

La Datation du squelette
de Koné (Site WKO 013)

Discussion des résultats

*Notes on the datation of the Koné
Skeleton (Site WKO 013)*

J.C. GALIPAUD



*société, urbanisation,
développement*

NOTES TECHNIQUES

N° 14
AOUT 1993

Document de travail

NOTES ON THE DATATION OF THE KONE SKELETON (NEW CALEDONIA)

Jean-Christophe Galipaud

ORSTOM, BP 76

Port-Vila

Following the results of a collagen dating given out recently by Foss Leach, I have made a review of the previously available information on the Koné site. I hope that this review together with the new data now available will allow a better evaluation of the results of analysis and help solve the problem of dating of this skeleton.

New data refer to the salvage work conducted in January 1992 on site 13, Foué peninsula, by ORSTOM and the Service des Musées et du Patrimoine (Sand C., Semah A.M., Semah F. et Ouetcho A. 1992). New dates stated in this note are unpublished and should not be quoted without the authors' permission.

Situation of the skeleton.

I found some teeth and other cranial fragments along the coast of the Foué peninsula in January 1988, the day after cyclone Anne severely damaged this coast. The fragments had been washed away by the sea and the rain. The remaining part of the skeleton was excavated two weeks later together with E.Kasarherou.

Before describing the situation of the skeleton I will outline briefly the main stratigraphic features of the Koné site (Figure 1) and the known relations between levels and archaeological remains. Along the coast of the Foué peninsula, a rich dark silty layer covers the sand. This layer (layer A), as a thickness varying from 0.30 to 0.80 meter and contains most of the archaeological material recovered during the first phase of the research (Gifford & Shutler, Frimigacci). It covers a sandy layer of marine origin (layer B) the granulometry of which increases with depth. It has a maximum thickness of 1.30 meter. Coarse layers of sand and shell on top of a consolidated sand (beach-rock) end this sequence.

Excavations conducted by Gifford & Shutler (1956:7-9)¹ on location 13A did not reach deeper than the upper part of the B Layer (42 inches or 1.06 meter). Pottery does not appear in the test pits close to the coast below 30 inches (0.76 meter). Furthermore, 88 percent of the plain pottery and 83 percent of the decorated sherds have been collected in the upper 18 inches (0.46

meter) (Green & Mitchell, 1983:35)². Recent work undertaken in the same area (Sand & al 1992:24-26)³ shows a similar distribution of the artefacts. The majority of the pottery is of Lapita type. This evidence and the 14C dates (see below) associated with the remains have led Sand to reconfirm the previous assumption that the lower part of layer A and the top of Layer B represent the initial Lapita occupation level.

On location 13B, however, the discovery, in the same stratigraphic context, of the skeleton followed the year after and in the same area by a complete Lapita vessel and some times later by part of a second vessel led me to hypothesise that they could have been an earlier Lapita occupation on this site or that this remains represent an undisturbed sequence of the same occupation.

The skeleton lay in the lower part of the sandy layer (B) above some coarse layers of marine origin (Figure 1 and Figure 2). There is no evidence to suggest that a grave pit could have been dug through the A layer. There is no visible feature around the skeleton, apart from a slight coloration of the sand around the body.

The skeleton was not sitting in an upright crouched position, as it is usually the case in this context. It was lying in a somewhat unnatural posture: the upper body part laid flat on the back, the arms apparently folded on the stomach. The upper part of the skeleton was in connexion. The lower body part appeared at first, the feet being higher than the head. The left and seemingly the right legs were twisted across the body, the left foot touching the pelvis. This unnatural posture suggests a post mortem movement of the skeleton that could well fit with an upright starting position.

Artefacts found during the excavation comprise mainly sherds associated with the Lapita complex (Lapita and Podtanéan style). They have been found in the A layer except for several sherds, bigger, which have been found in the upper part of the B layer. Among those later sherds is a paddle impressed decoration (Podtanéan) and part of a pottery handle. According to Kasarherou and Dedane, none of those artefacts are in close association with the skeleton, most of them being well above in the stratigraphy⁴.

Relative dating of the skeleton.

