

LENScience Senior Biology Seminar Series

Rethinking Polynesian Origins: Human Settlement of the Pacific

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Our Polynesian ancestors are renowned as some of the world's most successful and innovative navigators. Using their knowledge of tides and stars, Polynesian seafarers explored vast areas of the Pacific. They discovered and settled nearly every inhabitable island in the Pacific Ocean well before European explorers got here in the 16th century.

Māori oral legends tell us that Hawaiki is the legendary homeland from which Māori and Polynesian people explored and colonised the islands of the Pacific and Aotearoa New Zealand. There is also increasing scientific evidence that Polynesians reached South America well before the first Europeans.



The question of human origins and the mapping of human movement around the world is one that has long interested science. Scientists use biological, linguistic and cultural evidence to investigate the origins of human populations.



Allan Wilson Centre anthropologist Lisa Matisoo-Smith, is part of a team of researchers investigating questions about the origins of Polynesians such as:

- Where did the ancestors of Polynesians come from?
- What route did the settlers take through the Pacific?

Answering questions like this is the role of a field of science called biological anthropology.

Anthropology traces the history and evolution of humans (biologically and culturally) from our primate origins, through over five million years of prehistory, to historical and contemporary societies.



Lisa Matisoo-Smith is Professor of Biological Anthropology at the University of Otago and Principal Investigator in the Allan Wilson Centre. Her research focuses on identifying the origins of Pacific peoples and the plants and animals that travelled with them, in order to better understand the settlement, history and prehistory of the Pacific and New Zealand. Her research utilises both ancient and modern DNA analysis to answer a range of questions regarding population histories, dispersals and interactions.

The research process

All research starts with finding out what is already known about the topic: in this case human migrations out of Africa and through the Pacific. This process is called a literature search and involves identifying all relevant published research in the field. This is used to decide on the research questions that will underpin new research.

What is already known about human migration?

- The first migration of anatomically modern humans out of Africa occurred around 150,000 – 100,000 BP (Years Before Present), moving east towards Asia and north into Europe.
- Part of this migration reached South-East Asia by 60,000 BP.
- Populations of these stone-age hunter gatherers then expanded from Southeast Asia into the Pacific through New Guinea to Australia and the Bismarck Archipelago by about 45,000 BP
- Once in Southeast Asia and Australia the movement of humans into new areas stopped for nearly 30,000 years.
- A later wave of expansion out into the rest of the Pacific took place began around 3,500 BP.
- In this migration the people went east to Samoa and Tonga where the Lapita expansion stopped.
- The last major migration event involved the settlement of the Polynesian triangle from Hawaii in the north, and from there north to Hawaii, east to Easter Island and south to New Zealand.

