

BALOF SHELTER, NEW IRELAND — REPORT ON A SMALL EXCAVATION

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SUMMARY

The excavation of 6 m² from a rock shelter in New Ireland is described. The maximum depth of deposit was 80 cm, with no clear strata being visible. A radiocarbon date of 6-7,000 years b.p. was obtained from the lowest levels, and one of 2,500 years b.p. from the middle. Faunal materials recovered include mammals (all except one still extant), lagoon fishes, reptiles and shellfish, the last being primarily from reef and lagoon environments. Artefacts from earlier levels include bone bi-points, flaked stone tools patterned similarly to those from the New Guinea Highlands and made from stone from a variety of resources, and obsidian imported from Talasea, New Britain. Obsidian from the Lou (Admiralty Is.) source, and pottery date from about 2,500 years ago. The site is the oldest so far excavated in Melanesia, and data from it provide insights into the development of trade patterns in the area over the last 7,000 years.

1. SITE, STRATA AND DATING

SITE AND EXCAVATION

Balof shelter is situated about 1.5 km inland from Medina village, on the east coast of New Ireland, some 90 km from the northern end (Fig. 1).

The coastal strip around Medina is only a few hundred metres wide and the country then rises in a series of irregular terraces, each of which is a few hundred metres across and possesses a steep and sometimes partially cliffed front. Balof shelter is located in the face of one such front, the third above the current coastal strip. It is estimated to be some 60-75 m above sea level.

The cliff at the point where the site is formed has been eroded and dissolved (possibly post-elevation) into an almost circular cavity some 50 m across at the base, which itself has been somewhat undercut to form a series of shelters. The largest and driest of these cavities is on the northeastern side, where the protected area is some 25 x 6 m. This is known locally as Balof (Fig. 2). The other shelters around the cavity are damp, while the cavity centre is filled with lianas hanging from the surrounding bush and a few trees. On the eastern side one scrambles over a pile of boulders to reach the main terrace surface from which it is a fairly easy walk to the beach.