

RECENT WORK ON THE PREHISTORY OF THE WESTERN SOLOMONS, MELANESIA

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Despite their central position within the Island Melanesian chain (Figure 1), the islands of the Western Solomons have long remained an archaeological backwater. The majority of work undertaken within this region has been limited to surface surveys of existing structural remains. While these studies have revealed much about the most recent period of Western Solomons prehistory, they have failed to provide the islands with any real time depth. Within the past two years, investigations conducted by archaeologists working for the Solomon Islands Western Province Government have led to the discovery of a number of sites which appear to be much earlier than anything previously reported from that area. While no excavations have yet been undertaken, the sites have yielded an abundance of surface remains which promise to shed new light on the early prehistory of the region.

This paper documents some of these more recent findings and combines the data with the work of previous researchers to produce a tentative outline of Western Solomons prehistory. It is hoped that this review may help to generate new questions concerning the past of these islands, and the role they played in the prehistory of the Southwest Pacific.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH IN THE AREA

Only two significant archaeological excavations have been undertaken within the Western Solomons to date. In 1964 Masashi Chikamori undertook excavations at the abandoned village sites of Veala and Tu'umbuo in the mountainous interior of the island of Vella Lavella. According to oral tradition Veala was the first site to be settled on Vella Lavella (Itoh 1967).

Chikamori's excavations were directed towards uncovering some evidence as to the origins and early history of the island's inhabitants. However, the English synopsis of Chikamori's work reveals neither the extent nor the depth of his excavations. No radiocarbon dates are given for the site, and the most useful information provided is a straightforward listing of the artifacts recovered - 'stone axes, shell bracelets, shell monies, stone flatwares, stone jars, rubstones, etc.' (Itoh 1967:9). Each of these artifact types was in common use at the time of European contact. No pottery was recovered from either of these sites.

Chikamori's excavations shed little light on the question of Western Solomons cultural origins. The limited evidence available suggests both Veala and Tu'umbuo represent relatively late period sites occupied after the abandonment of pottery use on Vella Lavella.

Another, somewhat more extensive programme of excavation was conducted by Geoffrey Irwin in 1970 on the island of Alu in the Shortland Islands, to the west of Vella Lavella (Irwin 1972) (Figure 2). Irwin concentrated his work along the coast where he located a series of abandoned village sites, each possessing a surface scatter of pottery fragments. The decorative motifs present on much of this pottery proved to be quite different from those found on the locally-made earthenware pots which had been in use in the Shortland Group at the time of early European contact in the late 1800s. Combining the data collected from his various excavations, Irwin constructed a rough cultural sequence based upon what he saw to be the major changes in techniques of pottery style and decoration. His only radiocarbon date, 1050 ± 80 BP, was used to mark the commencement of this sequence.

According to Irwin's interpretation, the first ceramic settlement of the Shortlands occurred some time in 'the second half of the first millenium A.D.' (Irwin 1973:247). Irwin does not speculate as to where these first pottery-using settlers came from or whether they may have been preceded by an aceramic population. He states only that in this Early Period the islands' inhabitants produced a relatively thin, undecorated pottery tempered with crushed shell.

Some time after the initial phase of occupation the Shortland Island potters appear to have either developed or adopted a range of decorative techniques. The first appearance of decorated pottery signals the beginning of the second or Middle Period of Irwin's chronology. The dominant decorative technique found on the pottery recovered from this phase is incision. Other techniques of decoration were also in evidence during this period, but apparently on a much smaller scale. These include appliqué (or applied relief), brushing, and paddle impression.

In the Late Period of Irwin's cultural sequence the use of incision is found less frequently. Appliqué and paddle impression become more common, and continue to be so in the Shortlands until the early part of this century.

At the time Irwin formulated his ceramic sequence for the Shortland Islands, there were no comparable collections of pottery from early sites elsewhere in the Western Solomons. The island of Choiseul to the northwest of the Shortlands was known to produce pottery at the time of European contact, but these pots, though similar in thickness and temper to those from the Shortlands, were undecorated.

More recently, sherds of thin (c.2-5 mm) pottery with linear and curvilinear incising resembling Irwin's Middle period incised wares have been found at surface sites on islands within the New Georgia group and on Choiseul (Miller 1979; Miller and Roe 1982; Yen pers. comm.). Although Miller attempted limited excavations at a few of these sites, his test trenches produced no datable material.

