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Global journeys of Lapita potsherds from the Bismarck Archipelago

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Anyone who has taken even a passing interest in the prehistory of the Pacific will have encountered the terms ‘Lapita culture’ or ‘Lapita peoples’. The archaeologist Thomas S. Dye has summarised the significance of Lapita for Pacific archaeology as follows:

The established facts of the Lapita archaeological record reveal one of the greatest migrations in world prehistory. The culture’s distinctive archaeological characteristic is a pottery design system in which geometric motifs are stamped with a toothed tool into the wet clay of certain [...] vessel forms [...] Sherds of these so-called dentate stamped vessels [...] point strongly to a community of culture spread over a vast portion of the Pacific [...] At the western end of its range, from New Guinea to the Solomon Islands, the pottery was produced and deposited on islands that had been inhabited for tens of thousands of years. East of this, however, Lapita is the founding culture and the Lapita peoples are now recognized as the discoverers of the Santa Cruz Islands, Vanuatu, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, a prodigious achievement accomplished in an archaeological heartbeat. (Dye 2000:362)

The name ‘Lapita’ was first used in 1952 by two Americans, anthropologist E.W. Gifford and archaeologist Richard Shutler Jr, who apparently misheard the local name (Xapeta‘a) for the site where they were conducting excavations on New Caledonia’s Foué Peninsula (Gifford and Shutler 1956; see also Sand and Kirch 2002). Gifford and Shutler realised that the potsherds they had found in New Caledonia belonged to the same tradition as others found previously in the Bismarck Archipelago, Tonga and Fiji (Gifford 1951; McKern 1929).

However, the earliest detailed description (including drawings) of what was later recognised as Lapita pottery came from a German Catholic missionary, Father Otto Meyer MSC,¹ stationed on Watom Island in the Bismarck Archipelago (Meyer 1909a). When Meyer penned this description in 1909, no comparable pottery had been recognised from anywhere else in the Pacific, and many techniques now used by archaeologists, notably radiocarbon dating and x-ray fluorescence, were decades away from being developed. Meyer nevertheless considered his initial chance finds sufficiently important to follow them up with systematic excavations, publish a further two articles, and donate extensive collections of potsherds to at least eight museums in five countries.

This chapter draws on archival research in Australian and European institutions to illuminate the global journeys of these potsherds, the networks of missionary contact and scientific exchange along which they travelled, and their continuing significance for Pacific archaeology today. As Meyer is central to this story, a brief biographical outline is also offered here.

Rudolf Otto Meyer (Figure 15.1) was born in 1877 in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, now a city in the German state of Lower Saxony. He spent the majority of his childhood in Kleve (Cleves), close to the Dutch border; his father was employed as senior teacher at Kleve’s agricultural college from 1879 until his death in 1897. Meyer’s spiritual journey towards becoming a missionary was also a physical journey through Western Europe; he was confirmed into the Catholic faith in Antwerp in 1890, commenced his novitiate in Salzburg in 1896, and took his final orders in 1900 in Hilstrup (now a suburb of Münster), where the Missionaries of the

1 The abbreviation MSC comes from the French name for Meyer’s order, *Missionnaires du Sacré-Coeur*, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, originally a French order, had recently established a German province and mission house. In 1902 he was sent to the Vicariate of Rabaul and took up residence at Reber Mission Station on Watom Island (Figure 15.2). He remained there, apart from a year's home leave, until shortly before his death (MSC Archive, Sig. 565b, Questionnaire for new entrants; Stresemann 1938). In September 1937, having suffered a stroke earlier in the year, he departed for Sydney to undertake a rest cure, but was reluctant to remain long: 'he was anxious to return to the mission and to his beloved Vuatom [Watom]' (Zwinge 1938:79). In December he obtained his doctor's permission to travel; however, he passed away on board the ship that was to have borne him home, and was buried in Nudgee Catholic Cemetery in Brisbane (Anon. 1937; Howes 2016, 2017; Smith 1937; Zwinge 1938).



