

14

Superiority complex: Rudolf Pöch's interpretations of archaeological finds at Wanigela

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Cultural safety advice: Readers are advised that this chapter includes images of human remains.

When Austrian medical doctor and anthropologist Rudolf Pöch (Figure 14.1) arrived in New Guinea in July 1904 to commence an expedition lasting almost two years, archaeology was only one of several topics on his agenda. His work plan was divided into three main areas: physical anthropology and ethnology; tropical hygiene and other medical investigations; and observations, collections and photography in the fields of biology and natural history. He imagined that his activities in physical anthropology and ethnology might include finding 'traces of a Palaeolithic era in New Guinea', but he also planned to measure and photograph living individuals, acquire human skulls, skeletons, hair and soft tissue samples, investigate language diversity and sensory physiology, record songs and dances, and collect material culture (Pöch 1905a:2–11).

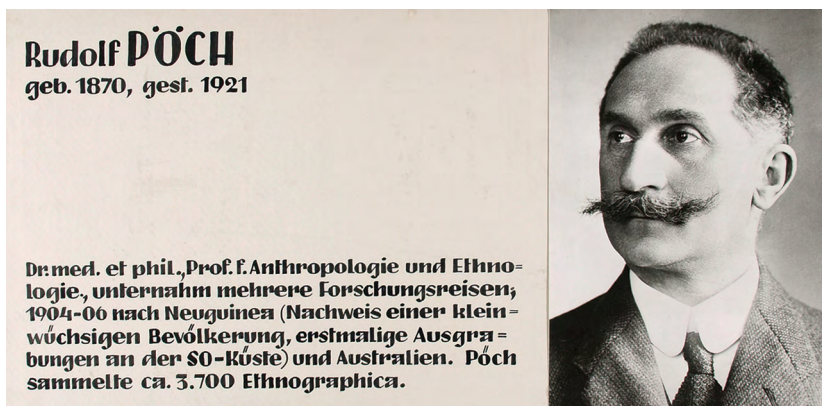


Figure 14.1. Rudolf Pösch, b. 1870, d. 1921 (undated).

The accompanying text states that Pösch undertook 'the first excavations on the south-east coast' of New Guinea.

Source: Reproduction courtesy KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Vienna, Photographic Collection (photographic print on card, VF 42245).

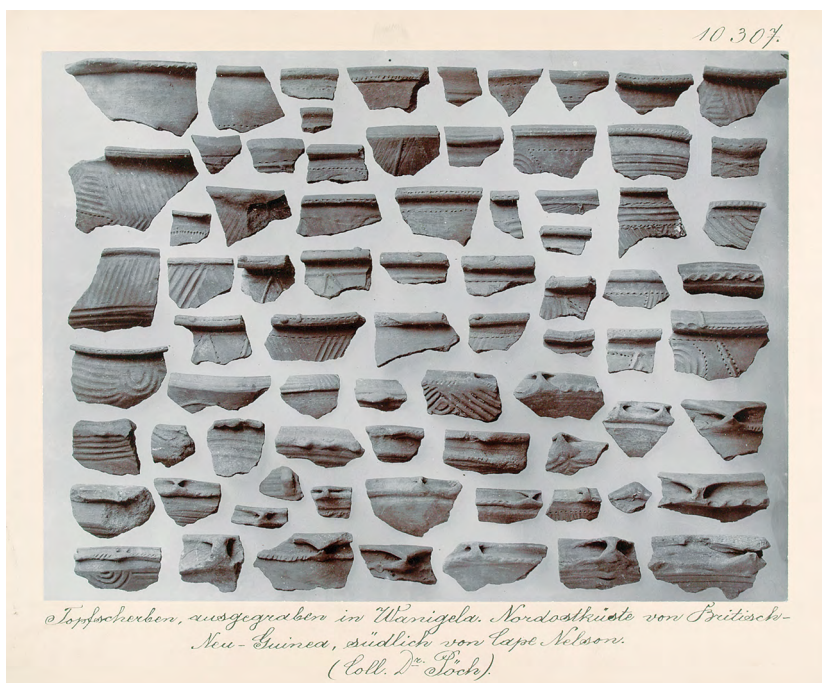


Figure 14.2. Some of the potsherds excavated at Wanigela, Collingwood Bay, British New Guinea (now Oro Province, PNG), 1905.

Source: Reproduction courtesy KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Vienna, Photographic Collection (photographic print on card, VF 10307).

