



Food Crops, Culinary Frontiers, and the Colonisation of Madagascar

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The first permanent colonisation of Madagascar is one of the longest-standing puzzles of African prehistory. Despite its proximity to East Africa, converging lines of genetic, linguistic and cultural evidence suggest that this remote western Indian Ocean island was first settled by people from Indonesia, yet decades of archaeological research has so far failed to find any direct evidence of links to Southeast Asia in the island's first settlements. One potentially critical line of enquiry that has been largely ignored is the remains of food plants that were introduced as part of this trans-oceanic migration. These are thought to include various vegetative crops such as banana, taro and yam, as well as Asian rice. Oxford's Sealinks Project recently undertook renewed excavations at several early occupation sites on Madagascar with the explicit aim of recovering archaeobotanical evidence of these crop transfers. We present the preliminary results of these analyses, and contextualise them in light of broader archaeobotanical and culinary patterns from across East Africa and the Comores, highlighting major differences in the past foodways of these regions. We argue that these differences represent deeply-embedded cultural values and food preferences, which in the case of Madagascar reflect strong Southeast Asian influences during its early settlement phase.



Age and Provenance of a Bronze Swivel Gun from Dundee Beach, Northern Australia

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A bronze cannon found on a Northern Territory beach in 2010 may be evidence of early historical Asian or European contact with northern Australia. The 107cm-long gun, an anti-personnel light artillery piece, was found on the mudflats at Dundee Beach southwest of

Darwin by then 13-year-old Christopher Doukas. There is debate over the origin and age of the gun. When first reported in the popular media, it was speculated that the gun might have once belonged to sixteenth century seafarers from Portugal. Conversely, some have proposed that the gun is most likely an Indonesian reproduction of European original. It has been theorised that the gun may have belonged to a slaving party of Balinese or Banda Islanders or perhaps Macassans involved in the trepang trade. Stylistic, metallurgical and dating analyses are being utilised to provenance the gun. These include optically-stimulated luminescence (OSL) and Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dating methods applied to sediment in the gun to assess how long the gun had been buried in the sand. The OSL results suggest that most of the sand washed into the barrel around 250 years ago. However, both older and younger sand is present and an AMS radiocarbon age from seaweed in the barrel gave an age after 1950. Lead isotope analyses have provided similarly inconclusive results. Of the known lead sources, the lead isotopic signature of the gun is most similar to that of several ores from the Iberian Peninsula. Ongoing studies may further characterise the age and origin of the Dundee Beach swivel gun.



New Investigations of Some Very Old Human Remains from Niah Caves, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Pleistocene-aged human remains from the West Mouth of Gua Niah (Niah Caves) have played a central role in reconstructing the early peopling of East Asia and Australasia for more than 50 years. Ever since D. Brothwell likened the 'Deep Skull' to Aboriginal Tasmanians in 1960, and made much of purported similarities to the Talgai skull, a consensus has held that people closely related to Aboriginal Australians once occupied much of Southeast Asia before being replaced during the Neolithic. Yet, from the biological perspective, this scenario hinges largely on outdated interpretations of a very small number of Pleistocene human fossils and overly-simplistic interpretations that have considered any cranium from Southeast Asia with a rugged morphology to show affinities to Australians. Here we present the results of a new morphological investigation of the 'Deep Skull' and a stratigraphically similarly-aged and previously unpublished partial