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LAPITA POTTERY FROM MOTURIKI ISLAND CENTRAL FIJI

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Introduction

The earliest-known inhabitants of Fiji belonged to the Lapita Cultural Complex (Kirch 1997), and arrived first in these islands perhaps 2900 years ago (Anderson and Clark 1999). A complete picture of Lapita settlement in Fiji is not yet available, although investigations in the last decade have added considerable detail; in July 1999, Lapita pottery was recovered for the first time from the Vanuabalavu group in northeast Fiji (Nunn and Matararaba *forthcoming*). Known Lapita sites in Fiji are located in Figure 1.

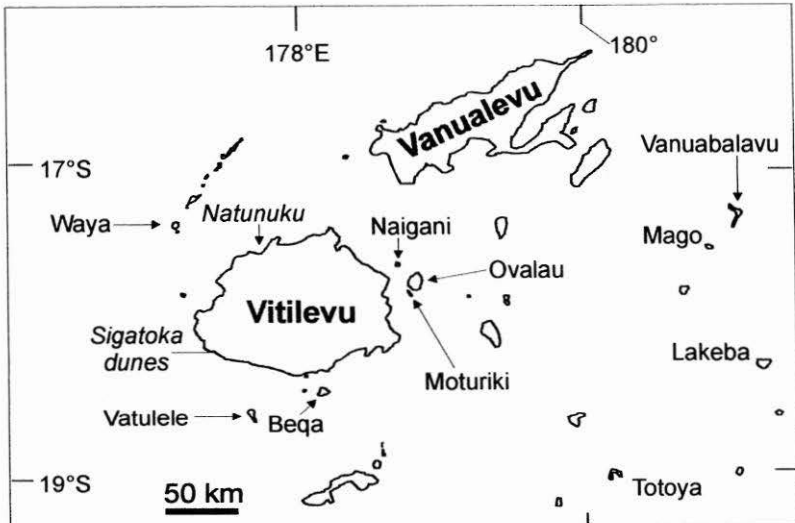


Figure 1. Lapita sites in the Fiji Islands. Note that no Lapita pottery has been found on Ovalau.

Investigations of central Fiji have been confined to small Naigani island (Kay 1984). This paper reports the results of a reconnaissance survey on nearby Moturiki island.

Lapita Pottery from Moturiki

Moturiki is a 10.9 square km island located 15 km off the east coast of Vitilevu Island and 15 km south of Naigani Island (1.91 square km), where a Lapita site was excavated in 1981 by Simon Best. Moturiki lies within 2.5 km of the southwest coast of Ovalau Island (1 02.7 square km) where no investigations into Lapita-age settlement have been conducted (see Figure 1).

Like nearby islands, Moturiki is entirely of volcanic origin, interpreted as part of the flank of the Lovoni Volcano, of which the whole island Ovalau is also formed. A conspicuous fault line running along part of Moturiki's northeast-facing coast accounts for the asymmetrical form of the island; southwest-facing coasts are broad and fringed with mangrove; northeast-facing coasts comprise a narrow, scalloped strip of coastal lowland backed by high cliffs marking the fault. The major settlements and rivers are shown in Figure 2.

Several surface collections of pottery were made along the coast of Moturiki. One site, Saulevu, about 1 km north of Nasesara village, is bisected by a small stream in the bed of which were found five decorated sherds (including rims). Two of these have been identified as belonging to the Lapita Cultural Complex (Figure 3).

The most likely source of these sherds is the small ($\sim 700 \text{ m}^2$) coastal flat drained by the river, and presently covered by dense vegetation. This flat forms a raised area, 0.6-1.2 m above the modern shore flat, comprising largely marine sediments with some colluvium, particularly along its rear, and covered with a soil 20-30 cm thick. The river is incised to a depth of 70 cm at its mouth.

The Saulevu coast is a likely site for a Lapita settlement on Moturiki. Farther south on the island's east coast, the fringing reef broadens rapidly and boat access, even today, is restricted to the highest tidal stages. North of Saulevu, the Moturiki coast is narrower still. Saulevu seems the first place at which people travelling from the north would have found a coastal flat, freshwater, and a sheltered place to moor their vessels in close proximity to a reef flat traversable on foot at low tide. Indeed, most other parts of the Moturiki coast are too shallow for boats to be moored at low tide, one exception is Naniubasaga on the island's southwest-facing coast.

