

Pre-Lapita Valuables in Island Melanesia

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ABSTRACT. An unusual obsidian stemmed tool found by Jim Specht at Boku Hill, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, provides evidence for the existence of valuables in the pre-Lapita period. The large amount of skill, care, and effort invested in the manufacture of this large artefact combined with its symmetry and fragility imply that, unlike the other stemmed tools found at the site, Specht's find was not used in an utilitarian context. As in the case of axes in the Highlands of New Guinea, stemmed artefacts were therefore both useful tools and non-utilitarian objects which circulated in some form of ceremonial exchange system and for which control of the Kutau/Bao obsidian sources may have been important. The occurrence of valuables pre-dating Lapita pottery demonstrates that social systems based on ceremonial exchange and prestige goods were not imported, but developed *in situ*.

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It is well known among Melanesian archaeologists that Jim Specht has an uncanny ability to find important sites, often those with the early dates that are highly prized in this discipline. He excavated Misisil Cave, which for many years represented the earliest occupation of the Papua New Guinea islands (Specht *et al.*, 1981; 1983); he began work in the Yombon area and found pottery (probably Lapita plainware) far inland of its normal distribution (Specht *et al.*, 1981); he led Christina Pavlides to sites near Yombon mission where she found the earliest evidence for colonization of New Britain (Pavlides, 1999; Pavlides & Gosden, 1994); and he also began work at Kilu Cave on Buka, which later produced the earliest date for the Solomon Islands (Wickler & Spriggs, 1988). Although his achievements are perhaps not unexpected, since he has been exploring Melanesia for many years, I believe he has a gift. Not only did he, “by accident,” find obsidian stemmed tools in the base of a new latrine at Bitokara Mission, an event which led to the excavation of the type site for the region and set the basis for the use of volcanic stratigraphy within landscape archaeology (cf. Specht *et al.*, 1988; Specht *et al.*, 1991;

Torrence *et al.*, 1999a, 2000), but recently he also made a find with much significance for Melanesian prehistory, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

A remarkable discovery

During the 1999 field season, Jim and I visited the newly developed Garu Plantation, part of the Numundo Group owned by New Britain Palm Oil Ltd (Torrence *et al.*, 1999a) with a number of team members. The manager, Kefu Boromana took us to the top of Boku Hill where he had observed obsidian artefacts in an area recently levelled by bulldozer for a new house (Fig. 1). The hill is approximately 80 m a.s.l., overlooks an extensive peat swamp and has views stretching to the sea on the west side of the Willaumez Peninsula (about 10 km away). A small raised area on the north west side had been pushed over the edge of a steep cliff to provide the required level surface. As a result, most of the archaeological material dating to at least the past 6,000 years had been removed. Obsidian flakes were thinly