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Historical Archaeology in Island Melanesia: First Research on the Convict Settlements of New Caledonia

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ABSTRACT

For a long time, archaeology in Melanesia has been almost totally focused on pre-European studies. We present here for the first time the results of an archaeological research programme on convict settlements on the Grande Terre (Big Island) of New Caledonia. Penal settlement was a central drive of European immigration during the second half of the nineteenth century in this French colony of Island Melanesia. Archaeological excavation of buildings at Nouville, the central landing port off the Noumea harbour, and in the convict camp of Teremba on the west coast of the Grande Terre have started to fill some of the gaps around this major episode of New Caledonia's colonial history. The partial study of house structures and administrative buildings but also of a large brick oven, a toilet area, a forge and rubbish pits, has allowed us to diversify our data, with the discovery of a variety of related domestic objects and long gone building artefacts like tiles. The analysis of this material has shown specific trading patterns between France and New Caledonia, and the avoidance of trade with Australia and New Zealand. These results are put in a present-day social context, to highlight the new ways in which the younger generations of the archipelago perceive their past.

Keywords: HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY, COLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY, CONVICT SETTLEMENTS, NEW CALEDONIA, NOUMEA, NOUVILLE, TEREMBA, SOCIAL CONTEXT.

INTRODUCTION

New Caledonia is the southern-most archipelago of Island Melanesia. France's decision in 1853 to take over the main island, the 'Grande Terre', directed its colonial history in a particular direction, in contrast to the rest of the region. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Western colonisation of the island was fuelled by the creation of a penal colony on the Australian model before the introduction of mainly Asian and Oceanian labour forces and, more recently, a new flow of European settlers (De Deckker 1994). This ethnic patchwork of colonial arrivals, together with the indigenous Kanak population, has created a society characterised today by great cultural and racial diversity. Over time, each cultural group has developed its own building traditions, leading to a diversity of heritage remains.

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In contrast to Australia and New Zealand, non-indigenous heritage was not considered of any importance before the 1980s. The outbreak of Kanak independence claims contributed to a perception of colonial remains as testimonies of a 'historical mistake', while at the same time forcing the descendants of colonial settlers to question their long-term relation to the archipelago's history and to the built testimonies of their own past. This led to the first local initiatives by cultural associations to promote heritage protection and conserve buildings. The process was taken over in the 1990s by the New Caledonia Provinces, which are responsible for cultural heritage. Studies have begun on some major sites and the first conservation plans have been put in place (Harbulot 1994). The local administrative staff appointed to work on this task considered that archaeology had no say in cultural management. There were photographs of buildings and houses, well-preserved maps and plans of some of the most spectacular constructions, and it was thought that excavations could not add any useful information to the already existing archival data. It took years before the local Department of Archaeology finally got authorisation to conduct the first ever excavations on a New Caledonian historical site in 1996. As we had anticipated, what we found under the surface was not what could be seen in the photographs (Sand *et al.* 1998). This 'discovery' stimulated an unexpected interest in historical archaeology, resulting over the last few years in a number of excavations on colonial sites in the Southern Province (Fig. 1).

Most of the data collected on historical sites has not yet found its way to a proper publication and only preliminary site reports have been written. This paper presents some of our results for the first time, as a contribution to the slow advent of historical archaeology in the archipelagos of the western Pacific. The paper is divided into three main