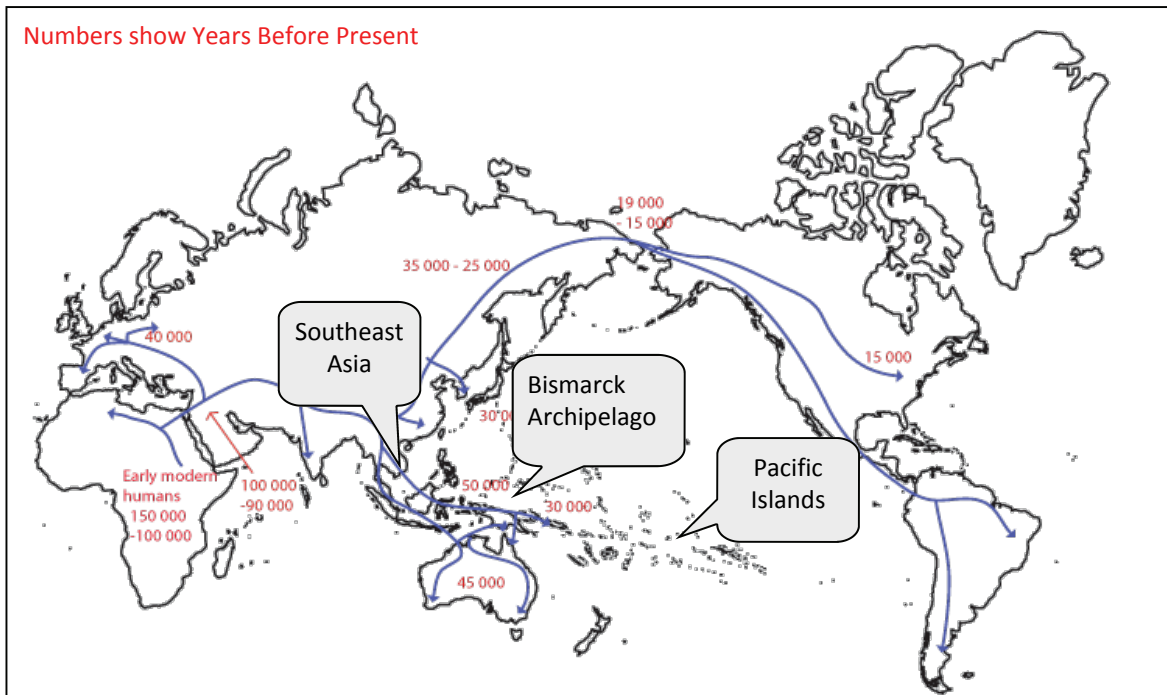


Figure 1. The dispersal of anatomically modern humans from Africa

Research Questions

These are the types of questions that came out of the background research:

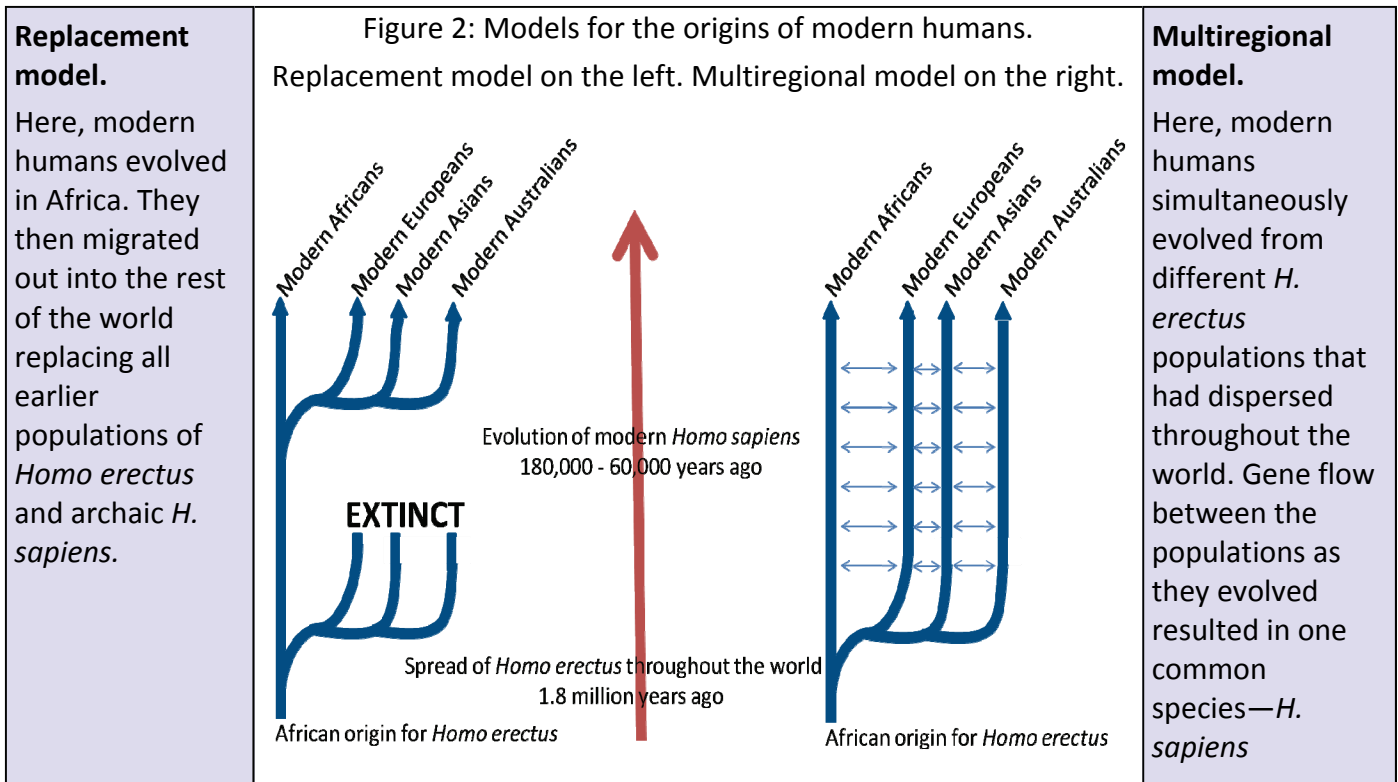
1. Who were the ancestors of modern Pacific peoples?
2. Where were the geographic origins of these ancestors ?
3. What route or routes did they take in their migration through the Pacific?

