
THE PREHISTORY OF SANTO

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• • • The first Oceanians

At present, Archaeology considers that discovery of the Pacific region by Man was performed through two main distinct processes. The first one took place during the Pleistocene and had concerned the Australian continent, New Guinea and the close archipelagos joined up by the past in a single continental landmass called Sahul. The second one began around the fourth millennium BP and ended with the discovery of the Pacific Islands followed by human settlement. The first sea crossing from South East Asia to Sahul took place 80000 years ago, maybe earlier. Human presence is attested 40000 years ago in New Guinea, and 10000 years later in the Bismarck Archipelago islands, east of New Guinea. This first settlement, which developed slowly, has allowed man to reach the Solomon Islands up to Guadalcanal, thank to past existing natural bridges

between islands and thank to seafaring techniques which allowed crossing at sight. There is a strong correlation between the distribution of the Papuan languages and this very ancient colonisation.

The marine gap between the Santa Cruz Islands and the smaller archipelagos of Vanuatu and further east to the Fiji Islands was only crossed about 3200 years ago, when nautical knowledge enabled deep-sea navigation. This natural border in the Santa Cruz Islands divides Near Oceania, inhabited for at least 30000 years from Remote Oceania (Fig. 538).

The discovery of Remote Oceania archipelagos, as far as Samoa and Tonga, was performed by very small mobile groups ultimately from Southeast Asia who appeared in the Bismarck Archipelago islands about 3500 years ago and quickly spread

