

## Chapter 2

# Position of the Marianas in Oceanic Prehistory

How did an early Marianas settlement relate to the larger picture of Asia–Pacific archaeology? How did people manage to colonize these remote and small islands in the first place? From where did the colonists embark and for what reasons? This book will work toward answering these questions in its conclusion ([Chap. 11](#)), but first we must consider what else was happening in the Asia–Pacific around 1500–1000 B.C. and earlier. Such consideration inevitably involves discussion of how the first groups of sedentary people, known as the Austronesians, came to inhabit Island Southeast Asia and eventually spread to other areas.

In a large-scale view of the Asia–Pacific, the Mariana Islands are isolated in the far Northwest Pacific Ocean (see [Fig. 1.1](#)). The setting is part of Remote Oceania, referring to islands outside the range of inter-visibility or beyond 350 km ([Green 1991](#)). In addition to practical limitations of a long-distance colonizing voyage, Remote Oceanic islands tend to be biotically disadvantaged and challenging for human colonists. For instance, the kinds of foods most important for human life in the tropical islands, like bananas and taro, did not exist there naturally, and people needed to import these and other resources for their survival. Although coastal and marine resources were plentiful, the necessarily limited range of terrestrial resources provided insufficient or unreliable nutrition for long-term or large-scale settlement, unless satisfactory crops could be imported and managed.

Remote Oceania posed a barrier for colonization, while the islands of the so-called Near Oceania were settled perhaps 20,000 years ago by hunter-gatherers and low-intensity horticulturalists ([Spriggs 1997](#)). Related populations were established nearly 50,000 years ago in Australia, New Guinea, and Island Southeast Asia ([Bellwood and Hiscock 2005](#)). The longest ocean voyages at that time were about 200 km, but most were less than 90 km.

Prior to 2000 B.C., Island Southeast Asia and Near Oceania supported low-density populations that relied almost entirely on available native resources. The surviving artifacts primarily are stone tools, mostly found in cave sites but occasionally in other open settings. People apparently accessed almost every environmental zone in their known world. They did not, however, cross the ocean to inhabit the islands of Remote Oceania, nor did they necessarily have any reason to do so.

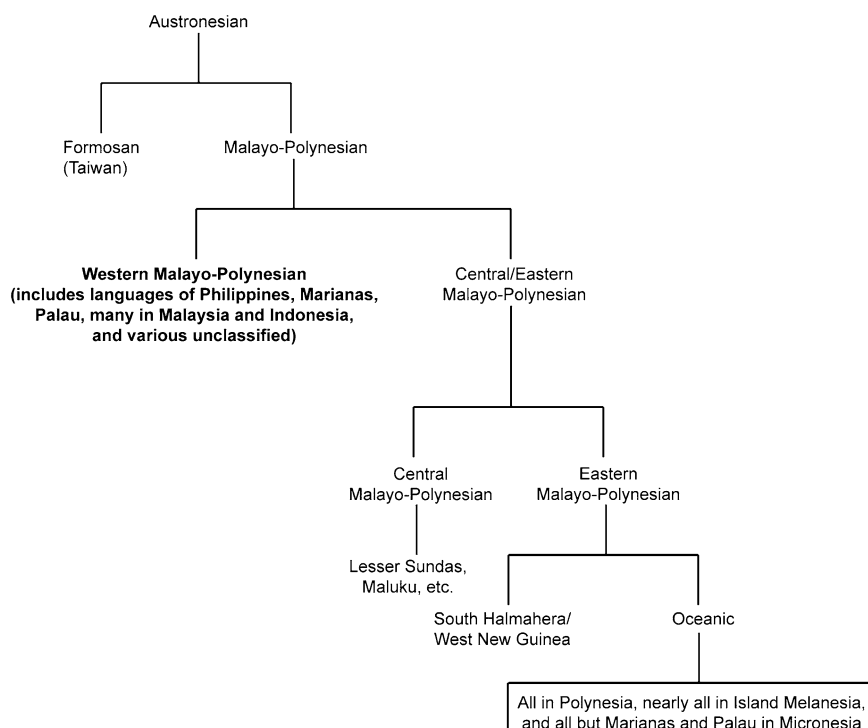
Their luxurious tropical forests provided an endless supply of food and resources, but such was not the case in the more distant islands of Remote Oceania.

Coming from any potential source-area in Southeast Asia or Near Oceania, crossing the frontier into Remote Oceania required two equally important cultural traits. One was a set of remote-range navigation skills and seaworthy vessels (Irwin 1992). Another was the ability to transport and manage essential subsistence crops (Bellwood 2005). These developments are attributed to large-scale migrations by land-dependent farming populations that began when groups of people first spread from Taiwan to the Philippines about 2000 B.C. or earlier (Bellwood et al. 2011). Whatever was their motivation for settling in new and distant lands, these people created the first instances of pottery, farming, and sedentary lifestyles in the region.

Beginning about 2000 B.C., sedentary farming groups intruded through the humid tropical zones of Island Southeast Asia, specifically in the Philippines and parts of Indonesia, where they met with the long-established populations of hunter-gatherers and low-intensity horticulturalists in these areas. The archaeological evidence includes a sudden appearance of pottery and other artifacts that can be linked to origins in Taiwan (Hung 2008). Most important was a red-slipped pottery tradition, which in the Philippines developed to include fine dentate-stamped and circle-stamped designs by 1800 B.C. (Hung et al. 2011). By 1500 B.C., the telltale redware pottery appeared in increasingly more sites throughout Island Southeast Asia, namely in the Philippines and parts of Indonesia (Bellwood 1997; Simanjuntak 2008).

