

Settlement History and Landscape Use in Santo, Vanuatu

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ABSTRACT. Preliminary results of an archaeological investigation of the northwest coast of Santo Island in Vanuatu are presented. They indicate the possibility that wet taro gardening correlated with the use of oven stone cooking technology in some coastal rockshelters extends back some 1,000 years.

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In 1996 I started a research project on the prehistory of Santo, the largest island of Vanuatu, which began with field survey and test excavations in two rock shelters (Malsosoba 1 and 2). This project focused on subsistence strategies on the western, mainly mountainous part, of the island. The settlement chronology of the high northern islands of Vanuatu is very little known apart from the recent work done by Bedford in Malekula (Bedford, 2000). It was anticipated that in a rugged and hardly accessible part of the countryside any evidence of human presence would not only reflect the final expansion of ancient populations, but also indicate the introduction of important activities such as irrigated gardening, pig husbandry or stone oven technology.

Preliminary results showed that an important part of the archaeological material found on surface sites along the coast of Santo (Galipaud & Walter, 1997) was a pottery with stylistic similarities to Sinapupu ware of Tikopia in the Solomon Islands, which is around 2,000 years old (Kirch & Yen, 1982). This pottery, however, could not be dated in Santo. The general survey was completed in 1997 with further excavation in Malsosoba 1 rockshelter at the northern end of Cape Cumberland. This shelter is located at the edge

of a large irrigated taro pondfield and the results of the excavation are used to discuss the chronology of irrigated taro gardening in this area.

Location

The rockshelters Malsosoba 1 and 2 are on the north end of Cape Cumberland, the northern-most part of the west Santo coast (Fig. 1). This area, surrounded by open sea, is an old coralline uplifted structure, which was once a reef at the base of the high volcanic chain of west Santo. Several flat terraces reveal the uplift history of the region. The maximum altitude is about 300 m. The only village in this area is Hokua, about 3 km northwest of the shelter. Irrigated gardens extend over several hectares in the vicinity of the two rockshelters and remnant garden systems are witness to irrigated taro gardening which once extended up to a few meters away from the shelters' entrances.

The shelters are close to the coast, about 10 m above the Naturtur River. Fossil terraces near the shelters are now too high for irrigation as a result of recent uplifting. The rate of uplift (determined from the dating of uplifted coral reefs, Jouannic *et al.*, 1980; Gaven *et al.*, 1980) is between 2.2 and 4.6 mm/year in this area.