Molecular biotechnological techniques are now an important tool in collecting data to answer these questions, particularly for looking at mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and the Y chromosome. mtDNA and the Y chromosome are used in this type of research because they are inherited from only one parent. Therefore they do not recombine with DNA from the other parent and consequently follow distinct inheritance patterns along the paternal and maternal lineages. Scientists are interested in variation or differences in the mtDNA or Y chromosome between different populations in different areas as these can indicate likely movement of the founding population.

Origins of modern humans

Ever since the first discovery of Australopithecine fossils in Africa, there has been considerable debate about whether modern *Homo sapiens* evolved once and then spread throughout the world (The Out of Africa or Replacement model) or simultaneously evolved multiple times in different geographical areas (The Multiregional model).

The differences between these two models are shown in Figure 2 below.



Evidence from genetics and the fossil record has tilted the discussion in favour of a single African origin for modern *Homo sapiens* (the replacement model) with modern humans migrating out of Africa and replacing all older *Homo* populations including the Neanderthals. Recent discoveries, however, of fossils and new genetic data from a previously unknown human population combined with data from the sequencing of the Neanderthal genome, suggest there may have been more gene flow between older *Homo* species and modern species than previously thought ⁽⁶⁾.

The new genetic data comes from nuclear DNA from a 40,000-year old finger bone found in the Denisova Cave in southern Siberia. Analysis of this ancient DNA shows that the Denisovans were most likely to have descended from the same ancestral population as Neanderthals, which had separated earlier from the ancestors of modern humans ⁽⁷⁾.

The picture now emerging from the data is that the ancestral population of Denisovans and Neanderthals left Africa around 300,000 years ago. This population diverged with one group moving into Europe and evolving into Neanderthals. The other group moved east towards Siberia forming the Denisovans. Approximately 80,000 years ago modern humans began their migration out of Africa into Europe and Asia and came into contact with the older populations. Interbreeding occurred between Neanderthals and modern humans and Denisovans and modern humans, leaving traces of DNA in the genomes of humans today. But eventually modern humans replaced the older populations. Some scientists call this a 'Replacement plus gene flow' model.

Where does this leave the place of Neanderthal in the hominin family tree? The genetic evidence that modern humans interbred with both Neanderthal and Denisovans has led some scientists to suggest that modern humans, Neanderthals and Denisovans can all be considered sub species of *Homo sapiens*.



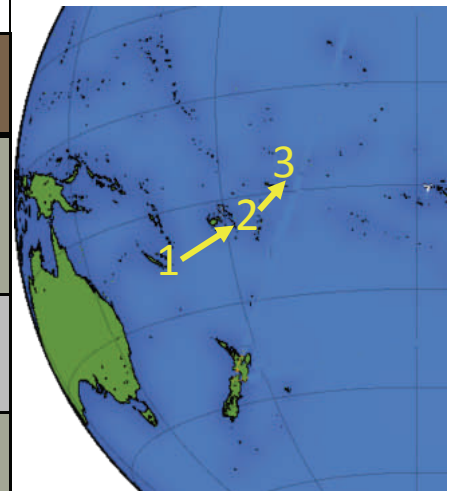
Figure 5: Pieces of Lapita pottery
Source: Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland.

