

Trade and Culture History across the Vitiaz Strait, Papua New Guinea: The Emerging Post-Lapita Coastal Sequence

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ABSTRACT. This paper, focusing principally on post-Lapita times, outlines the course and outcomes of work undertaken over the last two decades in the West New Britain–Vitiaz Strait–north New Guinea coastal region. It presents two principal arguments. The first is that major periods of movement and abandonment documented in the archaeological sequences of this region from about 3,500 years ago coincide with the record of volcanism in the Talasea–Cape Hoskins area. The second is that the post-Lapita sequences of this region differ significantly from the post-Lapita sequences emerging in the island arc reaching from Manus via New Ireland to southern and eastern island Melanesia, which show continuous occupation and pottery production.

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Focusing principally on the post-Lapita period, this paper considers the results and culture-historical implications of research that Gosden, Summerhayes, Torrence and I have undertaken over the last 20 years in the West New Britain–Vitiaz Strait–north New Guinea coastal region (Fig. 1)—a region that Jim Specht (1967) began opening up some 35 years ago. Specht taught me how to do archaeology in New Guinea. I worked with him in West New Britain in 1980 and 1981 and literally and figuratively followed in his footsteps for many years afterwards. This places me in a good position to draw together aspects of the work undertaken on some archaeological issues close to his heart.

The aims of this paper are two-fold. The first is to demonstrate that major changes in the archaeological sequences in West New Britain and areas to the west across the Vitiaz Strait and along the north New Guinea coast from about 3,500 years ago align reasonably well with episodes of catastrophic volcanism in the Vitiaz Strait and the Talasea-

Cape Hoskins area of north-central coastal New Britain. Linguistically this latter area is the proximal source of North New Guinea and Papuan Tip Austronesian languages (Ross, 1988). It is also well-known as the geological source of much of the archaeological obsidian found in island Melanesia. The broad correlation between archaeological and vulcanological sequences may help account for the ways in which the central social, linguistic and biological characteristics of the coastal and island peoples in the region developed during the late Holocene. The second aim is to show that this emerging post-Lapita sequence in the West New Britain–Vitiaz Strait–north New Guinea coast region differs significantly from the post-Lapita sequences emerging in the island arc stretching from Manus down through New Ireland into southern and eastern island Melanesia where, in general, there is no break in pottery manufacture and the deposition of cultural materials is evident following the Lapita period.