

**Archaeological Studies of the Middle and Late Holocene,  
Papua New Guinea  
Part VII**

**The Evolution of Sio Pottery: Evidence from Three Sites  
in Northeastern Papua New Guinea**

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper describes changes through time in the characteristics of one of the ceramic wares excavated in 1983–84 from the KLJ and KLK sites in the Siassi Islands and the KBQ site at Sio, located in the Vitiaz Strait region in northeastern Papua New Guinea (Lilley, 1986). This region was the scene of one of the anthropologically best-known long-distance maritime trading networks in Melanesia, described in Harding's (1967) classic ethnography *Voyagers of the Vitiaz Strait*. The pattern of change mirrors that associated with the late prehistoric rise of specialized production for trade described on the Papuan south coast (Allen, 1984; Irwin, 1985). This indicates the operation of similar processes of socioeconomic intensification and concomitant technological evolution across northwestern Melanesia.

LILLEY, IAN, 2007. Archaeological Studies of the Middle and Late Holocene, Papua New Guinea. Part VII. The evolution of Sio pottery: evidence from three sites in northeastern Papua New Guinea. *Technical Reports of the Australian Museum* 20: 227–244 [published online].

Pottery was probably the most important craft-good traded in the wider Vitiaz Strait area of Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1), both in terms of quantity and because it could be exchanged for high value as well as low value items, thus facilitating the conversion of one into the other (e.g., taro→pots→pigs; Harding, 1967: 139). Although clays suitable for potting are available in many parts of this wider area, the craft was traditionally practised in only three places: at the western end of the Huon Peninsula in the coastal villages of Sio, nearby Nambariwa and Gitua, some distance east (the three of which made the “Sio” pottery of the

title); on Yabob and Bilibili Islands off Madang in Astrolabe Bay and possibly at Mindiri not far to the east (all usually known as “Madang” pottery); and in five communities on the south coast of the Huon Gulf (Hogbin, 1951: 88–90; May & Tuckson, 1982: 149–151). Sio pottery was the “main stock-in-trade within the Vitiaz Strait”, but Madang pottery attracted better rates of exchange because it was the most “finely made and ... most valuable” in the region (Harding, 1967: 37). Huon Gulf wares seem to have been traded mainly in the Huon Gulf and there is little information on their status as a trade item in the Vitiaz region. Pottery was also made