

Recent Survey and Excavation of the Monumental Complexes on Uneapa Island, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea

Sarah Byrne

Institute of Archaeology, UCL

Introduction

Two seasons of fieldwork, June-September 2004 and March-June 2005, were carried out on Uneapa Island, West New Britain, as part of the author's ongoing PhD research. The project was conducted in collaboration with the West New Britain Provincial Government and involved widespread participation from the local community. The significance of Uneapa's archaeological remains has only recently come to the attention of the archaeological community and relevant Papua New Guinea authorities, and future collaborative work needs to be undertaken in order to decide how the island's cultural heritage should be maintained and managed.

Uneapa Island is a small (30km²) Quaternary volcanic island located some 60km off the northwest coast of the Willaumez Peninsula, West New Britain (Fig. 1). Three volcanoes dominate the island's landscape: Mt. Kumbu, Mt. Tamagone and Mt. Kumburi.

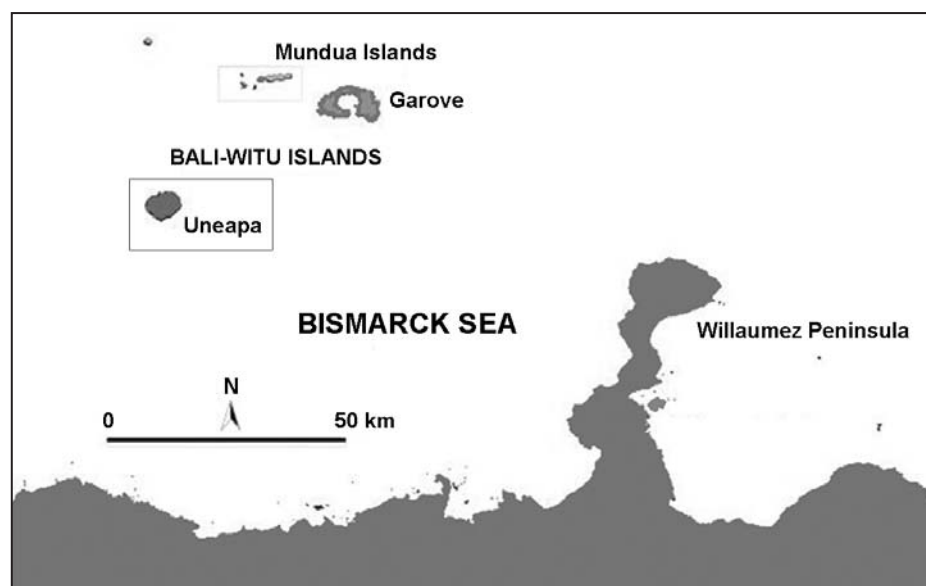


Figure 1. Map of northwest coast of New Britain, Papua New Guinea, showing location of Uneapa Island (after Torrence et al. 2002).

Background

In 2002, Torrence, Specht and Vatete carried out a reconnaissance survey of the standing archaeology on the Bali-Witu islands (Torrence et al. 2002). They visited Uneapa, Garove, Ningau, Goru, Silenge and Vambu islands recording a total of 102 locations of archaeological significance. It was on the island of Uneapa in particular that an unprecedented diversity and density of stone arrangements and rock art sites were noted. Standing stones, quarried columnar andesite features in the form of ‘seats’ and ‘tables’, and arranged boulder groups with and without petroglyphs were noted in a wide range of contexts and landscape settings. A large number of boulders with mortars, axe-grinding grooves and grinding hollows were also recorded.

By far the most common of the forms of rock art found on Uneapa are cupule marks (small circular engravings approximately 2cm in diameter). Curvilinear and rectilinear designs were also recorded, many sharing stylistic parallels with other known petroglyphs in the wider Western Pacific region. Three-dimensional carved anthropomorphic boulders at Malangai village, first recorded by Riebe (1967), were re-recorded by the 2002 survey team (Fig. 2). These boulders have no obvious parallels in the surrounding regions and are possibly unique.

Although it has long been known that stone monuments of various forms are present throughout the Western Pacific region (Riesefeld 1950), they have generally been under-studied and only a handful have been dated (Bickler and Ivuyo 2002; Sheppard et al. 2004). Substantial research needs to be carried out before we can begin to interpret possible relationships between the stone arrangements on Uneapa Island and those found in other parts of the Western Pacific.

More detailed localised studies are needed so that a substantial body of data exists before we can begin interpreting such features in their wider contexts.

Whilst prehistoric sequences on the West New Britain mainland have been extensively studied, such a chronology for the Bali-Witu islands has yet to be established.

Research Issues

As our knowledge of Uneapa’s monumental landscape is still in its infancy, one of the basic concerns was to establish monument, site and rock art typologies. Through an analysis of Uneapa’s archaeology and oral history, the main questions being tackled within this project are as follows:



Figure 2. Anthropomorphic carving locally known as the “boss boi”, found at Malangai village, Uneapa Island.