In his own opinion and that of his contemporaries, Pöch's expedition was a resounding success. His archaeological finds alone – sourced from excavations near the Anglican Mission Station at Wanigela, Collingwood Bay, in what was then British New Guinea (now Oro Province, Papua New Guinea [PNG]) – amounted to over 1,200 potsherds (Figure 14.2), as well as a strikingly carved piece of *Conus* shell (Figure 14.3), various other shell and stone artefacts, obsidian splinters, fragments of (possibly pig) bone, a piece of charred wood and four human skeletons. In addition, he had travelled extensively in British, Dutch and German New Guinea, with a shorter visit to Australia, and had assembled almost 100 human skulls, some 2,000 items of material culture, over 1,000 photographs, several dozen film and sound recordings, and over 2,000 mammal, bird, reptile and insect specimens (Pöch 1905a, 1905b, 1906a, 1906b, 1915:4). Most of Pöch's archaeological finds, with the exception of the human skeletons, are now held in the Weltmuseum (former Ethnological Museum) in Vienna (Reinhard Blumauer pers. comm. 2019; Jan Hasselberg pers. comm. 2017).



Figure 14.3. Engraved *Conus* shell excavated at Wanigela, Collingwood Bay, British New Guinea (now Oro Province, PNG), 1905.

Source: Reproduction courtesy KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Vienna, Oceania and Australia Collection (VO 78.172).

Pöch's involvement in Pacific archaeology has received little scholarly attention to date (but see Howes 2017; Spriggs 2013). Instead, most recent assessments of his life and work have focused on one of two topics. First, his large-scale studies of the 'racial characteristics' of prisoners of war (POWs) in Austrian and German POW camps during World War I have served to demonstrate the close wartime cooperation between the human sciences – especially physical anthropology – and the governmental–military complex. Within this context, Pöch has been identified as one of the 'figureheads of the generation that abandoned the [anthropological] discipline's liberal tradition' and steered it towards 'an illiberal paradigm

conducive to National Socialist [Nazi] cooptation' (Berner 2010a:253, 2010b:19; see also Berner 2007; Berner et al. 2011; Evans 2002, 2003, 2010; Lange 2010, 2011, 2013; Lange and Gingrich 2014; Rathkolb et al. 2013:223–225; Scheer 2010; Turda 2013; Weindling 2013). Second, Pöch's acquisitions of human remains in South Africa and Australia have attracted sustained criticism as particularly egregious examples of 'appropriative and unscrupulous' behaviour, involving 'systematic grave robbery' and 'clandestine deals for newly dead corpses in the name of science' (Legassick and Rassool 2000:12; see also Andrew and Matiassek 2017; Berner et al. 2011; Kirchner and Teschler-Nicola 2016; Legassick 2008; Rathkolb et al. 2013:223–225; Teschler-Nicola 2011, 2013; Weiss-Krejci 2013). Some of these human remains have been repatriated in recent years to their countries of origin (Andrew and Matiassek 2017; Australian Department of Communications and the Arts n.d.; Australian Embassy Vienna 2011; Rassool 2015; Teschler-Nicola 2013; Weiss-Krejci 2013).

This chapter examines Pöch's excavations at Wanigela within a broader context, taking into consideration the ways in which his working methods and conclusions were shaped by colonial power structures, racial theories, and research priorities in the human sciences at the turn of the twentieth century.

'Objects of scientific observation and study': Pöch's career

Pöch's New Guinea/Australia expedition was his first explicitly anthropological expedition, but it was not the first time he had travelled overseas to undertake scientific research. In 1897, shortly after completing a medical degree at the University of Vienna, he travelled to Bombay (now Mumbai, India) as a member of the Austrian Plague Commission (Kupferschmidt 1997:52). In 1902, after a year's study of physical anthropology and ethnology at the University of Berlin, he was sent to West Africa by the Institute for Maritime and Tropical Diseases (now the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine) in Hamburg, Germany, to study malaria (Fleischer 2000). He later asserted that his 'closer acquaintance [...] with the natives' in Bombay's Plague Hospital had helped kindle his interest in human beings as 'object[s] of scientific observation and study, not only from a medical perspective, but from an anthropological and ethnological one' (Pöch 1915:3). During his

expedition to West Africa, he took the opportunity to make ethnographic observations and assemble collections in addition to his medical research (Pöch 1915:4).