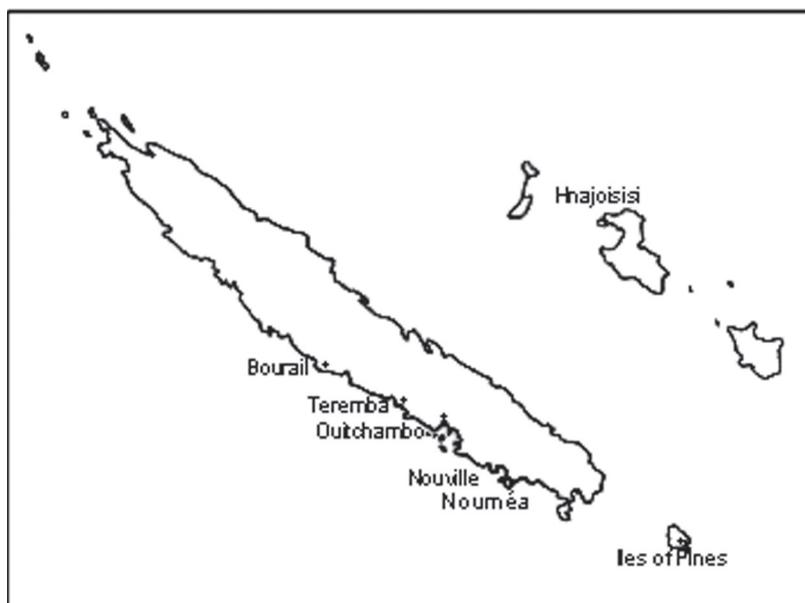


Figure 1: Map of New Caledonia, and location of the major historical sites excavated to date.

parts: after a short introduction on the historical context of the last 150 years of colonisation in New Caledonia, we present some examples of the field results and consider what has been gained from some of the studies on the archaeological material uncovered. The concluding discussion analyses some of the issues arising from the development of colonial archaeology in the present political context of New Caledonia.

A SHORT HISTORY OF NEW CALEDONIA

New Caledonia was first settled about 3,000 years ago by Austronesian seafaring groups producing Lapita pottery (Kirch 2000). About 1,000 years ago, predominantly local cultural changes prompted the progressive development of a specific traditional Kanak cultural complex, leading to a major human-related intensified land use (Sand *et al.* 2003). The first encounter with western visitors happened in September 1774, when Captain James Cook landed on the north-east coast of the Grande Terre. The periodic visits of western ships over the succeeding decades led to regular introductions of new diseases and the outbreak of epidemics. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the first attempts at Christian conversion began, the Kanak societies had already gone through a period of significant population collapse, prompting social crisis and political instability (Sand 1995).

As part of a new will to extend its colonial empire, France took over the Grande Terre in 1853, seizing the last large archipelago of the Western Pacific ahead of Britain. Unfortunately, because the French people were reluctant colonists, the first attempts to attract free settlers failed. As France was at that time looking for a replacement for its Guyana convict site, where a massive number of the convicts were dying within about a year of arrival, the New Caledonia archipelago was chosen as the new penal colony (Barbançon 2003). The idea was to copy the Australian model in this part of the world. The first convicts arrived in the harbour of Noumea in 1864 and started to construct their own prison. Between then and the last arrival of a penal ship in 1897, over 33,000 convicts, originating from mainland France but also from Italy, Spain and North Africa, were sent to New Caledonia.

In order to force the convicts to settle permanently and thus enable a long-term Western colonisation process to succeed, a regime of ‘double-sentence’ was put in place: each convict sentenced to more than eight years had to spend a second period of time, equivalent to his original sentence, as a free settler on the island without being allowed to leave. But to settle people, the colonial power needed land. This was taken away from the Kanak tribes by force, in a meticulous despoliation process that continued for a period of 40 years (Dauphiné 1989). The Kanaks reacted with a number of military revolts, leading to more despoliation and the confining of the indigenous groups in reservations. The first half of the twentieth century was characterised by a harsh colonial system between communities but also inside the European group, within which the descendants of convicts had an inferior position because of their origins. In order to wipe out any trace of this shameful past, families destroyed archives and buildings, and invented stories of their origins unrelated to the convict settlers, although about 80 percent of the present-day Caldoches² have convict ancestry. Two societies developed during this time, one indigenous and one colonial. The period after World War II saw the slow advent of a shared political project, with the title

²New Caledonian of European descent.

'two colours, one people', but this did not succeed, partly because of the arrival of a new set of European colonisers in the 1960s (Kurtovitch 1997). Local history books of that time do not even mention the penal colony of New Caledonia (Le Borgne 1959), although some of the last convicts were still alive then.

The awakening of a new Kanak generation in the 1970s led to a progressive claim for indigenous rights, the return of the confiscated lands, and finally independence. Although no-one really noticed it at that time, all the points of confrontation between the indigenous population and the Caldoche group were the direct results of the French convict period history and its consequences. The violent crisis of the mid-1980s, which at times seemed comparable to a local civil war, ended in peace agreements between the two major factions in 1988 and again in 1998, with considerable local autonomy and a new deal for the future (Garde 2001).

