than indirectly with a formative stage in the Bismarcks of the sort initially proposed by Green (1979) and accepted by most Lapita scholars today.

The end of Lapita is difficult to establish. Firstly, when does the Lapita pottery cease to be manufactured? To answer this question we need well-dated contexts with clear relationships between dated material (charcoal, usually) and decorated pottery. Such contexts are rarely found. Because most are close to the sea, Lapita sites have often been eroded or re-deposited and dated material provides only a snapshot of what might have been. On the island of Malo in Vanuatu, for instance, the Atanoasao site yielded several charcoal samples dated from 2800 B.P. from a horizon containing decorated Lapita pottery as well as a few plain sherds. There is no indication in this site of prolonged use or later occupation with decorated Lapita and so I have hypothesized that it was occupied only once, for a very short period, probably as a fishing or harvesting camp (Galipaud 2000). An accumulation of pumice and gravel suggests that what was a sand beach during the Lapita occupation was rapidly covered by the sea at some time afterwards, perhaps even forcing people to leave. This could be an indication that eustatic or tectonic instability played a role in the initial colonization process. A period of eustatic instability might have contributed to the rapid disappearance of the decorated Lapita component of the colonizers' material culture owing to the fact that it was generally used in vulnerable littoral zones. If these localities disappeared, the activities involving dentate pottery that were carried out in such places may simply have ceased, eliminating the need for "classic" Lapita. More local case-studies in different parts of the Pacific are needed to model the natural changes which occurred during this period before we can take such suggestions very far.

In other islands, the taphonomic impact of long-term human occupation makes it difficult to specifically date individual levels in sites. When we precisely date two overlying layers, can we automatically infer that there was continuous occupation between those two dates? This has been done often by archaeologists everywhere and the Lapita *tradition* is no exception, because it encompasses many different features and characteristic artifacts in different locations during the course of the first millennium B.C., all of which are considered to be part of a single, continuous tradition. The Lapita *horizon*, however, is definitely very short-lived and this alone is good reason to question the use and importance of the decorated Lapita pottery in the construction of social identities in Remote Oceania. The more dynamic and longer-lived part of the Lapita tradition lies more in the non-Lapita ceramic component (Plainware, Podtanéan, and so on) and the very early dates recently obtained from Plainware contexts in the Talepakemalai site (Kirch 1997:147) and the Arapus site (Bedford 2000) support my hypothesis that these Plainwares represent the active part of the initial settlement dynamic (Galipaud 1999). That said, there seems to be a clear difference between sites in Near Oceania and sites in Remote Oceania. Lapita as a pottery might have been very short-lived in the latter while it started earlier and might have lasted longer in the former. Regional differences are perhaps more important than the relative homogeneity in ceramics tends to show.

Conclusion

For a long time we have considered that decorated Lapita ceramics were the main feature and are now the best witness of the Lapita tradition. This tradition has recently been extended to encompass all other ceramic types found during that same period, reinforcing the idea of a homogenous, long-lasting tradition and promoting a sense of continuity in the development of Oceanic cultures over the millennia. We have been focusing too much on decorated Lapita, which has blinded us to other possibilities. These possibilities are best exemplified by Podtanéan ware in New Caledonia, which is evidently related to but different from "classic" decorated Lapita. The fact that we have Plainware at the beginning and end of our sequences should direct us to look more closely at it as a whole and try to understand its place and role in sites which also have an important decorated Lapita assemblage.

The origin of the Lapita style is still a matter of debate, but the origin of paddle-impressed and Plainware styles is less problematic because both are widely distributed in Southeast Asia. While research in western Micronesia has not yet allowed us to draw any direct link to Lapita, Micronesian ceramics are closely related to the Plainware component of the Lapita tradition and one should consider that some of the cultural shifts which led to Lapita played out in these latter islands. Research in the years to come will have to focus more on the less visible part of this early tradition. Plainwares do have a real homogeneity in time and space, draw a clear link between Southeast Asia and Oceania, and seem to last for a long time.

Plainware has been better dated in recent years and is now securely associated with the earliest part of the colonization process linked to Lapita. This recent advance in our understanding poses anew the question of the role of decorated Lapita ceramics in this initial dispersal. Rather than using pottery typologies to highlight cultural differences, we need to enlarge our understanding of the Lapita tradition. This will probably give us a more accurate perception of the diversity of origins of these early Oceanians and a better comprehension of the later changes leading to the emergence of the traditional societies of the Pacific.

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