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# Lapita before Lapita: The Early Story of the Meyer/O'Reilly Watom Island Archaeological Collection

EMILIE DOTTE-SAROUT  AND HILARY HOWES 

## ABSTRACT

Seventeen years before the first excavation at the archaeological site of Lapita (New Caledonia) in 1952, two men of the cloth met and exchanged artefacts, notes and ideas to produce some of the earliest analyses of what later became known as Lapita pottery. Otto Meyer (1877–1937), a Sacred Heart Missionary stationed on Watom Island, described chance finds of ‘prehistoric pottery’ in 1909, following these with more systematic excavations. Patrick O’Reilly (1900–88), a Marist Father associated with the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, drew on Meyer’s work, his own extensive bibliographical knowledge and his observations during a one-year mission in the region in 1934–5 to present part of the collection in France, laying the ground for further theories. The publication, interpretation and curation of the Meyer/O’Reilly collection represents an exemplary journey through the history of Pacific archaeology and the emergence of the Lapita paradigm. We consider the context of Meyer’s encounter with O’Reilly, the ideas both men advanced in analysing the collection and the site, and how these resonated during the development of Pacific and Lapita archaeology throughout the first half of the 20th century.

**Key words:** Lapita, New Britain, Watom Island, archaeology, Otto Meyer, Patrick O’Reilly

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## INTRODUCTION

In Pacific archaeology today, ‘Lapita’ evokes the first archaeological signature of human presence in the islands of Remote Oceania (the last region of Oceania to have been populated, east of the Solomon Islands). This appellation refers to the eponymous archaeological site (Xapeta’a, New Caledonia) where the distinctive pottery type associated with the archaeological Lapita material culture complex was first extensively recovered and analysed by Edward W. Gifford and Richard Shutler, Jr in 1952.<sup>1</sup> However, 17 years before the first excavation at the ‘Lapita’ site, two men of the cloth, one German, the other French, met on the island of New Britain where they exchanged artefacts, notes and ideas to produce some of the earliest collections and analyses of what later became known as Lapita pottery. Otto Meyer (1877–1937), a Catholic missionary of the Sacred Heart stationed on Watom Island in the Bismarck Archipelago (Figure 1), described chance finds of ‘prehistoric pottery’ in the international journal *Anthropos* in 1909,<sup>2</sup> following these with more systematic excavations in 1910, 1922 and 1924. Patrick O’Reilly (1900–88), a Marist Father associated with the Musée de l’Homme (MH) in Paris, brought back to France a large collection of artefacts, including many dentate-stamped decorated potsherds discovered by Meyer, after a one-year mission in the Solomon Islands and New Britain in 1934–35 (Figure 1). O’Reilly then drew on Meyer’s work, his own bibliographical knowledge of the Pacific and his personal observations in the field to present part of the Watom collection in France and advance ideas about the region’s prehistory throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

The story of the Meyer/O’Reilly Watom collection in Paris, encompassing several well-known ‘Lapita’ pottery sherds but also other types of artefacts, and its communication, interpretation and museum curation during the five decades that followed the discovery of the first potsherds offers an exemplary journey through the history of Pacific archaeology and the emergence of the Lapita paradigm, subsequently consolidated during the 1960s. By ‘Lapita paradigm’ or ‘Lapita model’, we mean the identification of a specific type of ceramic and associated designs with a broadly homogeneous material culture complex signalling the movement of people (long implicitly seen as homogeneous as well) between different islands of the Pacific. This definition is intentionally general enough to encompass understandings of it before and after the development of concepts such as Near and Remote Oceania, and before the advent of carbon-14 and DNA analyses. We place the first definite determination of such a paradigm in 1961, with Jack Golson’s paper summarizing the work done in the archaeology of the southwest Pacific to date and clearly articulating how specific ‘incised’ pottery types, ‘non-Melanesian’ quadrangular

<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Gifford and Richard Shutler, *Archaeological Excavations in New Caledonia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956); also see Christophe Sand and Patrick Kirch, *L’expédition archéologique d’Edward W. Gifford et Richard Shutler Jr. en Nouvelle-Calédonie au cours de l’année 1952* (Nouméa: Département Archéologie, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> O. Meyer, ‘Funde prähistorischer Töpferei und Steinmesser auf Vuatom, Bismarck-Archipel’, *Anthropos* 4:1 (1909): 251–2.



FIGURE 1: Map of Papua New Guinea showing the main locations discussed. Base map produced with the permission of CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

adzes and similar dates for their appearance in the islands demonstrated ‘a community of cultural tradition’.<sup>3</sup> Based on this, Golson proposed

for the S.W. Pacific some early community of culture linking New Caledonia, Tonga and Samoa, antedating (on present evidence) the ‘Melanesian’ cultures of the first and ancestral to the historic Western Polynesian culture of the other two,<sup>4</sup>

adding that finds from Sigatoka in Fiji and ‘Vuatom’ in Papua New Guinea supported this idea.<sup>5</sup> The history of the Meyer/O’Reilly archaeological collection from Watom and of its interpretations prior to the development, during the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>6</sup> of a

<sup>3</sup> Jack Golson, ‘Report on New Zealand, New Caledonia, Western Polynesia and Fiji’, *Asian Perspectives* 5:1 (1961): 166–76. This report appeared in a special issue synthesizing work done in the pre-history of the Pacific and Australia.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 176.

<sup>6</sup> Especially through a series of influential publications by Jack Golson and Roger Green; see Christophe Sand, ‘Oceanic Origins: The History of Research on the Lapita Tradition’, in *Lapita. Oceanic*

more precise concept of a ‘Lapita cultural complex’ demonstrates how today’s Lapita paradigm is rooted in early perceptions of the region’s past, such as those presented here.

We consider how the site of Watom was excavated in the first place, how Meyer collected the artefacts, how he gave part of the collection to O’Reilly, who brought it back to France, and what kinds of interpretations both men advanced when presenting the collection and the site. These different phases are analysed in their intellectual and religious context, in relation to networks, publication controls and expected norms. We present the main aspects of the Watom collection and consider its subsequent fragmentation. Finally, we reflect on how these first analyses of a ‘pre-Lapita paradigm’ Lapita site with its artefacts illuminate the accelerated development of Pacific archaeology during the first half of the 20th century.

### OTTO MEYER ON WATOM ISLAND

Rudolf Otto Meyer (Figure 2) was born in 1877 in the German city of Oldenburg, but grew up in Kleve (Clevés), where his father was employed as senior teacher at the local agricultural college. He was confirmed into the Catholic faith in Antwerp in 1890 and commenced his novitiate in Salzburg in 1896. In 1899 he relocated to Hiltrup (now a suburb of Münster), where the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, originally a French order, had recently established a German province and mission house. Here he took his final vows, and in 1902 was sent as a missionary to the Vicariate of Rabaul. Watom Island, just off New Britain’s northern coast, was entrusted to his care, and he remained here, apart from a year’s home leave in 1912–13, until shortly before his death in Brisbane in 1937.<sup>7</sup>

Meyer’s passion for the natural sciences was evident even before his departure for Rabaul.<sup>8</sup> From his first days on Watom Island, he also displayed an interest in ethnography and linguistics.<sup>9</sup> However, his initial discovery of what would later be termed Lapita pottery was a matter of chance:

At the beginning of the year [1909] terrible north-westerly weather prevailed here [...] the current flows past around five minutes away from my station and forms a small counter-current in the

*Ancestors. Ancêtres Océaniens*, ed. C. Sand and S. Bedford (Paris: Somogy-MQB-JC, 2010); Sand and Kirch, *L’expédition archéologique*, 24–5.

<sup>7</sup> E. Stresemann, ‘P. Otto Meyer†’, *Journal für Ornithologie* 86:1 (1938): 166–9; Hermann Zwinge, ‘P. Otto Meyer, M.S.C.†’, *Hiltruper Monatshefte zu Ehren Unserer Lieben Frau vom heiligsten Herzen Jesu* 55 (1938): 79–80; Otto Meyer personnel file, Archiv der norddeutschen Provinz der Herz Jesu Missionare Münster-Hiltrup, Germany (MSC-Archiv), Sig. 565b.

