

Archaeological Studies of the Middle and Late Holocene, Papua New Guinea

Edited by Jim Specht and Val Attenbrow

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**Archaeological Studies of the Middle and Late Holocene,
Papua New Guinea
Part IX**

**A Stone Tablet from Buka Island,
Bougainville Autonomous Region**

BARRY CRAIG

South Australian Museum, North Terrace, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia
Craig.Barry@saugov.sa.gov.au

ABSTRACT. A stone tablet, photographed in 1971 by Graeme Pretty of the South Australian Museum at the village of Tohatsi in northeast Buka, has been incised with designs reminiscent of those to be found on some Lapita ceramics and contemporary Polynesian bark cloth. Photographs of the stone tablet are reproduced along with the information gathered by Pretty. Possible analogues are noted and reference is made to other engraved stone objects in the region.

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During the first half of 1971, Graeme Pretty, then Curator of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum, conducted field research in the Melanesian islands pursuing his interest in the mortar and pestle complex of the region. Pretty's field notebooks and photographs from this research are held in the archives of the South Australian Museum. So far as I am aware, a full, formal report of the expedition was never completed.

By chance, I came across some of Pretty's 1971 photographs in 2003 and those showing a stone tablet arrested my attention, as I had seen nothing quite like it before. Further, the designs engraved on one side of the tablet recall Lapita-type pottery designs. It seemed appropriate,

therefore, to try to find out exactly where the stone tablet was found and any other information concerning it.

Pretty kept field notebooks that he called "Daily Jottings" (Pretty, 1971). Volume VII covers the period 30 April to 7 May 1971, during which time he was in Buka (Fig. 1), taking off by plane for Rabaul on 2 May. After breakfast on that last day in Buka, his host in Tohatsi village, Herman Halihu, showed him "an elaborately carved stone which he found while clearing the ground for a house on his new settlement last year" (Pretty, 1971, VII: 38). [Tohatsi is Beatrice Blackwood's Tohatchi, on the northeast corner of Buka, whose people speak Halia, an Austronesian language.]

