

Pioneers of the Pacific

No one is sure how they did it or even why they did it, but over 3,000 years ago people sailed into the enormous emptiness of the Pacific Ocean in simple **canoes**. Within a few centuries, these people—now known as the Lapita—had migrated from the volcanoes of Papua New Guinea to the island of Tonga, at least 2,000 miles to the east. They explored millions of square miles of the Pacific, and they discovered and then inhabited dozens of tropical islands never before seen by human eyes: Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa.

There is much we do not know about the Lapita. Although their **voyages** began in the northern islands of Papua New Guinea, their language came from Taiwan, and their style of pottery decoration probably had its roots in the northern Philippines. So who were the Lapita? Did they come from a single point in Asia or from several different places?

Now, archaeologists Matthew Spriggs and Stuart Bedford of the Australian National University are working to answer these questions. A Lapita **cemetery** on the island of Éfaté in the Pacific nation of Vanuatu has revealed information about Lapita customs, and DNA from the ancient bones may help to



▲ canoe

answer questions about the Lapita people. “This represents the best opportunity we’ve had yet,” says Spriggs, “to find out who the Lapita actually were, where they came from, and who their closest descendants are today.”

But even if the archaeologists can answer those questions, we still won’t know how the Lapita sailed so far east against the trade winds, which normally blow from east to west. Atholl Anderson, professor of prehistory at the Australian National University, suggests that El Niño, the same warming of ocean water that affects the Pacific today, may have helped. Climate data obtained from slow-growing corals around the Pacific and from lake-bed **sediments** in the Andes of South America indicate a series of unusually frequent El Niños around the time of the Lapita expansion. By reversing the regular east-to-west flow of the trade winds for weeks at a time, these *super El Niños* might have carried the Lapita sailors on long, unplanned voyages far over the horizon.

However they arrived on the islands, the Lapita came to stay. Their descendants have inhabited the region for thousands of years, and why not? They’re living in an island paradise that many of us only dream about.