<sup>8</sup> See Hilary Howes, ‘Early German-Language Analyses of Potsherds from New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago’, *Journal of Pacific Archaeology* 8:1 (2017): 37.

<sup>9</sup> For a list of Meyer’s publications, see Anon., ‘Liste der Bücher und Veröffentlichungen der Missionare vom hlst. Herzen Jesu im Vikariat Rabaul von 1894–1931’, in *Pioniere der Südsee: Werden und Wachsen der Herz-Jesu-Mission von Rabaul zum Goldenen Jubiläum 1882–1932*, ed. Josef Hüskes (Hiltrup: Missionare vom hlst. Herzen Jesu, 1932), 212.

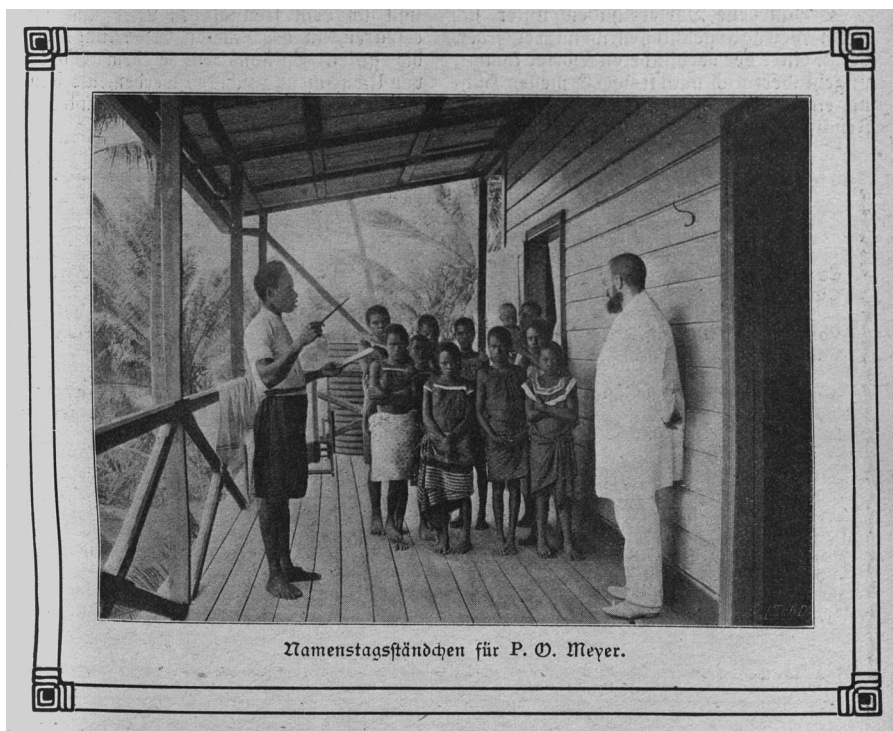


FIGURE 2: 'Name day serenade for Fr. O. Meyer'. Anon., 'Nachrichten aus den anderen Missionsgebieten', Monatshefte. Vereinsorgan der Erzbruderschaft U. L. Frau vom hlst. Herzen und der Genossenschaft der Missionare vom hlst. Herzen Jesu (Hiltruper Monatshefte) 32 (1915): 211. Reproduction courtesy Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.

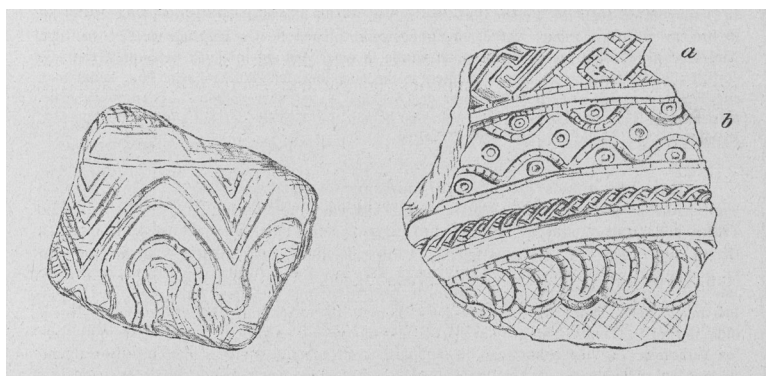


FIGURE 3: 'Two fragments of vessels similar to pots or pitchers'. Meyer, 'Funde prähistorischer Töpferei', 251. Reproduction courtesy National Library of Australia.

quiet bay of Reber. Thanks to this counter-current, and to the rain, I discovered two fragments of vessels similar to pots or pitchers [Figure 3] [...] Both fragments are made of black earth. The first



piece is well preserved and smooth on the inside; the figures on the outside appear to have been engraved. The second, with completely different markings, is quite heavily weathered and abraded.<sup>10</sup>

Later the same year, Meyer confirmed that he had ‘found a third’ piece of pottery, and hoped that ‘the north-westerly currently raging’ would ‘bring to light several more’.<sup>11</sup> He was not disappointed:

The north-westerly wind did indeed bring to light numerous fragments of prehistoric pottery vessels, but only three with markings [...] Other pieces, from the uppermost rim, are toothed or fluted [...] A few are brick red, the majority black or grey [...] I have now found the site whence they all originate. Some years ago I had a pit some 2 m deep dug beside my house. The pieces (without markings) lie in the earth most recently cast up, those with markings somewhat further [away] and were probably washed by the rain as far as the [sea]shore.<sup>12</sup>

Meyer added that ‘the most recent excavations’ had also revealed ‘snail shells and coconut shells’.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that he had undertaken a deliberate investigation of the site, rather than merely relying on the weather to expose further items. A third contribution to *Anthropos* in 1910 confirms that he had continued to investigate, assisted by local people:

I would like [...] to communicate to you the results of the most recent excavations I arranged [...] more pieces of smooth pottery vessels were dug up. Amongst these were several with large figures superimposed or glued on, such as I had not found previously [...] Most pieces were located only ½ m deep, others up to 2 m deep.<sup>14</sup>

Meyer described other artefacts unearthed during the excavations: ‘partially polished’ and ‘almost complete Trochus arm rings’, ‘a fish hook made of Trochus’, ‘small, still sharp pieces of obsidian’, ‘a small stone axe, of a kind still in use until a few decades

<sup>10</sup> Meyer, ‘Funde prähistorischer Töpferei’, 251–2. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are by Hilary Howes.

<sup>11</sup> O. Meyer, ‘Nachtrag’, *Anthropos* 4:4 (1909): 1093.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Meyer’s description of the location of the decorated potsherds here is ambiguous: *etwas weiter* (‘somewhat further’) could mean either ‘somewhat further away’ or ‘somewhat further down’. His stratigraphic profile (Figure 9) for Maravot, the site closest to his mission station, shows that the decorated potsherds were indeed found at a greater depth than the undecorated potsherds. However, in the context of the sentence, ‘somewhat further’ suggests to me that he was in fact describing the location of the potsherds at the time of his discovery of the site from which they had originated: the undecorated potsherds were still lying in the earth most recently removed from the pit, whereas the decorated potsherds had been washed by the rain somewhat further away from the excavation site, as far as the seashore.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1094.

<sup>14</sup> O. Meyer, ‘Funde von Menschen- und Tierknochen, von prähistorischer Töpferei und Steinwerkzeugen auf Vatom, Bismarck-Archipel’, *Anthropos* 5:4 (1910): 1160–1.

ago', 'semicircular sharp stones', and 'stone knives [ ... ] used during Iniet gatherings'. He also listed skeletal and faunal remains found, including human bones and teeth, bird bones, pig teeth and tusks, fish jaws and seven genera of 'snail shells and seashells'.<sup>15</sup>

Although Meyer did not publish again on the results of his excavations, he continued to pursue them over the following years. His 1910 article stated that he was 'sending the entire yield of pottery vessels to the museum in Hiltrup' – that is, the in-house museum of the Sacred Heart Mission House, which he and two fellow students had established around 1899 with the encouragement of their provincial superior, Father Hubert Linckens MSC (Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis/Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus).<sup>16</sup> By 1912 he had acquired over 100 further potsherds, enough to supply both the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne and the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin with substantial collections during his year of home leave.<sup>17</sup> At this time he also apparently donated a small collection of 25 sherds that entered the Institut de Paleontologie Humaine in Paris in 1914, later finding its way to the MH in 1973 (finally transferred to the Musée du Quai Branly) (Figure 4).<sup>18</sup>

Details of Meyer's excavations following his return to Watom are documented in a series of unpublished papers donated to the MH by O'Reilly in 1956 and currently held in the archives of the MQB-JC. We discuss these papers in more detail below. Briefly, they confirm that Meyer conducted further excavations near his station in Reber in 1922 and 1924, and depict stratigraphic profiles for three sites: Maravot, Kainapirina and Vunaburigai.