Figure 15.1. Father Otto Meyer (1877–1937) and companions at Rakival, Watom Island, c. 1903.

Photographer unknown. The pile of logs further up the beach marks the mouth of the stream bed where Meyer first found Lapita potsherds (Jim Specht pers. comm. 2019). Source: Reproduced with the author's permission from Hiery (2005:146). Original held in the Archive of the Sacred Heart Missionaries in Vunapope, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea.

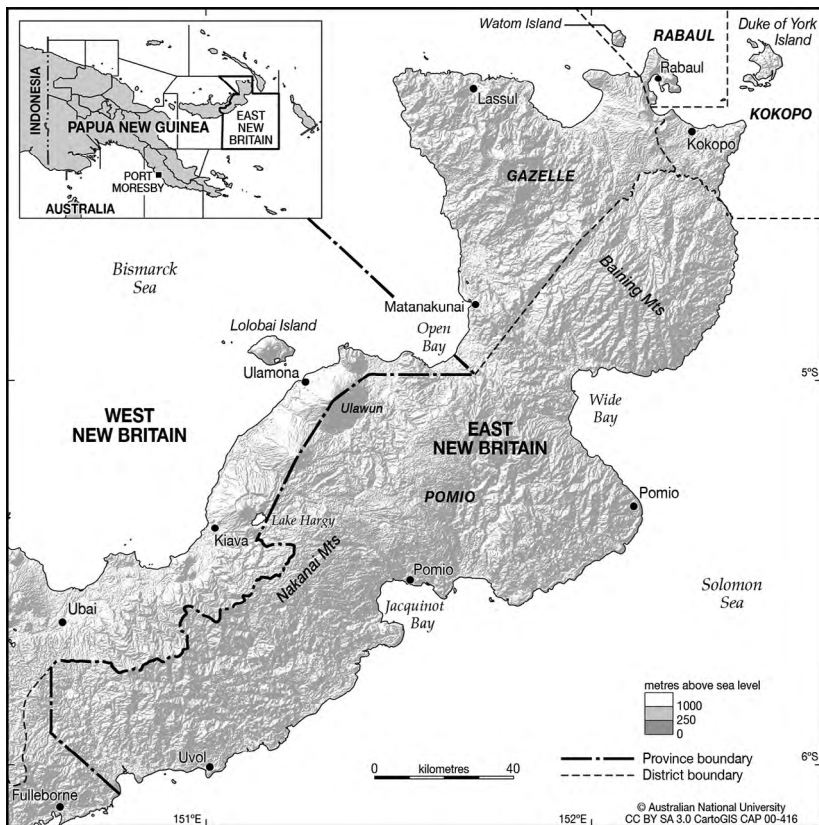


Figure 15.2. Location map of Watom Island.

Source: Map reproduced with the permission of CartoGIS Services, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

Meyer had a longstanding interest in scientific research and collecting. Shortly after arriving in Hilstrup to prepare for his final orders, he and two fellow students established the Hilstrup Mission Museum, an in-house collection of ethnographic, zoological and botanical specimens (MSC Archive, Sig. 1267a:16; Linckens 1922:142; Raesfeld 1903). They were encouraged in this venture by their Provincial Superior, Father Hubert Linckens MSC, who had donated ethnographic objects collected in New Britain to the First German Colonial Exhibition of 1896 in Berlin. These objects were later incorporated into the collections of Berlin's Ethnological Museum (Luschan 1897:73, 85). During his time on Watom, Meyer was particularly active in observing, describing and collecting specimens of birds and birds' eggs; he also documented local ceremonies and oral traditions, as well as material culture and subsistence practices (see Hüskes 1932:212 for a list of Meyer's publications).

The Hiltrup Mission Museum was the first institution to receive potsherds from Watom. In 1910 Meyer forwarded to the museum ‘the entire yield of pottery vessels’ he had found to date (Meyer 1910:1161). These included his first chance finds, ‘two fragments of vessels similar to pots or pitchers’ exposed by heavy rain, as well as further potsherds uncovered during deliberate ‘excavations [he had] arranged’ after finding ‘the site whence they [had] all originate[d]’, ‘a pit’ that had been ‘dug beside [his] house’ a few years previously (Meyer 1909a:251, 1909b:1093).

