

# Cannibalism and Developments to Socio-Political Systems from 540 BP in the Massim Islands of south-east Papua New Guinea

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**ABSTRACT.** The consumption of human flesh, popularly defined as cannibalism, has arguably occurred throughout much of human history. In New Guinea, it has been associated ethnographically with warfare, mortuary rites and nutrition. However, it often evades detection in the archaeological record because of difficulties in distinguishing it from other social practices. Here we disentangle colonial myths associated with the consumption of human flesh and report disarticulated, burnt and cut human skeletal remains from two coastal sites spanning the past 540 years in the Massim island region of southeast Papua New Guinea. These sites, Wule and Morpa, both occur on Rossel Island. The skeletal evidence is contemporary with the construction of large stone platforms where human victims were often killed and consumed, and inland villages which were established in response to a well-attested period of conflict on Rossel and throughout the region. Within an ethnoarchaeological framework, we argue that cannibalism became increasingly prevalent in association with feasting as a means of maintaining social relationships and personal power. The findings are placed first within an island, then a regional model of emerging pressures on existing socio-political systems.

## Introduction

Cannibalism—popularly but narrowly defined as eating the flesh of another person—has long been a subject of macabre fascination among public audiences because of its association with primitive behaviour (Kilgour, 1998). Yet, the consumption of human flesh has occurred globally throughout much of human history, and for reasons other than the acquisition of food (Fernandez-Jalvo *et al.*, 1999; Andrews and Fernandez-Jalvo, 2003; Boulestin *et al.*, 2009; Defleur and Desclaux, 2019). In most archaeological studies the social and psychological factors which make it a functionally useful practice are poorly defined, although

economical, religious, and political motivations are often elicited (Villa, 1992; Conklin, 1995; Metcalf, 1987; Degusta, 2000). In the Pacific region, disarticulated, burnt and cut human bone have been attributed to cannibalism. However, the possible social implications are rarely discussed in detail (Kirch, 1984: 159; Poulsen, 1987: 250; Spennemann, 1987; Barber, 1992; Rechtman, 1992; Rieth, 1998; Degusta, 1999, 2000; Steadman *et al.*, 2000; Bedford, 2006: 228; Pietruszewsky *et al.*, 2007; Stodder and Reith, 2011). In large part, this is due to uncertainty in attributing skeletal evidence to disarticulation and cooking rather than to some other explanation, and likely also for fear of misrepresentation (Poulsen, 1987; Villa *et al.*, 1986; Vilaca, 2000; Carbonell

**Keywords:** Papua New Guinea; Rossel Island; Massim; cannibalism; feasting; subsistence

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**Received:** 19 November 2020 **Accepted:** 30 November 2020 **Published:** 12 May 2021 (online only)

**Publisher:** The Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia (a statutory authority of, and principally funded by, the NSW State Government)

**Citation:** Shaw, Ben, and Simon Coxe. 2021. Cannibalism and developments to socio-political systems from 540 BP in the Massim Islands of south-east Papua New Guinea. In *From Field to Museum—Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence*, ed. Jim Specht, Val Attenbrow, and Jim Allen. *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum Online* 34: 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.1835-4211.34.2021.1742>

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