The first human settlers of Remote Oceania are associated with the Lapita culture, which first appeared in the Bismarck Archipelago in Near Oceania around 3500 BP. (An archipelago is a chain or cluster of islands formed from volcanic activity).

The Lapita culture is named after the distinctive patterned pottery seen in Figure 5, which was first found at a site called Lapita in New Caledonia. Anthropologists are very interested in who the Lapita people were and what role they played in the settlement of the Pacific.

Remnants of Lapita pottery are now found throughout many areas of Remote Oceania, which suggests that the Lapita people were the first to settle this area. Table 1 shows how the age of the pottery remains found in each area supports the idea that this settlement spread from west to east from Melanesia into Polynesia.

Location of Lapita Archaeological sites	Date (years before present)
1. Reef and Santa Cruz Islands Vanuatu New Caledonia	~3000 BP
2. Fiji Tonga	~2900 BP
3. Samoa	~2700 BP



Evidence such as this suggests that the Lapita people are the ancestors of modern Pacific peoples, but questions remain about whether there could also have been contributions from other populations from Asia and Micronesia at later times.

Models for human settlement of the Pacific

Prior to the development of molecular biotechnological techniques, scientific understanding of human settlement in the Pacific was developed by collecting evidence from archaeological studies (remains of Lapita pottery and other archaeological artifacts), language, physical and cultural comparisons, and studies of blood groups and the limited genetic data available at the time. By the early 1990's it was commonly accepted by anthropologists that the only ancestors of the Polynesians were the Lapita peoples. Evidence for this hypothesis (or model) came from:

- archaeological remains like the pottery in Table 1, suggested that Lapita were the first humans in the region,
- relatively limited variation in culture and languages between Polynesians
- a unique Polynesian phenotype i.e. little variation in physical appearance between the different populations, particularly in comparison to the biological variation found in Melanesia.

This model is often called the **Lapita-only** model of human settlement of the Pacific.

As always occurs with the development of new scientific models and the testing of hypotheses, scientists then collect further evidence to either strengthen or modify the model. One of the key researchers in this area has been Lisa Matisoo-Smith from the Allan Wilson Centre.

Using molecular biotechnologies, Lisa and her fellow researchers have found evidence which suggests an alternative explanation to the Lapita only model for the origin of Pacific peoples.

Research carried out by Lisa and her team has focussed on determining the genetic origins of animals and plants that are known to be associated with human settlements in the Pacific. These are known as commensal plants and animals because they have a close relationship with humans – as food items, companions, or because they are important for other cultural reasons. Examples of these animals include rats, pigs, dogs, and chickens. Importantly these animals cannot get from one island to another unless they are taken there by humans, therefore scientists can track the movements of the humans by tracking the movements of these commensal animals that travelled with the humans.

The first commensal animal that Lisa’s team studied was the pacific rat or kiore (*Rattus exulans*). Kiore is a good animal for this type of research because:

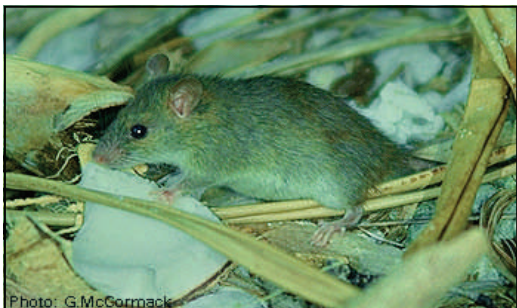


Figure 6: Pacific Rat.

Picture from Cook Islands Biodiversity Database:
<http://cookislands.bishopmuseum.org/species.asp?id=8745>

- it was often intentionally transported in colonising canoes as a source of food
- it cannot swim so can only get to new islands by being carried in canoes with people
- it reproduces rapidly and thus accumulates mutations faster than humans
- it is a different species from the European rats that were introduced later and therefore can not interbreed with them. This means any current populations of kiore are direct descendants of the original populations
- remains of kiore appear in the earliest layers of archaeological sites associated with Lapita people and are found in all sites associated with Lapita and later Polynesian settlement.