The Kanak awakening had two unexpected consequences. The first was that, for the first time, the descendants of the Western settlers were forced to confront their real past. Over the last decade, this has led to a significant amount of research (see Angleviel 2003, 2004) and PhD theses on the colonial history of the Archipelago (e.g., Barbançon 2003; Palombo 2002; Terrier 2001). The second consequence has been a start in taking into account the visible remains of the colonial past. In this regard, Caldoches have followed the words of the Kanaks: 'If the actual remains of our forefathers' work are destroyed, what will we be able to show to defend our historical legitimacy?'

COLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

One of the magical aspects of Pacific archaeology is that you can, in a real sense, 'touch' the very moment of 'first contact'. Time and time again, excavations in rock-shelters have allowed us to experience the tiny stratigraphic jump as we move from a deposit in which a few pieces of rusted nails and flaked glass are mixed with indigenous remains, to a deposit containing only stone flakes and potsherds (Sand 1998). The change takes place in a few centimetres at most, but the break is real, observable, vivid. This archaeological topic will not be developed further in this paper, but it must be emphasised that there is in this field of 'early contact' in Oceania a whole avenue to explore that has never really been tackled, although it has been a very important moment in the region's long-term history (e.g., Bedford 1996; Murray 1996; Torrence and Clarke 2000).

The involvement of our local Department of Archaeology in colonial archaeology in New Caledonia has been mainly directed towards penal sites, although we have also worked on some church buildings (Appendix 1). We have tried to make a useful contribution in the two main fields just presented: the writing of a more detailed and scientifically correct history and the better knowledge of heritage remains on the ground. We will focus in this part of the paper on two major sites related to the convict history of the Grande Terre, Nouville and Teremba.

NOUVILLE

The site of Nouville was on an island in Noumea bay, separated from the mainland by a stretch of sea about 1.5 km wide. It was the main convict centre of New Caledonia, the first constructed, the last used, and where most of the penal administration was located (Cormier

1997). The first landing place of the convicts was on Nouville (Fig. 2), which today is easily accessible from Noumea, after the infilling of the isthmus and the construction of a road³.

Our involvement as archaeologists on Nouville has encompassed several field seasons and has taken place in various locations on the peninsula. Our first objective was to identify buried structural remains of former buildings known through old photographs; our second was to observe former construction techniques and settlement organisation at the house level, as well as more general township planning. A few examples are detailed here.

One of our major areas of excavation has been around the main bakery of Nouville. Old photos showed a whole array of now destroyed buildings around this very strategic building of the penal town. The bakery was one of the first buildings to be constructed in 1868. Nothing could be clearly identified on the ground surface, but the clearing of the topsoil led to the discovery of the remains of wall foundations of various houses. Unexpectedly,



Figure 2: View of the main Nouville convict settlement in the 1880s.

excavations in an area of about 30 m² allowed us to identify features such as the paved floors of the houses, with rooms about 9 m² in size, and the entrance of each house, marked by a large stone (Fig. 3).

³ The opening of direct access prompted an anarchic development of tourism related to convict remains, which led to the proposal of a heritage project by the Southern Province. We will not go into details of the multiple episodes of destruction and the recent inappropriate “restoration” projects that have taken place on this site. Suffice it to say that we are still far from a good coordinated heritage programme, although we try our best to promote good practice to the Southern Province staff.



Figure 3: Example of excavated house-floors on a former dwelling site of the 1880s to 1900s at Nouville.

Another excavation was conducted on the main plaza of Nouville, in front of the arrival jetty for the convicts. Old photos showed the construction of different buildings over time, but partial excavation of the main building (32 m long and 9.3 m wide) allowed us to expand the information significantly by identifying remains like old stairs, drainage channels for rain water, palisades, internal divisions of the succeeding buildings, as well as the introduction of new products like concrete in the early twentieth century. Excavation of the wall foundations enabled us to define construction techniques and to follow the sewerage system leading to the sea.