## PATRICK O'REILLY AND THE 1934 'O'REILLY EXPEDITION' OF THE MUSÉE DE L'HOMME

Father O'Reilly (Figure 5), a well-known and respected figure in the community of French *Océanistes* and Pacific scholars in general, is recognized as the most

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1161; Johann Braam, 'Das Hiltruper Missionsmuseum. 1933–1941. Ein Katalog mit natur-, völker- und missionskundlichen Notizen. I. Band (Schrank A-L)', 1943, MSC-Archiv, Sig. 1267a.

<sup>17</sup> The Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum currently holds 67 potsherds donated by Meyer, the Ethnological Museum in Berlin 60. O. Meyer to Wilhelm Foy, 30 September 1912, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt, Cologne (RJM), Sig. 1912/18; O. Meyer to Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, undated [January 1913], Acta betreffend die Erwerbung ethnologischer Gegenstände aus Australien, Vol. 24: Vom 1. Oktober 1911 bis Ende 1914, Pars IB, Ethnologisches Museum (Archiv), Berlin, E No. 20/13.

<sup>18</sup> Collection 72.73.334, MQB-JC. The MH original log indicates that after being transferred to the Musée d'Archéologie Nationale de St Germain (incorporating a special series of 'comparative archaeology' items from non-European cultures) the sherds entered the collection of Serge Daget, an Africanist working at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (MNAO) in the mid 20th century, who donated them to the MH in 1973.





FIGURE 4: Examples of sherds from MQB-JC collection 72.73.334 (‘Daget Collection’; see note 16). Note the label ‘Nouvelle Poméranie’ on the insides of the sherds. Photos: Emilie Dotte-Sarout. Produced with the permission of the MQB-JC.

erudite bibliographer of the Pacific throughout the 20th century, the majority of his 300 or more publications being reviews or annotated bibliographies of Oceania that are still useful scholarly references. He is also renowned for his critical role within the Société des Océanistes in Paris, and for his involvement with cultural heritage in Tahiti throughout the 1950s and 1960s. We investigate here his early contributions to Pacific archaeology through his involvement with the Watom excavation collection.

Born in 1900 in a small village in Meuse, northeastern France, Patrick O’Reilly was the fourth-generation descendant of an Irish sea captain whose young son migrated to France at the end of the 18th century. After spending most of his childhood on the family estate in Normandy and receiving a solid Catholic education, O’Reilly had to interrupt his intended university studies at the Sorbonne and Écoles Nationale des Chartes to complete 18 months’ military service in 1920. While in Paris, the young O’Reilly had stayed at the Marist Fathers’ hostel for students; the very one – ‘104, rue de Vaugirard’ – where he would be appointed chaplain from 1931. O’Reilly entered the novitiate of the Marists at La Neylière, near Lyon, after his military service and was ordained priest in 1928.<sup>19</sup> This choice may indeed have resulted from a religious vocation, but it also appears to have followed some failures in pursuing his original academic path, while representing a potential way to satisfy a long-standing

<sup>19</sup> Sonia Fassael, *Itinéraires insulaires. Le Père Patrick O’Reilly, sm* (Nouméa: Le Rocher à la Voile, 2002), 18–36; Hugh Laracy, *Watriama and Co: Further Pacific Islands Portraits* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013), 259–60.



FIGURE 5: Father O'Reilly on his Vespa (late 1960s). Jean Guiart, ed., *Patrick O'Reilly: Carnet de route océanien* (Nouméa: Le Rocher à la Voile, 2012). Reproduction courtesy Jean Guiart and Sonia Faessel.

romantic interest in 'distant sunny tropics, savages with feathers, precipices and long walks through strange civilizations'.<sup>20</sup>

Immediately after returning to Paris and settling at 'the 104', O'Reilly started following the training provided by the newly founded Institut d'Ethnologie de l'Université de Paris, led by Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, then director of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero (MET). He received the institute's diploma in 1932, and developed during this period a specific interest in Oceania and missionary enterprises in this region, as evidenced in his first publications.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Rivet was seeking new recruits to expand both the MET's collections and knowledge

<sup>20</sup> Patrick O'Reilly, *Mon Ami Gilbert l'Africain* (Dijon: limited edition, 1942), 19, cited in Faessel, *Itinéraires*, 36. All translations from French are by Emilie Dotte-Sarout.

<sup>21</sup> Laracy, *Watriama*, 258; Hugh Laracy, 'Bibliographie des Ecrits du Père O'Reilly', in Faessel, *Itinéraires*, 159–79.

about Oceanic cultures and their place in human history. Between 1932 and 1934, at exactly the same time as the MET's well-known 'Métraux-Lavachery mission' to Easter Island, Rivet organized an expedition to the Northern Solomon Islands by O'Reilly.<sup>22</sup> It was Rivet who obtained a grant from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and secured the Marist Congregation's authorization to send O'Reilly on a one-year expedition to the islands of Buka and Bougainville (then part of the Australian-administered Territory of New Guinea) (Figure 1).<sup>23</sup> The ethnographer-priest was to collect artefacts and ethnographic observations to provide the material for his doctoral thesis.<sup>24</sup> O'Reilly never completed the latter, but did bring back an extensive collection of over 2000 objects with numerous notes and a documentary film.<sup>25</sup> He collected a substantial portion of this material indirectly, through Marist and other missionary networks in the islands.

O'Reilly based himself at the Marist mission at Buka Passage (Bougainville) and relied on the local knowledge of the islands' missionaries, abandoning his original idea of 'retiring alone in a village, living as close as possible to the indigenous people'.<sup>26</sup> By 1934, the Marists had been present on Bougainville for 33 years, and thanks to the missionary-ethnographer tradition of the time,<sup>27</sup> their manuscript records and artefact collections represented an exceptionally rich and detailed anthropological corpus. O'Reilly was convinced that missionaries were 'forefront ethnographers' able to provide essential field data to armchair 'comparatist ethnologists'.<sup>28</sup> He also visited missionaries from other congregations, at least two of whom donated items

<sup>22</sup> Both Métraux and O'Reilly left France in March 1934. On the Lavachery-Métraux expedition, see Christine Laurière, 'Fictions d'une mission. Île de Pâques 1934-1935', *L'Homme* 3-4:175-6 (2005): 321-43.

<sup>23</sup> O'Reilly left France in March 1934 and returned in October 1935, but was in the Australian Territory of New Guinea mainly from June 1934 to July 1935.

<sup>24</sup> Faessel, *Itinéraires*, 45; Laracy, *Watriama*, 261-2.

<sup>25</sup> Laracy (*Watriama*) writes '4000' objects. However, the MQB-JC, which inherited all the 'ethnographic' Pacific collections of the MH, together with those of the MNAO, currently lists fewer than 2000 individual items collected by O'Reilly in the Solomon Islands or New Guinea area, in addition to the documentary film. O'Reilly placed some parts of his collections, including notes, in the Marist Musée de la Neylière, donated others to the Ethnographic Museum of Lateran, Vatican, and kept others again privately at 'the 104'; all of these latter objects were lost after his death except for a unique album of photographs and drawings by Bougainville islander artist Somuk, recently acquired by the MQB-JC (Nicolas Garnier). In the records of his exports from the Solomons, kept now at the MQB-JC, O'Reilly clearly stated that some items were to be kept separately for his own private collection; it is unclear if some Watom remains are curated at La Neylière today, but the Vatican collection does not contain any. Patrick O'Reilly, 'Description sommaire d'une collection d'objets ethnographiques de l'île de Bougainville', *Annali Lateranensi* 4 (1940): 163-98.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Patrick O'Reilly to his sister, 7 August 1934, cited in Faessel, *Itinéraires*, 48-9.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Harries, 'Anthropology', in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 238-60; John Cinnamon and Wendy Urban-Mead, 'Introduction: Missionaries and Ethnography', *Le Fait Missionnaire* 19:1 (2006): 7-13.

