

13. Australia and Oceania – main characteristics

Australia

Location

= island continent, between the Indian and South Pacific oceans, SE of Asia and forming, with the nearby island of Tasmania, the *Commonwealth of Australia*, a self-governing member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

Boundaries

- N = Timor Sea, Arafura Sea and Torres Strait
- E = Coral Sea and Tasman Sea
- S = Bass Strait and the Indian Ocean
- W = Indian Ocean

The Commonwealth of Australia extends about 4,000 km from Cape Byron in the east to Western Australia, and about 3,700 km from Cape York in the north to Tasmania in the south. Its coastline measures some 36,735 km.

Total area: 7,614,500 km² (continent alone) or 7,682,300 km² (including Tasmania) => the smallest continent and one of the largest countries in the world

Figure 1: Australia



= made up of 6 states and 2 territories:

- New South Wales
- Queensland
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Victoria
- Western Australia
- Australian Capital Territory
- Northern Territory

Australia's external dependencies are e.g. Christmas Island, the Cocos Islands, Norfolk Island and the Coral Sea Islands Territory

Capital: Canberra

Oceania

Micronesia

= one of the three major ethnogeographic subdivisions of Oceania, encompassing (involving) the islands of the Pacific Ocean east of the Philippines and north of the equator. It comprises (includes) more than 2,000 islands, e.g. Northern Mariana Islands, the Palau Islands, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Guam, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Guam is the largest of the islands with an area of 559 km² most of the others are small atolls (Figure 2).

The name Micronesia derives from the Greek meaning “small islands”.

Evolution of settlements

Western Micronesia, comprising Palau (Caroline Islands) and the Mariana Islands, was first settled about 3,500 years ago, probably by peoples from Indonesia or the Philippines. Eastern Micronesia was settled at about the same time, possibly by people from eastern Melanesia. Blood type analysis has shown that, contrary to earlier beliefs, Micronesians are distinct from Australian, Asiatic, and Polynesian races.

Figure 2: Micronesia



Melanesia

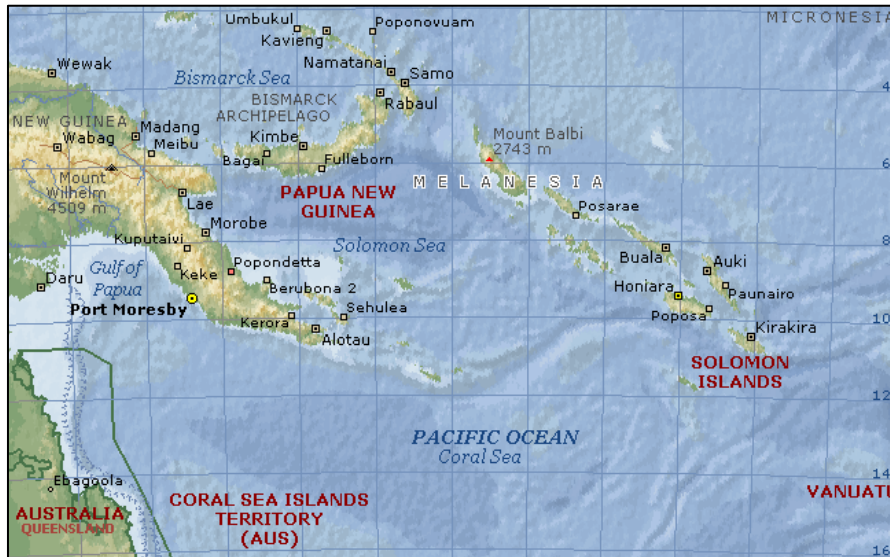
= the islands in the western Pacific Ocean, south of the equator. Melanesia includes, from west to east, the island of New Guinea, the Admiralty Islands, the Bismarck Archipelago, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides), Fiji, and Norfolk Island.

Evolution of settlements

The name Melanesia, which derives from the Greek words meaning “black” and “islands”, reflects the fact that the islands are inhabited by dark-skinned peoples who migrated to Melanesia in two distinct waves. The first settlers were the Papuans who may be related to the Aborigines of Australia and who migrated to the area that later became New Guinea at least 40,000 years ago. They went on to settle the Bismarck Archipelago then. About 4,000 years ago another culture appeared with the arrival of seafaring peoples with a South East Asian tradition. They moved into parts of northern New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, and went on to settle in the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji.

Melanesia today is characterized by two distinctive cultures and language groups, which reflect these two waves of settlement. The more than 700 languages spoken belong predominantly to either the Papuan or Oceanic-Austronesian families, the latter dominates east of the Bismarck Archipelago.

Figure 3: Melanesia



Polynesia

= huge triangle of islands in the east-central and southern Pacific Ocean. The word Polynesia derives from two Greek words meaning “many” and “islands”. The Hawaiian islands are at the apex of the Polynesian triangle, New Zealand and Easter Island form the base corners. Other Polynesian islands and island groups: Samoa, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Tonga, Wallis and Futuna, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Pitcairn Island, American Samoa and Niue. Ethnological descriptions sometimes include Fiji in Polynesia because a significant proportion of its population is of Polynesian descent. New Zealand's original inhabitants, the Maori, are a Polynesian people.

Evolution of settlements

It is thought that central Polynesia was first settled 3,000 to 4,000 years ago by people from Melanesia. New Zealand was first settled sometime about AD 1000. The close relationship between the various Polynesian languages, despite the vast distances of ocean separating the islands, is seen as supporting archaeological indications of relatively recent diffusion of Polynesian culture.

Figure 4: Polynesia