Pöch's New Guinea/Australia expedition built on these earlier expeditions and became the springboard for a flourishing career. His travels in New Guinea and Australia were self-funded, but his second major anthropological expedition, which took him to South Africa from 1907 to 1909, was commissioned and funded by the Imperial Academy of Sciences (IAS) in Vienna. Shortly after returning from South Africa, he obtained a position as an unsalaried junior professor at the University of Vienna; from 1910 to 1913 he offered tertiary courses in physical anthropology, 'racial biology' and comparative craniology, as well as working as a salaried assistant at the IAS Phonogram Archive. In 1913 he completed his doctoral dissertation, 'Studies of Natives of New South Wales and of Australian Skulls', on the basis of anthropometric measurements carried out, and Australian Indigenous ancestral remains obtained, during his New Guinea/Australia expedition. He was appointed associate professor of anthropology and ethnography at the University of Vienna the same year. In 1919 he became the university's first full professor of anthropology and ethnography; he also married one of his former students, Helene (Hella) Schürer von Waldheim. Only two years later, aged 41, he died of pancreatic necrosis (for general biographical information, see Oberhummer 1921; Pöch 1915:3–6; Regal and Nanut 2010; Szilvássy et al. 1980; Teschler-Nicola 2011:53; Weninger 1933, 1980).

Pöch's influence on physical anthropology and 'racial biology' in Austria extended well beyond his death. The Austrian Academy of Sciences published 12 volumes based on his observations and collections from expeditions and POW camps over the period 1927–62, two of which related specifically to New Guinea (Bondy-Horowitz 1930; Graf 1950; Szilvássy et al. 1980:758). A number of Pöch's students also continued to pursue research in his fields of specialisation (Berner 2007, 2010b; Fuchs 2002a, 2002c). His widow Hella Pöch cultivated a close relationship with the NSDAP (Nazi) Office of Racial Policy in Germany in the years preceding the Anschluss, acted as a 'racial assessor' in Austria thereafter, and persisted with racial research even after the collapse of the Nazi regime (Fuchs 2002b; Pöch 1957).

‘Inferior development’: Pöch’s superiority complex

Knowing all this, it is difficult not to depict Rudolf Pöch as a caricature, a cardboard cut-out combining in one person the very worst aspects of colonial brutality and white supremacist thought. His correspondence, field journals and reports from his New Guinea/Australia expedition do little to dispel this impression. Clearly he believed without question that the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia and New Guinea were biologically inferior. For example, his first report from the field identified ‘the often receding and “poorly filled” forehead’ of the approximately 150 Indigenous people he had examined and measured along New Guinea’s north-east coast as the ‘most conspicuous indication of inferior development’, while a letter to a family friend described Australia as ‘the land of the most primitive black human race’ (Natural History Museum [NHM] Archive, Rudolf Pöch to Frau Overbeck, 1 July 1905; Pöch 1905a:440). It is true that such beliefs, although not universally held, were widespread among Western scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see for example Erckenbrecht 2010; Kühnast 2018; Poignant 2004; Scheps 2013; Winkelmann and Teßmann 2013). However, unlike some of his contemporaries (see for example Howes 2011, 2012, 2013), Pöch seemingly experienced nothing in the course of his New Guinea/Australia expedition that led him to question these preconceptions. Even though many of his encounters with Indigenous New Guineans left him with positive impressions, the best compliment he could muster towards the end of his expedition was a backhanded one: ‘It is possible to be very fond of these people, despite their brown skin and inferiority’ (NHM Archive, Rudolf Pöch to Unnamed, 8 December 1905).

Pöch’s correspondence and field journals also reveal that he used a combination of payment and threatened or actual violence in order to achieve his goals. If we take his pursuit of human remains in New Guinea and Australia as an example, it appears that in some cases he was able to obtain them with permission. While inland from Finschhafen on the Huon Peninsula (now Morobe Province, PNG), he wrote that people who had committed a crime or were suspected of sorcery were ‘often killed by their next of kin’, and that the inhabitants of settlements

he had visited ‘allowed me to dig up these slain criminals’. Whether he compensated them in cash or kind for facilitating access to these human remains is unclear; however, he noted that people from the same region assisted him on his travels ‘in return for small gifts, show[ing] me the way and help[ing] me carry my things’ (NHM Archive, Rudolf Pöch to Frau Overbeck, 1 July 1905). In other cases he openly described using force. In New Ireland, infuriated that his guides had ‘given [him] the run-around’ by offering conflicting information on the location of burial caves, he threatened one of them by putting a knife to his throat. Shortly after this incident, he found a sympathiser in the local Methodist missionary, the Reverend William Cox,¹ who ‘appeared to be free from [any] sentimental overestimation of the qualities of the natives’ and willingly helped Pöch plunder a burial cave near his mission station (NHM Archive, Rudolf Pöch correspondence book entry ‘My last trek in New Ireland’, 22–26 May 1905).

