

From Misisil Cave to Eliva Hamlet: Rediscovering the Pleistocene in Interior West New Britain

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ABSTRACT. The potential for archaeological evidence of Pleistocene activity to exist in West New Britain was first realized by Jim Specht. More recent work in Specht's research region of Yombon reveals intriguing archaeological data which demonstrate the organized utilization of rainforest resources as early as 35,500 years ago. The early colonists of the Bismarck Archipelago were versatile hunter-gatherers able to move beyond the coastal island fringes of Melanesia and harness important economic and lithic resources deep within the lowland rainforests.

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Twenty years ago Jim Specht published two short and modestly titled papers listing the then oldest archaeological site in the Bismarck Archipelago (Specht *et al.*, 1981: 14, 1983: 92). The first paper relayed the facts that Misisil Cave, a site set deep in the lowland tropical rainforest of West New Britain, had evidence of terminal Pleistocene occupation. The realization that the Bismarck Archipelago might have been colonized during the Pleistocene was just dawning on scholars of Melanesian prehistory and this find in West New Britain put Jim Specht firmly in the middle of the most hotly pursued set of archaeological data. Since then many archaeological sites in the Bismarck Archipelago and the Solomon Islands have demonstrated the remarkable colonizing feats of Melanesia's first occupants. Several of these very early sites are from another area visited by Jim Specht in the early 1980s—the Yombon village area in the shadow of Misisil Cave. The Yombon sites are extremely important as they indicate that the rainforests of West New Britain were entered and occupied in excess of 35,500 years ago. In addition they indicate that the early colonists of the

Bismarck Archipelago were not trapped along coastal island fringes, but rather were able to harness and utilize important inland resources and locales. This paper will evaluate current models of early habitation in Melanesia by examining the organization of flaked stone technologies found at Yombon and comparing this new information with data from other contemporary Melanesian sites.

“Strandlooper” models of sporadic, low intensity use of new environments by highly mobile coastal foragers are not consistent with new data from the Yombon area. For example, there is evidence to suggest that West New Britain's Pleistocene occupants were more structured in their approach to lithic resource acquisition and artefact production. In this case the targeting of specific high quality geological sources has organizational implications for technological planning and mobility strategies, as has the production of formal tools which could be maintained for extended periods of time. Models which argue for patterns of high mobility during the Pleistocene are therefore consistent with the pattern of technology observed at the