CURRENT RESEARCH: THE EARLY CERAMIC PERIOD EVIDENCE

While sites possessing Lapita pottery are known from Buka at the northwest end of the Solomons chain (Specht 1969; Wickler, pers. comm.) and the Reef and Santa Cruz Islands at

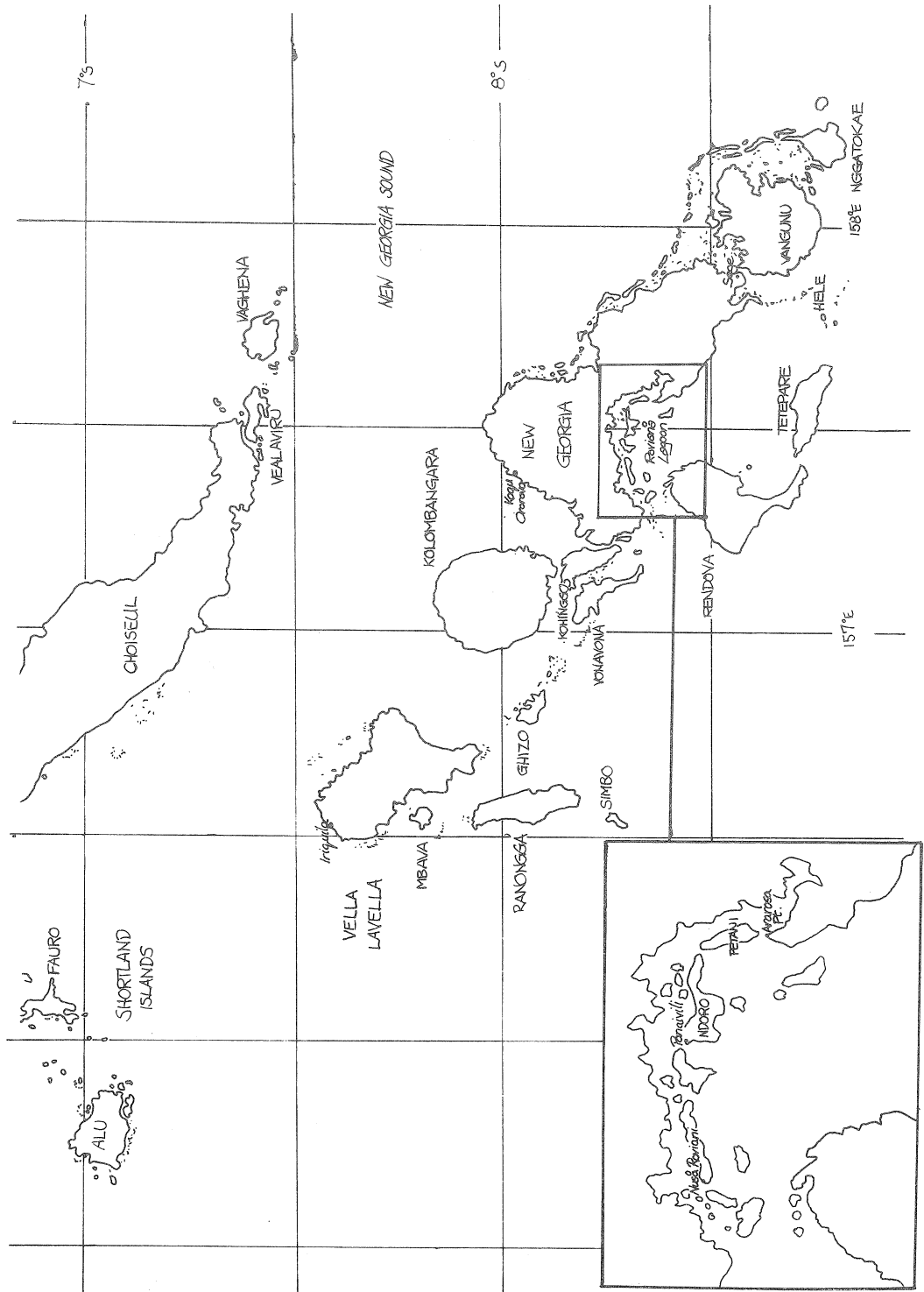


FIGURE 1: THE MAIN ISLANDS OF THE SOLOMONS AND THEIR POSITION WITHIN THE MELANESIAN CHAIN

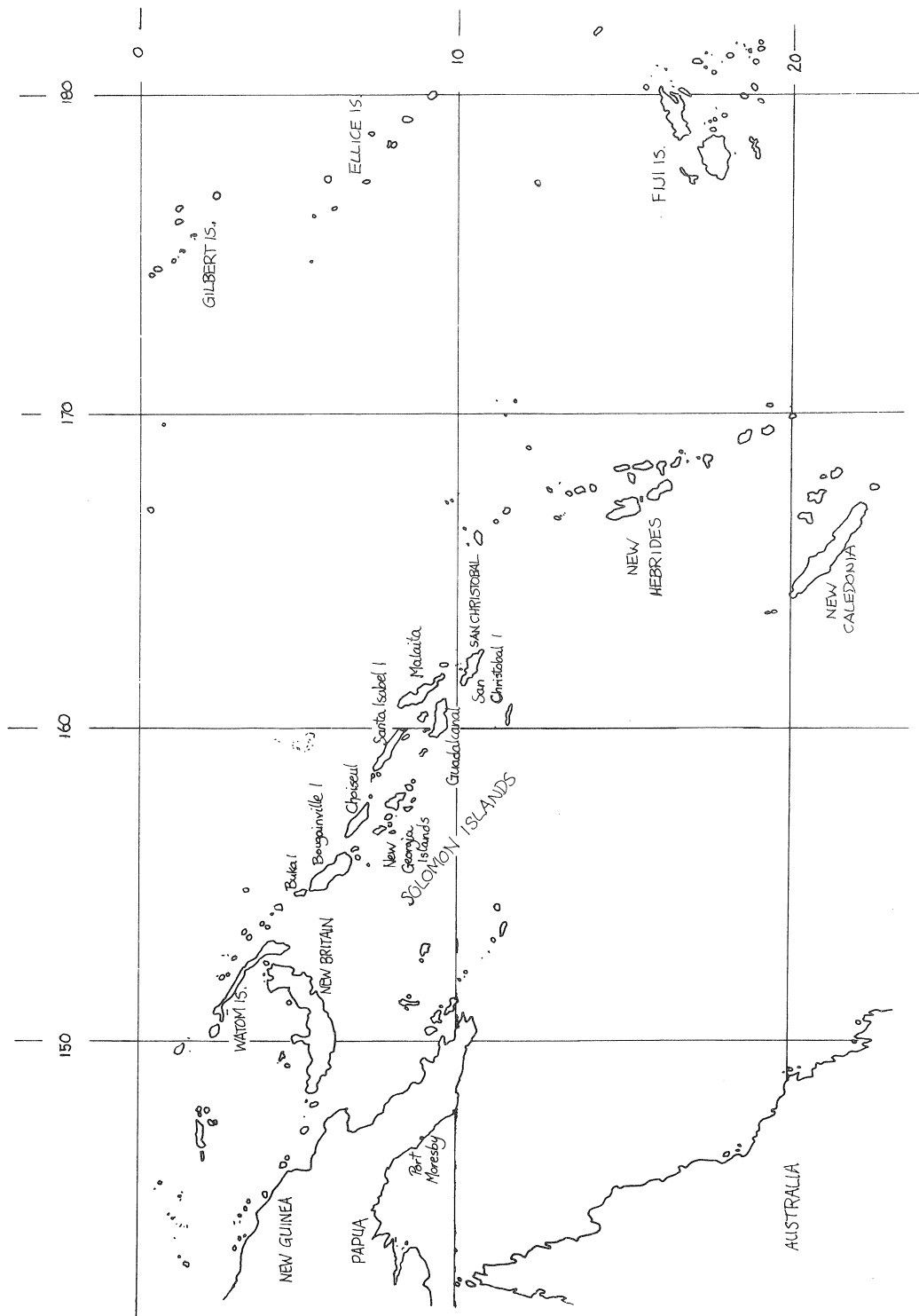


FIGURE 2: THE WESTERN SOLOMONS, WITH AN INSET OF ROVIANA LAGOON (NEW GEORGIA)

the southeast end (Green 1976), no firm evidence of Lapita settlement has yet been recovered from within the main Solomons. This may be due, however, more to the vagaries of research than to the absence of the sites themselves.

To date four sites containing a distinctive and possibly Lapita-related style of decorated pottery have been found within the Western Solomons; three in the New Georgia area and one on Vella Lavella.

PANAIVILI

By far the richest of these sites is located at the village of Panaivili on the barrier island of Nodoro in the Roviana lagoon (Fig. 2 - inset). Panaivili is situated at the western end of the island on its sheltered lagoonal side. It lies in a shallow cove protected by a scatter of offshore islands. Adjacent to the village is a deepwater passage which links the lagoon to the open sea.

The Panaivili site was first recognized by Matthew Spriggs and the author from a surface scatter of pottery sherds lying on the shallow inter-tidal flat fronting the present village. This expanse of loose silty sand stretches for approximately 15 m out from the high water line and is only exposed at low tide. The surface spread of pottery fragments found here covers an area c.10 m wide and extends for c.30 m along the shoreline. A small number of sherds was also picked up in the shallows surrounding the closest of the offshore islands. No sherds have yet been found above the high-water mark.

Soon after the initial discovery of the Panaivili site, curious villagers dug a number of scavenge pits into the area of the pottery scatter. Once discovered, this unauthorized digging was stopped, but not before a substantial amount of the deposit had been disturbed. Although these unsystematic 'excavations' caused a great deal of damage to the site, they also revealed a wealth of cultural material.

There is insufficient evidence at present to establish whether the c.70 cm of cultural deposit found at Panaivili is the product of one or a series of occupations. The action of the tides has served to obscure any stratigraphy present within the pits themselves. However, sherds dug from the site are similar both in fabric and in decorative style to those collected from the surface. This would tend to suggest that the deposit was built up within a single cultural period.

Location of the Site

The position of the Panaivili site, on the sheltered inner coast of an outer reef island immediately adjacent to a deepwater passage, would have allowed its inhabitants to make full use of the lagoon's rich and varied resources while still having access to the open sea. In this Panaivili bears a strong resemblance to the majority of known Lapita sites which also exhibit a strong marine orientation (Green 1979:32).

The question arises, however, as to whether at the time of its occupation the settlement area was subject to the same tidal inundations that it is today. The absence of any cultural material above the present high water mark suggests that the deposit survives relatively intact and was not simply washed into position from higher up along the shore.