<sup>28</sup> O'Reilly, 'Ce que l'Ethnologie attend des missionnaires', *Études Missionnaires* 2:1 (1934): 1-17.

recovered from archaeological excavations: Reverend Arthur Henry Voyce, from the Solomon Islands Methodist Mission,<sup>29</sup> and Father Otto Meyer.

In his travel journal, O'Reilly mentions meeting with 'Otto Meier' over three days, on 22, 23 and 24 June 1935, in 'Vuna Pope' (East New Britain).<sup>30</sup> There is no record of a trip to Watom Island or Rabaul. The dates and location of this encounter suggest that O'Reilly met with Meyer as he commenced his return trip to France. Vunapope, some 30 km south of Rabaul, had become the historical centre for the Catholic presence in New Guinea; it was also the administrative headquarters of the Sacred Heart Mission, and Meyer and his fellow missionaries visited every 3–4 months to participate in regular theological conferences.<sup>31</sup>

In his journal, O'Reilly noted, 'Pottery from excavations by F.O. Meier of which he gave me all that I want to take away'.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to know how many items O'Reilly originally took; possibly they travelled back to France directly with him. O'Reilly was known to keep some artefacts 'privately' and, as he noted himself in his very first publication about his Solomon Islands collection, in 1940:

The most important material collected was naturally sent to Paris, towards what was then the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero* [...] currently under reorganisation under the title of *Musée de l'Homme* [...] [which] explains why these collections have not yet been subjected to a methodical study.<sup>33</sup>

The MQB-JC's 'O'Reilly Solomon Islands expedition' collection currently contains 51 sherds identified as 'coming from excavations in Bismarck Archipelago, New Britain, Watom Island'. This seems to correspond to the number of entries recorded in the MH's original log in 1940,<sup>34</sup> although a presentation of the collection at the MH the same year mentions 75 sherds.<sup>35</sup> The collection contains large, highly decorated sherds, mainly with dentate-stamped decorations, including some with lime

<sup>29</sup> Around 60 items in the collection 71.1934.188 from the Mission O'Reilly to the Solomon Islands, MQB-JC; original forms from the MH (received in 1934 at the MET, entered in the records of the MH in 1940). The collection (mainly ceramic sherds) is from an excavation in 'an ancient village' on the islet of Teop, northeastern Bougainville, and its history is under further investigation.

<sup>30</sup> Travel journal of Patrick O'Reilly, 22, 23 and 24 June 1935, citations communicated by Nicolas Garnier to Emilie Dotte-Sarout, May 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Ischler, 'Die Zentrale Vunapope', in *Pioniere der Südsee: Werden und Wachsen der Herz-Jesu-Mission von Rabaul zum Goldenen Jubiläum 1882–1932*, ed. Josef Hüskes (Hiltrup: Missionare vom hlst. Herzen Jesu, 1932), 180–4.

<sup>32</sup> Citation from O'Reilly's travel journal, 22–24 June 1935, as communicated by Nicolas Garnier to Emilie Dotte-Sarout, May 2017.

<sup>33</sup> O'Reilly, 'Description', 4, 163.

<sup>34</sup> MQB-JC collection number 71.1934.188, 'Mission O'Reilly to the Solomon Islands'.

<sup>35</sup> 'Pottery found in Watom (New Guinea)', manuscript, archives associated with O'Reilly collections at MQB-JC, D001126/35983; see also extracts translated as 'Father Patrick O'Reilly: Extract from Communication on the subject of the pottery at the meeting of the "Centre des Études Océaniques" 9 February 1940', in Dimitri Anson, 'Appendix 1. The Archaeological

filling (Figure 6). Interestingly, O'Reilly also gathered non-ceramic remains found by Meyer during these same excavations: lithic pieces, bones and wood charcoal fragments (subsequently misidentified as 'dark stone')<sup>36</sup> (Figure 7). Although the Hilstrup Mission Museum and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum also received non-ceramic items from Meyer, only O'Reilly's collection contains non-ceramic items clearly connected to Meyer's excavations.<sup>37</sup> O'Reilly also appears to have subsequently donated a set of documents relating to the initial analysis of the collection presented at the Centre des Études Océaniques du Musée de l'Homme (CEOMH) in 1940.<sup>38</sup> These are discussed below, together with an examination of Meyer's and O'Reilly's analyses of the Watom finds.

### FIRST ANALYSIS OF THE WATOM SITE AND ARTEFACTS: FROM MEYER'S REPORTS TO O'REILLY'S PRESENTATIONS

Meyer's reports consistently demonstrate a careful attention to detail. This is evident in his descriptions of the potsherds' physical properties – colour, size, thickness, ornamentation – and in his illustrations of individual potsherds, as well as his compilation of 'an overview of most of the motifs' (Figure 8). Equally characteristic is his interest in associating archaeological finds with current local practices. His first instinct on finding the initial two fragments was to seek local views on their nature and origin. He recounted that the 'natives' to whom he showed them 'could only respond to my questions by saying that the markings on them were probably made by *Pir*, the legendary person of their tales', but added that they could identify some of these markings by name: 'The natives recognize markings *a* and *b* as *daudaul* and *tutumu na bint'*' (see Figure 3 above).<sup>39</sup>

In his third report, Meyer interspersed descriptions of the various objects found with comments linking them to his observations of local customs. He noted, for example, that the 'front side' of the human teeth uncovered during the excavations

Excavations of Father Otto Meyer on Watom Island', in R.C. Green, 'An Introduction to Investigations on Watom Island, Papua New Guinea', *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology* 20 (2000): 23–5.

<sup>36</sup> Non-ceramic remains from collection 71.1934.188 identified as 'coming from excavations in Bismarck archipelago, New Britain, Watom Island': one vertebra, one fragment of faunal mandible, one fragment of shell armband, one fragment of shell adze, four 'remarkable' stones showing a pink, yellow or green-grey colour and some polishing, four whole or broken polished stone adzes or axes, one fragment of a possible container in tuff, two wood charcoal fragments (misidentified as 'dark stone' in the collection log).

<sup>37</sup> Meyer donated a string of shell money and a series of stone items associated with Iniet gatherings to the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum. He sent the Hilstrup Mission Museum various items, mostly ornithological specimens; Braam's 1943 catalogue also mentions two items displayed together with Meyer's potsherds, a stone axe blade from 'Vuatom' and a weight (sinker) used for fishing from New Britain, but it is unclear under what circumstances these were found. Meyer to Foy, 30 September 1912 and 28 December 1912, and to Unknown [Fritz Graebner?], 25 January 1913, RJM, Sig. 1912/18; Braam, 'Das Hilstruper Missionsmuseum', MSC-Archiv, Sig. 1267a.

<sup>38</sup> In 1956 according to the MH entry number.

<sup>39</sup> Meyer, 'Funde prähistorischer Töpferi', 251–2.