The Lapita site of the Foué peninsula near Koné has been dated several times in the past. The most reliable date at the time of submission of the bone sample (2800+/-350 BP (M341) on charcoal in 1953) is now confirmed by recent fieldwork (see table below). All, these dates give a consistent estimation of the Lapita occupation level on top of the sandy layer B. They fall within the range of dated occupations for the nearby Lapita sites of Koumac and Bourail. The last result (2450+/-70 BP (Sand pers.

communication)) is from a shell sample and it comes from the upper part of the B layer in a test excavation close to Anne's burial².

This set of dates gives a general indication on the period of settlement of the Lapita Site from the Foué Peninsula in Koné. The close correspondence of the different sets of datation, obtained at different times by different methods allows us to place this occupation with some confidence in the second part of the first millennium BC. Because the skeleton is buried underneath the dated occupation layer, it is logically associated with this occupation and should give a comparable if not anterior date. The close relationship, in the same level, of a whole Lapita decorated vessel is a further indication of the antiquity of the deposits in this level.

DATATIONS DU SITE DE KONE (WKO 013, 13A ET 13B)

N° Ech.	Date BP (Date cal BP)	Description
M341	2800±350 (2925, 2914, 2882)	Loc. 1, 24"-30", charcoal
M336	2435±350 (2468)	Loc. 1, 30"-36", charcoal
Gif-1983	2662±100 (2330)	Loc. A, marine shell
BETA	2590±60 (2292)	Loc. A, level B, shell
BETA	2450±70 (2081)	Loc. B, -95, shell
	1061±65	Skeleton "Anne"

Interpretation and perspectives

The recent result obtained when dating a bone sample of the Koné skeleton in Foué raises the problem of its association with the Lapita settlement on this site. As often the case with skeleton material in the Pacific, there is no structural remains or grave goods to help correlate the skeleton with its archaeological environment.

There is a strong stratigraphic presumption however that the surface of level B represents the initial occupation floor. This surface presents some clay alteration which suggests that it is part of a paleosol. The A level later sealed the B level, allowing for a better conservation of the Lapita horizon. This A level, a dark grey clay sediment, attests of a change in the ecological balance in favour of a swampy ecosystem (see ² page 2). Changes in the Koné river flow as well as climatic oscillations might explain these transformations. The abandon of the site might be linked with the natural changes attested in the stratigraphy. More recent occupation is attested by sherds in the A level as well as traces of gardening activities that can explain the somewhat heterogeneous material found in the A layer. The A level deposition must have occurred closely after the abandon of the site by the makers of Lapita pottery.

The position of the skeleton as well as of the complete vessel of Lapita style is in accordance with the stratigraphic evidence and the skeleton could well have been buried during the occupation of the Lapita horizon. The sandy nature of this level as well as time would explain the lack of any pit coloration. The pottery that has been found in the proximity of the skeleton must also have been buried before the abandon of the place to have withstood the 2500 years of deposition.

A more recent age for this burial would have involved the digging of a pit through the black A level. This would in turn have left a clear pit outline in the much whiter sand of level B. However, the proximity of the sea may have influenced the sediment deposition in this part of the site. There is no evidence at the moment of a later deposition of level A near the sea but I will follow this hypothesis and test its logical consequences on the field. The date of 1060 BP places the skeleton at the optimum of the Naïa/Oundjo period. This period is characterised by the development of the modern Kanak society and the skeleton should then bear the main physical traits of the actual inhabitants of the island.

¹ Gifford E W, Shutler R, 1956. Archaeological Excavations in New Caledonia. *Anthropological Records*, 18:1-148.

² Green R C, Mitchell J S, 1983. New Caledonian Culture History: A review of the archaeological sequence. *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology*, 5:19-67.

³ Sand C. et al. 1992. Site Lapita WKO 013 B/A. Sondages de reconnaissance et fouilles de sauvetage sur la presqu'île de Foué (Province Nord, Koné, Janvier 1992) in "Rapports d'Activité, Sciences Sociales, Archéologie, N°4.

⁴ Dedane S., Kasarherou E. 1988. La Sépulture WKO 013B. In "Fouilles de Sauvetage en Nouvelle-Calédonie", Office Calédonien des Cultures et Service des Musées et du Patrimoine de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouméa.