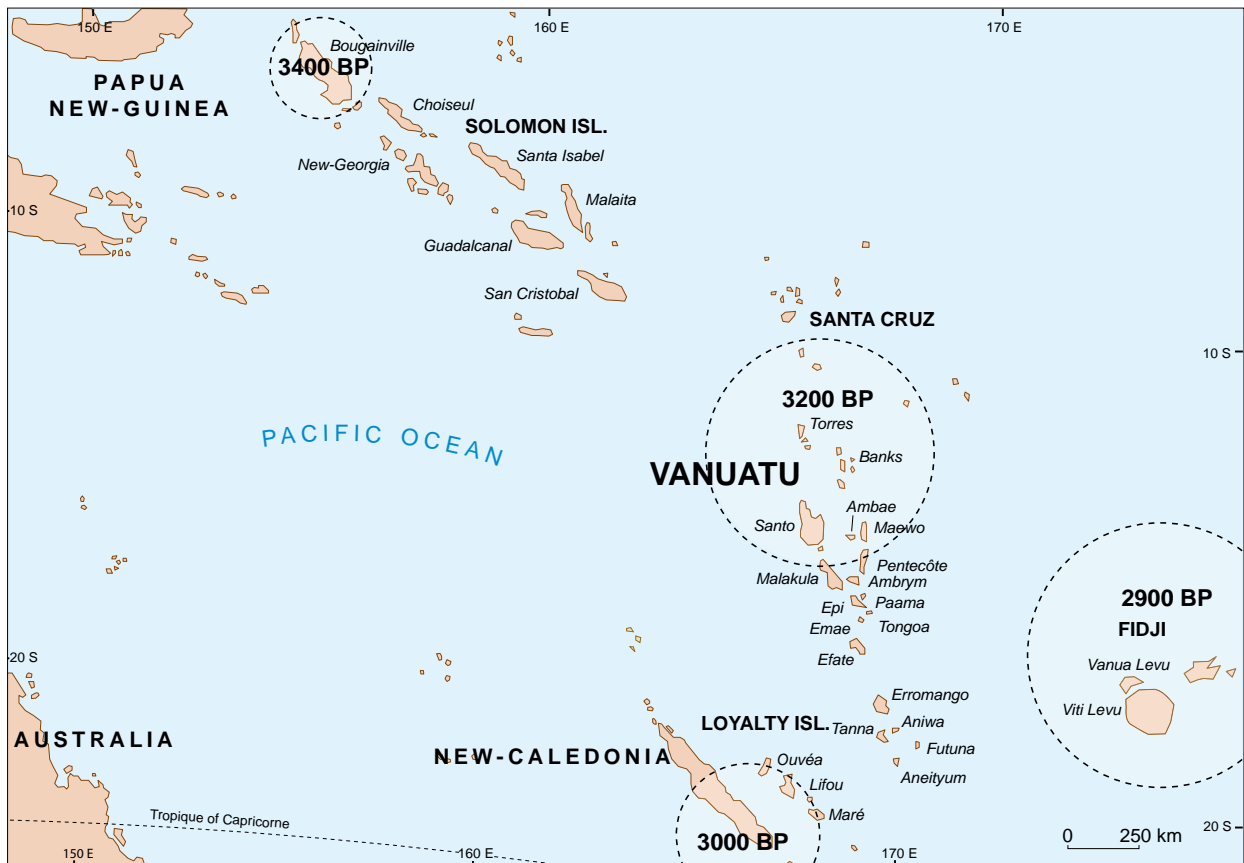


Figure 538: The second step of human diaspora into the Pacific: the discovery of Remote Oceania. Dates shown are mean accepted values for the settlement of each archipelago. (Carte J.-C. Galipaud - IRD).

towards the South and the East reaching Samoa and Tonga 3 000 years ago.

Their presence is noticed in the Santa Cruz Islands and in the North of Vanuatu 3 200 years ago and we believe that this area has been an advanced base for their later movements. The distinctive pottery they left, called Lapita, marks out their peregrination. The Austronesian languages are the only spoken languages in Remote Oceania and are logically associated with the Lapita diaspora (Fig. 539).

• • • **The discovery of Santo**

The settlement of the Vanuatu islands follows the settlement process of other Remote Oceania islands. In Vanuatu, Lapita sailors favoured the small offshore coral islands of South Santo and North Malakula as well as Efate and Erromango (Fig. 540). They locally produced a very characteristic and richly decorated pottery, the Lapita pottery. The North Vanuatu islands offered many resources to these discoverers and were the melting pot where they became acclimatised to their new world.

These sailors, being used to marine environment, first preferred coral island's beaches, which offered marine resources and havens for canoes. They exploited local resources, but quickly introduced plants and animals for a more lasting installation. Among transported plants were probably many trees with edible nuts, fruit trees including banana, and

some variety of taro or yam. The animals imported were the Pacific rat (*Rattus exulans*), the chicken (the *Gallus galus* domestic form) and maybe the dog (the domestic form of *Canis lupus*); the pig (the domestic form of *Sus scrofa*) is absent from the very early settlements associated with decorated Lapita pottery, but becomes, after some centuries, an essential part of the fauna in archaeological sites. The large spiny rat (*Rattus praetor*) is very rare in Lapita settlements beyond the Santa Cruz.

Nevertheless, these first seafarers did not neglect the resources of large islands like Santo where they settled after few centuries. They preferred coastal environments such as the Shokraon site in Luganville, one of the few well-preserved sites of this period in Santo. At the beginning of our era they left the coast to move inside the island.

From Man arrival, 3 200 years ago, until the 350 BP first contacts with the European world, these populations had modeled Santo, adapting their society to the specificities of a diversified and changing environment.

• • • **Sailors of the New World**

Many Lapita sites revealing the beginning of human colonization of the islands are found in Vanuatu and they are especially numerous in Malo, Aore, and in the South of Santo. Dozens of sites have been located along the north and east coast of Malo and around



Figure 539: Lapita pottery fragment from the Makué archaeological site in Aore Island (North Vanuatu).

Aore. All these sites are now buried under approximately one meter of sediment on uplifted terraces that are several meters above today's seashore. Such situation is due to uprising episodes that affected these islands during the last three millennia.

The site of Makué, North of Aore, in front of Luganville is a well-kept testimony of the initial populating period. Discovered then excavated between 2002 and 2006, it entailed several successive settlements, which took place at the very beginning of the human installation in the island. The oldest layers give evidence of a seasonal camp from sailors from the Bismarck Archipelago, 2000 km further north. Many obsidian flakes, which have been traced successfully to the region of Talasea in New-Britain attest of the origin of these first discoverers of the Vanuatu shores. The large amount of marine turtle and shells remains, of large size, give evidence of the marine economy of these first Vanuatu inhabitants. The successive levels of occupation (Fig. 541) suggest more a landing place that was used during a period not exceeding a few hundreds years, rather than a coastal village occupied for many centuries. The varying decorative patterns of the Lapita pottery in the layers also suggest multiple origins for these first inhabitants (Fig. 541).

After few centuries, the Lapita pottery disappears while these sailors remain and settle down in most of the islands. During this founding period, they remain close to the sea, a doubtless indication of a widely marine economy and of a high mobility. At the beginning of the Christian Era, most of the shore sites are deserted.

