

## *Lapita in Near Oceania: The Mussau Project*

by Patrick V. Kirch

The Mussau Islands (also known as the St. Matthias Group) are situated on the northern arc of the Bismarck Archipelago, part of the New Ireland Province of Papua New Guinea. Archaeological excavations in the Mussau Islands, under the direction of Prof. Patrick Kirch, were initiated in 1985 as a part of the international Lapita Homeland Project. Subsequent fieldwork in 1986 and in 1988 was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, National Geographic Society, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

During the course of the three field seasons, excavations were conducted at 13 sites, totaling 159.5 square meters. Sites dating to the Lapita Period were the main focus of research, although several sites post-dating Lapita were also investigated.

Of particular note is the large Talepakemalai (ECA) site, the largest and earliest Lapita site yet on record. This site contains a waterlogged component, in which the anaerobically preserved bases of a series of stilt houses were preserved, along with more than 10,000 preserved seeds and other plant remains. In addition, the ECA yielded a large collection of decorated Lapita pottery and other portable artifacts.

Since the completion of fieldwork in 1988, the OAL team and affiliated collaborators have been carrying out a variety of detailed laboratory studies of the large collection of ceramics, non-ceramic portable artifacts, and faunal and floral remains recovered. Preliminary results of the Mussau Project have been published in a number of journal articles and books (see below). Many of the key findings from this project are summarized in Prof. Kirch's 1997 book, *The Lapita Peoples: Ancestors of the Oceanic World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers).

In 2001, Volume I of a projected three-volume series of monographs on the Mussau Project was published by the Archaeological Research Facility, Berkeley (P. V. Kirch, Ed., *Lapita and its Transformations in Near Oceania: Archaeological Investigations in the Mussau Islands, Papua New Guinea, 1985-88. Volume I, Introduction, Stratigraphy, Chronology. Archaeological Research Facility Contribution No. 59. Berkeley: University of California*). This volume presents an introduction to the project, environmental and cultural background to the Mussau Island, the definitive site reports and details of all radiocarbon dates from the project. Volumes II and III will report on ceramics, other portable artifacts, and the faunal and floral remains.

### *Publications:*

1987 P. V. Kirch, M. Allen, V. Butler, and T. L. Hunt, Is there an early Far Western Lapita province? Sample size effects and new evidence from Eloaua Island. *Archaeology in Oceania* 22:123-127.

1988 P. V. Kirch and T. L. Hunt, Editors, *Archaeology of the Lapita Cultural Complex: A Critical Review*. Burke Museum Research Report No. 5. Seattle. [v + 181 pp., 22 figs.]

1988 P. V. Kirch and T. L. Hunt, Radiocarbon dates from the Mussau Islands and the Lapita colonization of the southwest Pacific. *Radiocarbon* 30:161-169.

1988 P. V. Kirch, The Talepakemalai Lapita site and Oceanic prehistory. *National Geographic Research* 4:328-342.

1988 P. V. Kirch, Long-distance exchange and island colonization: the Lapita case. *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 21:103-117.

1989 P. V. Kirch, D. Swindler, and C. Turner III, Human skeletal and dental remains from Lapita sites in the Mussau Islands. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 79:63-76.

1989 C. Gosden et al., Lapita sites of the Bismarck Archipelago. *Antiquity* 63:561-586.

1989 P. V. Kirch, Second millennium B.C. arboriculture in Melanesia: archaeological evidence from the Mussau Islands. *Economic Botany* 43:225-240.

1990 P. V. Kirch, Specialization and exchange in the Lapita complex of Oceania (1600-500 B.C.). *Asian Perspectives*

29: 117-133.

1991 P. V. Kirch, Mussau Islands prehistory: results of the 1985-86 excavations. In J. Allen and C. Gosden, eds., Report of the Lapita Homeland Project, pp. 144-163. Occasional Papers in Prehistory, No. 20. Canberra: Department of Prehistory, Australian National University.

1997 P. V. Kirch, The Lapita Peoples: Ancestors of the Oceanic World. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers [xxv + 353 pp., 20 plates, 24 figs., 9 maps, 7 tables]. Issued in cloth and paper editions.

1998 D. W. Steadman and P. V. Kirch, Biogeography and prehistoric exploitation of birds in the Mussau Islands, Bismarck Archipelago, Papua New Guinea. *Emu* 98: 13-22.

1998 D. Lepofsky, P. V. Kirch, and K. Lertzman, Metric analyses of prehistoric morphological change in cultivated fruits and nuts: An example from Island Melanesia. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 25: 1001-1014.

2001 P. V. Kirch, Lapita. In P. N. Peregrine and M. Ember, eds., *Encyclopedia of Prehistory, Volume 3: East Asia and Oceania*, pp. 150-55. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

2001 P. V. Kirch, Editor, Lapita and its Transformations in Near Oceania: Archaeological Investigations in the Mussau Islands, Papua New Guinea, 1985-88. Volume I, Introduction, Stratigraphy, Chronology. Archaeological Research Facility Contribution No. 59. Berkeley: University of California. [xx + 248 pp., 139 figs., 16 tables]