It also seems unlikely that the site was built originally on a dry beach which has subsequently been submerged by rising water levels or geological subsidence. If this had been the case then we might expect the ceramic material recovered to be heavily eroded and badly fragmented as a result of having lain exposed on the ground surface. The large size and good preservation of the majority of sherds collected at Panaivili suggest that they were deposited in soft sand and quickly covered over by the action of the tide.

All this would tend to indicate that the houses at Panaivili were built originally on piles out over the tidal flat. The discovery at the site of a c.50 cm long section of log (possibly a post) and of a small wooden gourd stopper indicate that the waterlogged nature of the deposit has acted to preserve some organic materials.

Pottery

Potsherds recovered from the Panaivili site differ dramatically from any so far found within the Western Solomons. Unlike the thin wares reported by Miller and Roe, these sherds are relatively thick (c.5-10 mm) with a heavy mineral temper most probably composed of volcanic river sands. At the time of the discovery a small sample of sherds was collected at random from the surface of the site. While the majority of these proved to be plainwares, a sizable percentage were decorated using a variety of techniques (Table 1 gives a rough breakdown of the sherds collected).

The most common form of decoration encountered at Panaivili was incision (Fig.3a-e). This was often supplemented by stick or fingernail impression, such impressions usually being aligned in single or parallel rows (Fig.3f-h).

Less common was the use of appliqué. Examples of this include the attachment of worm-like ribbons of clay (Fig.4c) and the application of what may be embossed stylized human and animal faces (Fig.4e-f). This technique was also used in the construction of handles and elaborate lugs which may have been used to suspend the pot from cords (Fig.4h).

Occasionally the rim of a pot is perforated by a series of equally spaced holes (Fig.3i). These may have served as a method of suspension.

Pot rims from Panaivili were frequently decorated by either notching (Fig.3i); or horizontal scalloping (Fig.3a-b). No dentate-stamped decoration, which is considered to be the hallmark of classic Lapita ware, was found on any of the Panaivili sherds.

The sample of ceramic material collected from Panaivili is as yet too small to attempt to catalogue the full range of motifs in use at the site. However a few basic designs are recognizable. These most commonly take the form of panels of linear and/or curvilinear incision, sometimes interspersed with appliqué and occasionally bordered by rows of stick impression. Much of this decoration, at least on the larger carinated vessels, is restricted to the area between the shoulder and the lip. One of the sherds collected was large enough to be recognized as belonging to an everted rim pot with a plain body, a line of stick impression circling its neck, and a motif of opposed diagonal incision extending upwards to a scalloped rim.

In addition to exhibiting a variety of decorative techniques and motifs, the pottery in use at the site also possessed a wide range of vessel shapes. Sherd profiles show the presence of

several types of flat-bottomed dishes, shallow bowls, shouldered jars and both globular and subglobular pots.

Pottery analysis	Sherd count	Total
<i>Rims:</i>		
Notched rims:		
both sides notched - plain	2	
outside notched - plain	6	
top notched - plain	1	
outside notched and possibly pinched - incised	1	
outside notched - incised	4	
outside notched - incised, appliqué	2	
outside notched - partial perforation	1	
		17
Scalloped rims:		
plain	33	
incised	11	
stick impressed	1	
incised and perforated	1	
		46
Rolled rim:		
outside notched - appliqué and stick impression	1	
		1
Plain rims	18	
Plain rim: stick impressed	1	
Possible plain rim (maybe pinched): perforated	1	
		20
<i>Body sherds:</i>		
Plain	not counted	
Incised only	49	
Appliqué only	5	
Appliqué and incised	5	
Incised and stick impression	15	
Stick impression only	14	
Perforated only	2	

