


**BIRD-MAN AMULETS AND TRIDACNA SHELL DISCS FROM TAUMAKO, SOLOMON ISLANDS**

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Kapkaps, *Tridacna* discs with turtle shell overlays, are a distinctive form of personal ornament in several parts of Melanesia. In northern Melanesia, from the Admiralty Islands to the northern Solomons, the turtle shell overlay is a circular fretwork, centrally placed; in the Santa Cruz group, a highly stylised figure, often interpreted as a bird and/or fish motif, is placed on the upper part of the disc, which in this area is always worn as a breast pendant. Various writers have reviewed the distribution of kapkaps and other kapkap-like ornaments in Melanesia and beyond (for example, Reichard 1933, Bodrogi 1961, Rose 1980). The relationship between the true kapkaps of northern Melanesia and the Santa Cruz discs has been debated inconclusively. Rose has suggested that good archaeological materials "might permit time-depth evaluations over broad areas" (Rose 1980:255).

Excavations on Taumako, a Polynesian outlier on the eastern fringe of the Santa Cruz district, showed that the *Tridacna* shell disc itself has considerable antiquity in this part of Melanesia, and produced two examples of a form of amulet which may be ancestral to the Santa Cruz turtle shell overlays. The amulet can be interpreted as a bird-man, although other interpretations are also possible. We offer this short paper in honour of Ralph Bulmer and in memory of his interest in birds, bird-men, and people-carried-away-by-birds.
Taumako is a group of small rugged islands in the Outer Eastern District of the Solomon Islands. The group is also known as the Duff Islands; Taumako is actually the name of the largest island in the group, where most of the population is concentrated. The Taumako people speak a Polynesian language, very closely related to that of Pileni in the Reef Islands. For this reason, Taumako is regarded as one of the several Polynesian outliers in the Santa Cruz area.

In 1977-78, we carried out archaeological investigations in the Taumako group, as part of the second phase of the South East Solomons Culture History project. The investigations included two major excavations. One, at Te Ana Tavatava, produced evidence about the antiquity of *Tridacna* discs; the other, at Namu, produced the amulets.

Te Ana Tavatava is a small cave shelter at the rear of an old living site on Lakao, the second largest and only other permanently inhabited island in the Taumako group. Excavations in the cave shelter and in the open area in front produced evidence of an occupation sequence spanning almost 3000 years. The earliest deposit, at the base of the cave shelter at a time when the beach was directly in front of it, dates to about 2600 B.P. (NZ4641 Conventional Radiocarbon Age = 2603 ± 64, see Leach 1985:117). From this basal layer was recovered a worked piece of *Tridacna* shell which we interpreted as an unfinished disc. The identification of this piece was confirmed by the discovery, in the same layer, of a fragment from the rim of a complete disc, approximately 120 mm in diameter, identical in size and rim form to examples from the much more recent Namu site. No evidence about the presence or form of any overlay was obtained from this excavation. It demonstrates, however, that large *Tridacna* discs have been made in the Taumako area for almost 3000 years.

The Namu site is a burial ground, located in the grounds of the village school on the main island of Taumako, opposite the artificial islet of Tahua where the majority of the Taumako people live. The site was visible on the surface as a very low mound about 8 m in diameter and 70 cm high. Fragments of human bone, shell beads and broken bits of *Trochus* shell arm rings were scattered on the surface.

Altogether 201 individual burials were partly exposed and numbered; 187 of these were excavated and brought back to New Zealand for study.

The present day Taumako people have no traditional knowledge of this or other similar burial grounds. The dating of the Namu site has posed problems. Several radiocarbon dates on bone collagen proved unsatisfactory. There is one date on charcoal from near the base of the site of about 340 years B.P. (NZ4639 Conventional Radiocarbon Age = 338 ± 55). Electron Spin Resonance (ESR) analysis of a series of bone samples suggests that the burial ground was in use for about 170 years, or from about A.D. 1530 to 1700 (Whitehead *et al.* 1986).

Many of the people at Namu were buried with personal ornaments, including *Tridacna* disc breast pendants, *Tridacna* nose pieces, *Trochus* arm rings, Nautilus ear discs, and various kinds of strung ornaments.

Figure 1. ‘Bird-man’ amulets from Namu, Taumako, thought to be ancestral to the turtle shell fretwork overlays on Santa Cruz breast pendants. A: #78.114, Burial 151. B: #78.113, vicinity of Burial 126.
including necklaces, anklets, waist bands and head bands. These strung ornaments were made up of various combinations of small shell beads, ivory 'reel' beads, flying fox teeth, small *Nautilus* pendant units and perforated small gastropods. Most of the ornaments found at Namu are very similar to ornaments described ethnographically from the Santa Cruz area (for example by Koch 1971). One notable exception is the ivory reels, which are generally regarded as a Polynesian ornament type, and have been shown to have been made of both whale and dugong ivory (Leach *et al.* 1979). Similar reels are known, however, from another Polynesian outlier in the region, Tikopia (Firth 1951), and also in the nearby Vanuatu group (Matthew Spriggs, pers. comm.). Another exception is a limb ornament consisting of a *Cassis* or *Ovula* shell with perforated lip, worn on the upper arm or just below the knee. We are not aware of anything quite comparable in ethnographic collections.

Ornaments were found with men, women and children at Namu. Although the richest grave was that of a male, some female and infant burials were also very rich. Men, women and children were also found with few or no grave goods.