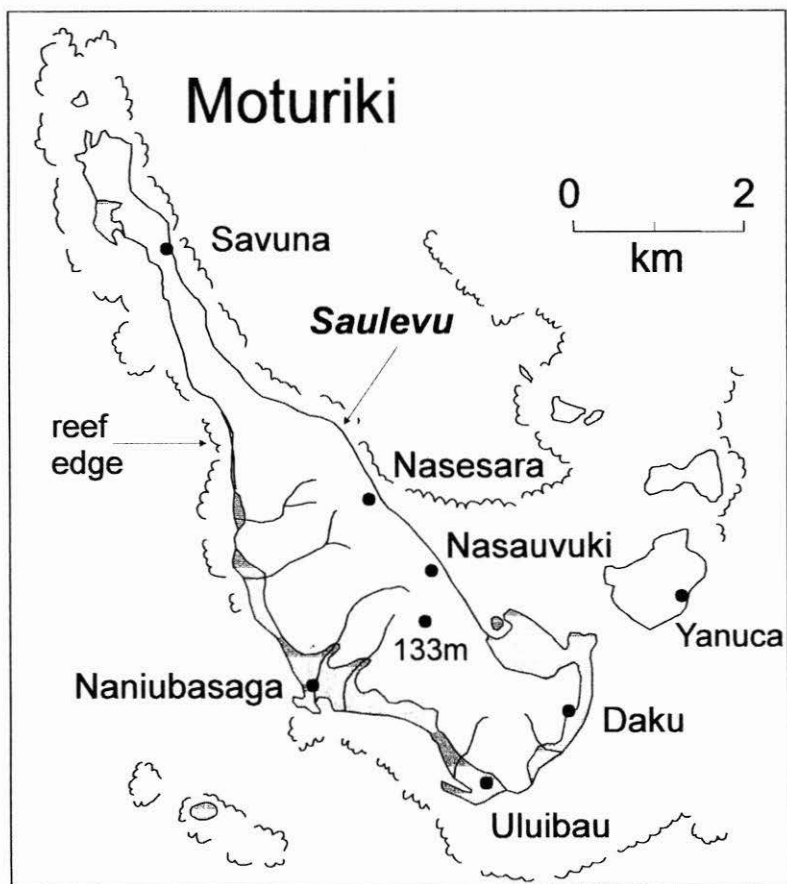


Figure 2. The island Moturiki showing the principal settlements and the location of Saulevu, where Lapita sherds were found. Note the broad reef flat extending east and north of Nasauvuki which connects to the reef system fringing nearby Ovalau Island.

If there was a Lapita settlement in the Saulevu area, it appears likely that its inhabitants came from the north (where Naigani lies) and that affiliations should be expected between the cultural remains there (Kay 1984) and those at Saulevu (see Figure 1). It is also probable that the same people who settled Naigani and Moturiki at Saulevu, also settled the leeward (west) coast of larger, well-watered, fertile Ovalau Island.

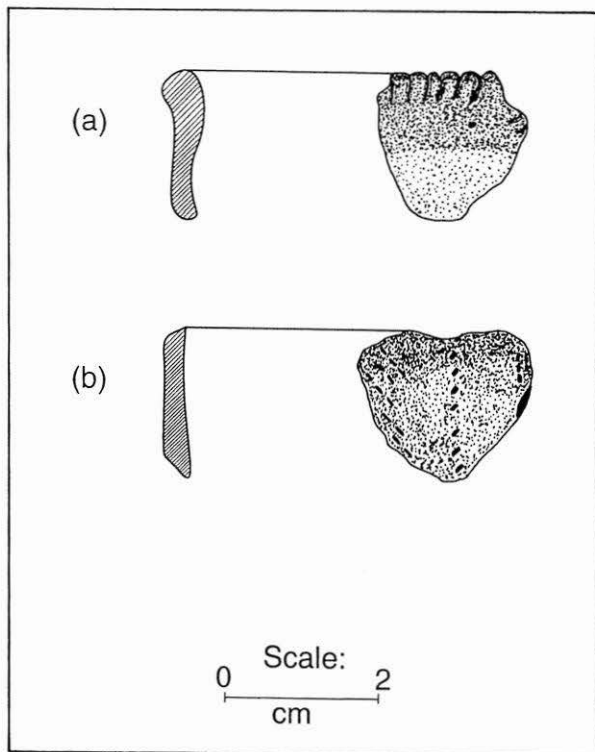


Figure 3. Lapita sherds from Saulevu. Drawings by Sereima Raimua.

Conclusions

Recent discoveries of Lapita pottery on Moturiki and elsewhere show that there were many more Lapita age settlements in Fiji than once thought. Whether this means that the number of initial colonisers was more numerous or that the rate at which they and their progeny spread throughout Fiji was more rapid than generally supposed until now is uncertain, and must await fuller investigation and dating of these newly-discovered sites.

Acknowledgements

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