TABLE 1: PANAIVILI REEF SITE

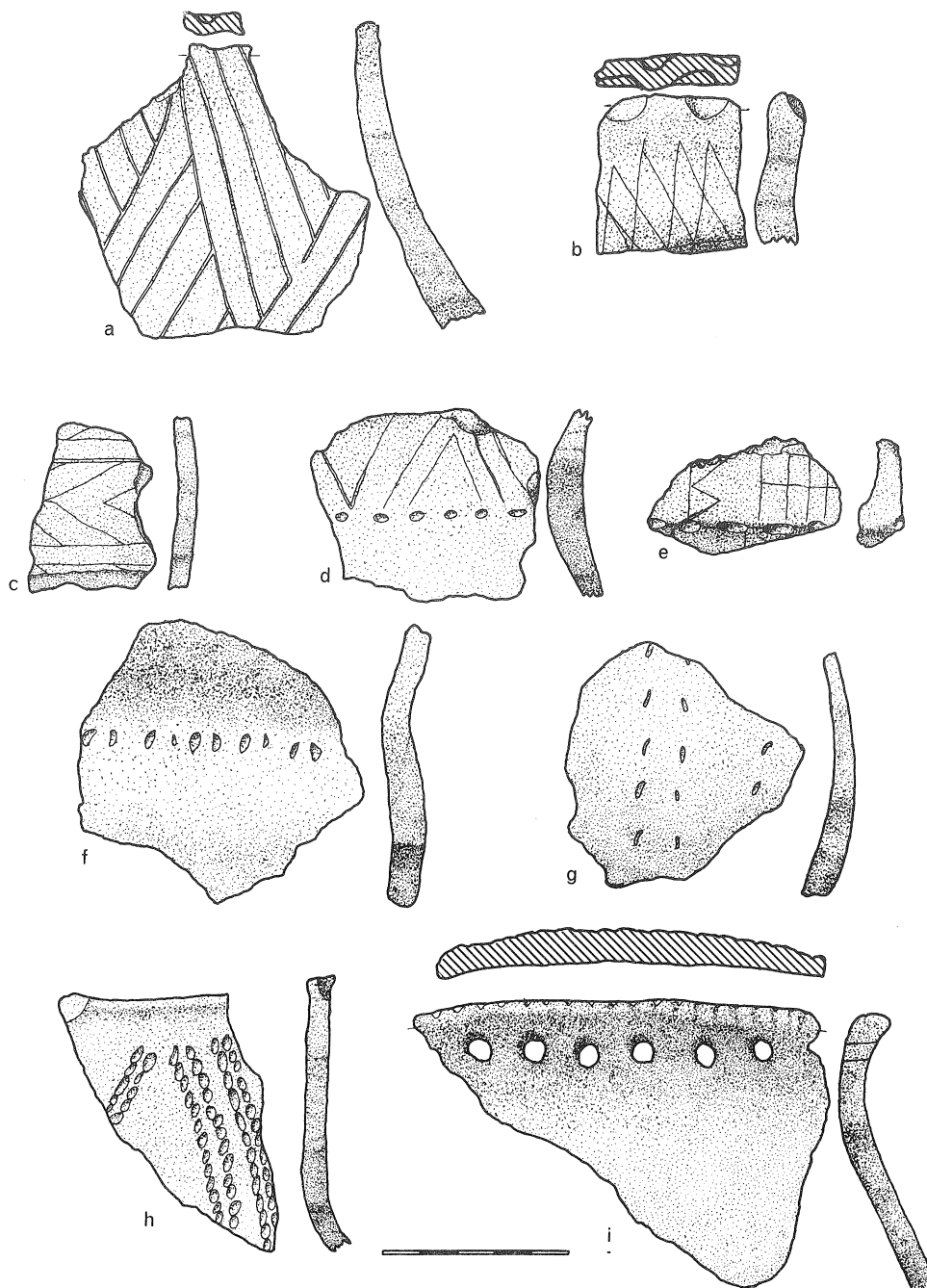


FIGURE 3: POTTERY SHERDS FROM PANAIVILI SHOWING VARIOUS FORMS OF SURFACE DECORATION

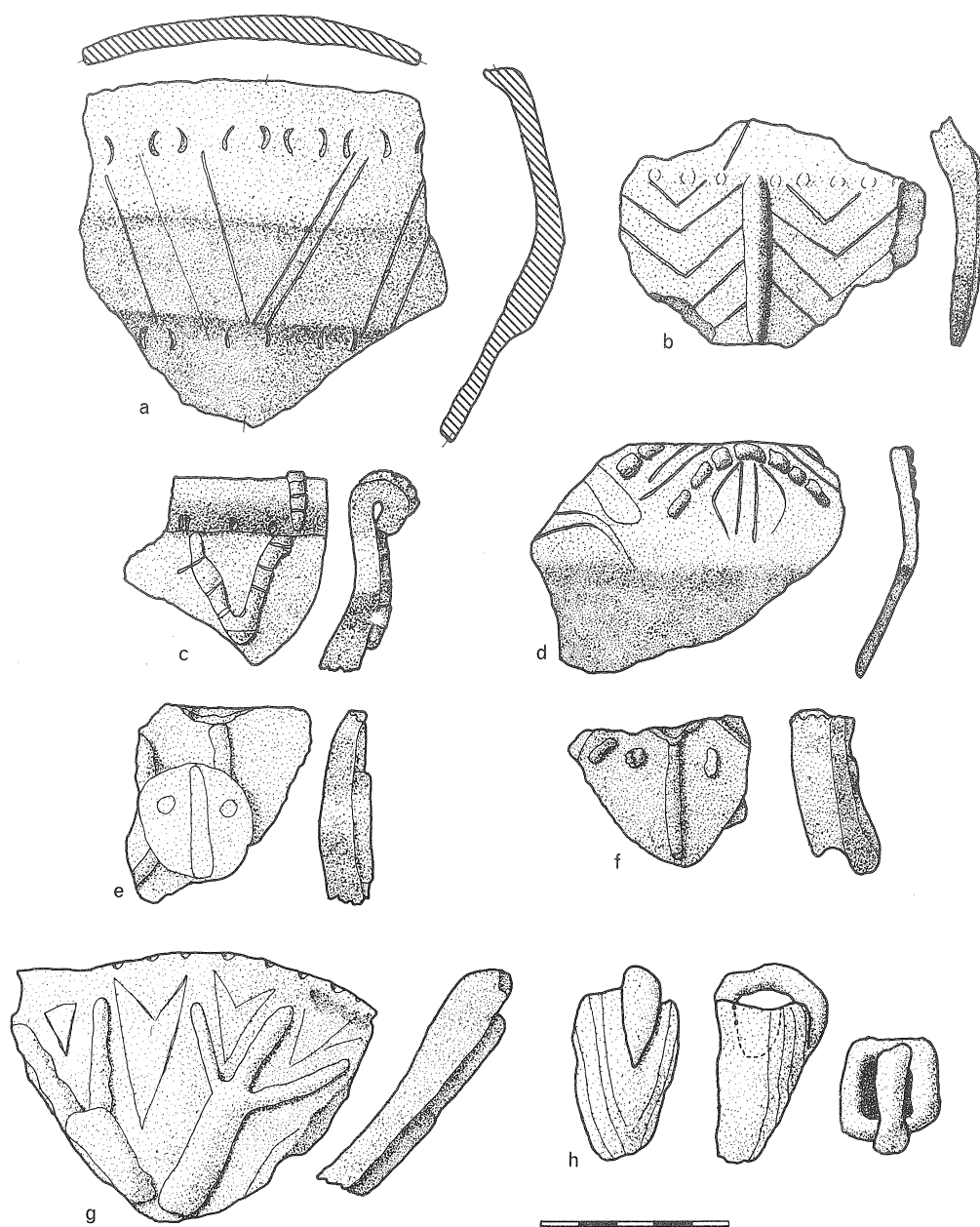


FIGURE 4: DECORATED POTTERY SHERDS FROM PANAVILI

While the absence of dentate-stamping makes it impossible to consider the Panaivili material as belonging within the classic Lapita tradition, its decorative techniques and its wide range of vessel shapes (another characteristic of Lapita and Lapita-derived ceramics; Green 1979:40-42) suggest that it represents a related tradition, possibly derived or descended from Lapita.

All of the decorative techniques present at Panaivili have also been noted in Lapita ceramic assemblages (Anson 1983:36-51). Although considerably less common than dentate-stamping, linear incision is now recognized as an integral part of the Lapita design system (Green and Anson 1987). It occurs in varied percentages at most excavated Lapita sites. Notched rims also appear to be a relatively common feature of Lapita ceramics. The remaining techniques of appliqué, stick/fingernail impression and scalloping are more restricted in their appearance. They have, however, been reported from the Lapita sites of Kreslo (Specht ms.), Ambitle (Anson 1983:28), in the Arawe Islands (Gosden 1987) and on Watom (Specht 1968:127-129; Anson 1983:28-37; Green and Anson 1987).

When one looks at the design motifs present on Panaivili sherds the similarity with Lapita becomes even more striking. The majority of articles published on Lapita ceramics have tended to concentrate on the elaborate designs created by dentate-stamping. Incised motifs have been relatively neglected. Yet if one examines the collections themselves it becomes evident that the incised component of Lapita assemblages is not simply a variant or subset of dentate-stamping. Seldom are dentate-stamped motifs replicated in incision. Instead, incision can be seen to possess its own quite distinct design system.