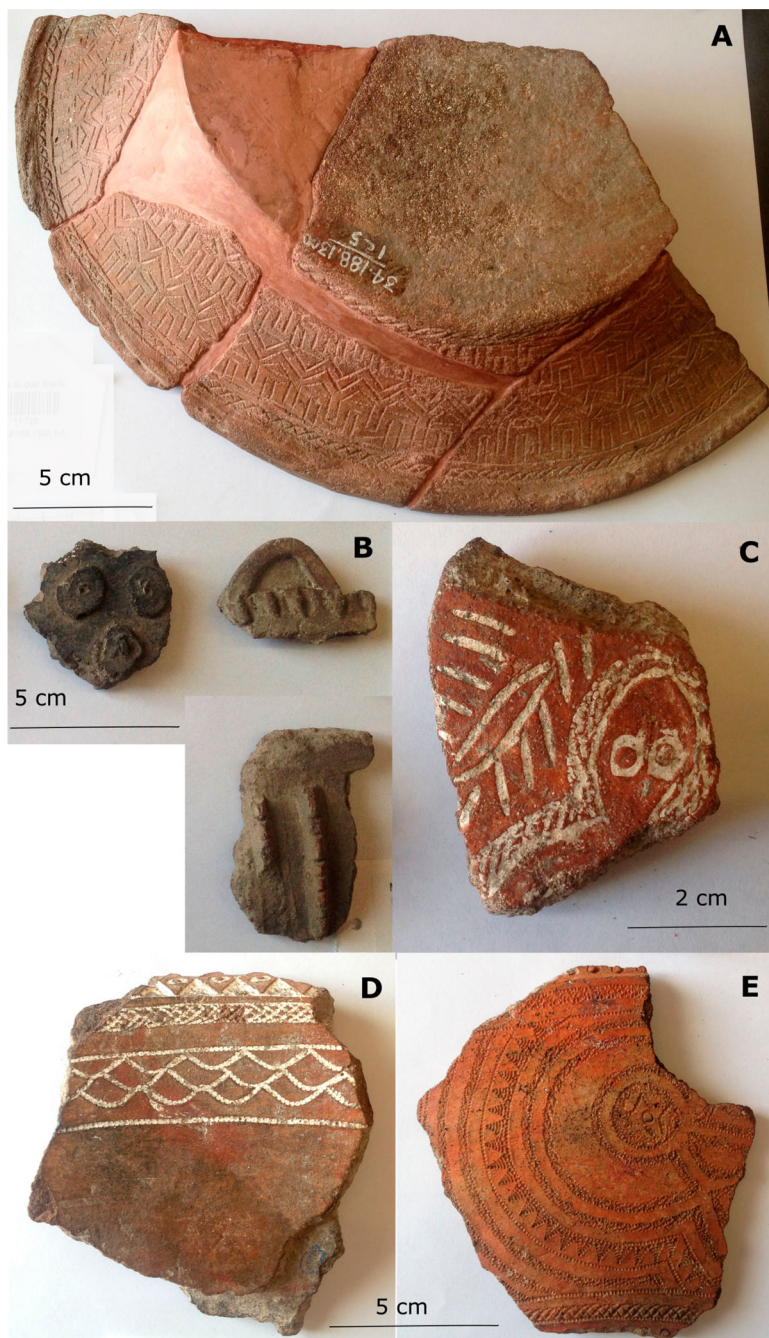


FIGURE 6: Remarkable sherds from MQB-JC collection 71.1934.188 'Mission O'Reilly to the Solomon Islands': (A) reconstructed bottom of dish from the original MH curation, richly decorated with incised drawings; (B) examples of pottery identified as 'Melanesian' types in the 1940 manuscript presented at the CEOMH; (C) the main sherd with the design interpreted as a 'snake head'; (D) example of lime-infilled decor; (E) example of dentate-stamped decor. Photos: Emilie Dotte-Sarout. Produced with the permission of the MQB-JC.





FIGURE 7: Non-ceramic remains from Meyer's excavations, brought back by O'Reilly to the MH (MQB-JC collection 71.1934.188 'Mission O'Reilly to the Solomon Islands'; also reported by Meyer in 1912 – see note 12); recorded as: (A) 'quadrangular adze fragment' typically referred to as 'Non-Melanesian' type by O'Reilly; (B) vertebra (unspecified) 'found in the layer of dark earth in conjunction with the decorated pottery'; (C) 'mandible fragment, found in a layer of dark earth in conjunction with the decorated pottery'; (D) 'fragment of arm-ring made of white shell'. Photos: Emilie Dotte-Sarout. Produced with the permission of the MQB-JC.

'was gleaming brown, perhaps previously blackened, as the people still do'. The fish jaws were identified as belonging to the family Pristipomatidae, 'species which today are caught with a large reef fish basket'. Of the seven mollusc genera found, Meyer recorded that 'Terebra shells [...] are not eaten nowadays', while 'Potamites shells' lived 'only in mangrove flats' and had to be 'obtained from Nakanai'.<sup>40</sup>

The detailed descriptions in Meyer's published reports contrast with a noticeable lack of hypothesis or speculation. Meyer offered few views on the nature of the excavation site(s), suggesting only that the 'snail shells and coconut shells' found might indicate the former presence of 'a rubbish heap', and none about the makers of the pots, where they might have come from or whether they had any connection to Watom Island's current inhabitants. What did it mean that particular faunal genera excavated were not available locally, or not currently used as food? Meyer drew no conclusions from these observations.

Probably this reticence was deliberate, adopted in deference to the wishes of Father Wilhelm Schmidt SVD (Societas Verbi Divini/Society of the Divine Word), an influential ethnologist and linguist and founding editor of *Anthropos*. In a 1905 circular announcing the journal's establishment, Schmidt argued strongly for missionaries'

<sup>40</sup> Meyer, 'Funde von Menschenknochen', 1160–1.

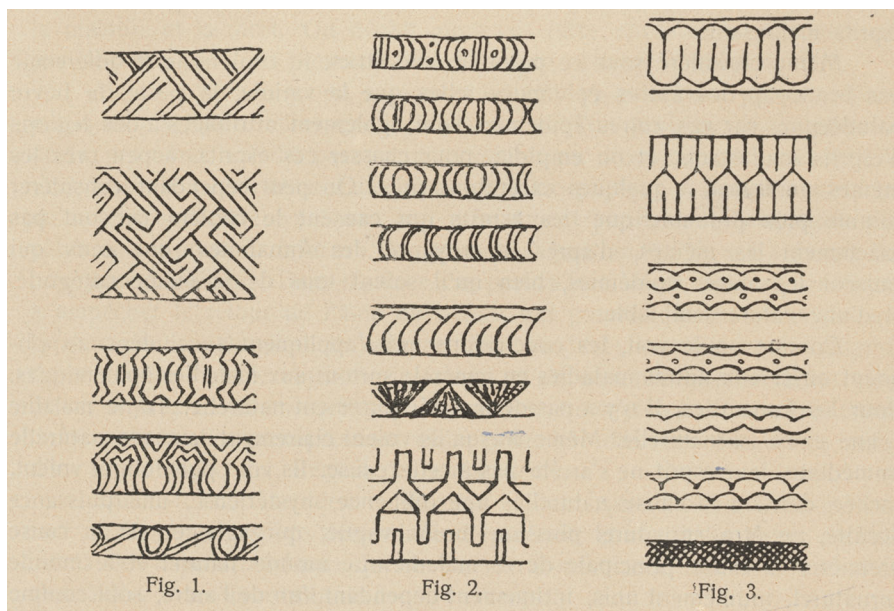


FIGURE 8: 'An overview of most of the motifs'. Meyer, 'Funde von Menschenknochen', 1160. Reproduction courtesy National Library of Australia.

capacity to contribute to the human sciences, but strictly delimited what he considered appropriate contributions:

The *real strength of missionaries* in the field of ethnology and linguistics lies in the incomparably favourable opportunity always to be able to observe the *facts in situ* [...] *it cannot so much be their task to proceed to wide-ranging comparisons [and] to postulate comprehensive theories.* For this [...] specific disciplinary qualifications are required, a mastery of the often very complex literature, and [...] easy access to such literature [...] postulating wide-ranging theories without these prerequisites would only bring to light highly uncertain, fantastical or downright incorrect results, which of course could not redound to the honour of Catholic missionaries.<sup>41</sup>

Schmidt's views on the complementary but unequal roles of missionaries and arm-chair ethnologists are echoed in O'Reilly's distinction between 'forefront ethnographers' and 'comparatist ethnologists' in his own discussion of missionaries' precise role in ethnography.<sup>42</sup> More broadly, they reflect a desire evident amongst late 19th- and early 20th-century metropolitan scientists of various disciplines to

<sup>41</sup> W. Schmidt, *Einladung zu Mitarbeit und Abonnement auf 'Anthropos'*, *Internationale Zeitschrift für Völker- und Sprachenkunde* (Kempten: Jos. Kösel'schen, 1905), 16, emphasis original. Available online at: <http://www.anthropos.eu/media/anthropos/docs/PWSAufruf.pdf>. Accessed 23 November 2016.

