

Lapita People: an Introductory Context for Skeletal Materials Associated with Pottery of this Cultural Complex

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ABSTRACT. Various theoretical statements in the 1970's and 1980's by Howells, Bellwood, Pietrusewsky, Brace & Hinton, Terrell, and Houghton on the likely biological origins and affinities of populations which settled the geographic areas of Melanesia and Polynesia are outlined. They serve to highlight some of the background issues involved in a set of papers assembled here that constitutes the first thorough examination of human burials associated with the Lapita cultural complex. These are the only skeletal materials recovered so far from the Oceanic area to bear directly on the nature of the biological populations present in Island Melanesia and Western Polynesia 3,500 to 2,100 years ago and as such allow limited assessment of the different theories which to date have largely been derived from the analysis of either fairly recent palaeobiological evidence or from the study of still living populations.

GREEN, R.C., 1989. Lapita People: an introductory context for skeletal materials associated with pottery of this cultural complex. *Records of the Australian Museum* 41(3): 207–213.

The discussion of the biological origins and affinities of the populations resident in Oceania at the time of European contact has a long history. It began with types called Melanesians, Micronesians and Polynesians, and it is in some ways unfortunate that those categories still remain with us today in many discussions of this topic. Certainly the concept of Polynesians as a reasonably homogeneous biological entity continues to have some utility (Howells, 1973:49, 228–233; 1979:282; Friedlaender, 1987:355–356) as it does culturally, linguistically and historically (Green, 1987; Kirch & Green, 1987). But this is emphatically not the case with the terms Melanesian and Micronesian, at least not in their original sense of separate and unified entities with a status similar to the situation in Polynesia (Terrell, 1986a: 15–41; Thomas, 1989; Green, 1989). In fact, as most researchers now recognise, the peoples of Melanesia in particular (i.e. those populations within the geographic area

of New Guinea and Island Melanesia) are "...markedly heterogeneous in languages, customs and biology..." (Terrell, 1986b:195).

Above all, what has been evident from the time of Howells' surveys (1943:42; 1973:48) to the most recent compilation of biological data (whether of blood polymorphisms, anthropometrics, dermatoglyphics, odontometrics or other biological variables), "...is the extraordinary amount of biological diversity..." which characterises smaller areas within Melanesia (Rhoads & Friedlaender, 1987:125), as well as Melanesia itself. For this reason the phylogenetic relationships between the human populations of Melanesia, and those of Micronesia and Polynesia have been the subject of numerous formulations, none of them entirely satisfactory, and often not particularly congruent with those developed by the linguists and archaeologists for the peopling of this area.