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The Early Polynesian Settlement on Rennell Island: Archaeological Works in 1973—74

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People of Rennell Island constitute one of the so-called Polynesian Outliers which inhabit numerous islands scattered within Melanesia and some of islands in Micronesia. They consist of the New Hebridean region (West Futuna, Aniwa, Mele-Fila, Mae, Tikopia, Anuta, Pileni, Taumako, West Ubea), the Solomon Islands (Rennell and Bellona, Sikaiana, Nukumanu, Luangiua, Taku, Nukuria) and the northern region (Nukuoro and Kapin-gamarangi). Their cultural position is very important in order to understand on the history of Oceanic people.

Linguistically two major hypothesis have been established on their origin. A. Cappell (1962) argued that the grammatical core of certain Outliers derives from an early Polynesian population left on the islands in Melanesia and Micronesia as the ancestors moved eastwards. However, Pawley (1967) denied that there was any evidence confirming this Cappell's hypothesis. All the outliers, according to him, are comprised into the Samoic group, which has three subgroups. But this classification is not complete enough because Rennellese and some languages are not covered by it. Notwithstanding the two preceding views, D. Bayard (1966) claims that most Outlier cultures have multiple origins.

Traditionally the people of Rennell island claim to have come from Western Polynesia. Actually, today the people are recognized as Polynesians because they closely resemble other Polynesians in appearance, and speak a Polynesian language. The Rennellese language is related to some languages in Western Polynesia. Although the details are uncertain at present, S. Elbert (1967) pointed out there is some evidences to suggest a very close link with East Futuna on Tikopia, rather than to

East Uvea as their oral traditions would indicate.

Their material culture contains many characteristically Melanesian items. Birket-Smith (1956) stated that the population of Rennell separated from the Polynesian stock at a relatively early period and since then had little contact with other Polynesian groups.

The introduction of certain designs and betel pepper among the present people are believed to be fairly latter on. Although contact with Melanesian groups is demonstrable, it does not indicate actual immigrations to the island.

On the other hand, on the basis of the evidences of erythrocytes, people of Rennell and also Bellona have a B type frequency of 0.34 and almost no A type at all, which is totally different from Polynesian. They also have the exceptional proportion of 0.70 for M, and no S.

Archaeological data may be expected to answer such question more effectively, but Rennell Island has been largely neglected in archaeology until today. Moreover, Polynesian Outliers are little known from archaeological point of view.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORKS

Our first archaeological field work was started at the end of December 1973 and continued to the beginning of March 1974. We restricted our work to the western half of the island because 1:25,000 maps, published by the Department of Land and Survey, British Solomon Islands, were available.

Our field approach had three steps:

The first step was surveying and mapping of sites for establishing the archaeological potential of the island, which took up the first half of the period we spent on the island. As a result, 42 archaeological spots have been plotted.

The second step was the discription of the charactor of each of the sites based on ecological conditions, traditional information and test excavations. As a result of this work these sites were

classified tentatively into three groups. They are a) the prehistoric sites for which we have found no information through oral traditions; b) the protohistoric sites belonging to Hiti, or the former inhabitants of the island, which appear in oral traditions; and c) historic sites, which belong to the culture of the direct ancestors of the present day island people. These include habitation sites, various ceremonial sites, chief's tombs and so on, and most of the items in this category were found on the inland side.

The third area of the work was the excavation of the main stratified sites. At this time, we wish to merely list here a brief set of notes concerned with the result of the third area of the work which are particular of immediate interest.

EXCAVATIONS

The Excavations were carried out at three locations which are numbered RE-LM 1, RE-LC 1 and RE-LC 2 at Labanggu area. (RE : Rennell Island, L : Labanggu, M : mound site, C : Cave or Rock-shelter site)

These sites offered deep stratified deposits and provided artifacts as well as faunal remains and structural evidences, and thereby drew attention for the first time to its archaeological potential.