<sup>42</sup> O'Reilly, 'Ce que l'Ethnologie', 1–17.





were familiar with pigs centuries ago, if not longer'.<sup>44</sup> Although his choice of words here cannot be said to express an unequivocal opinion, it does suggest that he did not necessarily believe the makers of the pots were connected to Watom Island's current inhabitants. Witness, for example, his use of an indefinite rather than a definite noun – 'inhabitants' rather than 'the inhabitants' – and of a verb tense and accompanying adverbial phrase suggesting completed rather than continuous action in the past – 'were familiar [...] centuries ago' rather than 'have been familiar [...] for centuries'.

A more explicit statement came later still, in a French-language typescript titled 'Note of R.F. Otto Meyer, M.S.C., missionary at Watom Island (New Guinea Territory) on the subject of ancient pottery found in situ',<sup>45</sup> seemingly sent to O'Reilly as a letter between 1935 and 1937.<sup>46</sup> It is unclear whether Meyer wrote in French, or whether the typescript represents a translation by O'Reilly from the original (see below). After describing the excavation sites, Meyer noted that the government geologist of Papua, Evan R. Stanley, had 'examined the ancient pottery finds' in 1922 and reported that they were 'of Peruvian origin'.<sup>47</sup> In fact Stanley's account indicates that he did not examine the pottery himself: 'It was reported to us in Rabaul', he wrote, 'that Father Meyer had discovered some Peruvian pottery on [Watom] Island. Unfortunately Father Meyer was away from the Mission Station, and the time at our disposal did not permit us to make any very extensive investigations [...] It is yet to be proved that it is Peruvian pottery'.<sup>48</sup> However, it seems the two men did meet on at least one occasion. Meyer described showing Stanley 'certain figures which resemble the motifs of pottery pieces from here' in two encyclopaedic German-language works of the time, Georg Buschan's *Illustrierte Völkerkunde* (Illustrated Ethnography) and Moritz Hoernes' *Urgeschichte der Menschheit* (Prehistory of Humankind)<sup>49</sup> and concluded, very tentatively, in a non-prescriptive, open-ended manner,

If I can permit myself the luxury of having an opinion, it is this: I believe that if the motifs mainly resemble those of South America, for example Peru, more than others, there could have been contacts between this local ancient culture and that of South America.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> O. Meyer, 'Die Tierwelt der Qunantuna Neubritanniens', 1917, MSC-Archiv, Bestand norddeutscher Provinz.

<sup>45</sup> Trans. Anson, 'Appendix 1', 20–3.

<sup>46</sup> In the same documentary folder (D001126/35983), the note is referred to as a 'letter' in the associated list of figures, and Meyer appears to address his comments directly to O'Reilly, with the expectation that his reader already knows about the site, the findings and his publications, hence the comments must follow their encounter of 1935.

<sup>47</sup> O. Meyer, trans. Anson, 'Appendix 1', 23.

<sup>48</sup> Evan R. Stanley, *Report on the Salient Geographical Features and Natural Resources of the New Guinea Territory* [...] (Melbourne: Albert J. Mullett, Government Printer, 1922), 7, 21.

<sup>49</sup> O. Meyer, trans. Anson, 'Appendix 1', 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

## PATRICK O'REILLY AND THE 'NON-MELANESIAN POTTERY' OF MELANESIA

While Meyer's analyses of his finds were grounded in his local experiences and knowledge of Watom Islanders' traditions, O'Reilly's analyses were definitely conceived within the current (French) dominant conceptions of Pacific cultures and their history, these in turn being based in more general ideas about culture diffusion and the peopling of the world. O'Reilly never published a detailed study of either the Watom finds or the entire collection of material culture items he brought back from his Solomon Islands mission, probably for various reasons including the restructuring of the MET into the MH after his return, the disruptions of World War II, his responsibilities as director of 'the 104' from 1935, and his overall shift in interest towards other topics.

However, the ideas he was willing to advocate in relation to the region's pre-history can be traced in a number of publications throughout the 1940s and 1950s, spanning the pre-Lapita paradigm period to the early emergence of such a concept. Two main documents punctuate this period: a lecture made in 1958 at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris requesting its support to develop French research in Pacific archaeology,<sup>51</sup> and an unpublished paper presented in February 1940 at the CEOMH.<sup>52</sup> The latter, the only text that directly presents analyses of the Watom finds, has been attributed to O'Reilly since its citation as such by Jacques Avias in 1950.<sup>53</sup> However, and although O'Reilly apparently never objected to this attribution, the copy currently kept in the MQB-JC archives is a manuscript recorded as 'Pottery found in Watom (New Guinea)' bearing no title or author name, while O'Reilly himself indicated that at least part of the work was done by a student then engaged in the Oceania Department of the new MH. Indeed, in the first meeting of the new Société des Océanistes in December 1944, O'Reilly reported on the activities of its predecessor the CEOMH, established in 1939 under Paul Rivet's patronage.<sup>54</sup> He noted that meetings resumed 'at the beginning of 1940', after a period of interruption with the start of the war, and mentioned that 'Miss Schargorodski, based on specimens kept at the Museum, described to us some pottery from Melanesian excavations coming from the island of Waton [sic] in New Guinea'.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Patrick O'Reilly, 'Premiers résultats de la recherche archéologique dans le Pacifique insulaire', *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 102:3 (1958): 272–7.

<sup>52</sup> Partly published and translated by Anson, 'Appendix 1', 20–3.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Avias, 'Poteries canaques et poteries préhistoriques en Nouvelle-Calédonie', *JSO* 6 (1950): 111–40.

<sup>54</sup> O'Reilly, 'Le Centre d'Etudes océaniques du Musée de l'Homme, Durant la guerre', *JSO* 1 (1945): 129–32.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, emphasis original. Faessel (*Itinéraires*, 49) notes that, during the move and transformation of the MET into the MH, a number of students were recruited by Manouka Laroche of the Oceania Department to unpack the crates of material, notably those containing O'Reilly's collections, in 1939.

Whoever authored this communication, it is certainly in line with O'Reilly's ideas as presented in his other publications, and was one of several documents associated with the Watom collection that he donated to the MH in 1956. These include French translations of Meyer's 1909 and 1910 papers, as well as the two manuscripts mentioned above, 'Note of R.F. Otto Meyer ...' and 'Pottery found in Watom (New Guinea)'. There are also two versions of the stratigraphic profiles of Meyer's excavations (Figure 9)<sup>56</sup> and drawings of sherds from the collection brought back to the MH and discussed in 1940.

The 1940 lecture presented in French what Meyer exposed in his *Anthropos* publications and his 'Note', in terms of the context of the finds – with mentions of non-ceramic remains – and the stratigraphy. As previously noted by Anson,<sup>57</sup> it differs from Meyer's reports in dividing the pottery into 'Melanesian' and 'non-Melanesian' types. In the manuscript, the discussion is divided into two parts. The first discusses 'Pottery types': one 'clearly Melanesian', related to contemporary and ethnohistoric types recorded in the islands, specifically with incised or applied designs, no use of lime infilling, a dark/greyish colour, thin and 'somewhat flat' in shape (see Figure 6); the other 'not resembling any of the known Melanesian types', with 'designs incised before firing and then incrustated with lime', 'always geometric' and made up of 'multiple little points', a 'brick red' colour, thicker and of a different (unspecified) shape.<sup>58</sup> Importantly in the history of Lapita archaeology, the designs are analysed as possibly produced by the use of 'a roulette', or 'rather made with a wooden stick held vertically, imprinting each point individually'.<sup>59</sup>

The second part of the manuscript, not included in Anson's translation, presents various 'opinions' gathered about the 'non-Melanesian' pottery sherds.<sup>60</sup> It starts with Meyer's consideration of indigenous informants' comparison with designs found on the 'Stone of Pir',<sup>61</sup> and of a possible South American (Peruvian) origin as advised by Stanley. Two other 'opinions' are then considered, based on examination of the sherds by specialists then working at the MH. 'M. Wernert' and 'M. Kelly',<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Anson drew a synthetic composite of the two versions, published in 'Appendix 1', 22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> 'Pottery found in Watom (New Guinea)', manuscript, MQB-JC archives.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> In his 1936 paper 'Ethnological Notes', Australian archaeologist D.A. Casey also noted similarities between the Watom pottery motifs, based on specimens held in the National Museum of Victoria (now the Melbourne Museum) or loaned by Meyer and the Catholic Mission Museum at Vunapope, and motifs found on various material culture items from Asia and South America (D.A. Casey, 'Ethnological Notes', *Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria* 9 [1936]: 90–7, plate VIII). However, Casey's paper is not referred to in this or any later publication or communication by O'Reilly. Given the disruptions brought about by the war and O'Reilly's other responsibilities, it is possible that he was not aware of Casey's ideas.

