Lapita calédonien. Archéologie d'un premier peuplement insulaire océanien de Christophe Sand

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REFERENCES

SAND Christophe, 2010. *Lapita calédonien. Archéologie d'un premier peuplement insulaire océanien*, Paris, Société des Océanistes, Travaux & documents océanistes 2, 296 pages, richly illustrated, statistics, photographs, sketches, notes, bibliography, index, directory at the end of the book.

- 1 Ever since the first Europeans reached the Pacific in the 16th century they were curious about the origin of the islanders. And towards the end of the 18th century the popularity of the discoveries of James Cook and others, published and distributed all over Europe, brought this question to the attention of a broader public. It was not until 1909, however, that the first evidence of an earlier population was recognized in the Bismarck Archipelago. Since then tremendous insights have been made towards answering the question as to by whom and when the vast area of the Pacific was settled. Indeed within the last two decades science and knowledge about this topic seem to have made a giant jump towards unveiling the history of the Pacific islands and their people, thanks to the development of new techniques in dating archaeological finds, to linguistic and genetic analyses and – not forgetting – thanks to all the colleagues who never stopped applying for grants to carry out this work. Sometimes a political change is needed to do what has to be done. This is the case in New Caledonia. The Department of Archaeology was installed in 1991 and finally in 2010 the Institute of Archaeology of New Caledonia and the Pacific with Christophe Sand as the first director was founded. New Caledonia, together with Vanuatu, is the place with the most impressive finds in recent years, due to

intensive research. His book now gives a comprehensive overview of the most updated research into the settlement of New Caledonia, referring to the most recent revealing discovery of the cemetery in Téouma on Éfate/Vanuatu in 2004 as well. Already in 2008 Sand together with Jacques Bolé, André Ouetcho and David Baret had given a wonderfully published richly illustrated report on the first two decades of research carried out by the Département Archéologie du service des Musées et du Patrimoine de Nouvelle-Calédonie in *Parcours archéologique* (Nouméa 2008). Lapita calédonien now gives the background information.

- 2 The publication of this book was perfectly timed to coincide with the opening of the first exhibition in Europe devoted solely to this subject, the curators being the author Christophe Sand, and Stuart Bedford, from Canberra University. The exhibition 'Oceanic Ancestors' was held at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris for three months from November 9th 2010 until January 9th 2011. On display were a beautiful array of the finest potteries and sherds so far discovered, among them a tiny and magnificent piece with pointed decoration from the Bismarck Archipelago from the excavator's private collection as well as the large pots from Site WKO013A, the eponymous place near Koné found in 1995. They were on loan from the museum in Nouméa and ceramics from the cemetery of Teouma in Vanuatu, only discovered in 2003/2004. So a reader of the book had the unique chance to see for himself or herself the beauty and ingenuity of these items which are still so elegant and beautiful after 3000 years. The curators also took the opportunity to show Lapita patterns on tapa and on a carving from the Austral Islands. Coinciding with the exhibition, the day after it opened there was a one day symposium with the title: 'L'épopée Lapita: peuplement ancestral du Pacifique Sud-Ouest'. Several of the most prominent people in Lapita research gave papers and discussed them with the audience. Altogether this provided a lot of publicity for one of the still unsolved questions in human history.
- 3 Several fascinating books on Austronesian settlement in the Pacific have been published during the past few years, among them *The Austronesians* by Bellwood, Fox and Tyron (ed.), Canberra 1995, and *An Archaeological History of the Pacific Islands before European Conquest* by Kirch, University of California Press 2000. The latest of these is the award winning *VAKA MOANA. Voyages of the Ancestors*, edited by K. R. Howe, Auckland 2007. Not to forget to mention *Serge Dunis Pacific Mythology*, thy name is women published in Papeete in 2009. Sand's book fits into this list perfectly, as it gives so many detailed answers on the subject of pottery from the Lapita people; in fact it supplements all the hitherto available literature. The material revealed to the reader is simply overwhelming. And even when the emphasis lies on New Caledonian finds, there is no neglecting the other islands. On the contrary, here our curiosity is satisfied as the latest research results from all over the Pacific are comprehensively discussed and compared with various hypotheses put forward by different scholars. Thanks to detailed drawings and instructive photographs, statistics, timetables and maps, it is possible to follow Sand's convincing argumentation. He gives the reader the feeling of being involved in how the knowledge and insights grew over the decades. Ever since 1909 when the German missionary Otto Meyer of the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD Mission in Styl) published, in *Anthropos*, his article on finely decorated potsherds found on the beach of the island of Watom, off the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, ethnographers and priests working in the Pacific had wondered about their origin. Sand gives an overview on the history of finds and the ideas and hypotheses put forward by the finders, starting with Pater Meyer,

then quoting Fritz Sarazin, who, prior to the First World War, was the first to report about these ornamented potsherds from Foué, one of the best researched sites. He next introduces the different research programs since then, and explains the definitions and the evolution of the concept of Lapita. His approach is an holistic one and it is impossible to sum up the complexity of this book in a review.

- 4 The in-depth discussions are fascinating – e.g. how the pointed patterns were achieved, and what utensils might have been used by the producers. Here there are certainly obvious analogies with tattoo instruments. After reading Sand's book browsing through museum collections and looking at archaeological artefacts will never be the same! Crossing Oceanic galleries it seems as if Lapita patterns are all over, and not only that, in European history we as well find similar decorations, as on a finely woven belt from a Danish king of the 13 hundreds, carried out in labyrinth decor. Old collections – and especially those in German museums, where we house several thousand artefacts from the Admiralty Islands, New Guinea's northeast coast and the Bismarck Archipelago down to the Solomons, often include unidentifiable objects with unknown applications. These objects were frequently neglected, never written about and put at the back of shelves. Maybe in twenty years from now we will know more about some miraculous items like the published stone fragments with two hollows, which Sand shows and discusses in chapter seven on stone and shell implements and jewelry: "Outillage lithique, outillage coquillier et parures" (photograph 86).
- 5 Anyone who has ever had the chance to look at the already mentioned amazing lapita pots and sherds, partly excavated by the author Christophe Sand and his colleagues in 1995 on site WKO013A, the original Lapita site on Foué peninsula, will be fascinated by this detailed reformulation of data. Wonderful drawings, depicting the different forms of the ceramics, bring out the beauty and elegance of the shape and patterns of the design. There is no doubt that they would have the same effect and would be a feast for the eye on a contemporary festive dining table. So in the appreciation of beauty there has been no change over a period of at least 3 thousand years and on the other side of the globe.
- 6 To summarize: This book is a wonderful supplement to the classic works on the settlement history of the western Pacific. It should be used by students of ethnology and historians alike. It is beautifully produced and the lavish illustrations combined with clear language give deep insights into the subject. The interested researcher as well as the layman look forward with great anticipation to learning about the latest discoveries not only on Pacific Islands, but also in the other areas settled by Lapita people. May such finds be published in the same outstanding manner.