Molecular biotechnologies offer advances in understanding

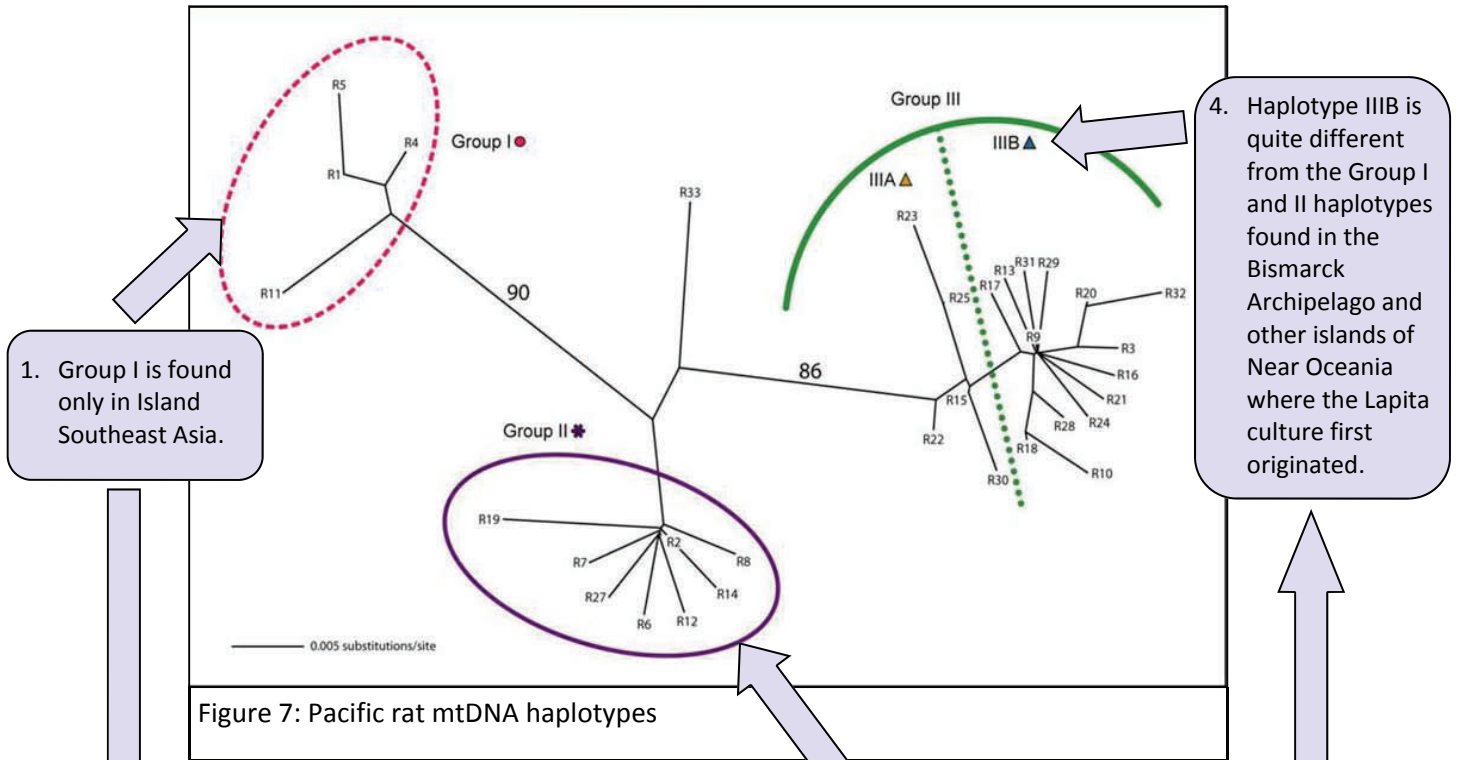
Lisa’s research has focussed at looking at variations in DNA from living populations of kiore from islands around the Pacific, in particular mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). mtDNA is inherited only from the mother as the mtDNA in the sperm is not transmitted into the egg during fertilisation. This plus the fact it undergoes a predictable rate of mutation, makes it a very useful tool for looking at the evolution and migration of populations. By looking at similarities and differences in mtDNA between different populations, Lisa and her team are able to work out the relatedness of the different kiore populations. This can then be used to work out the movement of kiore through the Pacific and therefore the most likely migration paths taken by the human ancestors of the present day Pacific peoples.