<sup>61</sup> See Howes, 'Potsherds', 39.

<sup>62</sup> Presumably prehistorian and 'palaeoethnologist' Paul Wernert, then a lecturer at the Institut d'Ethnologie, and Harper Kelley, then head of the MH's Department of Prehistory.



called upon as eminent prehistorians, noted the similarities of some designs with ‘South Asia’ pottery decorations – from India, Indochina and Cambodia in particular. ‘Mr Hernandez’,<sup>63</sup> an Americanist archaeologist, identified specific parallels with Chibcha pottery from Colombia and Arawak pottery from northeast coastal South America – especially the so-called ‘Snake’ design (see Figure 6). The paper concludes by stating that Meyer believed in ‘a prehistoric civilization that would have had close relations with Asia and especially with America’, while noting that ‘the areas excavated were maybe ancient tombs as still today, indigenous people of Vuatom bury their dead with objects of value, but broken’. This reflects Meyer’s observation that ‘[e]ven today they still bury their dead with valuable but broken objects’, though some of O’Reilly’s other publications also discussed tombs with broken pottery he had observed in Bougainville.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, we have found nothing in Meyer’s writings linking the potsherds to Asia, though possibly Meyer and O’Reilly discussed this when they met. In any case, the final sentence notes that ‘the question remains open’ as to ‘how all these different types [of pottery] [...] can be found in Melanesia, with Melanesian pottery while they present no similarities with known Melanesian types’.<sup>65</sup>

The underlying idea of a ‘non-Melanesian’ cultural ‘layer’ having been present in the islands in the past, as represented by items of material culture that do not correspond to historic Melanesian types, can also be found in contemporary papers by O’Reilly about his Solomon Islands collection. In his overview of the collection sent to the Lateran Museum in the Vatican, O’Reilly discussed adze shapes, pottery types and pottery-making traditions as elements demonstrating important differences between the north, centre and south of the island of Bougainville. He judged the latter more ‘Melanesian’, with an ‘autochthonous pottery of a crude technique without skilfulness’. He added, ‘the fact that it is in the hands of men confirms [...] that it is not ancient and of pure imitation’ (as opposed to the north and centre where women are the potters).<sup>66</sup> He noted that decorated sherds found ‘by excavations’ bore motifs unknown to the current population.<sup>67</sup>

These ideas are made clearer in a short communication O’Reilly presented at a meeting of the Institut Français d’Anthropologie, less than two weeks after the Watom finds lecture at the CEOMH.<sup>68</sup> He explained his attempts to use material culture items from his collection and field observations ‘to determine the different

<sup>63</sup> Most likely Gregorio Hernández de Alba, then a Colombian archaeologist on exchange at the MH through Rivet’s support, who later helped Rivet escape to South America during the Gestapo’s targeting of the MH Resistance network.

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, trans. Anson, ‘Appendix 1’, 23; O’Reilly, ‘Description’, 163; O’Reilly, ‘Essai de distinction des couches culturelles dans l’île de Bougainville, principalement d’après la civilisation lithique: précis’, *L’Anthropologie* 49 (1939–40): 831–2.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Pottery found in Watom (New Guinea)’, manuscript, MQB-JC archives.

<sup>66</sup> O’Reilly, ‘Description’, 175–9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–9. O’Reilly cites the ancient ‘villages of Tiop’ and ‘tombs of Telei’ (in Buin), so most likely refers to Voyce’s excavations.

<sup>68</sup> O’Reilly, ‘Essai’, 831–2.

cultural layers of the island of Bougainville’, proposing ‘two well-differentiated culture zones in the North and South of the island’ based on a suite of distinctive techniques and items of material culture (repeating the pottery case). He concluded that the examination of ‘lithic axes’, divided between a northern rectangular type and a southern ‘classic Melanesian type’ of ‘pedaloid’ shape, confirmed this theory. Moreover, ancient remains of the northern axe type were found in the south, as were funerary monuments containing ‘traces of burnt bones and shattered pottery’.<sup>69</sup>

Like Meyer, as a good priest-ethnographer describing detailed facts to be used by comparatist ethnologists entitled to establish theories, O’Reilly did not offer any clear interpretative statements or general hypotheses on the meaning of these observations for the prehistory of the region.<sup>70</sup> However, his ‘working hypothesis, the idea in the back of his mind’,<sup>71</sup> is apparent throughout the three 1940 papers: a ‘non-Melanesian’ culture not related to the direct ancestors of the current Melanesians had existed in the islands under investigation, and its people had a fine pottery-making tradition and specific quadrangular lithic axes or adzes. In the 1940s, despite the advent of cultural diffusionism in France, the direct association of changes in material culture with various migrations involving not only cultural but also ‘ethnic’ replacement was still commonly applied in ‘palaeoethnology’. It was most clearly present in Pacific studies, where European bewilderment at the ethnic variations observed had strongly influenced the first prehistoric interpretations of the region.<sup>72</sup> Eminent colleagues and mentors of O’Reilly, including Rivet and pastor-ethnologist Maurice Leenhardt, shared this mindset,<sup>73</sup> while the much referenced work of Swiss anthropologist Felix Speiser had previously identified several cultural and ethnic ‘layers’ in Melanesia.<sup>74</sup> Still, the articulation of ideas supported

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 831–2.

<sup>70</sup> Before leaving for the field, O’Reilly (‘Ce que l’Ethnologie’, 11–13) wrote that ‘ethnography is not a metaphysic or a theology, it is first of all an exact science of the perceptible and tangible reality’, hence the good ethnographer should ‘always beware of never [...] blending facts and theories’.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> See Emilie Dotte-Sarout, ‘How Dare Our “Prehistoric” Have a Prehistory of Their Own?! The Interplay of Historical and Biographical Contexts in Early French Archaeology of the Pacific’, *Journal of Pacific Archaeology* 8:1 (2017): 23–34.

<sup>73</sup> Maurice Leenhardt, ‘Le masque calédonien’, *Bulletin du Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro* 6 (1933): 3–21; Maurice Leenhardt, ‘Conique et marmites en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Problème de préhistoire’, *Comptes rendus de l’Institut français d’Anthropologie* 7 (1941): 13; Maurice Leenhardt, ‘Le problème des migrations en Nouvelle-Calédonie’, in *Südseestudien. Études sur l’Océanie. South Seas Studies. Gedenkschrift zur Erinnerung an Felix Speiser* (Basel: Museum für Volkskunde, 1951), 304–17; Paul Rivet, ‘Les Océaniens’, in ‘Contribution à l’Etude du peuplement zoologique et botanique des îles du Pacifique’, *Mémoires de la Société de Biogéographie* 4 (1934): 237–47.

