
REVIEWS

Jens Poulsen, *Early Tongan Prehistory: The Lapita Period on Tongatapu and Its Relationships*. 2 vols. Terra Australis 12. Canberra: Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1987. Vol. 1: pp. xxiv, 307, text, references, appendixes; vol. 2: pp. x, 205, 111 tables, 77 figures, 79 plates. A\$33.00 set, paper.

Reviewed by Janet Davidson, National Museum of New Zealand

Few people have struggled through the ordeal of writing a Ph.D. thesis and then been willing to spend a further ten years completely rewriting it for publication in the light of criticisms of the original work. Jens Poulsen did this, and the result is both a major "contribution to the prehistory of the Tongan Islands" (the title of the original thesis) and an important assessment of the methodology adopted.

The fieldwork took place in 1963-1964 and the thesis was submitted three years later (Poulsen 1967). On the basis of his excavations in six pottery-bearing midden sites and a small number of radiocarbon dates, Poulsen developed a chronology for Tongan ceramics in which pottery manufacture and use appeared to have lasted from first settlement, about three thousand years ago, almost to European contact. On the basis of another excavation in the same part of Tongatapu where Poulsen had worked, and a few more radiocarbon dates, Groube (1971) proposed a drastic revision of the Tongan sequence. Groube argued that some of Poulsen's radiocarbon dates actually dated unrecognized recent disturbances in the predominantly early deposits. Groube's description

of Poulsen's excavation methods as rapid and arbitrary cast doubt on the contexts not merely of the radiocarbon samples, but of the finds themselves.

Poulsen accepted the reinterpretation of his radiocarbon dates (although one remains anomalous) and undertook a major revision of his entire work. Thus, although this publication largely follows the structure of the original thesis, most of it has been completely rewritten. Some of the original appendixes have been retained and some new ones have been substituted or added. In the course of the revision, stratigraphy and features have been reconsidered in the light of the original field drawings (which must have been very detailed); problems of disturbance have been explored through the study of joining pottery fragments; aspects of the pottery analysis have been revised. All assumptions are scrutinized, and the possibility of disturbance is constantly considered. At times the point is labored, but this is understandable, and the final result is a much more confident statement about the culture and economy of the Lapita period in Tonga.

The revision was largely completed by the late 1970s. Unfortunately, there was then a very long delay before publication. Although there have been minor updates in that time, the comparative sections do not take account of some important work that has appeared more recently. This weakens the force of some of the discussion.

The publication follows the normal path of an excavation report. The sites and excavations are described. There are chapters on pottery analysis, the nature of Tongan pottery, and its external relationships. Two further chapters explore material culture and technology, and habitat and economy.

The excavations yielded a large quantity of predominantly small potsherds, restricting opportunities for actual vessel reconstruction. The analysis is an attribute study of more than seven thousand rims and decorated sherds, of which the rims proved more sensitive chronological indicators. The publication demonstrates quite clearly that despite the amount of disturbance of the deposits, and the method of excavation by arbitrary levels, a useful ceramic sequence based on statistical trends has been established. Indeed, other workers have long recognized the validity of Poulsen's sequence. It is fascinating to see just how effectively the statistical trends seem to resist disruption by stratigraphic disturbance. The strength of Poulsen's analysis is in his development of ceramic sequence suitable for assemblages of small potsherds. His treatment of vessel form, the decoration of whole pots, and the technology of pottery production is limited.

Poulsen's mastery of his own pottery data has enabled him to write an impressive chapter on the external relationships of the Tongan pottery, using whatever information was available from other published excavations. He focuses on the paradox of regional divergence in pottery development in western Polynesia and Fiji despite a common trend towards simplification, and identifies an interesting parallel between Tongatapu and Futuna.

The much smaller numbers of other artifact categories mean that their chronological position within the sequence covered by the excavations is less secure. Once again, possible sources of error and confusion are exhaustively canvassed. Despite the problems of disturbance and the relatively small samples, some suggestions about differential activities within the sites can be made on the basis of artifact distribution. The excavations yielded a wealth of artifacts of many categories, notably adzes and personal ornaments. All are described and illustrated in detail and comparisons are sought both west and east of Tonga.

The final chapter describes the content of shell samples and the relatively small amount of bone recovered. The evolution of the lagoon at Tongatapu and the effects of human exploitation of shellfish are discussed, and the question of changing patterns of settlement and subsistence is reviewed.

There is no concluding chapter. Important comments about the position of the Tongan Lapita within a wider framework can be found in various places throughout the volume, and it is a pity that the author did not feel able to take the final step and make the major statement about Lapita that seems almost possible from the strong base of this rich Tongan material. Perhaps the problem is that any such statement written in the late 1970s would seem inadequate in the late 1980s, and there is now too much new material to take into account.

The thesis-like form of the publication has resulted in some awkward features. Cross-references in the text are to numbered sections and subsections of chapters, but these numbers do not appear in the text: their location must be discovered by consulting the table of contents. Figure and plate series are separately numbered but interspersed, and again a particular figure or plate must be found by consulting the list of contents. The editorial standard is quite high. There are few typographical errors and, considering the enormous amount of detail, relatively few slips of the type where *oven p* in the text appears as *oven q* on the relevant figure.

When Poulsen's thesis first became available to archaeologists working in Tonga and adjoining regions, problems over dating and uncer-

tainty over the extent of the disturbance led to its being undervalued. Twenty years later its merits are much more obvious. It has not been superseded by other detailed studies, published or in thesis form. The wealth of material and the detailed description of context and method, which were features of the original work, are enhanced by the honest and painstaking reassessment of assumptions and conclusions. There will always be some critics who will quarrel with the excavation strategy, but most will admit that the end result of the study is not merely acceptable, but a notable contribution to Lapita studies and to Polynesian prehistory.

REFERENCES

Groube, L. M.

- 1971 "Tonga, Lapita Pottery, and Polynesian Origins." *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 80:278-316.

Poulsen, J.

- 1967 "A Contribution to the Prehistory of the Tongan Islands." 2 vols. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.