

Tracing Lapita

Following the path of the earliest
open-ocean navigators across the Pacific



Detail of dentate design on Lapita pottery

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This Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship travel grant has allowed me to complete the first part of overseas travel and research for a creative non-fiction book project about humanity's last major migration, the expansion across the Pacific.

I would first like to acknowledge the long delays in being able to undertake this trip. First, the travel restrictions during the Covid pandemic made it impossible to bring various people together at an active excavation site on Vanuatu's main island Efate. Later, personal circumstances regarding the health of a family member further delayed my travel plans.

Unfortunately, the M 7.3 earthquake in December 2024 in Vanuatu has now delayed the second part of my itinerary to visit researchers and Lapita archives in Canberra because it is being coordinated by one of the people based in Port Vila. This trip is now planned for later this year. I am grateful for the trust's patience.

Completed project goals

In November 2024, I was able to return to Vanuatu's Efate Island, which I had last visited a decade ago to attend the 8th international Lapita conference.

Efate was an important stepping stone for the Austronesian Lapita people who were the first to undertake open-ocean voyages, out of sight of any land. Considered the ancestors of modern Polynesians, these people's journey began some 3,300 years ago in the Bismarck Archipelago to the east of New Guinea. From there, the Lapita fanned out beyond previously inhabited regions of Near Oceania to populate the Pacific's many islands. Up to this point, people had been crossing sea gaps between islands in Near Oceania but had always navigated within sight of land.

The Lapita established the first human settlements in the western part of an area known as Remote Oceania. Their voyage east from the Solomon Islands to Vanuatu was the first to require open-ocean navigation and larger ocean-going waka. Lapita people became the first to make landfall in Vanuatu, heralding the last major prehistoric wave of migration.

Archaeologists have discovered several ancient Lapita sites on Efate and other islands across the Vanuatu archipelago and I was able to visit or discuss several of them. Arguably the most important site is Teouma, the oldest known burial site which held skeletal remains dating back to the first arrivals, reaching three millennia into the past to the very beginning of the Lapita people's epic voyage of discovery.

I stayed with Matthew Spriggs, an emeritus professor of archaeology at the Australian National University, who now lives in Port Vila and has recently completed a five-year Australian Research Council Laureate project on the history of Pacific archaeology. I conducted a series of oral history interviews with Prof Spriggs, recalling his own career path and the earliest discoveries of Lapita sites.

During this time I revisited Teouma, which remains the largest cemetery of this foundational Pacific culture found so far in the Western Pacific. It was discovered by accident in 2003 by a digger driver excavating the site for a prawn farm. When the driver unearthed an elaborately decorated piece of pottery, he recognised it as something special. Prof Spriggs was one of the archaeologists called in and quickly identified it as Lapita, a people known for their specific dentate pottery designs depicting symbolised faces.



Fragments of a Lapita pot

Teouma's serendipitous discovery soon led to a major project which revealed not just more pottery but human remains in 68 burials with clear evidence that the Lapita used their decorated pottery for ceremonies and rituals. The bones themselves have been studied for traces of disease and ancient DNA extracted from them continues to shed new light on the Lapita people's origin, migration route and the incredible speed of their expansion – in just 2,500 years, Lapita and their descendants colonised the Pacific, covering about one-tenth of the world.

The bones and much of the pottery is held at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta) and Prof Spriggs took me behind the scenes of an exhibition on display at the time.

“Teouma is the first really core Lapita site ... it's given us unique insights into who the Lapita people were.” _Matthew Spriggs

The highlight of my visit was a field excursion with Australian National University archaeologist (and New Zealander) Stuart Bedford, who co-leads the excavation of a site at Pang Pang village, on the east coast of Efate, together with Indigenous ni-Vanuatu archaeologists. I met several of them, including Iarawai Philip, who discovered the site during surveys of the area in 2022.

Excavations have so far focused on unusual mounds on the fringes of the village, thought to be Lapita middens. They revealed pottery and shells, including that of an extinct tortoise. It was interesting to meet the ni-Vanuatu archaeologists and discuss how they move between their deep local knowledge and ancestral storytelling traditions and their Western training. It was clear they have inspired broader awareness and pride of history and ancient culture among rural communities.



Stuart Bedford and Iarawai Philip at the nakamal

During the visit, I also had a chance to interview Pang Pang village chief Matthew David and his wife Elena. Both talked about how the discovery of Lapita remains makes them feel more deeply connected with their own ancestry and their role as cultural bridge builders between Melanesia and Polynesia.

“The whole Lapita story is an extraordinary chapter of human history.” _Stuart Bedford

Another person I was able to interview is French ethnobotanist Vincent Lebot, who specialises in the genetic analysis of tropical roots such as cassava, kumara, yams and taro and was able to show that these carbohydrate-dense staple crops have travelled with people on their voyages because they are easy to propagate. Because each waka only transported a few tubers, there is a clear west-to-east erosion of genetic diversity in these crops, which Lebot has used to trace the route of the human migration.

I am particularly interested in various methods of tracing human movement through proxies such as food, language or cultural artefacts such as Lapita pottery. Lebot introduced me to a number of other botanists working in this field across the Pacific, and I have been following up with them since my visit to Vanuatu.

For this book, I am planning to use narrative non-fiction storytelling to profile people involved in research to trace the expansion across the Pacific. The opportunity to travel and observe field work and village life around excavation sites adds actuality and authenticity. It has already helped me to better understand people’s sense of place and their connection to their ancestral stories.

But most scientists are not Indigenous and given the colonial history of the Pacific, I want to avoid any appropriation of local stories and knowledge. For this reason, my plan is to include contributions by Indigenous scientists, writers and artists as much as possible in a collaborative process.