Unlike the delicate patterning formed by dentate-stamping, incised motifs tend to consist of bold geometric designs. Lines are often so straight that they appear to have been inscribed by tracing along the edge of a guide. The most commonly encountered incised motif is formed by a band of opposing diagonals (Anson Type 187, Anson 1983:210). This same motif is met with repeatedly on sherds from Panaivili (Fig.3a). Indeed, on first looking at the Panaivili assemblage one is tempted to describe it as Lapita without dentate-stamping. However, the presence of more elaborate designs in incision and appliqué (Fig.5b) suggest that Panaivili displays instead a development out of Lapita in which the dentate-stamp design system (with whatever socio-symbolic significance it may have once held) has been abandoned. Its place has been taken by an elaboration of existing incised and applied relief techniques.

A number of ceramic assemblages exhibiting decorative techniques similar to those present at Panaivili have been noted at sites from elsewhere in Melanesia. The majority of these date to a period immediately following the decline of the Lapita Cultural Complex (Spriggs 1984:215). Sites possessing incised and appliqué pottery have been found in the Admiralty Islands (Kennedy 1982), on New Ireland (White and Downie 1980), on Buka (Specht 1969; Wickler, pers. comm.), in the Banks Islands (Ward 1979) and in Central Vanuatu (Garanger 1971). Incised and applied relief wares, most probably imported from Vanuatu, have also been recovered from sites on the islands of Vanikoro and Tikopia in the Solomons (Kirch 1982).