Work was also carried out on better preserved buildings. The bakery, for example, provided the opportunity to rediscover hidden structures. We were asked to establish whether there were any remains of the ovens that had disappeared during refurbishing of the original building in the 1950s. There were no good photos of the inside of the bakery, and the only indication we had was what appeared to us to be the domes of the ovens at the back of the building. We started to knock down the concrete wall to find a void beneath and went through a harassing process of destruction to bring back to light a majestic, perfectly preserved brick wall, enclosing the 4.5-m-large dome of an oven. Subsequent location and cleaning of the other ovens has allowed what was at the time the biggest bakery of the colony to be opened to the public.

The third example concerns construction materials. Archival documents indicate that parts of some buildings in Noumea were transported as kitsets from Europe, especially the iron parts. Other parts, like the cut stones and most of the bricks, were produced *in situ*. In the photographs, it can be seen that all the main buildings were roofed with ceramic tiles.

Today, none of these tiles remain on any of these constructions; they have been replaced with corrugated iron roofs.

A major set of new information on this topic was added to our data through a salvage excavation in a rubbish-pit located between two main barracks of one of the Nouville



Figure 4: Examples of imported tiles that covered the colonial buildings in the nineteenth century: (top) Marseille; (bottom) Perigord.

convict prisons. The pit, about 3 m wide in total, was almost completely filled with ceramic tiles. Detailed study of the different forms, imprints and names observable on the tiles enabled us to identify at least four different sources of production in France (Fig. 4). The first was Marseille on the Mediterranean Sea, which was a major European producer of tiles. Ships passing through the French colony of Algeria before sailing to New Caledonia started from Marseille. Another source was Bordeaux, the Atlantic port where one of the main French commercial groups of the South-west Pacific region, 'Les Etablissements Ballande', was based. But more unexpectedly, a fair number of tiles were produced elsewhere, for example in Perigord, in the centre of France, far from any port (Sand 2000). The presence of these Perigord tiles reflects the existence of complex market procedures put in place by the New Caledonia Penal Administration in France in the nineteenth century, with competition between producers to win construction markets.

TEREMBA FORT

Teremba, the second site studied in some detail, is located away from the main Noumea centre, in one of the convict outposts on the West Coast of the Grande Terre, about 130 km from the capital. This type of settlement was mainly intended to house convict working forces engaged in opening the first colonial roads, and to be a military control post and stopping place for the round-the-island ships. The site covered about 10 ha and was occupied between the early 1870s and the late 1880s, when the military camp was moved inland because of a lack of permanent freshwater. Around a central bunker, fortified after the Kanak revolt of 1878, were sets of buildings such as the commander's house, the post office, the kitchen, the workshops, etc.⁴

The involvement of the Department of Archaeology in Teremba started as part of a larger effort by the Southern Province to carry out a long-term conservation plan and promote heritage preservation as well as tourist access. We developed three objectives for our studies on the site: to identify buried remains, to define the use of the different buildings, and to improve our knowledge of everyday life in this type of penal site through the study of the archaeological remains and objects. Large-scale excavations inside the fort over four years, covering a total area of 300 m² of floors, allowed us to study most of the undisturbed areas before 'restoration'. This enabled the identification of the different buildings built against the inner walls, bringing to light the remains of ovens, organised pavements, paved rainwater channels, and foundations of walls and doors (Fig. 5). Excavations in what was probably the stable revealed a partly preserved stone pavement. Nearby was the toilet area, allowing us for the first time to study the organisation of this type of structure and the associated drains. We also recorded in the prison a massive quadrangular pavement of very fine workmanship, which indicates the presence of professional stone workers amongst the convicts in Teremba.

Old photos showed that as well as stone buildings of various sizes and uses there had been, scattered outside the fort, wooden houses whose traces could not be clearly identified on the ground in the bush. Unfortunately, mechanical clearing of this bush in 1999 by bulldozer destroyed a number of the underground remains, leading us to conduct rescue excavations on one of the most significant structures identified. The excavation enabled us

⁴ The ruins of the central blockhouse were covered by an entirely new, two-storey building in the late 1980s by French army soldiers, without any professional advice.



