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# Archaeological and anthropological fieldworks along the Purari River (Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea)

Recent [results](#) generated by the Papuan Past Project identified the major rivers of the southern lowland region of Papua New Guinea as potential early natural corridors of migration since the initial settlement of northern Sahul. Consequently, the sites and communities along the [Purari River](#) were the focus of our 2023 fieldwork. This research in the southern lowlands complements our investigations in the northern [lowland region of the Sepik](#) and in the highlands along the [Wahgi](#) valley (*cf.* this [post](#)), on the history of settlement and adaptation of Papua New Guinean populations.

From the 27<sup>th</sup> of January to the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 2023 a team of six people undertook this fieldwork of the Papuan Past Project in the upper Purari region (Kikori district, Gulf province). The team was composed of researchers from French universities (François-Xavier Ricaut, Hubert Forestier, Justin Guibert), Jean-Pierre de Saint Aubert, one researcher from the [National Museum and Art Gallery](#) (Kenneth Miamba), and one cultural heritage officer from [TotalEnergies EP PNG Ltd](#) (Avis Babalu) who is starting a master's in archaeology and anthropology at the University of Papua New Guinea.

## The Purari River

The [Purari River](#) originates in the Enga province and flows 630 kilometers through the Gulf province to the Gulf of Papua, connecting the highland region to the coast. For this reason, this major geological corridor has been a natural route since the early settlement phase of the highlands ( $\approx 25,000$  years ago). This route was also used by the Leahy brothers' expedition in 1933 which led to the discovery of the populated Wahgi valley. Today, the Purari river is still used to reach the highland province of Chimbu, by moving up stream to Wabo and Uraru villages and then following mountain tracks.



The Purari river (Photo F.-X. Ricaut)

The Purari River has played an important role in the trading activities of the region since at least the mid-Holocene. Purari communities were involved in two long distance trades. First, in a coastal trade called Hiri between the Gulf of Papua and the Motu people living around what is now Port Moresby by [exchanging](#) locally made sago and rainforest canoe logs for earthenware pots and shell ornaments. Secondly, in an exchange network of stone axes with the central highland and the Torres strait. The presence of the Lapita settlement in the Gulf of Papua (Hopo site), dating back 2600 years, may also have initiated these long distance trading networks.

## Activities on the field

The scientific team pursued three research activities:

- Related to archaeological investigation, we surveyed two of the three archaeological sites identified by the National Museum and Art Gallery in 1977 in the upper Purari valley. The two sites visited are located upstream from the Wabo village and identified as the Sizorebe rockshelter and the Eripa caves. The survey of these sites gave us a better understanding of their scientific interest and the logistics needed for future excavation.
- Concerning anthropology, we started interviewing the inhabitants of Wabo and the neighboring hamlet. We recorded their genealogy, language, clan, and kinship relationship among other information. The main tribe (Pokeia) in the area which is composed the 8 clans has been identified.
- Concerning the genetic history of the Purari population, we started to collect DNA samples in Wabo village to cover the main clan lineages.



Meeting with some clan owners (Photo F.-X. Ricaut).



Sizorebe rockshelter (Photo F.-X. Ricaut).



During these three research activities the team benefited from the logistical support of [TotalEnergies EP PNG Ltd](#), in term of transportation from Port Moresby to Upper Purari (plane, boat and helicopter), accommodation (Wabo station and Herd Base), and access to local communities.



Eripa caves (Photo F.-X. Ricaut).



Wabo station on the upper Purari river (Photo F.-X. Ricaut).

## Perspectives

After the survey in the Upper Purari region part of the team (H. Forestier, J. Guibert and J.-P. de Saint Aubert) went back to France. In the meantime, F.-X. Ricaut joined the rest of the team (Nicolas Brucato, Sébastien Plutniak and Christopher Kinipi) working at the Archaeological Laboratory of the University of Papua New Guinea on an [anthropobiological research project](#). In 2024 the team plan to return to pursue these different projects.

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