‘Exceedingly threadbare’: The limitations of Pöch’s research

A similar combination of payment, (potential) violence, and the assistance and support of fellow Europeans facilitated Pöch’s excavations at Wanigela in December 1905. From October 1905 to January 1906 he was based at the British government station at Cape Nelson (Figure 14.4) (now Oro Province, PNG), where Resident Magistrate Guy Manning ‘hospitably accommodated and supported [...] my work in every way’ (Pöch 1906a:601). It was Manning who offered Pöch ‘the opportunity [...] to travel with him in his whaleboat to Collingwood Bay’, and it was Manning who arranged for ‘police officers [to be] taken to supervise the work, as well as spades and mattocks’ (Pöch 1907b:68). Although none of Pöch’s accounts of the excavations mention actual violence, the inhabitants of Wanigela would have had good reason to construe the presence of police as a threat. One of the first actions of Charles Monckton, Manning’s predecessor as resident magistrate of the North-Eastern Division, after he took office in 1900 was ‘raiding two Maisin villages south of Wanigela,

1 Cox, who later became chair of the New Britain mission district, is best known for his involvement in the Cox Affair of October 1914, in which he was attacked and beaten in New Ireland by German civilians who suspected him of being a spy (Australian War Memorial n.d.; Hiery 1995:36–38; Reeson 2013:319–320).

during which his police shot dead at least six men and wounded an unknown number as well as destroying canoes'. In subsequent years, 'the police periodically raided villages in [southern Collingwood Bay] to forcibly recruit carriers for expeditions into the Musa, the home of much feared enemies of the coastal people' (John Barker pers. comm. 2017; see also Barker 1985:80–82, 1987:73; Lutton 1978, 1986). However, Pöch also ensured that 'all discoveries [during the excavations] were rewarded'. This encouraged local people 'to dig in other places on their own initiative, including at a more distant mound, a good distance inland', and bring him 'particularly fine pieces to sell, which they had found on earlier occasions and had kept in their houses as rarities' (Pöch 1907b:69).



Figure 14.4. Government cutter *Murúa* in Tufi Harbour, Cape Nelson, British New Guinea (now Oro Province, PNG), 1905.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Anthropologische Abteilung, NHM Wien, Anthropological Department (photographic print, 34.250).



Figure 14.5. Excavations in Wanigela, Collingwood Bay, British New Guinea (now Oro Province, PNG), 1905.

Source: Reproduction courtesy Anthropologische Abteilung, NHM Wien, Anthropological Department (photographic print, 34.357).

Pöck tended to describe his activities in the first person, emphasising his personal achievements as an explorer and scientist: ‘I carried out prehistoric excavations’, he claimed, ‘I myself dug through a previously untouched hill’ (NHM Archive, Rudolf Pöck to Richard Thurnwald, 20 December 1905; Pöck 1907c). However, some of his descriptions and particularly his photographs (Figure 14.5)² reveal that the excavations at Wanigela were a group effort; they would not have succeeded without the assistance of local people and representatives of the British colonial administration. At a still more basic level, without the combined efforts of local people, the British colonial administration, and Australian missionaries, Pöck would not even have known that Wanigela was a suitable place to undertake archaeological excavations. He had read a report by Monckton describing ‘an old village site of a forgotten people, and a quantity of broken and ancient pottery [...] of curious and unique

2 We were initially concerned about potential community sensitivities regarding depictions of human remains in this photograph and are grateful to Leviticus Iriso, Koreaf Villages, and community leader for the Onjob people of Wanigela, for confirming that it is acceptable for this photograph to be used in its entirety, without obscuring the human remains (Elizabeth Bonshek pers. comm. 2020).

design and shapes', found during 'excavations carried out by the [Anglican] mission and natives [...] in Collingwood Bay' (Monckton 1905:33). Pöch's account of these excavations erased the involvement of local people and attributed the archaeological work solely to Europeans: Monckton, who had not in fact participated, and Percy Money, district missionary at Wanigela from 1901 to 1910 (Pöch 1907c).