Figure 5: Excavations underway in front of the old kitchen block, inside the Teremba fort.

to define the form of the building and the inner divisions. Excavations in the basement of the commander's house, a large building of about 250 m² which included a cellar, exposed a good stratigraphic sequence, which preserved the history of the destruction of the building, the types of material composing the living areas, and a fair diversity of objects of every-day life. In some other instances, we were able to find the buried inner floors and assign a precise function to old buildings, such as the bakery, for example.

The study at Teremba has provided the opportunity to compare in detail the historical data taken from photographic documents with the archaeological remains. For this comparison

we targeted the old forge, of which we had a close-up photograph (Fig. 6). Excavation of about 50 m² in front of this building (Fig. 7) revealed a well-organised pavement as well as a long-buried water channel parallel to the house, structures that were not present when the photograph was taken (Fig. 8). People working in historical archaeology are certainly familiar with this kind of experience, but for the local historians and people working in cultural preservation in New Caledonia, this result was a shock.

Objects recovered from the different excavations at Teremba, and especially from one of the rubbish pits located near the site, included a wide variety of implements. Study of the bricks has indicated that, although normal bricks were produced locally, the high-heat-resistant bricks used in the ovens were imported from France. The identification of domestic objects allowed us to demonstrate that the members of the penal administration had a fairly cosy life-style, in contrast to the convicts, who had only tin cups and wooden plates. The recording of the forms, design and stamps observable on good quality ceramic plates (Fig. 9) and fine glasses has allowed us to trace the origin of these objects. What has been identified as the earliest set of plates was made in eastern France, before its annexation by Germany in 1870, and in England, and probably reached New Caledonia through Australia. The later products came from the big production centre of Montereau south of Paris, and from factories in Bordeaux. The precise date of production can be established in most cases



Figure 6: Nineteenth century photograph of the Teremba forge. Excavations shown in Figure 7 are in the area facing the building on the left in this photo.



Figure 7: Archaeological excavations in front of Teremba's forge foundations, showing remains not present in Figure 6.

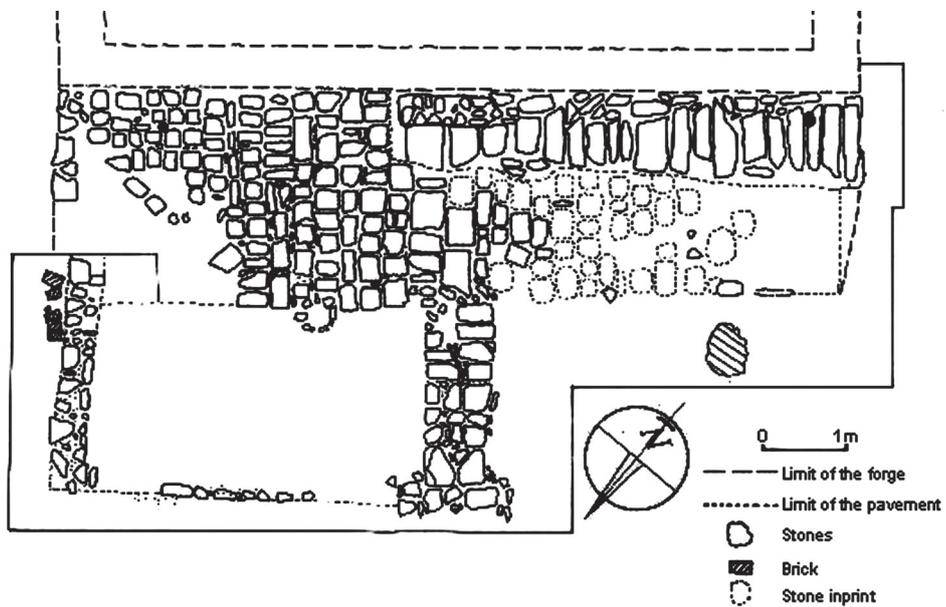


Figure 8: Site plan of the organised pavement facing the forge of Teremba (Fig. 6).