Hiltrup was not immune to the forces shaping twentieth-century European history. Over the years 1940–42, in what was later termed the *Klostersturm* or ‘storming of the monasteries’, the Nazi regime seized over 300 Catholic monasteries and convents, including the Sacred Heart Mission House, confiscated their contents, and drove out their inhabitants (Mertens 2006, 2009). For much of the war the collections of the Hiltrup Mission Museum were stored in two separate locations: the zoological specimens were held in the Provincial Museum of Natural History in Münster, while the ethnological items entered the depot of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Bomb damage and multiple relocations took their toll, but parts of the collections survived, and by 1950 Meyer’s potsherds were again on display in Hiltrup’s Sacred Heart Mission House (MSC Archive, Braam Mappe Teil 1, Johann Braam to Jos. Averbek, 21 November 1945; MSC Archive, Sig. 1366:4, 38). In the 1960s the Hiltrup Mission Museum was disbanded and sold to a private collector, Thomas Schultze-Westrum, who on-sold parts of the collections in the 1970s to the Museum of Cultures in Basel, Switzerland (Museum der Kulturen Basel [MKB] Archive, Thomas Schultze-Westrum to Jim Specht, 23 March 1976). Meyer’s potsherds remain there to this day.

Meyer continued excavating after 1910, although he did not publish again on the results. In 1912–13, during a year’s home leave, he donated potsherds to the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World in Cologne (RJM) (Figures 15.3 and 15.4), the Ethnological Museum in Berlin (EMB), and the Institute of Human Palaeontology in Paris (RJM Archive, Otto Meyer to Wilhelm Foy, 30 September 1912; EMB Archive, Otto Meyer to Royal Ethnological Museum Berlin, undated [1913]; Dotte-Sarout and Howes 2019). It seems these donations were made at Meyer’s own initiative; there is no evidence that they were solicited by museum personnel. Possibly the choice of Berlin was influenced by Linckens, given his pre-existing connections to Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, outlined above.



Figure 15.3. Potsherds donated by Meyer, clearly from the same pot.

Source: Left, Museum of Cultures, Basel (Vb28524.2). Right, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne (28554). Photographs courtesy Jim Specht.



Figure 15.4. Potsherds donated by Meyer, almost certainly from the same pot.

Source: Left, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris (72.73.334.17). Right, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne (28576). Photographs courtesy Jim Specht.

Cologne may have come to Meyer's attention through *Anthropos*, the journal in which he published his three articles on potsherds and other excavated artefacts (Meyer 1909a, 1909b, 1910). Although *Anthropos* had been established by a Catholic missionary, Father Wilhelm Schmidt SVD,² primarily as a vehicle for Catholic missionaries to publish their ethnographic observations, it also published and reviewed works by non-missionaries, including Wilhelm Foy, then director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (Foy 1906; Schmidt 1905:6). Schmidt himself reviewed two of Foy's publications and wrote approvingly of the

2 The abbreviation SVD comes from the Latin name of Schmidt's order, *Societas Verbi Divini*, the Society of the Divine Word.

‘Cologne Museum’ as an ‘outstanding contributor to the progress of our science [ethnology]’ (Schmidt 1909, 1910:1174). In particular, Schmidt praised the use of ‘culture circles’ as an explanatory device to classify and interpret the museum’s collections. ‘Culture circle theory’, which sought to map the distribution of cultural traits – including material culture and aspects of social organisation – in space and time, is now most closely associated with Schmidt himself, as well as his fellow Divine Word missionaries in the Vienna School of Ethnology (Aigner, **Chapter 22**, this volume; see also Brandewie 1990:107–114). However, Schmidt clearly drew much of his initial inspiration from Foy and Fritz Graebner, Foy’s assistant at the museum, who succeeded him as director in 1925. Schmidt referred to Foy and Graebner as the ‘Cologne School’, even if his understanding of culture circles later diverged from theirs (Tönnies et al. 1929:176; see also Graebner 1905; Leser 1977; Schmidt 1935).