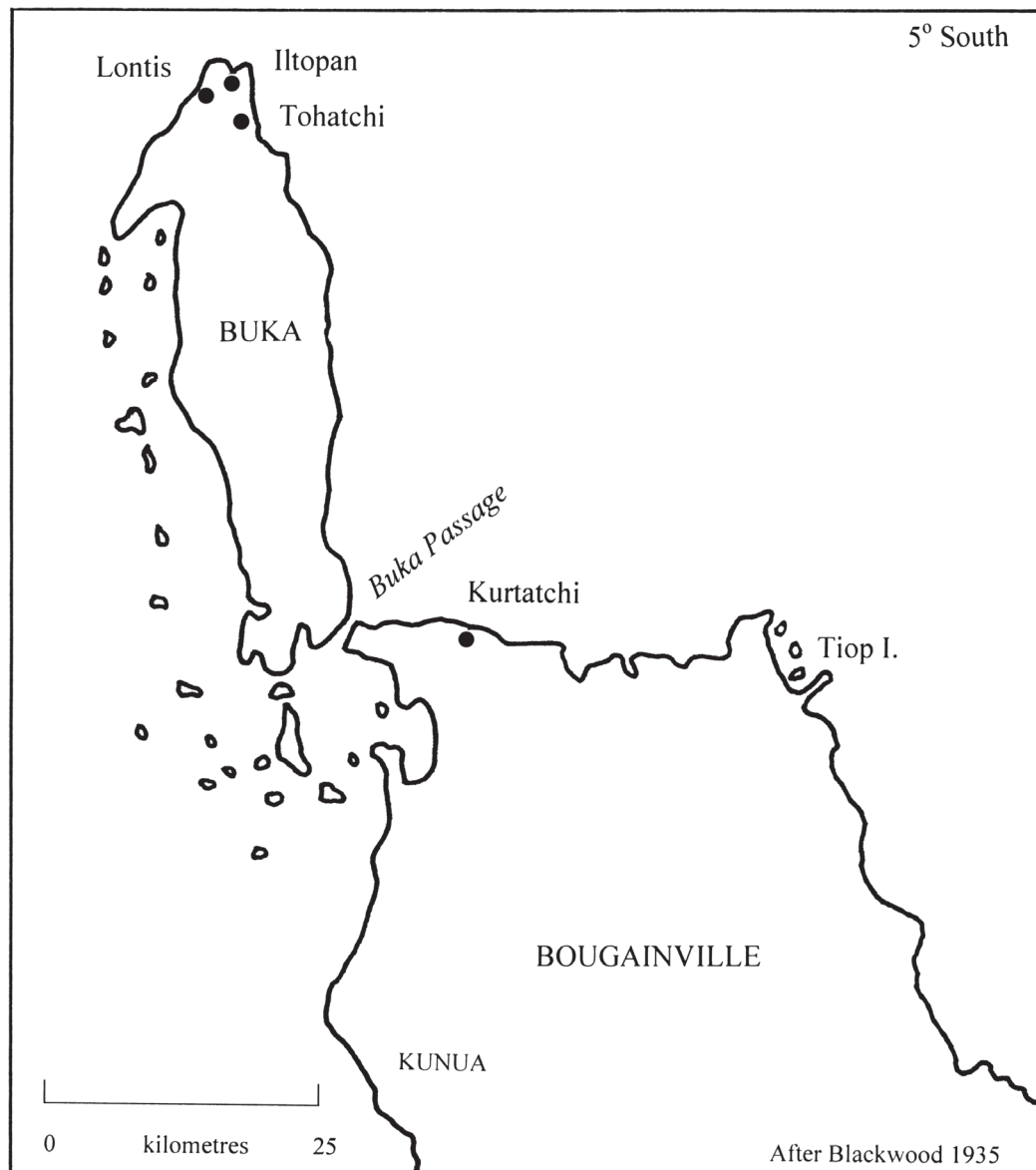


Fig. 1. Map of Buka Island and nearby Bougainville (after Blackwood, 1935).

In September–October 2003, Matthew Leavesley, then in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University, visited Buka and sought out Herman Halihu to find out if he still had the stone tablet and more details concerning it. He reported (pers. comm. 17 October 2003):

I ... went to visit Herman Halihu but unfortunately he no longer has the stone object. Apparently he lost it during the [Bougainville] crisis ... He told me that he found it at the place that he built his present house. Tohatsi village is at the top of an 80 m high cliff overlooking the sea. His house is so close to the cliff he could fall out of his house—wind [an open-sided shelter—B.C.] and over the cliff ... I am inclined to think that everything he owned probably went over the side (although he didn't explicitly say so).

Description of the tablet

The stone tablet varies between one and two centimetres in thickness and is an irregular shape approximately 21 cm by 13 cm. The orientation of the patterns on each side seems to be consistent, suggesting that both designs were done at the same time. As both designs are incomplete, the tablet may have been broken from a larger piece. It is not certain which way “up” the designs were supposed to be but I have chosen to orientate the images so that the double-spiral motif of the Lapita-type design is at the top.

The Lapita-type design (Plate 1) consists of motifs delineated by incised notched lines. There are three double-spiral motifs and a pendulate form to the left of them. These four forms are diagonally displaced with regard to each other. Below the pendulate form at the left is an incomplete circle enclosing an “hourglass” motif. Below these are a series of circular forms each enclosing a quadripartite motif.

The technique and design for the obverse side of the tablet (Plate 2) is different, with a grid of incised diagonal straight lines and a foliate pattern cut out in low relief in the “north-south” direction and in raised relief in the “east-west” direction. There are other incised lines (Plate 2, top and near right-hand edge) that could have been added later.

Other photographs taken by Pretty show that two of the edges have been incised with a zigzag pattern (Plate 3) using the same technique of notched lines as that for the incised Lapita-type design shown in Plate 1. The zigzag pattern is along the edge of the two long sides on the left in Plate 1; all other edges are etched crosswise with plain, roughly parallel lines. There is no evident linear continuity between the designs on the faces of the tablet and the incised lines on the edges, suggesting the latter could have been added after the tablet had been broken.