To start this part of the project, I met with Vanuatu Cultural Centre director Richard Shing, who not only showed me the collections of pottery and ancestral remains from the Lapita burials held by the centre, but also introduced me to people who practise ancient ritual traditions such as sand drawing, which is recognised as a method of oral and visual communication.



Sand drawings are used as a storytelling tool

I was able to observe practitioners and talk to them about the roots of this traditional art form, and whether the earliest people to inhabit these islands may have had similar cultural traditions.

Lapita are probably best known for their unique pottery designs. One research group is focused on exploring whether the symbols used on pottery were also a communication tool, but this part of the project is only at the beginning and I hope to build on this during my visit to the collections held in Canberra.

Ongoing travel and research plans

My plan for this book is to open each chapter with a specific story about a place or an object.

This could be pieces of pottery linked to a significant node in the Lapita migration route or other cultural artefacts linked with Lapita, including items of material culture. For this, I plan to spend a week exploring the comprehensive collection of key artifacts from different parts of the Pacific held at the Australian National University in Canberra. This will also be an opportunity to meet other team members in the research group focused on Lapita. This visit was originally planned for February this year but had to be rescheduled because of the Vanuatu earthquake.

Between travel, I am continuing to interview other groups based in New Zealand (genetics of migration), in the US (Pacific archaeology) and in Germany/UK, where most of the research on linguistics is centred, tracing the evolution of languages as a way of charting people's movement across the Pacific.

Benefits to New Zealand

For many years, Lapita were considered an “archaeological complex” – a collection of related artefacts that describes a culture – rather than a distinct people. However, this has changed recently as ancient DNA sheds more light on the lives of these early navigators – and has even been used to reconstruct facial approximations. This makes Lapita more real and their significance as the ancestors of modern Polynesians, including Māori, more relevant.

So far, the story of the Lapita expansion across the Pacific has mostly been told by academics writing about their specific field of research. This book aims to pull different strands together, combine science and culture and include Indigenous voices.

Collaboration between Indigenous knowledge holders and local and international researchers is an important aspect of this project and I am particularly interested in observing and discussing processes of informed consent, given that artefacts, including human remains, are often removed from their original localities, out of the care of the people they belong to.

My visit to Pang Pang village was important for this part of the work. Villagers often volunteer during archaeological excavations, learning about their own ancestry but also contributing to a shift to Indigenous leadership. In Vanuatu, the training of local archaeologists and technicians is part of every excavation and many projects are now initiated and led by a young generation of Indigenous scholars.

Perhaps the most important aspect for me is to explore the process of informed consent and how local Indigenous communities can shape scientific questions so that they draw the main benefits from the work.

I have already written about Lapita and Pacific archaeology and plan to produce more longform articles, both for publications and broadcasters in New Zealand and overseas, as I travel and interview more people in the lead-up to the book-writing period. I currently contribute to several international publications, including the Guardian, Nautilus, Eos and Science, as well as New Zealand Geographic and the Listener, and I hope to place Lapita-related articles with these and more over the course of this project.

To disseminate what I learn, I will also use my social media channels, including Bluesky where I currently have the strongest following (10.2K), Instagram and LinkedIn.

At this point, I plan to continue working as a science/environment editor for the Conversation, which collaborates with academics to cover new research and current affairs and is an excellent platform to publish relevant studies and profile some of the scientists I meet.

I haven't approached a publisher yet, but hope to co-publish with an international press, as I have done with my 2012 book about Antarctic science (co-published between Auckland University Press

and Yale University Press) to reach readers worldwide. However, for this book, I hope to engage a more general non-fiction publishing house rather than a university press.

Once I have gathered enough material, I plan to take a year off to write the book, hopefully partly supported through writer's residencies and grants. During this time, I am also considering launching a Patreon crowdfunding site to begin building a community of people interested in the topic. I will continue to produce stories for other media and use social media to promote the book in the lead-up to its publication.

List of relevant publications

My own writing about Pacific archaeology and Lapita

RNZ 2019

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/ourchangingworld/546010/tracing-the-great-pacific-migration>

RNZ 2015

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/ourchangingworld/546545/tracking-the-lapita-expansion-across-the-pacific>

and

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/nights/audio/201761811/the-bold-lapita>

RNZ 2011

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/ourchangingworld/546090/lapita-early-polynesians>

RNZ 2012

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ourchangingworld/audio/2541465/genetic-map-of-first-settlers>

RNZ 2016

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ourchangingworld/audio/201807075/wairau-bar-how-it-all-began>

Articles I edited for the Conversation

Rising seas threaten to swallow one of NZ's oldest settlement sites – new research

<https://theconversation.com/rising-seas-threaten-to-swallow-one-of-nzs-oldest-settlement-sites-new-research-260799>

Fitting the ‘missing puzzle pieces’ – research sheds light on the deep history of social change in West Papua

<https://theconversation.com/fitting-the-missing-puzzle-pieces-research-sheds-light-on-the-deep-history-of-social-change-in-west-papua-250616>

New evidence from West Papua offers fresh clues about how and when humans first moved into the Pacific

<https://theconversation.com/new-evidence-from-west-papua-offers-fresh-clues-about-how-and-when-humans-first-moved-into-the-pacific-231686>

Linguistics locates the beginnings of the Austronesian expansion – with Indigenous seafaring people in eastern Taiwan

<https://theconversation.com/linguistics-locates-the-beginnings-of-the-austronesian-expansion-with-indigenous-seafaring-people-in-eastern-taiwan-186547>

New research shows ancestral Māori adapted quickly in the face of rapid climate change

<https://theconversation.com/new-research-shows-ancestral-maori-adapted-quickly-in-the-face-of-rapid-climate-change-19415>

There is a wealth of academic literature about Lapita and their expansion across the Pacific.