Despite the strong influence of culture circle theory on the early development of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, its collections were not confined to culture circle interpretations. Margarete Schurig, one of the first women to complete a doctorate in ethnography in the German-speaking lands, studied collections of pottery in various European museums, including the potsherds Meyer had donated to Cologne, while completing her dissertation (Spriggs, **Chapter 19**, this volume; see also Schurig 1930:34, 174, 178). The resulting monograph, *Die Südseetöpferei (Pacific Pottery)*, 1930), explicitly criticised Graebner’s application of culture circle theory to the Pacific. Schurig noted that Graebner had failed to consider linguistic evidence when identifying supposedly distinct cultural areas, and that his reliance on a so-called ‘criterion of form’ led him to assume cultural relationships between different areas on the basis of superficial similarities in pottery vessels, whereas in several cases documentary evidence revealed that these vessels were made using very different techniques (Schurig 1930:201–203). *Die Südseetöpferei* was the first attempt at a comprehensive description of pottery-making techniques and traditions across the Pacific region and remained the foremost text on the subject for over 30 years (Beer 2007:201–203; Spriggs 2004).

In 1916 or later, following his donations to Hilstrup, Cologne, Berlin and Paris, Meyer made a further donation of potsherds, this time to the National Museum of Victoria, now Melbourne Museum (see Spriggs, **Chapter 24**, this volume for the story of the Melbourne Museum collection). At some point he also donated potsherds to local museums in Rabaul and at the Catholic headquarters in Vunapope, both on the main island of New Britain.

Meyer's last documented donation of potsherds was to a fellow religious, the Marist Father Patrick O'Reilly. As his name suggests, O'Reilly was descended from an Irish sea-captain's son who migrated to France. In 1934–35, at the behest of Paul Rivet, then director of the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography in Paris, he undertook a one-year expedition to the Solomon Islands and New Britain. O'Reilly returned with over 2,000 objects, many collected indirectly through missionary networks (see Haddow et al. 2020). These included potsherds and non-ceramic objects (such as stone and shell items, bones and charcoal fragments) from Meyer's excavations. Meyer had documented finding such objects during his excavations as early as 1910; however, the O'Reilly collection is the only one containing non-ceramic objects specifically attributed to pottery-bearing levels, although Meyer did also donate stone and shell items from Watom Island to other museums (Dotte-Sarout and Howes 2019; Jim Specht pers. comm. 2019).

O'Reilly also obtained further information about the context of Meyer's finds, including a map showing three separate excavation sites and a stratigraphic profile for each site (Figure 15.5). Either he or a certain 'Miss Schargorodski', an assistant at the museum, divided the pottery into 'Melanesian' and 'non-Melanesian' types, and hinted at the possible existence of a 'non-Melanesian' culture, predating and not related to the current inhabitants, in the Bismarck Archipelago and Solomon Islands. O'Reilly's colleagues at the museum suggested connections between the patterns on the 'non-Melanesian' potsherds and others from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and South America (Dotte-Sarout and Howes 2019).