1. How, when and for what purpose were the monumental complexes created in the first place? Were they constructed rapidly as the result of major shifts in local political organisation or settlement pattern? Alternatively, were they created more slowly over longer periods of time through generations of re-use, renovation and re-invention? What can these monumental complexes tell us about past social practices on Uneapa?
2. As we know that certain communities on Uneapa continued to erect stone monuments until at least the 1970s, how should this recent use be studied? Is a long-term chronological framework best in order to understand fully the monumental complexes as we see them today?
3. How are the monumental complexes perceived and remembered today? What impact did European colonialism have on the use and perception of these places? What role did the local cargo cult, known as the Perekuma Company, play in the re-erection and re-location of such monuments?

Fieldwork Season One: Summary

The initial aim of the first season of fieldwork (June-September 2004) was to carry out a complete survey of Uneapa's archaeological remains. After an initial two-week survey, it became apparent that the scale of archaeological remains far surpassed any previous estimates. The majority of these sites were considerably overgrown and their true extent could only be revealed through extensive bush clearing. It was therefore decided that an island-wide survey would not be possible within the timeframe of the project and that detailed analysis of one area of the island would be more productive, yielding more comprehensive results.

Western Uneapa was chosen as an appropriate case study area for understanding the stone arrangements and rock art sites found on the island. A full range of topographies can be found there: coastal, ridge, valley, foothill and highland areas. The survey was designed to include these distinct topographic categories and the resulting site gazetteer was organised accordingly.

Western Uneapa was the area of the island most affected by European colonialism. During the late 19th century German New Guinea Company established Bali Plantation in this region, covering an area of almost one-fifth of the island's total landmass. Local people remember how at least seven major clan groups were violently uprooted from their traditional lands during this period.

The 2004 survey recorded 105 new locations of archaeological significance island-wide, of which 91 were recorded in Western Uneapa. Combined with the 2002 survey, the total number of significant archaeological locations recorded so far is 171. Each location was mapped using a hand-held GPS console. Descriptive notes were penned and photographs taken.

Six sites were mapped in detail (1:100 plans using tape and offset), namely Bola Ke Voki (U/161), Kite Vuaka Taki (U/37), Nabugou (U/134), Nidabadaba (U/73), Vatumadiridiri (U/118) and Vunedeko (U/156). These sites were chosen because they varied in complexity, size, monument variation, topographic setting and in the amount of associated oral history.

Bola Ke Voki (Voki's Mat) was by far the largest site surveyed, with over 300 purposefully arranged stone features stretching over an area of 150x100m lying between two sharply incised creek beds. Features at this site include elaborately carved boulders, arranged groups of boulders with cupules, andesite 'seats' and 'tables', seven cooking areas or mumus (up to 4m in diameter) and five in situ stone mortars (Fig. 3). The majority of this area was heavily overgrown and most of the stone features have now collapsed. This site is remembered by elders as being a prominent meeting and feasting place of the Kulubago clan.



Figure 3. Small reconstructed 'mumu' at Bola Ke Voki (U/161).

Petroglyphs were found at a total of 12 locations in Western Uneapa, namely Bola Ke Voki (U/161), Daniel Kadomu Ruku's Garden (U/163), Dumedumeke Creek (U/119) (Fig. 4), Gavana Kuriki Creek (U/162), Kite Vuaka Taki (U/37), Ngoko Waterfall (U/113), Nitalingopo Beach (U/97), Nitianga Beach (U/96), Nivari Beach (U/99), Vaboko Creek (U/155), Vatumadiridiri (U/118) and Vunekuluvatete (U/154). All of the rock art was recorded, with a total of 43 panels traced. This imagery awaits further analysis but a strong association with water was noted, with seven out of 12 locations occurring either on the side of creeks or on beaches.

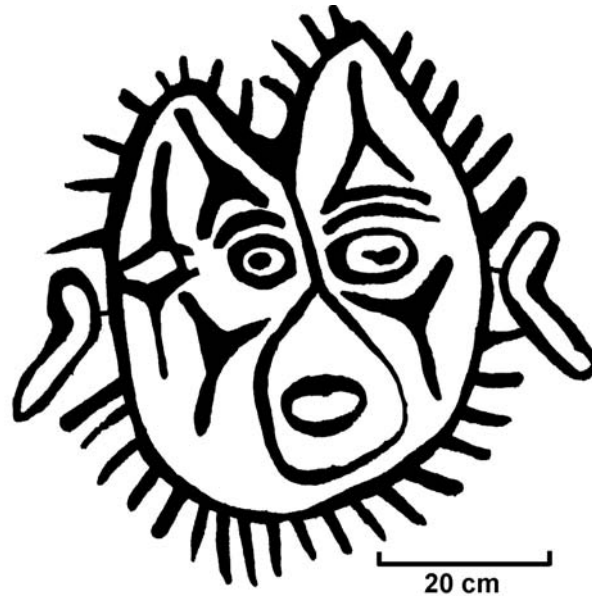


Figure 4. Tracing of mask-like carving found at Dumedumeke Creek (U/119).