<sup>74</sup> Felix Speiser, ‘Kultur-Komplexe in der Neuen-Hebriden, Neu-Caledonien und Santa-Cruz Inseln’, *Archives Suisses d’Anthropologie Générale* 3–4 (1919–20): 207–32; Felix Speiser, ‘Observations on the Cultural History of New Caledonia and the New Hebrides’, *Man* 34 (1934): 74.

by O'Reilly in association with the first analysis of a 'Lapita' site appears as a striking foretelling of the way a 'Lapita culture' would start to be defined 20 years later.<sup>75</sup>

## RIPPLES IN THE PACIFIC: LAPITA BECOMING LAPITA FROM WATOM TO POLYNESIA

In the meantime, after a return to research preoccupations following the end of World War II, O'Reilly built a strong bibliographical knowledge of Oceania, starting to publish his annual bibliographies in the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes (JSO)* in 1947. He also returned to the Pacific, visiting Fiji, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia in 1948–9. A number of publications presenting archaeological objects or sites visited during this trip demonstrate his interest in the topic throughout the first half of the 1950s.<sup>76</sup> These remained strictly factual: for instance, O'Reilly did not use his direct observation, in New Caledonia in 1949, of dentate-stamped pottery sherds newly discovered on the Isle of Pines at the site of Saint-François/Vao (now referred to as Saint Maurice/Vatcha – KVO003) to elaborate on his ideas from 1940. Others with an amateur or professional interest in Pacific archaeology rapidly did so. Following the original publication of the 1947 Vao finds by Maurice Lenormand in the local journal of the Société des Études Mélanésiennes,<sup>77</sup> his co-discoverer Jacques Avias 'announced the shared identity of the styles found at Isle of Pines and Vatom' in a communication at the Institut Français d'Anthropologie in March 1949, then in a detailed analysis of New Caledonian pottery types in 1950.<sup>78</sup> Avias, referencing O'Reilly, noted that the Watom finds had been presented in a lecture given at the Société des Océanistes in 1940; he also categorized the ceramic types into a 'Melanesian' and an 'advanced' facies found together in the two sites. Comparing the pottery, its context of deposition and accompanying non-ceramic remains from the two sites, he concluded that 'one identical human group (in the ethnic sense) passed through or stayed in these two points of the Pacific although being several thousands of kilometres apart'. He further asserted that this population, 'one of the prehistoric waves of men

<sup>75</sup> See Golson, 'Report', 166–76. Note the interesting parallel that the artefactual evidence for a 'common community of culture' are specific 'incised' pottery types and 'non-Melanesian' quadrangular adzes.

<sup>76</sup> Laracy, 'Bibliographie', 159–79.

<sup>77</sup> Maurice Lenormand, 'Découverte d'un gisement de poteries indigènes à l'Île des Pins', *Études Mélanésiennes* 3 (1948): 54–8.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Avias, 'Contribution à l'étude de l'archéologie et de la préhistoire néocalédonienne (notes préliminaires)', *Comptes-rendus de l'Institut Français d'Anthropologie* 59 (1949): 3; Avias, 'Poteries', 111–40. In the latter, Avias relates how he (when working in the MH's Oceania pottery collections) and O'Reilly (when visiting the Museum of New Caledonia) independently identified the similarities between the Vao and Watom types in early 1949, before discussing the fact together in 'the spring of 1949'.

who peopled the Pacific', must have been 'absorbed or destroyed' by the 'less-advanced and without doubt more ferocious' Melanesians.<sup>79</sup>

Avias's interpretations, unlike O'Reilly's, are clearly stated, and the 'non-Melanesian' element of the Watom and Vao sites is even seen by him to be affiliated to some 'Eurasian neolithic civilizations'. Notably, the 'non-Melanesian' makers of the 'advanced' pottery type were not yet affiliated to the Polynesians: the latter were generally seen as later migrants, not associated with pottery-making,<sup>80</sup> until similar prehistoric pottery types supposedly decorated with the use of 'a roulette' were identified in Fiji and Tonga following the 1951 publication of Edward Gifford's 1947 Fijian excavations.<sup>81</sup>

Gifford subsequently became the first professional archaeologist to discuss the Watom finds, in his 1952 synthesis of New Caledonia archaeology written for the *JSO* at the conclusion of his field expedition to New Caledonia – the very one when he excavated site 13 of Foué, at the locality of 'Lapita'.<sup>82</sup> In this paper, Gifford recalled that the same pottery tradition found in Watom and Vao had been discovered in Tonga and Fiji, indicating either a shared origin or the influence of one island on the others.<sup>83</sup> Three years later, Gifford and Richard Shutler's monograph on their excavations in New Caledonia added 'site 13' (not yet referred to as 'Lapita') to the list of connected sites and importantly provided the first dates for the pottery: in the first millennium BC.<sup>84</sup>

In this context, when O'Reilly gave his summary overview of Pacific archaeology in 1958 at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, the uniqueness of Watom had expired. O'Reilly mentioned only that the 'pottery decorated with a roulette or a comb' had been shown to be ancient in New Caledonia and to have some 'affinities with other Melanesian pottery' from Fiji and New Guinea – an interesting change in denomination. Strikingly, O'Reilly did not mention that the same pottery had been found in Tonga by McKern, as recently noted by Gifford, despite exposing his interest in knowing when and how Tonga and Samoa were first settled, as 'the characteristics distinguishing the Polynesian from all the other races' were probably shaped 'in the one that was first occupied'. He seems to have considered as the main result of archaeological research in Melanesia the fact that Gifford and Shutler's numerous excavations in New Caledonia had not discovered any 'cultural layer antedating the use of pottery', hence 'any trace of an australo-tasmanoid civilization'.

<sup>79</sup> Avias, 'Poteries', 134; see also Christophe Sand, 'Oceanic Origins', 33. Avias's ideas are reinforced in a later synthesis of New Caledonia prehistory, 'La préhistoire néo-calédonienne', *JSO* 9 (1953): 55–63.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Jean Poirier, 'Le peuplement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Couches ethniques et couches culturelles', *JSO* 7 (1951): 159–73; Leenhardt, 'Le problème des migrations', 304–17.

<sup>81</sup> Edward W. Gifford, *Archaeological Excavations in Fiji* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

<sup>82</sup> Edward W. Gifford, 'L'archéologie néo-calédonienne en 1952', trans. Jacques Avias, *JSO* 9 (1953): 64–70.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Gifford and Shutler, 'Archaeological Excavations in New Caledonia'.

For him, however, this did not imply that such a civilization had never existed, it implied that it could only have existed as ‘small scattered groups, more or less nomadic’.<sup>85</sup> O’Reilly hence seems to have clung, like many, to the idea that the distinct dentate-stamped pottery found in Melanesia could not have been related to the direct ancestors of the people he and others identified as Melanesians. But his interest in the discipline, ignited by his encounter with the Watom archaeological collection almost 25 years earlier, manifested itself through his will to champion ‘French archaeological science’ in Oceania, laying the ground for a new era of *archéologie océaniste*.

## CONCLUSION

The early history of the collection(s) and analyses of artefacts excavated in the first Lapita site – before the advent of the ‘Lapita’ paradigm – illuminates a series of foundational elements in the development of Pacific archaeology. Meyer’s and O’Reilly’s exchanges exemplify the central role played by men of the cloth in the history of ‘modern’ anthropology and archaeology until the mid-20th century, despite the very cautious expression of ideas they allowed themselves according to the codes of conduct recommended for missionaries. Their long-standing presence in the islands, as well as their extensive international and plurilingual networks, provided essential data. From Meyer’s analyses, grounded in his local experience and close relationship with local populations, to O’Reilly’s more distant interpretations and finally the first general comparativist explanations, the progressive erosion of local knowledge and traditions is striking. While Meyer offers parallels between material culture recovered in the Watom ‘Lapita’ finds and current Indigenous traditions, these are discussed but dismissed in O’Reilly’s (and associates’) later analyses, and are entirely absent from the first definition of a Lapita culture in 1961, 50 years after the initial Watom excavations.

Almost from the beginning, the material culture items later associated with the ‘Lapita cultural complex’ were read within a framework that dissociated ‘Melanesian’ cultures and people from ancient (Lapita) pots and adzes. This dissociation continued to echo in the construction of the Lapita paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s and subsequently. Interestingly, however, this was not directly linked at first to the quest for Polynesian origins. Lapita material culture was not clearly associated with the genesis of the Polynesians until Golson’s 1961 review paper assessing prehistoric pottery finds in Western Polynesia.

Finally, the dispersal of Meyer’s Watom Island finds between several museums, cities and countries (at least four different repositories today hold significant collections) is an important aspect of their history, as is the general lack of study of non-ceramic remains in analyses of his collections. The persistent focus on potsherds (and, initially, lithic adzes) is especially striking in regard to the MH/MQB-JC collection, which includes a variety of non-ceramic remains, as noted in Meyer’s original reports.

<sup>85</sup> O’Reilly, ‘Premiers résultats’, 272–7.

The Watom Island excavation collections collated by Meyer hold a central place in the history of Pacific archaeology. It is through his exchanges with another ethnographer-priest, O'Reilly, that some of this collection came to play a foundational part in the developments witnessed by the discipline during the first half of the 20th century – when Pacific archaeology moved from a pre-Lapita to a post-Lapita horizon.

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