The results of Lisa’s research suggested that it is highly likely that there were multiple introductions of the kiore to the Pacific Islands. This raised the question, “did these introductions all occur at the same time or at different times?” If they were at different times then this suggests that another group of people migrated into the Pacific sometime after the Lapita people.

This question cannot be answered by studying modern kiore mtDNA, as variation in modern mtDNA only shows different origins,—it doesn’t show the timing. Ancient DNA, however, could be used to answer this question. Ancient DNA is any DNA extracted from tissues such as bone that are not fresh or preserved for DNA extraction later. When an organism dies, the DNA molecules immediately start to break down, which makes it difficult to extract good quality DNA for analysis. The hot and wet environment found in most of the Pacific makes it just about the worst area for DNA preservation. Despite this Lisa and other Allan Wilson Centre researchers have been able to obtain DNA from Pacific samples as old as 3000—4000 years⁽²⁾.

If the age of the remains is known then the likely date of the introduction of new genetic material can be estimated. The team next investigated ancient DNA from the remains of kiore found in different archaeological sites around the Pacific, looking for patterns in the haplotypes in mtDNA. A haplotype is a combination of alleles that are located closely together.

Lisa found three distinct groups of haplotypes, - shown as Groups I, II and III in Figure 7. Three clearly different haplotypes (or genetic groups) is an indication that these populations of rats are likely to have quite different ancestral origins.



1. Group I is found only in Island Southeast Asia.

4. Haplotype III B is quite different from the Group I and II haplotypes found in the Bismarck Archipelago and other islands of Near Oceania where the Lapita culture first originated.

2. Group II includes samples found in Island Southeast Asia and Near Oceania. This fits with the model of the Lapita people originating in Southeast Asia and then spreading into Near Oceania.