Labanggu is a narrow sand beach at the foot of the cliffs inside the Bay of Kangava, located near the center of the south coast of the island. It is the only place along the whole of the coastline large enough to make possible a permanent settlement for the natives.

We selected three sites which appeared to be likely locations for early and continuous occupation, and each one has features quite its own, as the following will show: 3

RE-LM 1 Site; The site is situated at the western side of coastal flat area appears as a curved mound. There seemed to be no information available about this site via oral tradition. Circular

in ground plan with a diameter of 12.3 m., it is 2 m. high in the center, 9 m. long and 1 m. wide, N-S, and 10 m. long and 1 m. wide, E-W, two trenches were opened across each other. Deposits consist of the eight layers of accumulated midden which are contained cooking debris, burned coral and charcoal.

RE-LC 1 Site; The sea-erosion of the spectacular cliff in Kanggava Bay has undermined the rim every where. This site is one of these rock shelter used for habitation. It is called Motusu cave and given it a Hiti tradition by village people. A 28 sq.m. excavation trench was prepared. Our work had to be continued, at one time, in the midst of a cyclone striking the island.

RE-LC 2 Site; This, also, is a small rock-shelter located at the foot of a cliff on the coastal flat, which may have been used additionally as a canoe-house. We were unable to find any oral traditions referring to this sites. A 6 meter long and 1 meter wide excavation trench was opened along the cliff line.

Stratigraphy shows the site consists of two groups of distinct earth layers which are separated, upper and lower, by the hiatus of sterile sand. Excavation reached a depth of almost three meters but this was not in the deepest deposits in the area. Early stratigraphic context appears from the Vth layer because its radiocarbon age estimates 1250 ± 70 B.P. or around A.D. 700. From this level igneous rock something like pedestal or house foundation was found. It is interesting because the earliest imigrants from distant Wallis Island, according to traditions, brought igneous rocks which assumed a religious significance on Rennell as they were totally different from the local limestone. The principal types of artifacts recovered from this layer were shell adzes and simple fishhooks which promise to throw light on an earlier cultural phase of Rennell Island.

Radiocarbon Dating

Available radiocarbon dates are given in Table. All dates

Radiocarbon Age Estimates of Samples from Rennell Isl.

Sample No.	Sample Provenience		Initial Estimate of Sample Age Half-life 5568		Ajust Estimate of Sample Age Half-life 5730	
	Site RE	Layer	Years B.P.	Date	Years B.P.	Date
N-2088	LC-1 A3	II. b	815±80	B. P. A. D. 1135	840±85	B. P. A. D. 1110
N-2089	LC-1 A4	II. b	785±95	1165	805±100	1145
N-2090	LC-1 A4	II. a	550±95	1400	565±100	1385
N-2091	LC-2 A3	V	1210±65	740	1250±70	700
N-2092	LC-2 A1	VI	2030±100	80 B. C.	2090±105	140 B. C.
N-2093	LC-2 A1	V	1310±70	A. D. 640	1340±70	A. D. 610
N-2094	LC-2 A1	II	1110±85	840	1150±85	800
N-2095	LM-1 NS(S)	III	220±80	1730	225±80	1725
N-2096	LM-1 EW	IV	440±65	1510	445±70	1505
N-2097	LM-1 NS	VI	755±105	1195	780±110	1170

included are based on the 5730 and 5568 half life. Precise correlation in time of individual levels from different locations is extremely difficult. It is obvious that the dates must be used only to provide broad chronological frame work within which to view the material, and not as a precise time scale for individual levels. The date, around 2000 B.P., was estimated from the bottom layer of RE-LC 2 site which is not cultural layer, but we think there is a strong possibility that cultural phase belonging such time depth will be found in this area.