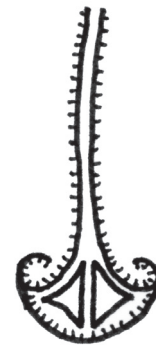
Pretty (1971, VII: 38) records that “[o]ne of the old men (Pohu) told him [Herman] that two of the marks were cut into the backs of the chiefs.” Motif A in Figure 2 is sketched in the notebook (VII: 39) and is notated: “hung from chief’s ear; *kasəna* of turtle shell”; motif B is notated “cut on chief’s back; *kokoənija*”. The foliate design shown in Plate 2 is notated “*kalangkətjənə*, also cut on the back and on side of cheek. He (Herman) has seen this cut on the cheeks of Kuanua people” (Pretty, 1971, VII: 42).²

Possible analogues and function

Various colleagues have been shown the photographs and all agree that the tablet is remarkable. Roger Neich, Curator of Ethnology at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, has suggested (pers. comm. 23 April 2003) that it could have been made as a decorative item in itself, to be used as a cover for a shrine or something comparable. The circular [motif on the] “Lapita-like” side can be matched with Solomons, especially Malaita, *laoniasi* necklace elements of clam shell or the *ulute* neck pendants of clam shell with the designs incised and then blackened” [see Edmundson & Boylan, 1999: plate 65; Neich & Pereira, 2004: 125].

Certainly the circular form and the technique of incised lines edged with notches do correspond; however, the quadripartite structure of the circular motif (Plate 2) recalls more the structure of the designs of the *kapkaps* made of turtle-shell fretwork fastened to discs of white *Tridacna* clam shell (Blackwood, 1935: plate 68, esp. top left and centre left; Neich & Pereira, 2004: 115). This design is found also on Buka “ceremonial paddles” which H. Spiegel (1967: 44) interprets as representations of *kapkaps* (see Australian Museum specimens E16513, B8752, E7981, E24668, B8768 in Spiegel 1967, fig. 1 and plates 4, 5, 7, 10, 12 respectively). The technique of drawing designs with notched or sawtooth lines is also found on lime pots (Blackwood, 1935: plate 72, esp. bottom centre).

The long-stemmed double-spiral motif (*kasəna*—Motif A in Figure 2) recalls a pearl shell ornament collected from Choiseul in 1935 during the voyage of *La Korrigane* (Coiffier, 2001: 142, item 67). The upper half of the ornament uses the double-spiral motif and the etched notches are suggestive of those on the stone tablet.



Motif A
kasəna



Motif B
kokoənija

Fig. 2. Motif A (*kasəna*) and Motif B (*kokoənija*) on one side of the stone tablet, as labelled by G.L. Pretty in his Daily Jottings, Vol. VII, p. 39 (South Australian Museum Archives AA255).

Looking further back in time, the motif corresponds with one of Spriggs’ Form 3C variants of his “ear plug emblems” reproduced from Lapita pottery sherds found at the RF-2 site in the Reef Islands, Southeast Solomons (Spriggs, 1990: fig. 32). This motif is not confined to “ear-plug emblems”; a variant of the Form 3C motif appears as (what could be) a representation of a tattoo on the buttocks of a fragmentary human figurine, found at the nearby RF-6 site in the Reef Islands (Green, 1979: fig. 1–2).

The foliate design set into a grid of diagonal lines (Plate 2) is similar to designs found on Fijian, Samoan, Tongan and even Niuean, bark cloth, though the foliate motif is usually set into a grid of horizontal and vertical, rather than diagonal, lines (Neich & Pendergrast, 1997: 18, 25, 39, 40, 56, 71; Troxler, 1977: 62, 68). It even crossed my mind that the tablet could have served as a rubbing block for bark cloth designs, though Roger Neich thought the relief did not look sufficiently well-defined for that purpose (pers. comm. 23 April 2003).

² The “Kuanua” are probably the Kunua, who live some 10 km inland from the west coast of north Bougainville, about 40 km south of Buka Passage. They speak Konua, a Papuan language.