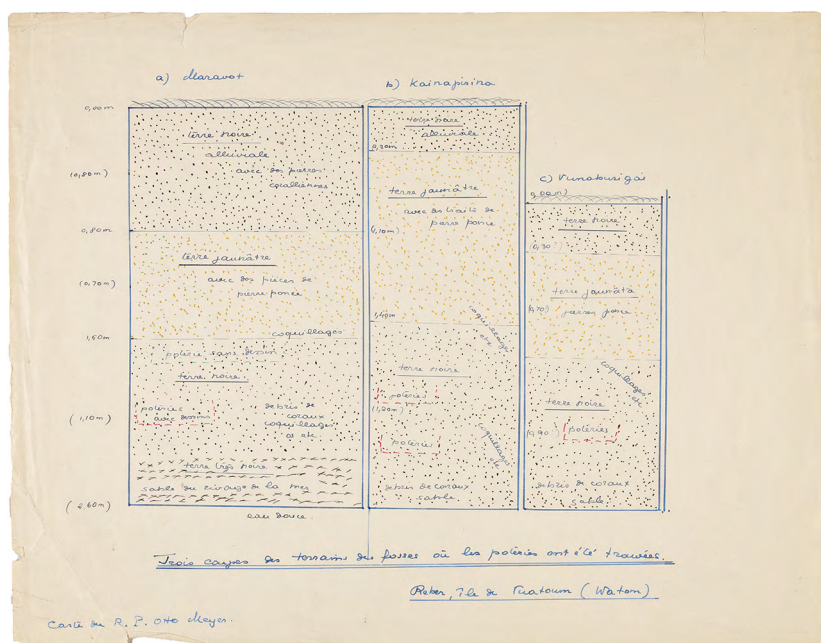


Figure 15.5. ‘Three excavation profiles from the trenches where the pottery was found, map of Father O. Meyer’.

One of two manuscript reproductions of stratigraphic profiles from Watom Island kept in the archives of the Meyer/O'Reilly collection of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

Source: © musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (71.1956.57 [Père O'Reilly] file D001126_SC_0006_0007).

In fact almost everyone who examined Meyer's potsherds prior to Gifford's 1952 excavations suggested connections to places far from Watom Island. South America was particularly popular, but Japan, Spain and even 'the Western European cultural circle' were mooted (MSC Archive, File on Johann Braam, Sig. 1267a:55; EMB Archive, File on acquisitions of ethnological objects from Australia, E No. 20/13, (August) Eichhorn, annotation to Otto Meyer to Royal Ethnological Museum Berlin, 5 January 1913). In the rush to identify distant origins, few paused to note that Meyer's first instinct had been to record local people's responses to the potsherds (Howes 2017). They identified some of the markings by name, and suggested that they had 'probably [been] made by Pir, the legendary person of their tales' (Meyer 1909a:251–252). Meyer also sought to link archaeological finds with current local practices, noting that the human teeth uncovered were 'gleaming brown, perhaps previously

blackened, as the people still do', and that some of the marine species found were still popular as food, whereas others were no longer eaten (Meyer 1910:1160–1161).

More recent archaeological investigations of Lapita culture have increasingly seen value in Meyer's holistic, place-based approach. The Lapita Homeland Project of 1984–85, which funded large-scale excavations in the Bismarck Archipelago, arose from archaeologists' belief in 'the need to re-establish the importance' of this area in 'Lapita discussions', and their dissatisfaction with arguments that neglected the possibility of Indigenous development of the Lapita cultural complex in the Bismarck Archipelago in favour of an 'entirely intrusive [...] model of migration' that imagined 'waves of colonists' from Southeast Asia 'streaming eastwards and bearing their superior technology, social organisation and subsistence modes towards a Polynesia-to-be, essentially by-passing the inhabited islands of Melanesia' (Allen and Gosden 1991:1–2). Roger Green and Dimitri Anson, who re-excavated the Watom Island site in 1985, praised Meyer's 'early contribution to defining what is today known as the Lapita cultural complex, i.e., the extension of Lapita to the non-ceramic items associated with the dentate-stamped pottery' (Green and Anson 2000:185). Indeed, Meyer's excavations continue to intrigue archaeologists. Further excavations of the Reber-Rakival site, the location of Meyer's first finds, were undertaken in 2008–09, revealing that 'previous excavations had not reached the base of the site', and finding 'evidence of human occupation [...] up to 0.8 m deeper than previously known' (Petchey et al. 2016:12). Separately, Jim Specht, who has been researching Watom Island archaeology since the mid-1960s (e.g. Specht 1968, 2003), is currently heading a project to record each of Meyer's collections photographically and publish them as a single virtual collection, making it possible to 're-unite' sherds from the same vessels.