Fieldwork Season 2: Summary

It became apparent after the first season of fieldwork on Uneapa that more needed to be known about the age of monumental complexes and the activities carried out within them. Therefore, at each of the sites surveyed in detail during the previous year, two to three test pits (1m² and 2m²) were excavated.

Excavations were very successful and a clear occupation sequence within the monumental complexes was seen at five out of the six locations with concentrated horizons of obsidian artefacts. Nidabadaba (U/73) was the only problematic site due to extensive modern intrusions and truncations. A number of partially and fully buried stone features were noted. At Bola Ke Voki (U/161) evidence pointed to at least two separate phases of monument building. The retrieval of charcoal samples for ¹⁴C dating was very satisfactory. All excavated material is awaiting further analysis. Of particular note was the discovery of a number of knapped European glass flakes found at a depth of 15cm at the monumental complex of Nabugou (U/154).

During the second season of fieldwork, more time was spent gathering local oral history associated with the stone monuments. Over 20 hours of interviews were recorded with elders. A number of meetings were arranged at the monumental complexes themselves so that a process of joint discussion and identification of specific monuments could more easily be achieved (Fig. 5). It became apparent that the monumental complexes were largely remembered as public arenas where meetings, feasts and other public ceremonies took place. In contrast, the meaning and purpose of rock carvings was not remembered.

Community Involvement

A programme of community awareness was initiated in many of the larger villages and schools on Uneapa. Village meetings were held by Blaise Vatete (Advisor for Culture and Tourism, West New Britain Provincial Government) and the author in order to discuss the aims of the archaeological survey. A number of school events were undertaken at Penope Community School and Makiri Secondary School. These involved both workshops and lectures aimed at explaining the significance of Uneapa's archaeological remains. The content of these sessions varied depending on the age group of the students in attendance. With the help of project volunteer Violeta Ayala, one day was spent running a workshop where theatre/improvisation techniques were used to explain the region's prehistory.

Both seasons of fieldwork involved day-to-day participation by the local community from Manopo village areas. The community was particularly pro-active in deciding how they wanted to get involved in the project. They created a specially designed roster that allowed equal involvement of members from different community groups. A special excavation training day was held by the author at the beginning of the second season of fieldwork.

A comprehensive site report and gazetteer has been written and submitted to the Papua New Guinea National Research Institute, Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery, West New Britain Cultural Centre and to various interest groups on Uneapa island itself.



Figure 5. Conducting oral history research with Bito Rave and Vaki at Nabugou (U/154).

Acknowledgements

Financial support for this project was provided by the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, the Graduate School, UCL, the Royal Anthropological Society and the University of London Central Research Fund. Essential academic support in between field seasons was given by the Australian Museum and the Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies (Australian National University). A sincere thank-you to Dr Robin Torrence (Australian Museum), Dr J. P. White (Sydney University), Dr Jim Specht and Kenneth Bazley for providing such wonderful support and assistance throughout the duration of this project. Warm thanks to Mr Blaise Vatete (Advisor for Culture and Tourism, West New Britain Provincial Government) for his invaluable assistance. So many people assisted and helped us on Uneapa that it would be impossible to thank them all indi-

vidually. Thank-you to all our friends who worked with us on a daily basis, planning, digging and exploring Uneapa Island's ancestral places. A special word of thanks to Bruno Baruku Pegeti (project supervisor), Stephen Baule Pindi (assistant supervisor) and William Tupi Tatau for their incredible enthusiasm and friendship. Finally, thanks to the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery, West New Britain Government, Mahonia na Dahri Research Centre and the PNG National Research Institute for their support and provision of the necessary work permits.

References

- Bickler, S. and Ivuyo, B. 2002. Megaliths of Muyuw (Woodlark Island), Milne Bay Province, PNG. *Archaeology in Oceania* 37, 22-36.
- Riebe, I. 1967. Anthropomorphic Stone Carvings on Unea Island. *Journal of Polynesian Society* 4, 77-109.
- Riesefeld, A. 1950. *Megalithic Culture of Melanesia*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Sheppard, P., Walter, R. and Shankar, A. 2004. Oral Tradition and the Creation of Late Prehistory in Roviana Lagoon, Solomon Islands. *Records of the Australian Museum* 29, 123-132.
- Torrence, R, Specht, J. and Vatete, B. 2002. *Report of an Archaeological Survey of the Bali-Witu islands, West New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea*. Unpublished report prepared for the West New Britain Provincial Government.