Plate 1. Stone tablet found by Herman Halihu at Tohatsi village, northeast Buka Island. Size approximately 21 by 13 cm. Photograph by G.L. Pretty, 2 May 1971 (South Australian Museum Archives AA255).



Plate 2. Stone tablet found by Herman Halihu at Tohatsi village, northeast Buka Island. Size approximately 21 by 13 cm. Photograph by G.L. Pretty, 2 May 1971 (South Australian Museum Archives AA255).

More closely related in form are some of the sand drawings of north-central Vanuatu (Bonnemaison *et al.*, 1996: figs 321, 323). Again, looking back in time, the foliate design may be read as Siorat's (1990: fig. 3) Lapita "trefoil theme" extended in two dimensions.

Considering the function of the tablet, the closest ethnographic equivalent is the clam shell *barava* of the west-central Solomons, "a sacred object associated with chiefs. It was often carried on war canoes to ensure the success of a raid, and placed at the gravesite of its owner" (Chick & Chick, 1978: unnumbered page). Interestingly these authors add that "[s]ome traditions suggest that a chief's *barava* was deliberately broken at the time of his death". The *barava* (Brake *et al.*, 1979: plate 12) are carved with openwork designs different to those on the stone tablet reported here, but the overall form and the fact of breakage hint at a possible correspondence and are consistent with Roger Neich's hunch reported above.

Other engraved stones

Engravings on stone are to be found throughout the Solomons, such as petroglyphs on large rocks in streambeds and in a cave in the Poha valley of western Guadalcanal (Chick & Chick, 1978: unnumbered pages). Beatrice Blackwood (1935: 531–540, plates 77–80) reports several stone tablets and pillars on Buka, and at Kurtatchi and Tiop on the north coast of western Bougainville, only two of which have designs carved onto them. She concludes that those she investigated "may perhaps once have formed part of an elaborate fertility ritual, most of which has now been lost" (Blackwood, 1935: 540). The pillar she photographed at Itopan, at the northeast corner of Buka and several kilometres north of "Tohatchi" (Tohatsi), has two circular motifs, one of which is similar to the small circular motif containing an "hour-glass" form located near the top left of Plate 1. Blackwood reports (1935: 533–534) that the designs on the stones at Itopan and "Tohatchi" were recognized as similar to the cicatrization marks of the face, forehead and back of the neck.

Pretty also recorded information on stone tablets and pillars in northern Buka and photographed a group of three called *mabisi* and another stone called *ginogono*, at Lontis on the northwest corner of Buka. Only one of the stone objects (not photographed) had an incised design, which consisted of a pair of concentric diamond motifs. None of the stone objects reported by Blackwood were those reported by Pretty, suggesting that they may have been removed or possibly destroyed. In particular a tall stone pillar at "Tohatchi" photographed by Blackwood (1935: plate 78) would surely have been brought to Pretty's attention if it had still been there in 1971. The stone pillar reported by Blackwood at Itopan, mentioned above, matches the description in 1935 by Sarah Chinnery (Fortune, 1998: 57) of one that was brought to her husband in Rabaul, presumably for safe-keeping in the Administration's museum there but almost certainly lost either in the volcanic eruptions of 1937 or when the Japanese attacked in 1942.

Conclusion

At this point in time, the Tohatsi tablet is unique and almost nothing is known about its origin or function. Nevertheless, by bringing to scholarly notice a photographic record of its existence, it may one day be related to some other object or data that will provide historical and cultural context, and contribute to knowledge of the richness of the prehistory of western Melanesia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. The comments of Jim Specht and two anonymous referees have improved this paper. In particular, one of the latter drew my attention to Sarah Chinnery's mention of a stone pillar that could have been the one recorded by Blackwood at Itopan.

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Plate 3. Stone tablet found by Herman Haliu at Tohatsi village, northeast Buka Island. Size approximately 21 by 13 cm. Photograph by G.L. Pretty, 2 May 1971 (South Australian Museum Archives AA255).