Among Pacific Islanders, Lapita makes its presence felt in various ways (see also 'Rakival Mission, Watom Island Meeting' and 'Statement by Rakival People', **Appendix**, this volume). On Watom itself, when the two double canoes of the Lapita Voyage, a major expedition in experimental marine archaeology, visited in 2009, voyage participants encountered a local guide 'who knew all about the Lapita finds and the various archaeological digs that had taken place' (Boon 2009; Hympendahl 2013). In the Santa Cruz Islands, Oliver Lueb has documented both the sale of Lapita potsherds as tourist souvenirs and the use of Lapita to assert continuity with the traditions of the past and locate the Santa Cruz Islands within global

and Christian history. During a presentation to tourists on the island of Nendö, Lueb saw a man wearing a tapa cloth on which was written that Lapita potters ‘lived on Trevanion [Malo Island, offshore of Nendö] about the time King Solomon ruled Jerusalem in Judea about 1,000 years, B.C.’ (Lueb 2018:75, 167–168). In Vanuatu, Richard Shing has noted that although ‘[f]or a long time Pacific Islanders have been wary of archaeology, often associating it with grave digging, a practice that [...] in many Pacific cultures is considered sacrilegious’, collaborative awareness programs are helping ni-Vanuatu gain ‘a much better appreciation of archaeology’. When Shing and his colleagues ‘talk about Lapita’, their local audiences often react with ‘shock, surprise and excitement and they are keen to know more’ (Shing 2013:189, 196).

Nevertheless, archaeology in the Pacific remains a highly political pursuit (Spriggs 1999:114–121). With regard to Lapita specifically, the existence of Lapita sites across the south-western Pacific has enabled present-day Pacific Islanders ‘to demonstrate that [...] their ancestors have played a part in the great history of humanity’, but it has also given rise to ‘a contentious debate around the concept of origins’ and fears that archaeological research that contradicts Pacific Islanders’ beliefs about their own history could undermine existing social structures (Sand et al. 2006:335–336). In order to resolve such difficulties, New Caledonian archaeologists Christophe Sand, Jacques Bole and André Ouetcho have looked to ‘the emergence of new generations of indigenous archaeologists conducting scientific research on their own past’ (Sand et al. 2006:341). These new generations are indeed emerging (e.g. Dotte-Sarout et al. 2018). There has also been a recent intensification of interest in Germany’s colonial and mission history among German-speaking scholars (e.g. Hempenstall 2018; Hensel and Rommé 2018; Mückler 2010, 2014; Rüegg 2018). Seen in parallel, these two developments offer the hopeful prospect of future collaboration and mutual investigation of a shared past.

Acknowledgements

Research for this chapter was carried out under the auspices of ‘The Collective Biography of Archaeology in the Pacific: A Hidden History’, funded by the Australian Research Council as Laureate Fellowship grant FL140100218 and by The Australian National University. I would like to thank the staff of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of

the World in Cologne, the Archive of the North German Province of the Sacred Heart Missionaries in Münster-Hiltrup, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and the Museum of Cultures in Basel for their generous assistance in accessing archival materials and collection items, in particular Oliver Lueb (Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World, Cologne), Sabine Heise (Archive of the North German Province of the Sacred Heart Missionaries, Münster-Hiltrup), Dorothea Deterts (Ethnological Museum, Berlin) and Beatrice Voirol (Museum of Cultures, Basel). I am also grateful to Jim Specht (formerly Australian Museum, Sydney) for his expert advice and guidance, to Hermann Hiery for granting permission to republish a photograph of Father Otto Meyer near the site where the first Lapita potsherds were found, and to the reviewers of this volume for their comments and suggestions.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World from March to August 2020.

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This text is taken from *Uncovering Pacific Pasts: Histories of Archaeology in Oceania*, edited by Hilary Howes, Tristen Jones and Matthew Spriggs, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/UPP.2021.15