Elizabeth Bonshek's exploration of Money's excavations at Wanigela (see Bonshek, **Chapter 13**, this volume) reveals that Money had 'enquired among the local population about the excavated material' and 'recorded how some of the enigmatic pottery fragments might have been used'. More striking still, he had spoken to eyewitnesses who recalled 'the clan that had lived on the excavated site': an old woman who said she was the clan's 'sole survivor', and an old man whose clan had lived adjacent. Pöch's writings give no indication that he was aware of these eyewitnesses' existence. Their testimonies were not acknowledged in Monckton's report, and Pöch did not actually meet Money during his visit to Wanigela; he reported regretfully that Money 'had had to leave the station [...] during the rainy season on account of blackwater fever, as he had already come down with it once' (Pöch 1907b:68). Whether or not Pöch endeavoured to obtain information about the excavation site from local people directly is not clear. However, his arrival in the presence of the resident magistrate and police, as well as his intrusive physical examinations and photographs of local people for anthropological purposes, presumably did not encourage them to confide in him. Money, who had 'built a good relationship with the local people', 'could speak the language', and might therefore have facilitated 'a degree of [local] cooperation', was not on hand to assist (John Barker pers. comm. 2017). In any case, Pöch's own 'language skills' were 'exceedingly threadbare', as he acknowledged in a rare moment of self-awareness to his friend and fellow ethnologist Richard Thurnwald. As a result, he added, his plans to undertake 'more subtle investigations of ideas of the supernatural and the like' among Indigenous New Guineans had 'amounted to nothing [...] since Pidgin English or a missionary are about as suitable for such investigations as a hedgehog for wiping one's arse' (NHM Archive, Rudolf Pöch to Richard Thurnwald, 20 December 1905).

‘Vanished potters’ settlements’: Interpreting the Wanigela excavations

Unburdened by any knowledge of local eyewitnesses to the former inhabitants of the excavated site, Pöch was free to categorise his finds as ‘prehistoric’, claiming that ‘no tradition about them exists, tradition being the sole unwritten history of New Guinea’ (Pöch 1907a:137). He declared that the potsherds and carved *Conus* shell he had discovered, like those sent by Monckton to the British Museum, revealed a ‘greater technical perfection of the potter’s art and an ornamentation foreign to this region’ (Pöch 1907b:67). His ‘examination of the human skulls and skeletons’ found at the excavation site convinced him that ‘the people in question appear[ed] not to have been substantially different from the present-day inhabitants’ (Pöch 1907c), but this did not discourage him from explaining the finds as a straightforward example of complete population replacement. To his mind, the old potsherds were ‘far superior to the current pottery in strength, size and fine workmanship’; this was sufficient to identify the makers of the pots as ‘a population whose culture was doubtless a higher one’ (Pöch 1906a:6). He proposed ‘immigration by a more cultivated people from the island groups further to the south-east in the Pacific Ocean’, arguing that ‘this supposition [was] strengthened’ by ‘the higher culture still existing today in the Trobriand Islands’ – notably ‘the well-developed chiefly rank’, indicative of ‘Polynesian influence’ – and ‘the pottery in the Amphlett Group’, ‘known today for the largest and most beautiful pots’ (Pöch 1907a:139).

Pöch supported these arguments with references to published overviews of archaeological and ethnographic work in New Guinea by British ethnologists Alfred Haddon, Thomas Joyce and Charles Seligman[n]³ (Haddon 1894; Seligmann and Joyce 1907). He speculated that the ‘vanished potters’ settlements’ revealed by his excavations could be interpreted as ‘a colony of tribes from the Massim district’ (Pöch 1907b:71). Haddon had identified the Massim district as an ‘ethnographical region’ encompassing the south-eastern tip of mainland New Guinea and various offshore island groups, including the Trobriand and D’Entrecasteaux

3 According to Seligman[n]’s obituarist, his surname was originally spelt ‘Seligmann’, but he ‘dropped the last letter of his surname after 1914’, presumably in response to anti-German sentiment associated with World War I (Myers 1941:627). In 1907 he was still publishing under his original surname, ‘Seligmann’.