WKO 0134 STRUCTURE
(coupe)

FIGURE 1

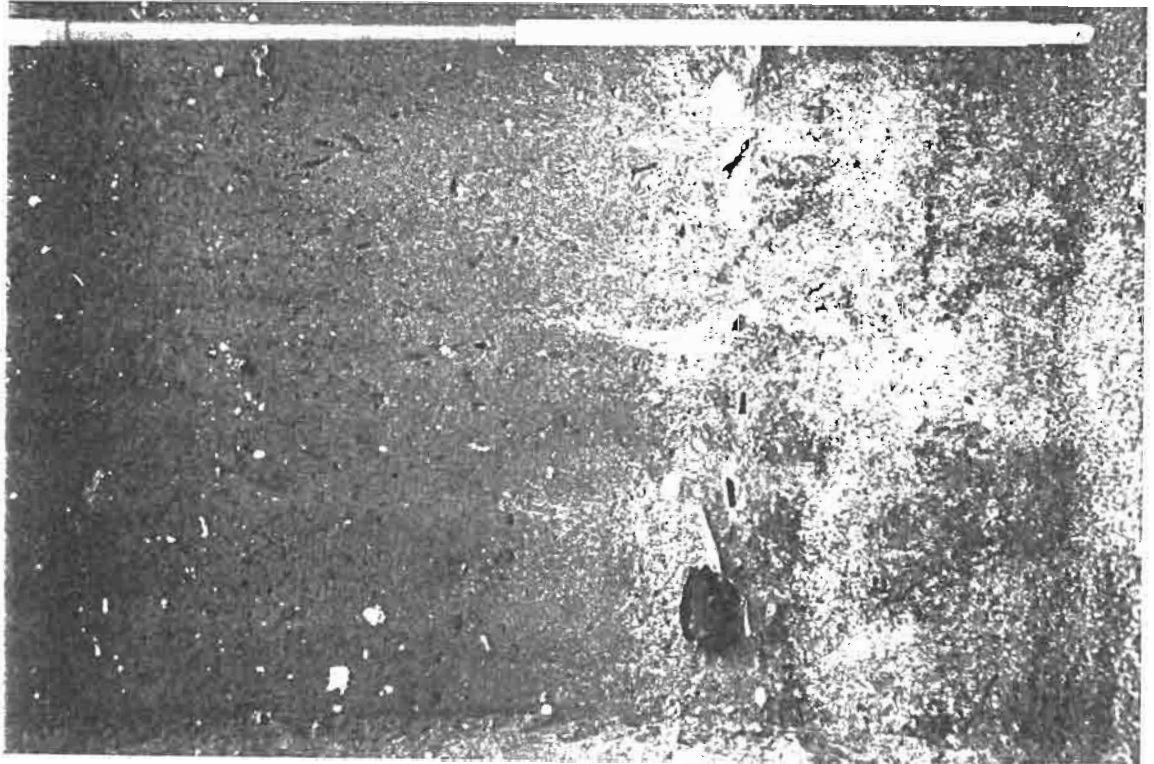
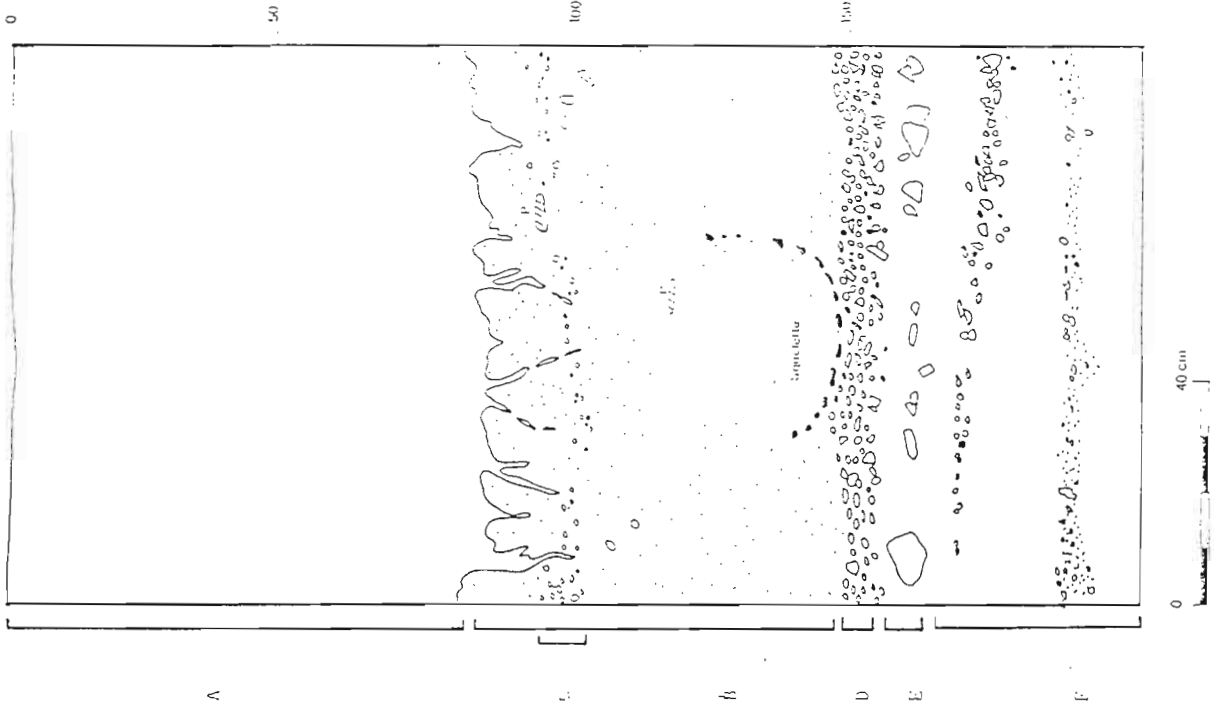
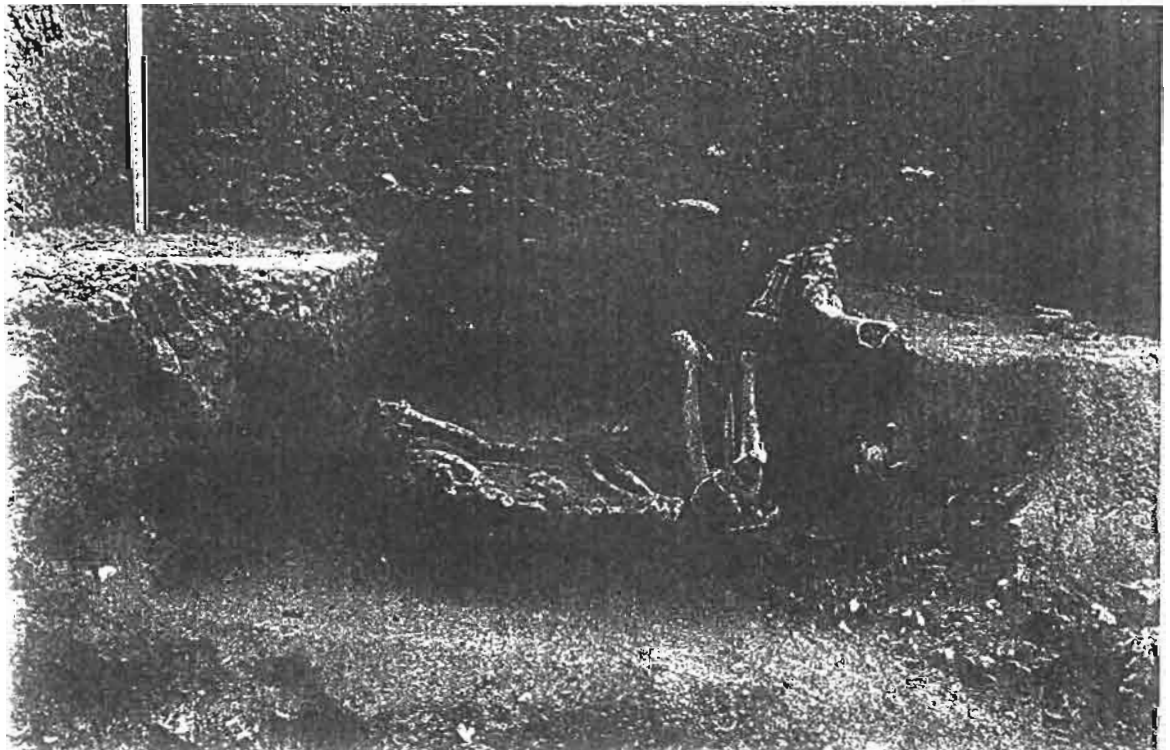


FIGURE 2

Site WKO 013.
Skeleton "Anne" during
excavation. Note (photo
below) the position of the
left leg and foot.



REPRÉSENTATION DE L'ORSTOM
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