5

Artifacts

All excavated soil was processed through 0.8 mm mesh screen to recover small artifacts and midden remains. All the material

can be used to draw inferences about the traditional way of life of the inhabitants of Rennell, on their economy, technology and settlement. It is not possible here to do much more than touch on certain artifact types. We wish merely to mention here a few types which are of particular interest.

Most of artifacts were made of shell. It is suggested that analysis of shell artifacts of many kinds will propel to study the prehistory in this area.

The most numerous items are shell adzes. They are made from the central portion of a *Tridacna* or giant clam shell with the outside of the shell forming the back of the edge. It can be seen that examples of this type are present throughout the sequence from the bottom to upper layers. They tend to be extremely uniform and severely limited in form by the material. Pounders or hammer stones also made of *Tridacna* shell, were crudely shaped. Parallel types can be found among these artifacts occurring from Anuta island sites. We have recognized stone adzes and axes obviously originating from a volcanic island among ethnographic use, but did not discover from archaeological site.

6 One should note that the fishhook collection came from layer V of RE-LC 2 site which is shown early cultural phase because the fishhook typology reflects culture change subtly in a prehistoric sequence in Polynesian prehistory. Specimens from Rennell are of the one-piece type made of *Trochus* shell, one is complete and the other is unfinished. The complete specimen is a jabbing hook, an extension line of the arc of the point does not cross with the shank, measured 2.76 cm. in shank length, 2.07 cm. in point length, 1.93 cm. in width. The line-attachment device shows its distinguishing mark that has a knob at the top of the shank formed by notching. Fishhook types with chronological sequences appears from Anuta (P. V. Kirch & P. H. Rosendahl 1973) and Nukuoro (J. Davidson 1967, 1968, 1971) sites of Polynesian Outlier islands. In comparison with them, the Rennell specimen

coincides with a fishhook type HT 3 from Anuta island in typology. This type of Anuta island sites derives from preceding two basic types which is shown in chronological sequence. Further comparative material from neighboring island may enable us to postulate the inter-cultural relationships of it.

In most cases ethnographic accounts of material culture offered by the Rennellese informants provide a fairly full account of some aspects of archaeological artifact. But no informant knowledge was available on the one-piece fishhook at all. Special attention should be paid to the presence or absence of this type of fishhook and its relations.

CONCLUSION

The people presently living on Rennell still have extremely rich oral traditions and genealogical ideas on themselves. According these traditions, the island was originally settled by people of unknown affinity at unknown time-depth, modern Rennellese refer to this people as Hiti. These aboriginal people, the Hiti were replaced by the ancestors of the present islanders. The genealogies suggest that this event took place 23 generations ago around A. D. 1,400 supposed.

Some problems of methodological interest are raised about how these oral traditions and genealogies would compare with other archaeological evidence having to do with Rennell prehistory but for the time being we must leave this for a future study.

In conclusion it may be said that on the basis of the limited excavations undertaken at this expedition, it is recognized some accounts of equivalent between the early cultural phase of RE-L C 2 site and the second or middle phase of Anuta island sites around A. D. 500 to 700. Time-depth radiocarbon estimated is comparable with some of evidences from neighbouring islands Bellona (J. Poulsen 1972) and Anuta (P. Kirch et al. 1973) 7

The occupation evidenced by a series of deposits of RE-LC 1 and RE-LM 1 has continuous relationships of cultural activities

as indicated by artifacts and midden remains, and it can be supposed that they are direct ancestral phases of the present island people.

Lacking of data about the earliest type of artifact it is hard to determine their cultural origin of Rennell at present. It should be emphasized that the series of cultural phases show a process of adaptation of people to the specific local environment and their exploitation.

The artifacts have been restricted by the limited natural resources of the coral island in various ways such as their raw materials, forms and uses. Their cultural change arose as a result of difficulty to reproduce in whole their parent culture for immigrant. (July. 1975)

This is merely preliminary report on the part of the results we had compiled as of 1974.

The second season's work consumed in excavation of sites at Labanggu area in this summer 1975.