Petroglyphs on the Rock of Rah, Vanuatu

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Abstract

This article is for an audience interested in the ancient history of Oceania, in particular an audience who like myself are interested in the art and interpretation of motifs used in art by ancient cultures. Questions have previously been raised about potential habitation of Melanesia predating the first recorded Lapita inhabitants who came from Asia. It is my aim to bring to the attention of the reader a potential questioning of the chronology of civilisation in this part of the Pacific.

In July 2019, on the island of Rah, part of the Banks Island group in northern Vanuatu, I have found volcanic rocks containing tool sharpening marks, as well as numerous carvings and iconography that do not conform to the known carvings of the early Lapita inhabitants of the Vanuatu islands. These carvings are interesting from three points of view; their artistic imagery, their archaeological significance, and their provenance; who put them there, who carved them, and why.

Introduction

The geographic division of Oceania is broadly divided in two; Near Oceania and remote Oceania. The gap between the main Solomon Islands and Eastern Solomons is the dividing line between the two, with Vanuatu falling East of this line; hence becoming a part of Remote Oceania (Walter and Sheppard, 2017). The Vanuatu archipelago has been described as one of the least understood regions of the Pacific (Kirch, 2017). Some archaeologists believe there is a serious gap in knowledge in this area due to insufficient archaeological sampling (Spriggs, 2010).

Previous archaeological work in Vanuatu has not found evidence of habitation predating Lapita arrival from Asia. Lapita arrived on the islands around 3000BP (Walter & Sheppard 2017). Skoglund et al. (Skoglund et al., 2016) state that the people of Vanuatu are descended from Lapita who came out of areas which are now Taiwan and perhaps the northern Philippines. They travelled past places where people were already living, but when they got to Vanuatu there was nobody there. Vanuatu is the most linguistically diverse country per head of population on earth (Lynch & Crowley 2001; Tryon 1996); it is unknown to what extent early habitation has influenced current languages, or if there was any influence from pre-Lapita arrivals.

Findings

On a recent trip to Rah with its population of 189 and a land area of 500 m^2, Cecil my host/guide and I ventured into the centre of the island to the Rock of Rah. "Rock of Rah" is a name given by Europeans to a volcanic rocky outcrop on the island of Rah. Beneath the rock is a cave that was once used as a bank by the local villagers and also used by people from neighbouring islands. The story about the cave told to me by my guide is that people would deposit their valuables in the cave without the fear of anything being stolen, because the cave had a guardian snake spirit that lived in the cave. The snake spirit knew intuitively who the owner of each valuable was and prevented anything from being stolen. I was also told that long before the

snake spirit inhabited the cave there was a giant who lived there, but had to be killed because he ran out of food and began to eat some of the villagers.

Photo 1

In 1972 a huge earthquake fiercely shook the little island and many fragments broke away from the Rock of Rah, reducing the size of the cave entrance and dislodging the peak of the rock. The top of the rock can still be seen today but it lies 40m beneath its original position. This rock fall has revealed a series of petroglyphs at ground level that once adorned the face and peak of the current 40m high rock.

Photo 2

These randomly arranged stones have directional marks forming an overall theme. Some grooves appear to resemble tool sharpening lines, however many show depictions of a common motif with petroglyphs on both sides of a conical formed fragment of rock,these may have been the pinnacle of the Rock of Rah. This would have given the peak of the rock a cathedral like appearance. The majority of marks made on all the fallen rocks, and other rocks discovered thus far in the area around the rock fall, are of the same theme. These rocks have marks made at the base of a concave and smoothed depression.

Photo 3

Beyond the perimeter of the rock fall, extending out 20m to 30m from the fall rubble, there are dozens of volcanic boulders more rounded and heavily worked with petroglyphs and cupules. One rock in particular I have named the West Gate Stone because of its positioning. The West Gate stone is broken in two and covered in petroglyphs. Once again, similar to the carvings found on the rocks in the rock fall, each individual carving in the West Gate stone has been carefully scalloped to form a concave depression with groove marks at the base. I believe the West Gate Stone once stood on its now west facing end, and the break has occurred on its fall. When the two pieces of the broken West Gate stone are measured as one it has a length of 320cm, a height of 275cm, and is 45cm deep. What also makes me think the West Gate stone was once standing is the fact that it has a perfectly straight base with its opposite end bevelled. Feeling underneath the "Stele" it would appear that there are carvings on its underside as well. When polished and chalked the depressions give a convex appearance rather than concave as they actually are.

Photos 4 and 5

Moving from the west to north of the island I discovered a very large polished boulder that I have named the Mother Stone. Like the other carved rocks it is volcanic in nature but much smoother than any of the rest. The Mother Stone measures approximately 360cm in length and is 150cm wide, it has both groove markings and cupules. Some of the cupules are joined together with the largest measuring 35cm across and 23cm deep, this largest cupule can hold approximately 7 litres of water before it starts to spill into the next cupule. The front of the Mother Stone (the longest side) faces directly north toward the island of Motalava.

Photo 6

Discussion

On my return to the Capital Port Vila I spent the day at the national museum and the archival library searching for clues to identify my recent discoveries. Unfortunately, I could not find evidence of anything similar to the petroglyphs on Rah. Further research led me to find a publication of a similar style of Petroglyphs found on an island in the Marquesas some 5800km to the East of Vanuatu (Chavaillon and Olivier, 2007).

This opens up a mystery; the carved rocks on Rah do not have Lapita style carvings, the Lapita are not known to have visited the Marquesas, and the carvings of the rocks on Rah are very similar to the styles found on the Marquesas. Who carved these rocks? When? Do these carvings predate Lapita arrival on Rah? These are questions that require consideration and further archaeological research.

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