Despite the broad distribution within Melanesia of sites containing incised and appliqué pottery, only a few areas have yielded collections large enough to be analysed in terms of their

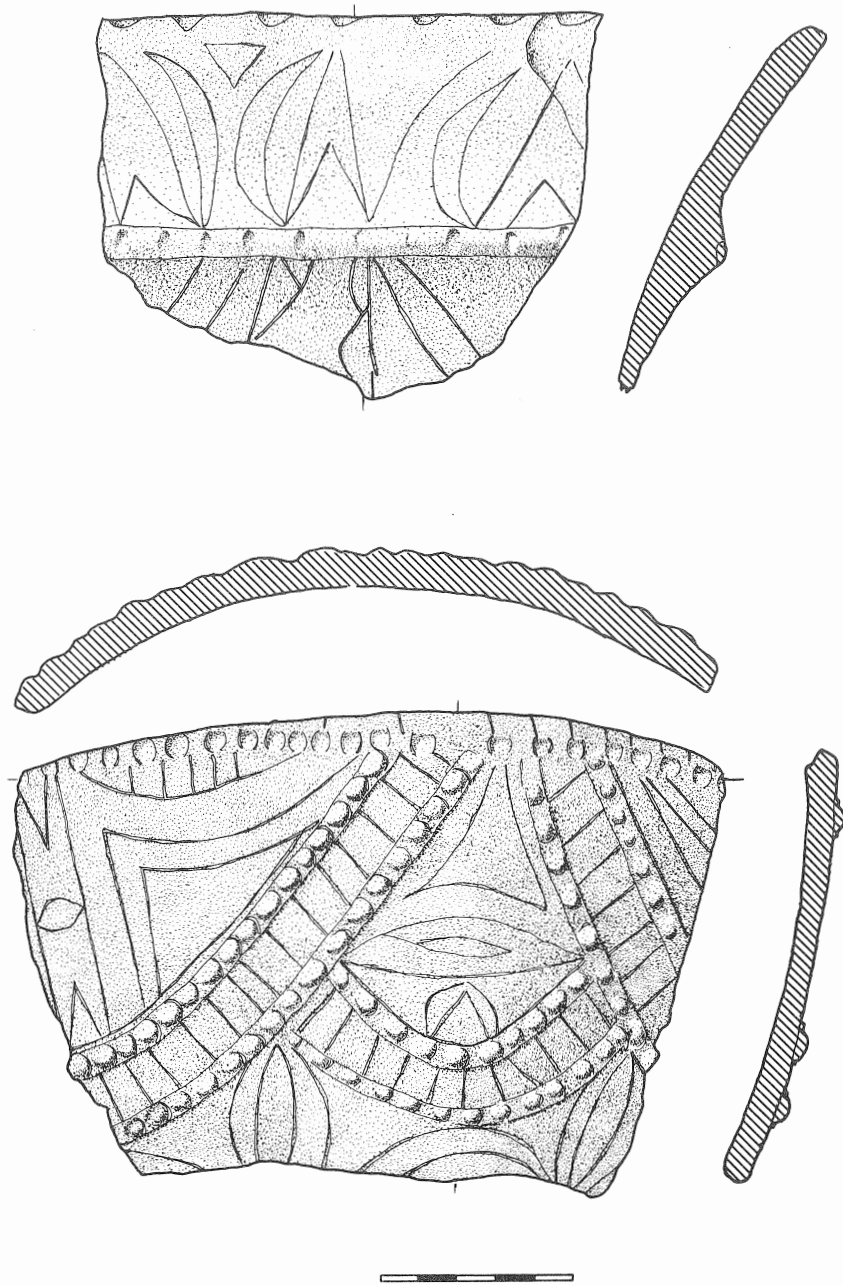


FIGURE 5: ELABORATELY DECORATED, INCISED AND APPLIQUE SHERDS FROM PANAIVILI

motif systems. Two of these assemblages, the Mangaasi wares of Vanuatu (Garanger 1971) and the Sohano wares of Buka (Specht 1969) possess enough shared motifs to be considered as belonging to roughly the same ceramic tradition. It might be tempting to see these as part of a pan-Melanesian incised and applied relief pottery tradition which evolved to replace Lapita (Spriggs 1984:216), except that midway between these two related ceramic centres lies the Panaivili material with its apparently unrelated design system. While it exhibits the same range of decorative techniques, the pottery from Panaivili possesses a very different set of design motifs.

It may be that the Panaivili ceramics in some way represent a link between the late Lapita material encountered at sites like Watom, where incision and appliqué make up a higher percentage of the assemblage than in earlier Lapita sites (Green and Anson 1987:23), and the Mangaasi/Sohano ceramic traditions.

Non-Ceramic Artifacts

In addition to an immense collection of pottery fragments, the unauthorized 'excavation' undertaken by the villagers at Panaivili unearthed a wide range of non-ceramic artifacts. Among these were a number of cutting tools made of both shell and stone. Three *Tridacna* shell adzes were uncovered at the site. Two were fully polished with a thickness that suggests that they were cut from around the hinge of the shell (Fig.6a-b). These resemble Kirch Types 7 and 8, found at Tikopia (Kirch and Yen 1982:222). The third adze (Fig.6c) was thinner and appears to have been taken from an area of the shell's dorsal surface, closer to its lip - similar to Kirch Type 3. All three adzes are of a type commonly found in Lapita and later Melanesian artifact assemblages.

The villagers also uncovered a small shell chisel (Fig.6g) which looks to have been formed from the lip of a *Cassia* shell (Kirch Type 9; Kirch and Yen 1982:222).

