

The SAC Burial Ground, Watom Island, Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT. Discussion of the burial practices associated with the Lapita cultural complex has previously been limited through lack of evidence. This is rectified by presenting the basic mortuary data on a sample of eight adult inhumations from the SAC burial ground in the Reber-Rakival Lapita site on Watom Island and comparing them with three individual burials from Lapita sites in Fiji and Tonga. A common preference for burial in flexed positions within a small rounded pit feature is evident in the sample, although this practice does not apply to every case. There is, however, less consistency in orientation of the body, the greatest number being with the head to the west.

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In Green's (1979) review of the Lapita cultural complex, little discussion of associated human burials was possible because the known examples were so few: Reber-Rakival, Watom; Natunuku, Fiji; To.1, Tonga. Among these only the locality of SAC (then site 8 or FAC) at Reber-Rakival on Watom Island, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea, suggested that an area within a site contained a possible burial ground. It was here that Specht (1968:126) described three burials located in trench I within an area of 6m², in the lower-most occupation zone designated C2. A direct date on a bone sample from parts of the three roughly contemporary burials yielded a result of 2,420±110 B.C. (ANU-37b) (Specht, 1968:124). As part of the Lapita Homeland Project (Allen, 1984), Green and Anson with the initial assistance of Specht returned to Watom Island and the Reber-Rakival site with several objectives. One of

these was to recover further Lapita-associated burial material by exposing a larger area at the SAC locality, one of several localities investigated within the Reber-Rakival area (Fig.1). Thus the SAC Watom excavations represent the first recorded investigations of a burial ground associated with the Lapita cultural complex. The other three burials dealt with in this volume are each individual cases from separate sites in Fiji and Tonga (see below). Other objectives were aimed at gaining stratigraphically secure radiocarbon samples which would help to pin down the chronological ages of the various occupation deposits associated with Lapita pottery on Watom and confirm the postulated late position of these among Lapita assemblages assigned to Far Western region (Anson, 1983, 1986).

An outline of some of the results from the excavations