Islands, Woodlark Island (Murua) and the Louisiade Archipelago (Haddon 1894:184, 1900:416; see also Shaw 2016:107). He characterised this region primarily by similarities in styles of ornamentation, notably ‘scroll patterns’, animal and human forms, and spirals (Haddon 1900:436). Pösch believed that the ornaments engraved on the *Conus* shell found during his excavations – ‘spirals that turn back on themselves, with elliptical centrepieces inserted between them’ – might reveal ‘connections to the Massim district’ (Pösch 1907b:71). However, he cautioned that ‘a closer comparison’ revealed ‘a number of differences’ to the ‘present-day art [...] of, for example, the Trobriand Islands’ (Pösch 1907b:71; see also Pösch 1907c). Potentially change over time could account for these differences, but Pösch was uncertain whether this explanation would be ‘sufficient to overcome the difficulty of the differences between styles’, noting that ‘we have no experience of the length of time necessary to alter the style of such primitive tribes’ (Pösch 1907b:71).

More recent archaeological and ethnoarchaeological research has confirmed Pösch’s suppositions of prehistoric connections between Wanigela and the Massim district (Ambrose et al. 2012; Egloff 1971a, 1971b, 1972, 1978, 1979; Key 1968; Lauer 1970, 1971, 1973; Shaw 2016). Engraved *Conus* shell valuables are still assigned to the Massim art style, and have now been found as far afield as Budibudi Atoll, some 500 km from Collingwood Bay (Ambrose et al. 2012). Using petrographic analysis of potsherds and radiocarbon dating of wood charcoal and shell samples, Wal Ambrose, Brian Egloff and others have proposed a three-phase model of the deep past in the northern Massim. The first two phases, c. 1500–1000 BP and c. 1000–500 BP, were characterised by ‘strong links between the groups living along the northern part of the eastern tip of New Guinea and the islands of the northern Massim’, whereas in the third phase (c. 500–100 BP) ‘strong trade contact’ between the New Guinea mainland and the islands of the northern Massim was ‘replaced by inter-island trade’ (Ambrose et al. 2012:128).

Pösch was working from a comparatively limited evidence base and did not have access to modern methods of absolute dating and compositional analysis. However, these factors cannot completely explain his preference for a relatively static and value-laden explanation of past human behaviour, namely immigration to the Wanigela area of ‘a more cultivated people’ from nearby island groups, rather than the dynamic social and trading networks postulated by more recent researchers. His own observations had convinced him that the ‘widespread assumption that individual

Papuan tribes live completely isolated from one another' was incorrect; instead, 'extensive trade flows' connected New Guinea's Indigenous inhabitants across great distances (Pöch 1905a:440). He documented multiple examples of such trade flows, and witnessed at least one at first hand: the annual *hiri* trade cycle, in which tens of thousands of clay pots were transported by sailing ship (*lakatoi*) from Port Moresby some 400 km westwards to the Gulf of Papua, where they were exchanged for hundreds of tons of sago flour (Pöch 1906a:608–609, 1907d:614; see also Skelly and David 2017). Yet, seemingly, it did not occur to him that similar processes might have underlain the results of his archaeological excavations. Could his perceptions of biological and cultural hierarchies have impinged? He certainly perceived the cultural life of the inhabitants of Wanigela and surrounding areas as both primitive and static, as the following anecdote demonstrates:

In celebration of the king's birthday, the resident magistrate, G.O. Manning, invited the natives of the North-Eastern Division to dances at the Government station at Cape Nelson. Some 700 men came [...] I admired the great influence which the Government there, in scarce five years, had acquired over a territory as large as my native land of Lower Austria, and inhabited by Papuans who, from immemorial time, had lived in tribal fights and man-hunting. (Pöch 1907d:614)

A final anecdote reveals the errors in scientific reasoning that could result from cultural prejudice. As already mentioned, Pöch considered the ancient potsherds uncovered at Wanigela 'far superior to the current pottery in strength, size and fine workmanship'; he noted dismissively that the modern pots were 'much weaker' and their walls 'much thinner' (Pöch 1907b:69–70). In complete contrast to this assessment, Egloff's investigations of 'the fabrication, form and function of contemporary pottery' in Wanigela in the years 1967–69 revealed that Wanigela vessels were a valued trade good in the surrounding region precisely because of 'their thin walls which permit the rapid cooking of food, while using a minimum of firewood' (Egloff 1973:77). He noted that 'they have reached the optimum point where the wall is thin enough to readily transmit heat without sacrificing durability' and concluded: 'Technical excellence of the vessel wall is one of the hallmarks of Wanigela pottery' (Egloff 1973:78).

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