Lapita, Forerunners and Successors in Near Oceania and Beyond

Papua New Guinea will host the 9th International Lapita Conference from 15th-18th October 2019 in Port Moresby. It is in Papua New Guinea that the pottery defined in later years as Lapita was first discovered on Watom Island. The emergence of Lapita in the Bismarck Archipelago and its later dispersal into the South Pacific provide an important reference point in Pacific historical reconstruction, covering the last 3500 years. Archaeologists and their colleagues in related disciplines have their own way of explaining the material culture, language diversity and/or relatedness, human or genetic population variation, introduced against indigenous flora and fauna and environmental changes often with the background of arrival and subsequent dispersal and settlement of a group of people whose original homeland was perhaps in Southeast Asia. Why did these people leave their original home land to travel into the unknown? Or was it really an unknown?

Debates continue on the origins of Lapita and on attempts at tying it down to a physical homeland, though PNG has the putative acknowledgement of being its original location. When Lapita was discovered on the south coast of the Papua New Guinea mainland and traces of pottery appeared in the Torres Strait then, obviously, questions of forerunners and successors need to be revisited regionally.

The innocuous theme, ‘Lapita, Forerunners and Successors in Near Oceania and Beyond’ inherently captures the essence of discussion for this conference by revisiting theories and assumptions from the current corpus of available data. As is generally understood, it is the purpose of this conference to discuss archaeological researches and discoveries and presentation of information that, together with information of related disciplines contextualised by Lapita, will look into the eastward diaspora originating from Southeast Asia into the Pacific Ocean more than a thousand years before the birth of Christ.

Who are the forerunners and what do we mean by that? Is the appearance of Lapita on the archaeological horizon illustrative of accidental linear journeys out of southeast Asia? What of the many people who were already living in Near Oceania and exchanging obsidian among themselves? How do they enter the Lapita story? Pertinent questions remain. What further knowledge can we derive from patterning in the archaeological record or the relevant disciplines that attempt to construct human histories in the region?

What of the successors to Lapita? The demise of Lapita in Remote Oceania is inferred to indicate social transformation occurring within Austronesian societies and beginning of regionalisation of this area in cultural terms. It is expressed in the rise of many regional styles of decoration or, in some cases, the cessation of pottery making altogether.
Forerunners and successors of Lapita delimit and define the boundaries for presentations but also open up the search for unbundling multiple levels of meanings or the social complexities of this distinctive cultural heritage. Instead of limiting ourselves to the conventional wisdom of archaeology, sticking to objects as have a divine and intrinsic holiness for speaking the truth, the conference organisers are challenged to create subjective and value-laden questions. The obvious question is, why didn’t the forerunners of Lapita culture invade, conquer and enculturate prior human existence in the Australasian region? Was the Lapita a mainstream society with a single language and with social complexities superior than the local inhabitants? Why are there no Lapita sites on the northern shores of mainland New Guinea? There were numerous potential onshore and offshore locations along the northern coast from Vanimo, Wewak, Madang and through Huon Peninsula down to Collingwood Bay.

Other Lapita ports of call along the New Guinea coastlines are yet to be found. Already, there are archaeological signatures in Papuan waters, providing additional challenges to accommodate a far more complex historical narrative than the “Out of Taiwan” story. This invites a rethinking of current ideas, methods and practices, and in turn brings other ideas namely non-Lapita into perspective. The forerunners of the Lapita are those communities that existed prior to the making of Lapita pottery. What was their influence on the Lapita culture? What was the outcome or successor of Lapita culture?

As challenging and provocative as it is, we address three themes.

1. **Who are the forerunners of the Lapita cultures?** Were they conquerors and invaders that transformed the prior inhabitants, but limiting their spatial relationships to the coast and using the ocean as a superhighway, escaping substantial inactions?

2. **Who are the successors of the Lapita cultures?** The New Guinea mainland and the adjoining islands are anthropologically celebrated with their distinctive languages, with the numbers above 800. Which of them are successors to Lapita cultures? Or are we looking into Remote Oceania to derive explanatory models of the fore-runners and successors of the Lapita cultural complex?

3. **How can we now tie in Papuan (south coast Papua New Guinea) Lapita within the context of existing information and debate connecting Near Oceania and Remote Oceania?** Current debates on the Lapita story are often viewed from a conventional perspective. How did Papuan Lapita people maintain contact with their homelands for more than 3000 years? What does Papuan Lapita say about the colonisation of Remote Oceania and the Pacific or westward into south coast Papua New Guinea and Torres Strait? Is there a need to revisit our explanatory models in the face of discoveries made over recent years on the south coast, or do we need to focus more research on the mainland of New Guinea to critically assess questions of forerunners and successors?

We invite session managers and paper abstracts for participation under the three themes.

Please email your paper abstracts to this contact:

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