3. Group III consists of all the samples from Remote Oceania. Haplotype III B is found throughout Polynesia.

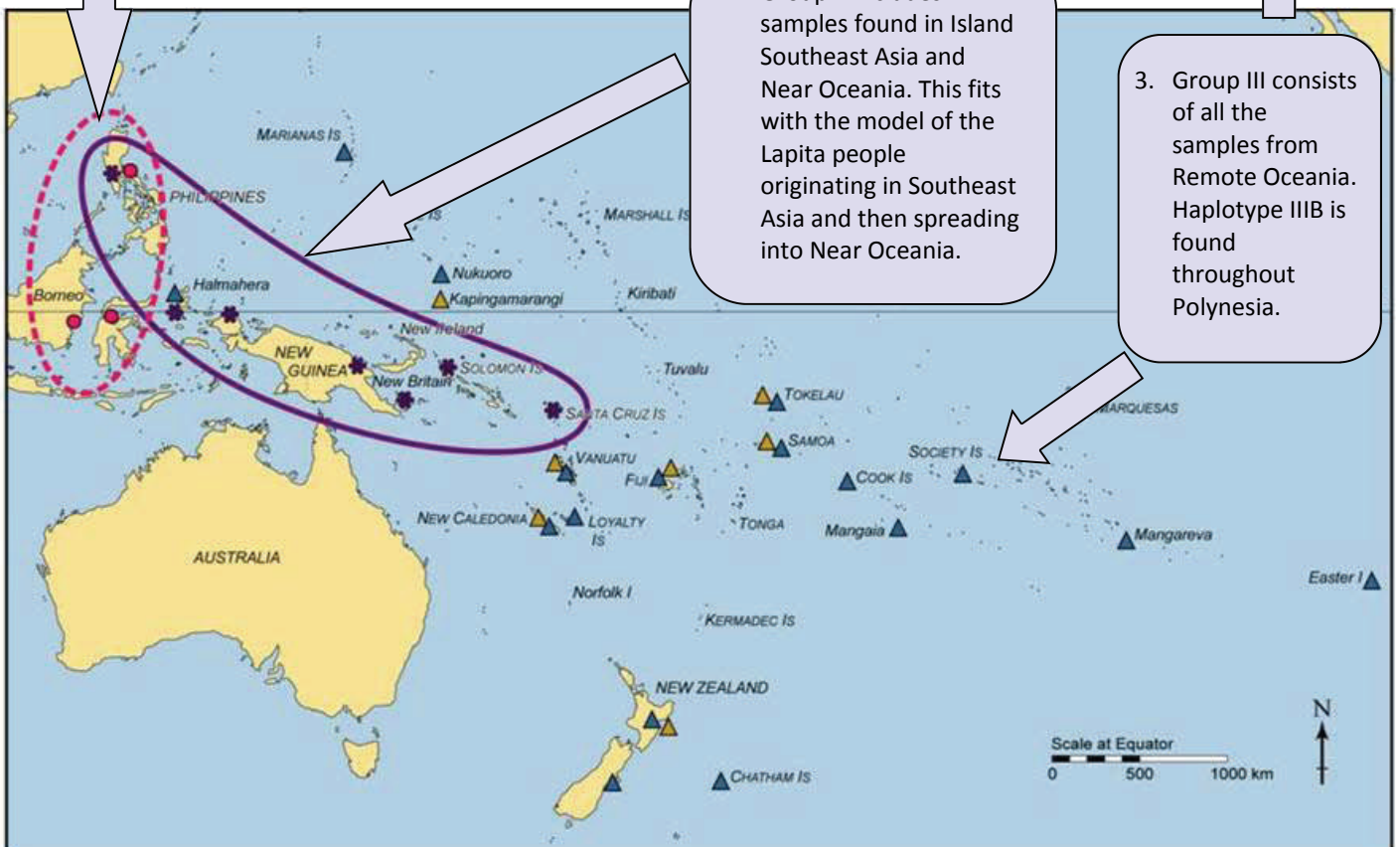


Figure 8: Distribution of the three groups of Pacific Rat haplotypes in Near and Remote Oceania. From: Matisoo-Smith, E., & Robins, J. H. (2004)

Group III does not fit the expected pattern. It shows no genetic link with the haplotypes found in Near Oceania. This suggests that this haplotype may be the result of a later introduction of the kiore into Polynesia sometime after the Lapita introduction.

To test this hypothesis Lisa and her team carried out similar studies of variation in both modern and ancient mtDNA in from other commensal animals. starting with pigs and chickens. Results from pigs showed introductions that are consistent in geographic distribution and time of appearance in the archaeological record with a Lapita introduction. But other mtDNA studies on chickens and dogs of the Pacific, plus the kiore data indicate a second introduction. This suggests a second population migration out of Asia sometime after 2000 BP.

Conclusion

These results have led Lisa and her colleagues to suggest a new model for Polynesian origins⁽¹⁾. It is based on an existing framework for Lapita origins suggested by Roger Green in 1991. Here are the key ideas:

1. The Lapita colonists in West Polynesia and the rest of Remote Oceania look very much like the current indigenous populations of Vanuatu, New Caledonia and western Fiji
2. Around 1500 BP a new population arrived in Western Polynesia with new and more typically Asian derived physical characteristics, and mtDNA lineages.
3. These new people also introduced new mtDNA lineages of commensal rats, dogs and chickens.
4. There was intense and complex interactions with the existing Lapita-descended populations as they spread over West Polynesia.
5. This resulted in the formation of the Ancestral Polynesian culture and biology. These people, now Polynesian in language, culture and biology, then disperse eastward, and ultimately settle the rest of the Polynesian Triangle.

This possible scenario is shown in Figure 9. The grey arrows show the initial Lapita expansion through Near Oceania and into Remote Oceania. The dotted arrows show the proposed arrival of new population (or populations) from Asia into West Polynesia. The black arrows show the settlement of East Polynesia and a back migration into Melanesia.

