

Is There Life After Lapita, and Do You Remember the 60s? The Post-Lapita Sequences of the Western Pacific

MATTHEW SPRIGGS

Department of Archaeology and Natural History,
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies,
Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Matthew.Spriggs@anu.edu.au

ABSTRACT. Speculation on the relationships among pottery styles in the western Pacific started in the 1930s. Jim Specht's 1969 Ph.D. thesis brought this early period of speculation to an end by presenting a well-developed pottery sequence for Buka in the Northern Solomon Islands and relating it to emerging dated sequences from other parts of the Pacific. Following on from this research, and that of Kennedy and others, Spriggs in 1984 argued for cultural continuity between Lapita and post-Lapita pottery styles in Island Melanesia, and that post-Lapita stylistic changes continued in parallel over a large area until at least 1,500 B.P. Direct evidence of prehistoric contact between the various areas concerned seemed to support this idea. Wahome's 1998 thesis provided some statistical back-up to these ideas and presented a detailed pottery sequence for Manus which was then compared to other regional pottery sequences. The redating of the Mangaasi type-site in central Vanuatu by Spriggs and Bedford brought this important site into line with the dates for what was seen to be similar Incised & Applied relief pottery elsewhere. However, recent theses by Clark and Bedford on Fijian and Vanuatu pottery, respectively, have questioned the reality of the claimed stylistic similarities in post-Lapita pottery across the region. Thus, a debate has been opened up on the levels of similarity between pottery styles and the meaning of any similarity found between them. Basic culture-historical questions remain unanswered by the data so far presented and there is a need for further sequence construction and regional comparison.

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This paper is about what may be one of the next big debates in western Pacific archaeology. It concerns claimed connections between the post-Lapita pottery sequences in different parts of the region. The question is whether there

are wide-ranging relationships among them and, if there are, to what social processes do these relationships point? Opening shots in this debate have already been fired at the start of this new millennium.