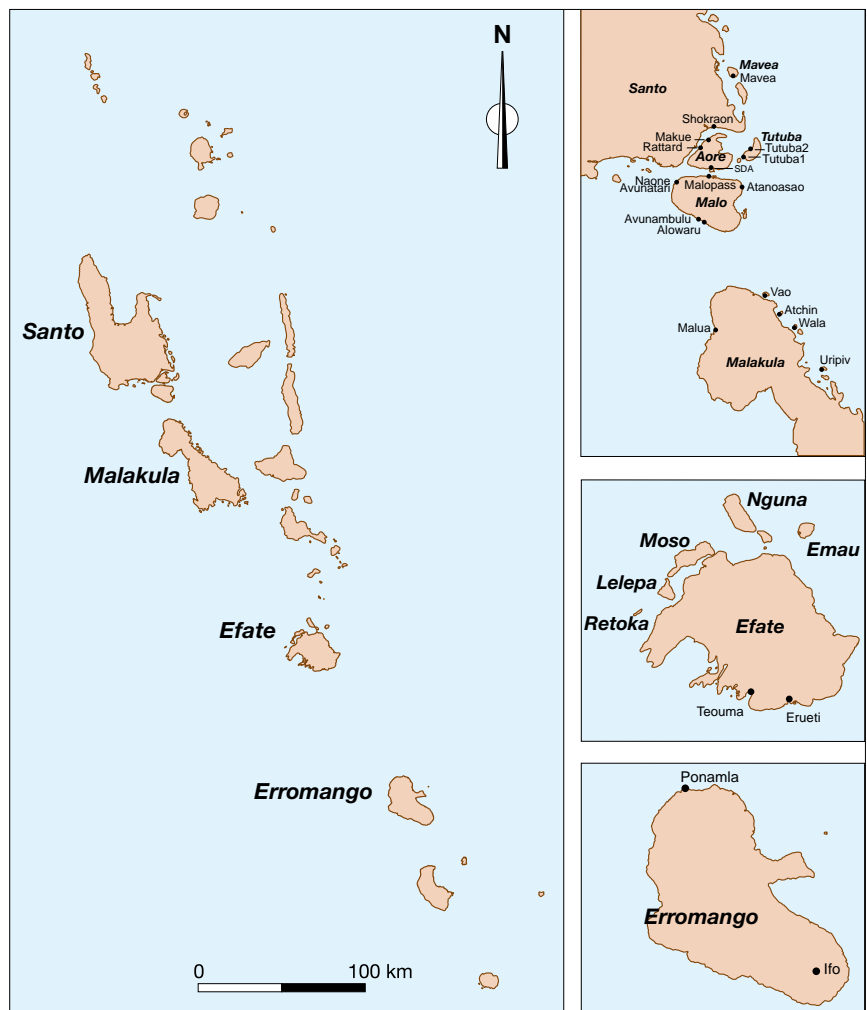


Figure 540: Location of the main Lapita sites in Vanuatu. (Carte L. Billaut - IRD).

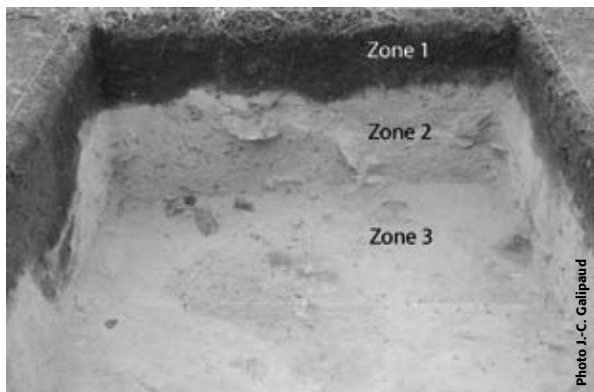


Figure 541: The three Lapita layers of the Makué site from Aore Island (zones one to three).

Few evidences of this founding settlement were discovered on the big island of Santo whereas all the smaller offshore islands close to the south and east Santo coast were peopled 3 000 years ago. This large island must have been nevertheless visited and its resources used. For example, we find in the Lapita site of Makué, in the North of Aore, rocks originating from Santo.

The site of Shokraon (Fig. 542), in the suburbs of Luganville, is the only site known to have some traces of the Lapita period in Santo. The Lapita pottery in the site is however very rare and the main archaeological finding at Shokraon is a simple shape undecorated pottery, which is associated with numerous pig remains. These remains characterise the period, following the island discovery by Lapita, a period during which the colonists begin to settle down on the island.

