

## Walpole, A “Mystery Island” in Southeast New Caledonia?

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**ABSTRACT.** Walpole Island, the southernmost island of Melanesia, is a spectacular raised limestone formation 135 km south of the Loyalty Islands within the New Caledonian archipelago. Occupied by enormous numbers of seabirds when the first westerners landed, this rocky spot was mined for guano. Workers frequently reported archaeological finds that indicated prehistoric occupation and an early collection of artefacts was sent to the Australian Museum in Sydney. Over the last 30 years, research on the archaeological heritage of the island has been carried out through the study of museum collections and excavations. This paper reports the results of recent stratigraphic excavations, and synthesizes current archaeological knowledge about the human occupation of Walpole spanning at least 2,500 years.

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During the last two decades, Melanesian and Polynesian prehistory has come of age (Kirch, 2000). Jim Specht was a pioneer with an insatiable drive to explore new directions in Pacific prehistory. Amongst numerous other projects, he initiated modern archaeological studies of the pre-European settlement on Norfolk Island (Specht, 1984). Before discovering Norfolk on the 5th October 1774, James Cook put a new archipelago on the European map—New Caledonia (Beaglehole, 1961). One week previously he had passed just out of sight of a small uplifted coral island, at the southeastern tip of the Grande Terre. Its name, given a few decades later, is Walpole.

Very few people know of this island at the southernmost point of Melanesia. Although Walpole appeared as a “mystery” early in the literature (see Sand 2002: 14 for a review), it is not normally listed in studies of the Pacific “mystery islands”, which focus only on Polynesia and eastern Micronesia (Bellwood, 1978: 352–353; Kirch, 1988; but see Di Piazza & Pearthree, 2001: 165). A historical

connection links Walpole to the Australian Museum in Sydney, where the oldest archaeological collection from the island is stored. In this paper I summarize the historical and archaeological data of Walpole and propose a tentative chronology.

### “Mystery Islands”: a short review

When European navigators started to systematically explore the Pacific, they visited uninhabited islands with signs of former human occupation, like Pitcairn in East Polynesia, and Norfolk off eastern Australia. These abandoned islands were mostly in Polynesia (Kirch, 1984: table 9), although some east Micronesian islands were also identified (Terrell, 1986: fig. 28). The “mystery” of their pre-historic settlement and abandonment led to early research (e.g., Emory, 1928, 1934). As Kirch (1984: 89–92, 1988) pointed out, although all these “mystery islands” were grouped on the basis of isolation, resource scarcity and absence of occupation at