Two unique shell amulets were found at Namu, one complete, one slightly broken (Fig. 1). They are almost identical in size and very similar in form. The incomplete example was near the knees of Burial 126, but may not have been directly associated with it. This was a male buried with a number of ornaments including a *Tridacna* disc and *Cassis* leg ornaments. The complete specimen was found among the ribs of

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Burial 151 when that burial was removed, and is thought to have been associated with it. Burial 151 was a young female who had experienced at least one pregnancy. She was buried with a variety of ornaments, including *Trochus* arm rings, and several strung ornaments, but no *Tridacna* disc. Unfortunately, the way these amulets were worn or used by living people cannot be established with certainty from this archaeological evidence.

The shell from which the amulets are made has not been identified. The general appearance and relative flatness suggest that it may be pearl shell rather than *Nautilus*, which was widely used at Namu for ear ornaments and small pendants. If so, these amulets would probably be the only pearl shell ornaments found at Namu. No pearl shell nose pieces, well known ethnographically from Santa Cruz, were found in the excavations. There is a clear stylistic relationship between these shell amulets and the turtle shell overlays on *Tridacna* discs from Santa Cruz (Fig. 2).

The turtle shell overlays occur in numerous variants, some more stylised than others, and some more easily interpreted as a bird motif, particularly a frigate bird.

The identification of the turtle shell overlays as birds or frigate birds and fish has been made by numerous writers (for example, Graebner 1909, Speiser 1915, Bodrogi 1961, Force and Force 1971:253, Rose 1980:256). Reichart (1933:115), however, argued strongly against this view, while accepting the frigate bird and fish interpretations of the more realistic engraved designs on discs from the Solomons. The most detailed interpretation was provided by Beasley (1939), who identified separate components of the design as frigate bird, tail of shark, bonito, shark's teeth, shark, and backbone of shark. Koch (1971:116) notes that the meaning of the overlay design is not known to modern informants and speculates that it is a frigate bird with fish or dolphins above. It has to be admitted that some of these identifications are rather fanciful, and all are uncertain. Koch's evaluation seems the most sensible.

The Namu amulets are the oldest known examples of this motif and certainly the simplest and most naturalistic representation. We think this basic design is best described as representing a bird-man, rather than

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a bird. The 'legs' in particular, but also the 'wings', are more realistic than the comparable appendages on most of the overlays of the historic period. The Taumako form can also be said to have a 'head', which is only rarely seen on the overlays. There does not appear to be any fish element in the Taumako example. The design is capable of seemingly endless transformations, in almost all of which, however, all the elements of the Taumako bird-man are retained (Figs. 3 and 4).

We have considered the possibility that the Namu amulets themselves may have been overlays on breast pendants, but for various reasons this seems unlikely. They are too small, and the perforations are differently positioned from those on ethnographic examples of overlays. The one which was more certainly associated with a burial was found with a burial that did not have a *Tridacna* disc. Moreover, there is some reason to think that few if any of the 19 *Tridacna* discs found at Namu had overlays.

Ethnographic collections from Santa Cruz include shell discs with turtle shell overlays, and shell discs without overlays, but with several strands of cord between the perforation and the rim on both sides. All but one of the Namu discs have a chemical shadow of a cord running from the central perforation to the edge; in all but three of these the shadow of the cord can be detected on both sides. We would not expect to find an actual shadow of an overlay, nor should there be cord shadows on both sides of a shell disc if it had an overlay, for the overlay lies between the cord and the surface of the disc in ethnographic specimens. It is possible, therefore, that although the discs themselves have considerable antiquity in the Santa Cruz region, the turtle shell overlays may be quite recent. It is also possible, of course, that the predominance of plain disks at Namu was simply a regional variation.

The Namu amulets could have had a secondary use as overlays, as for instance a broken pearl shell nose piece has been used in an example in the Auckland Museum (#3986.2), but they do not seem to have been designed primarily for this purpose. It is more likely that they were pendants, in which case they could have been part of ear or nose ornaments, or strung ornaments worn around the neck or elsewhere. The position of the complete amulet with Burial 151 could suggest a neck or breast pendant. We should not forget, however, the tendency for Santa Cruz islanders to decorate many portable objects with pendant units: these amulets may

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not have been worn on the body at all, but could have been attached to charms, dance wands, or even to coils of feather money.

The suggestion that the amulets were not themselves designed to be Tridacna breast pendant overlays does not mean that they are not stylistically and symbolically related to the overlays. It seems certain that the Namu amulets represent an older version of the same motif, which later became associated with the breast pendants in various more stylised and embellished forms.

It is difficult to identify a single primary version of the turtle shell overlay design of which all others are variations, although newly developing techniques aimed at studying shape transformations may help with this in the future. It would therefore be unwise at the moment to suggest that the Taumako bird-man is the single stylistic ancestor from which all the Santa Cruz turtle shell versions derive, although its simplicity certainly suggests this. The archaeological example has, however, given a new dimension to our knowledge of what is undoubtedly a very powerful symbol in the art of the Santa Cruz region.

The Taumako excavations, by revealing a very long history for Tridacna discs in the Santa Cruz region, have strengthened the view that the discs themselves will prove to have a single origin throughout Melanesia. They have also suggested the possibility that the turtle shell overlay may be much more recent in Santa Cruz. At the same time, however, they have shown that the design used in recent times for turtle shell overlays in Santa Cruz has an antiquity of at least several hundred years and has been embellished over this period from something less complex stylistically and symbolically. Moreover, the intimate association between the disks and the overlay, so evident in the historic period, may be confined to the recent past.

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REFERENCES


