

ANCIENT DISCOVERY

Manus' skeletal puzzle

By ALEX RHEENEY

THE soil was delicately scrapped away to reveal the remains of a human being. Its skull was broken and there were some bones missing from the feet and the left underarm, when the gruesome discovery was made last month on M'buke Island on the south coast of Manus.

The find could have caught the attention of forensic scientists and police as the person could have been murdered and secretly buried to conceal a crime.

But the trick was that the crime could have been committed over 2000 years ago as archaeologists reveal that the layer of soil that the remains were buried in was more than 2000 years old.

Danish archaeologist Dr Mads Ravn led a team from Denmark's Aarhus University to M'buke Island in December to look for prehistoric sites and hopefully, make a finding that could throw more light on the mystery of the Pacific's Lapita pottery.

But the discovery of the 2000-year-old skeleton was beyond his wildest dreams, especially for an archaeologist who is yet to make his mark amongst his peers.

Dr Mads, Aarhus museum curator Jeanette Varbergs and archaeological and anthropological students Signe Helles Olesen and Anders Emil Rasmussen were living in a house on M'buke Island that was next to the ancient grave that had the skeleton.

"We were actually living just above it and then when we hit it; we opened it up and found out that it was very old. I mean it could have been very recent I suppose. But from the layers that we could

trace down, we could see that it was probably more than 2000 years old. So now we got the whole problem or the whole task from that to reveal the skeleton, take photographs of it as the ones you see and take it home for further analysis," the archaeologist told said when he flew into Port Moresby to negotiate with the National Museum and Art Gallery on how further research work could be done on the skeleton.

M'buke Islanders were intrigued by the finding and questioned the visitors about it until their departure from the island.

"They were surprised that we were able to dig so deep and then suddenly bump into a skeleton. They also found it very brave of me to be sitting for more than four days in a grave. I told them that it was my job and they accepted that answer. They commented on how much patience I had digging out

the skeleton. Everybody were very interested and asked a lot of good questions, that made me think. Like how old was the person? Man or woman? Did he or she die a natural death and so on," said Ms Varbergs.

The National Museum has agreed to give Dr Mads clearance to move the skeleton to the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, to be stored in a cold-room where archaeologi-

cal finds are preserved and studied. The M'buke skeleton will come under the care of Professor Mathew Spriggs, a world-renowned expert on Lapita pottery who has pioneered archaeological exploration in Melanesia as well as the Pacific.

In April the skeleton will get a visit from world-class expert, Dr Frederique Valentin, whose last assignment was in Vanuatu in 2005 as part of an international archaeological team who excavated a 3000-year-old burial site.

Dr Mads says the skeleton could be much older than the soil it was discovered in but sophisticated and technologically-advanced testing at the ANU would need to be done to confirm that.

"We could see there was a black layer (of soil) above which is about 2000 years old so it must be older than that. We don't have an exact date on this skeleton yet which is why we need to have it further analysed. You know there is something called carbon 14 which is or can sort of analyse (and give a) date precisely than we can. But I am quite sure it is older than 2000 years," he said.

The M'buke Islanders and their local leaders gave Dr Mads and his team their full approval for the skeleton to be taken off the island for further analysis to determine its origins.

They also asked the archaeological team to put their island on the world-map, the international interest attracted by the skeleton confirms that the islanders are getting their prayers answered.



Jeanette Varbergs a member of the archeological team plasters the skull to keep it intact and take it away for further investigation.



PIECES of clay pots found near the site of the skeleton.



SKETCHING out a rough of the skeleton at the site.