The intrusive sedentary farmers in Island Southeast Asia are recognized as ancestors of today's Austronesian-speaking populations (Bellwood et al. 1995). Their language histories point to a shared Austronesian origin (Fig. 2.1), with a series of splits and divergences as groups and subgroups separated into dispersed populations throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Blust 2009a). A first-order split is noted between the Austronesian languages in Taiwan versus all others known as Malayo-Polynesian. The native Chamorro language of the Mariana Islands is situated at a high phylogenetic level within Malayo-Polynesian, most likely derived from an early stage of the language history in the Philippines (Blust 2000, 2009b; Reid 2002).

According to the linguistic evidence, all Remote Oceanic settlements can be attributed to Austronesian-speaking groups, but the particular founding population in the Mariana Islands differed significantly from all others elsewhere in Remote Oceania. Remote Oceania is virtually synonymous with the Oceanic grouping in the Austronesian family, with curious exceptions in the Marianas and Palau. These two languages are not directly related to each other, but both came from an Island Southeast Asian source that was different from the Oceanic language group. Corroborating this story, the oldest known sites in Palau are not older than 1100 B.C. (Liston 2005), some centuries post-dating the first Marianas settlement. Likewise, all other Remote Oceanic settlements post-dated that of the Marianas by at least a few centuries (Carson and Kurashina 2012).



**Fig. 2.1** Position of Chamorro, native language of the Mariana Islands, within the Austronesian language family. Information is based on data by Blust (2009a)

After Austronesians settled in parts of Island Southeast Asian, the migration into Remote Oceania most often is described as the legacy of the Lapita Cultural Complex (Kirch 1997). Around 1500–1350 B.C., a new group of people arrived in the previously occupied Near Oceanic islands of the Bismarcks and Solomons, where they made elaborately dentate-stamped Lapita pottery (Summerhayes 2007). The earliest Lapita designs in the Bismarcks display many of the same dentate-stamped and circle-stamped motifs that were found in slightly earlier dated pottery of the Philippines (Carson et al. 2013). Very soon, though, the Near Oceanic Lapita designs became significantly more extravagant, perhaps due to signaling of cultural identity in this area long-inhabited prior to the arrival of the pottery making groups (Summerhayes 2000a, b).

Around 1100–800 B.C., Lapita groups expanded into the previously unpopulated islands of Remote Oceania in Southern Melanesia and West Polynesia (Burley and Dickinson 2001; Nunn 2007; Sand 1997). The first settlement in this Melanesian-Polynesian part of Remote Oceania, however, post-dated the earliest sites in the Mariana Islands. Moreover, the signature of Lapita pottery decoration by this time had developed into a distinctive style of its own (Chiu 2012; Sand 2007, 2010). Links with a homeland in Island Southeast Asia by then were

just vaguely noticeable in the pottery designs, after some centuries of development in a separate context. Similarly, the distribution of Lapita pottery was exclusively within the Oceanic language grouping of the Austronesian family.

Compared to the case for Lapita settlement of Remote Oceania, Marianas settlement in 1500 B.C. would require a separate language group, a different direction of overseas voyage, an equal or earlier date, and more isolation. Accordingly, Rainbird (2004: 85) identified this event as “the longest sea-crossing undertaken by that time in human history.” The longest Lapita voyage was about 900 km between Vanuatu and Fiji about 1000 B.C. (Irwin 1989), as compared to an earlier crossing in excess of 2,000 km between the Marianas and any other contemporary populated area.

Looking at a modern map of the western Pacific, other Micronesian islands appear potentially within practical reach of the voyagers who settled in the Marianas (see Fig. 1.1). However, these islands bear no evidence of human habitation as early as the sites in the Marianas (Carson 2013). For instance, Palau was settled apparently no earlier than 1100 B.C. (Fitzpatrick 2003; Liston 2005). The many small atolls of Micronesia were not yet emerged above sea level until about 1,000 years later (Dickinson 2003), and accordingly their first settlements dated approximately 200 B.C.–A.D. 200 (Intoh 1997; Rainbird 1994, 2004).

As outlined here, Marianas settlement occurred earlier and separately from all other parts of Remote Oceania, and moreover it must have remained isolated from other parts of Remote Oceania that were not populated until some centuries later. Long-distance contacts certainly occurred periodically throughout Marianas culture history, but the sheer distance alone would suggest that such voyages were few and infrequent. Prior to 1100 B.C., the only reachable inhabited areas outside the Marianas were in Island Southeast Asia and Near Oceania. The Mariana Islanders must have known about their own homeland and other populated areas, but repeated two-way contacts probably were rare. They may even have known about a number of unpopulated areas, such as Palau in far Western Micronesia, as well as about remote shoals and emergent atolls, but no existing material evidence can confirm or deny these musings.

Unlike for Lapita with its Near Oceanic roots, the Marianas case exemplifies a direct colonization of an exceptionally isolated part of Remote Oceania. Lapita origins in Near Oceania have been debated as owing to immigrant Southeast Asian (Austronesian) influence, in situ indigenous Papuan developments, or combinations of the two before expanding into Remote Oceania (Green 2000). The circumstances in the Marianas do not involve these complications, described by Spriggs (1999: 20) as the “smoking gun” of an Island Southeast Asian origin of ancient population movements in the Western Pacific (see also Spriggs 2007: 113–114).

As compelling as this brave new tale may be, it nonetheless needs scientific support from real archaeological sites, or else it risks dissolving into a fog of fairy tales and unproven knowledge claims. At the very least, early Marianas settlement reveals more complexity in Oceanic settlement than has been evident in Lapita,

and possibly it exposes a radically different prehistory narrative. These daring and possibly disturbing notions now can be addressed properly by robust new field data from the Marianas, as presented in the chapters of this book.

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Earliest Sites in the Mariana Islands

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