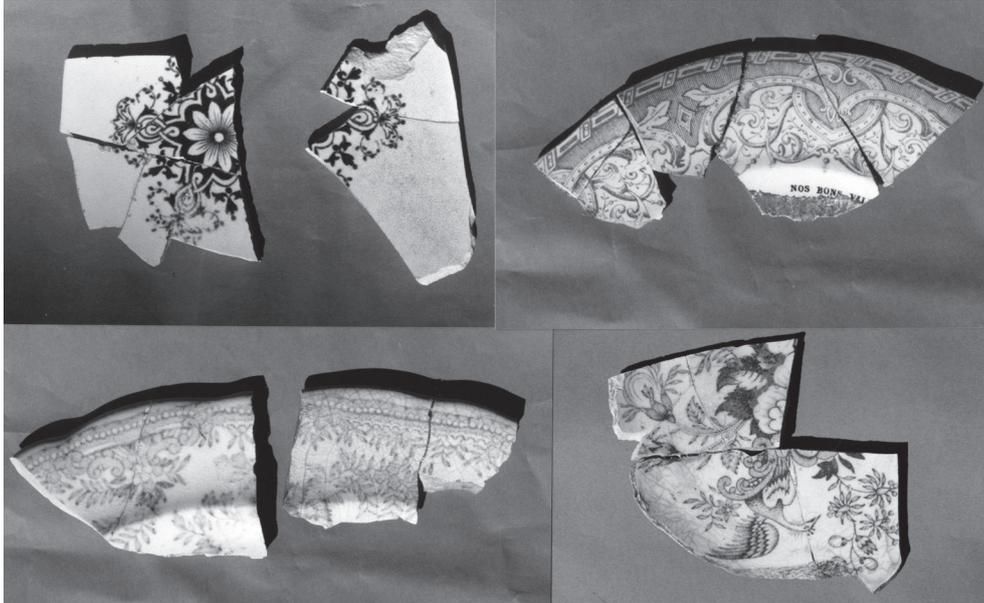


Figure 9: Highly decorated nineteenth century plates found in a rubbish pit of Teremba fort.

from the markers' marks and motifs. Amongst other things, these results show interestingly that after a first period of establishment of the colony, when the import of non-French material through the ports of Eastern Australia was necessary, the French colonial administration favoured a near-total reliance on metropolitan products, and attempted to close the colony to the Australian and New Zealand markets for decades.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The summary presented above of some of the results from our two major sites illustrates some of our recent work on historical archaeology in New Caledonia. Our programmes have allowed us to gain a broader understanding of the buildings studied, the history of the sites, and some aspects of the colonial history generally. Today, archaeology is finally recognised as a central tool for a better and more detailed knowledge of the colonial period.

In this section, we consider this research in its social context. At first sight, this work may appear to be only a scientific and academic exercise. This would be an error, as it would downplay an important aspect of the process. As we have pointed out in the first part of this paper, the development of colonial archaeology is taking place at a very special moment in the history of New Caledonia. It is a moment when political leaders, having finally fully recognised the importance of the indigenous Kanak people and written in the constitution that 'the Kanaks are in the centre of the political process', have outlined as the future objective of our archipelago that we have to "build a common destiny with shared values" (Luchaire 2000). In this context, excavating our colonial sites takes on a strong political meaning, contributing to the collective re-appropriation of bits and pieces of the past. As

in New Zealand, for example, this process is part of a search by some of the non-indigenous groups for roots and, in the end, historical legitimacy. But in New Caledonia, this process has had two unexpected outcomes.

The first is related to the Kanaks, who have welcomed with great interest the idea of excavating colonial sites. In a very positive way, most of them have found it important that the *Caldoches* finally study the remains of their ancestors and promote the part of history they contributed to as a group in the archipelago. At the same time, the study of convict remains has led to the revealing of a whole set of Kanak oral traditions about the convict period, making the younger generations of the indigenous community discover that their ancestors were not absent from the penal history and the convict sites. Kanaks took part in the functioning of the convict administration as guardians and troops, but the convicts also influenced Kanak clans through the installation of convicts in the tribes, with the agreement of the traditional chiefs, and often their subsequent marriage with Kanak women.