The sailors and potters of the Lapita period had some impact on the marine and land resources of these islands in spite of their occasional presence. The introduction of new species such as rats and pigs, certainly had disastrous effects on this virgin environment.

• • • Natural environment and anthropisation in Santo

Santo is the largest island of the Vanuatu Archipelago and one of the most ancient at the geological scale with Mallicolo. It is composed of a volcanic substratum on the West and an elevated reef formation in the East. In the North a big bay, where the river Jordan flows, separates these two geological entities. This singular geology influences island morphology. The West of the island is a high mountainous range where Tabwemasana, the highest summit of the island, peaks at 1 700 m. Strong and steep slopes limit access to the west coast where the coastal plain is often non-existent. In the northwest of the island, the lower and well irrigated Cumberland Plain offers places more convenient for human settlement.

In the East of the island, a succession of uplifted reef formations shows the role that tectonic forces



Figure 542: The Shokraon late Lapita site from Santo Island.

play in the island build up. Off this east coast and off the south one, many coral islands stretch.

The centre of the island and the foothills of the volcanic massifs block clouds brought by trade winds and are well watered supporting a tropical rain forest while the much drier, west coast, shelters a vegetation scattered by savannahs excepted in the alluvial valleys.

The two largest rivers, Apuna and Ora (or the Jordan) spring up in the wet centre of the island and run into Big Bay. During flood season, their rate of flow and stream speed are so high that a dense system of alluviums and plant waste reaches a depth of more than 800 m in the bay. All along the centuries these rivers built up a wide alluvial plain, which is very fertile and convenient for agriculture but may be flooded both by fresh and sea-water during tropical gales.

Man settled first and foremost in the plain of Big Bay and along rivers. On the West part of the island, he preferred wetter and cooler high altitude places and apparently did not occupy the west coast formerly (Fig. 543).

• • • The origin of island societies

About two thousand years ago, these first settlers have deserted the coastal environments of Santo and its offshore islands, probably forced by tectonic adjustments, which have remodelled the coastal zone, and in turn have destroyed archaeological evidences. Traces of human occupation dated from c. 1450 BP were discovered on the East calcareous terraces and along the West of the Cumberland Peninsula. A large exchange network covering the North of Vanuatu as far as the Santa Cruz islands (Tikopia) took place during the first millennium of our era and is characterised by a painted pottery decorated with incisions named "Sinapupu pottery" (Fig. 544). In Santo, this Sinapupu pottery marks the beginning of the human settlement inside the island.

Until the beginning of the second millennium of our era, remains of human activity are restricted to this pottery. Man has settled the mountainous foothills and the calcareous terraces where fertile soil and heavy rainfall favoured agriculture. The mobility probably remained important, the demography was quite low and the extended exchange networks are an indication of the cultural and linguistic homogeneity of these early societies.

Just before the year 1000, many innovations mark the beginning of a new cycle, announcing modern societies. New types of pottery emerge on Vanuatu islands where clay sources are numerous and abundant (Malakula, Santo) and exchange networks seem to shrink. Small offshore Islands are widely populated and regulate the movement of people and goods between the main islands, especially in the North where a new social order develops: the graded societies.

In Santo, several pottery manufacturing centres appear on the West coast, where clay deposits are abundant (Figs 545 & 546). The diversity in styles is an indication of the diversification of groups and the beginning of regionalism. This evolution is linked with increasing evidences of settlements and the emergence of big villages inside islands and on hillsides in front of the sea. This evolution culminates just prior to the European contact with an obvious increase in demography. Small offshore islands are the residence of powerful leaders who have the control over inter-island exchanges.

At the beginning of the second millennium of our era, irrigated taro gardening was introduced on the well-watered islands and in less sloping places. Such intensive culture allows for an uninterrupted production and generates surplus available for exchanges. It is probably also a necessary innovation linked with a drier climate. Irrigated garden are still in use on the West and North-West coast (Fig. 547).



Figure 544: Sinapupu pottery style (northwest Santo).



Figure 545: traditional pottery from the Wusi Village located on the west of Santo.



Figure 543: The Wusi village located on the West coast of Santo was founded in historical time by people inhabiting the highlands of the Tabwemasana area.



Figure 546: Traditional pottery from the Olpoi Village located on the north-west of Santo.



Figure 549: Stone table of the Suqe system. Salaea Village located in North-West Santo.