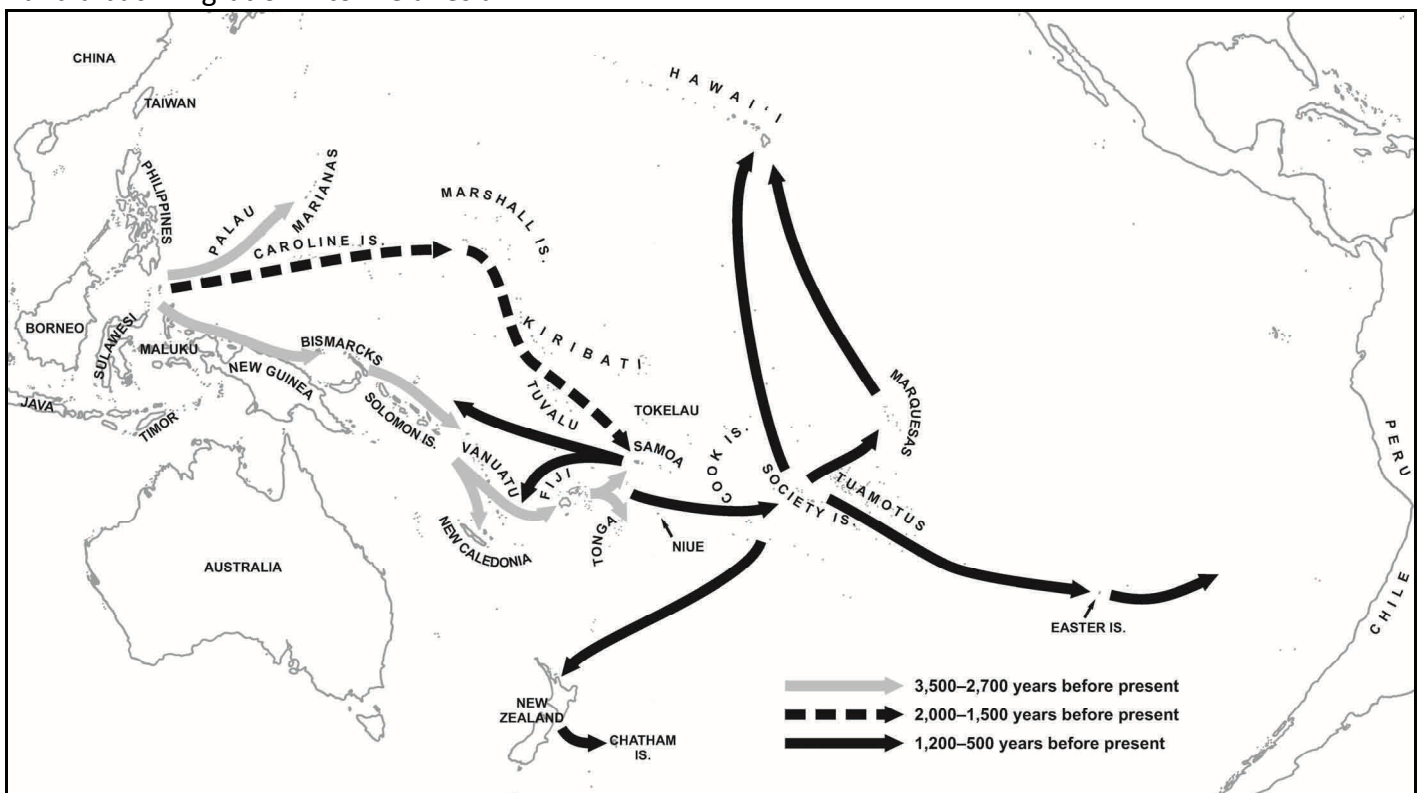


Figure 9: A new model for the origins of Polynesians

From: Addison, D. J., & Matisoo-Smith, E. (2010) *Used with permission from Archaeology in Oceania*

Lisa and her team continue to collect evidence to support or modify this model. Lisa's latest area of research is looking at variation in human DNA from modern Pacific populations.

The Genographic Project

The Genographic Project is a five-year research project involving a team of scientists from around the world. It aims to find out new information about the migratory history of the human species and in doing so answer questions like:

- Where do you **really** come from?
- How did you get to where you live today?

The researchers are using cutting-edge genetic and computational technologies to analyse historical patterns in DNA from participants around the world to better understand our human genetic roots. Lisa joined the Genographic project as a Principal Investigator in 2008 to further the project's work with Pacific Island communities.



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