The consequence of all this is that a new picture of colonial history is slowly emerging, bridging the supposed divide between an indigenous history and the colonial history that had been disconnected from it. As historians have known for a long time, bridges existed between groups even during the hardest times of colonial power. Far more than merely historical data, this new image, pointing to shared events on a day-to-day basis during the colonial history, is becoming apparent to the younger generation of school children. They share today a common curriculum of local history where, amongst a number of other points, the pre-contact data are presented and Kanak history with its sufferings during the last 150



Figure 10: Excavations in process involving teenagers during ‘heritage classes’, on the site of Teremba.

years is clearly stated (Collectif 1992). The children who take part in our excavations on prehistoric and colonial sites as part of organised 'heritage classes' for one week on site (Fig. 10), do not question their personal connection to the sites excavated: they consider that they are part of a global New Caledonian heritage. Young Kanaks, Caldoches, Asians, Polynesians, see what we perceive as separate cultural remains as just 'one'; the story of their nation under construction. They ignore the old divisions still perceived by our older generations. What is probably most important is that, as in other places of the Pacific such as Fiji, this process of global perception of the past is partly spontaneous; not totally politically controlled but driven by a strong social force. The dynamic is internal to the local groups, and especially the young people who get rid of our old barriers.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly presented the first results of historical archaeology conducted in New Caledonia over the last decade. These are preliminary programmes, still far from the achievements of New Zealand and Australia in this field. The topic could certainly be a full-time job for a number of archaeologists and students but, as everywhere else in Pacific archaeology, candidates are too rare. As well as presenting some of the data, we have tried to show that these programmes are emerging at a particular moment of the archipelago's history, in a period of major change. Research in human sciences is never neutral. In this regard, the advent of colonial archaeology in New Caledonia parallels the emergence today of a central interest in colonial and World War II remains in other archipelagos of the Pacific, such as the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Western Micronesia. The protection of World War II relics has become a central issue in these places today, not only for their monetary value, but because they are now considered as part of the nation's heritage and not some sort of alien rubbish. The image of indigenous Pacific people only interested in their traditional past appears more and more unsustainable. On the contrary, Oceanians today acquire an open vision of the past, which integrates colonial history.

Archaeology has certainly something to contribute in the evolving field of colonial history, being the only way of obtaining data from buried remains and recovering everyday lifestyle objects. The scientific interest of this research does not need to be defended any more. But the sight of the same team excavating Lapita sites 3000 years old, traditional Kanak dwellings from the last millennium and colonial sites in New Caledonia today has a profound effect on the vision the local society has of archaeology. The image that is given back to the archipelago is one of a dynamic long-term history. The process is clearly rooted in the present-day political project of a shared future between the communities. We participate consciously in a new episode of the process of "romanticising of tradition" (not to use the term "invention" [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983], which is sometimes felt insulting by indigenous people [Trask 1991]), that characterises what archaeologists give back to the public. It would be unfair not to recognise that archaeological writings have an influence on the society's perception of its past, quite apart from their contribution to in-depth scientific research. We know that the development of historical archaeology in New Caledonia is part of this overall process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX 1

Historical sites in New Caledonia excavated between 1996 and 2005

Site	Type	Date	Excavation
Nouville	WWII camp	1942–1946	25 m ²
Nouville	Bakery	1864–1920	3 m ²
Nouville	Houses	1870–1910	30 m ²
Nouville	Entrepot	1865–1930	40 m ²
Nouville	Tiles pit	1920s?	3 m ²
Nouville	Water system	1870s?	8 m ²
Ilot Signal	Settlement	1870s	50 m ²
Ouitchambo	Stable	1900s	15 m ²
Teremba	Kitchen	1870s	130 m ²
Teremba	Stable	1870s	50 m ²
Teremba	Toilets	1870s	45 m ²
Teremba	Water channels	1870s	35 m ²
Teremba	Defence walls	1879	30 m ²
Teremba	House	1880s	50 m ²
Teremba	Commander House	1870s	25 m ²
Teremba	School?	1870s	25 m ²
Teremba	Forge	1870s	100 m ²
Teremba	Entrepot/bakery	1870s	180 m ²
Teremba	Wharf	1870s–1880s	250 m ²
Hnajoisisi	Church	1860s	15 m ²

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