In order to keep up and develop, these systems had to maintain large networks of relations to facilitate the movement of goods, but also to allow marital exchanges and therefore insure the perpetuity of the groups. The inhabitants of the Cumberland region had close relations with the inhabitants of the Banks islands and their network extended probably as far as the Santa Cruz Islands at certain times.

East Santo's inhabitants kept relation with people of far East islands. It is the case of Aoba, and Malo people who exchanged pigs and pottery with the inhabitants of the North of Malakula Island.

● ● ● **Santo chronology in a wider context**

The chronology of the human evolution in Santo closely matches the chronology of the evolution in the remaining islands of the Vanuatu archipelago. The initial phase of discovery and settlement, confined to the coastal fringe of the islands is characterised by Lapita pottery. A period of integration



Figure 550: coral platforms of the Sumbwe system. Mavea Island.

follows, characterised by plain ware pottery of different styles and an increase in settlements, which cover all islands. Starting in the second half of the first millennium of our era, during the third phase of this evolution, the roots of pre-European societies emerge.

The cultural representations differ from one island to the other especially towards the last millennium when an increase in demography triggers a heavier reliance to land, which in turn provokes a diversification of cultural markers. This tendency, which is Melanesian wide and not only limited to Vanuatu, is expressed in the following figure 551.

● ● ● **Conclusion**

This rapid overview of the human evolution in Santo and its offshore islands shows that the gradual rise of population led to differing social strategies. These strategies developed in response to cultural and natural necessities but never were the result of isolation. From the Lapita sea-nomads to the potters of the late West Santo societies, movements of men and goods helped shape the people to the islands. Santo, with its natural and cultural diversity, is a good example of this process.

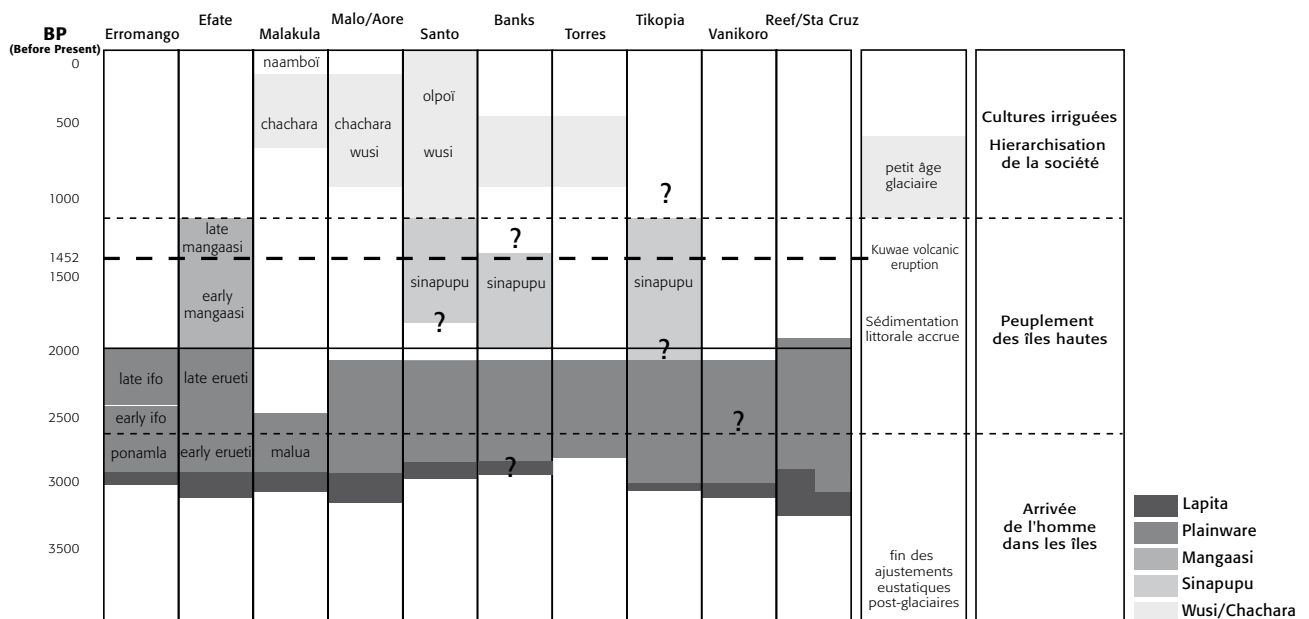


Figure 551: comparative table of the cultural evolution in Vanuatu and adjacent islands. (J.-C. Galipaud).