Three complete and four fragmentary stone adzes were also recovered from the site (Fig.6d-f). All appear to have been manufactured of fine grained basalt. It seems likely that the stone from which they were made was brought across the lagoon from the island of New Georgia. Unlike the stone adzes in use throughout Melanesia at the time of European contact, which generally possessed ovate cross-sections, the Panaivili adzes were typically quadrangular or plano-convex in cross-section. Such adzes are a characteristic element of Lapita cultural assemblages. In the post-Lapita period this type of adze continued to be used in Polynesia, but appears to have dropped out of use in Melanesia (Bellwood 1978).

Three 'waisted' axes were also found at the site (Fig.7). The waisted axes unearthed at Panaivili are of a type known to have been in use in the Solomons well into the 1800s (K. Roga, pers. comm.).

The most distinctive cutting tool found at Panaivili was a single large obsidian blade (Fig.6h). The nearest known obsidian quarries lie to the northwest in New Britain and the Admiralties, and in the Banks Islands to the southeast. The size and form of the blade suggest that it came from the quarries at Talasea on New Britain (Ambrose, pers. comm.). As yet no petrographic analysis has been undertaken to determine the source of the blade more accurately.

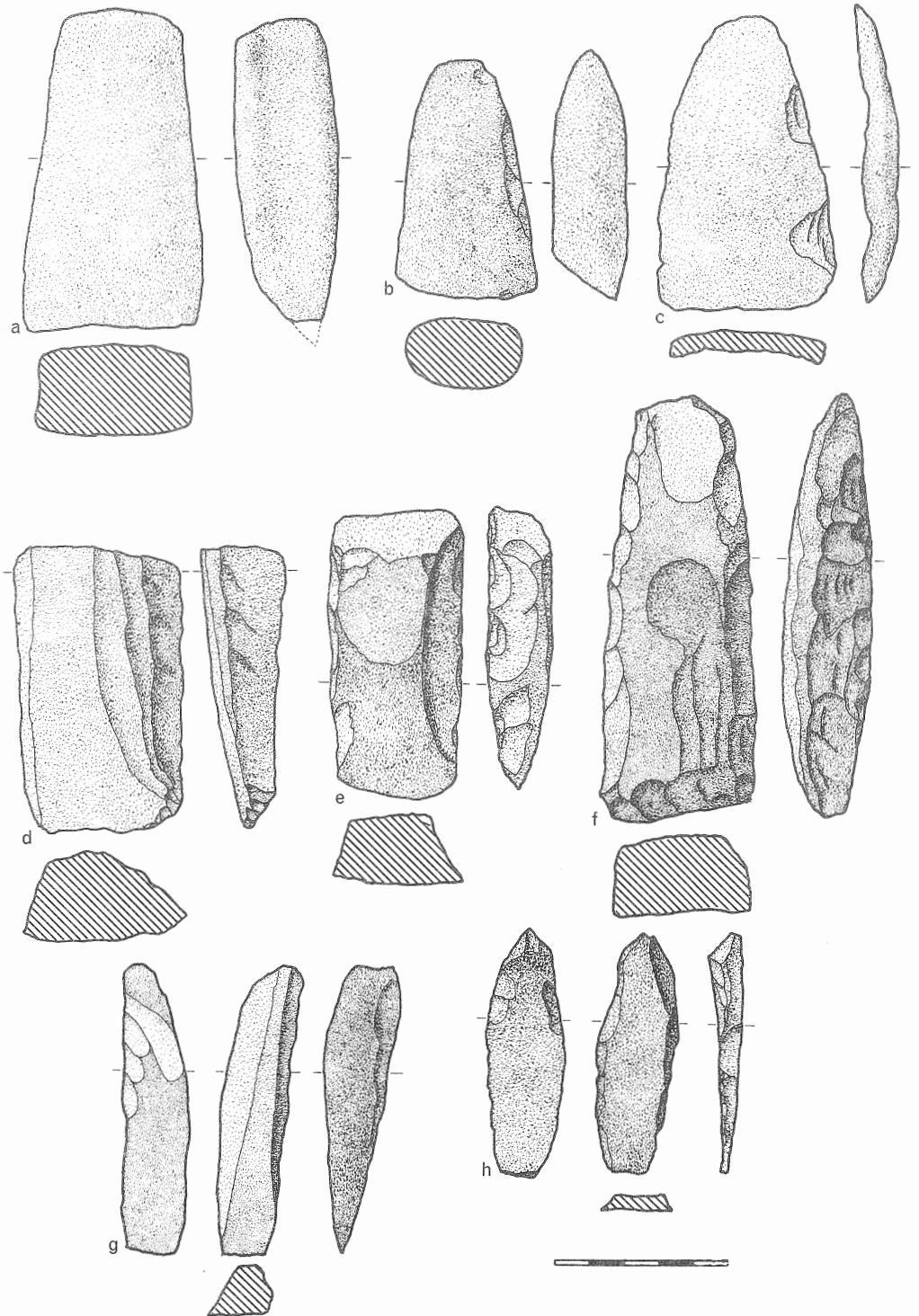


FIGURE 6: SHELL AND STONE WOODWORKING TOOLS FROM PANAIVILI

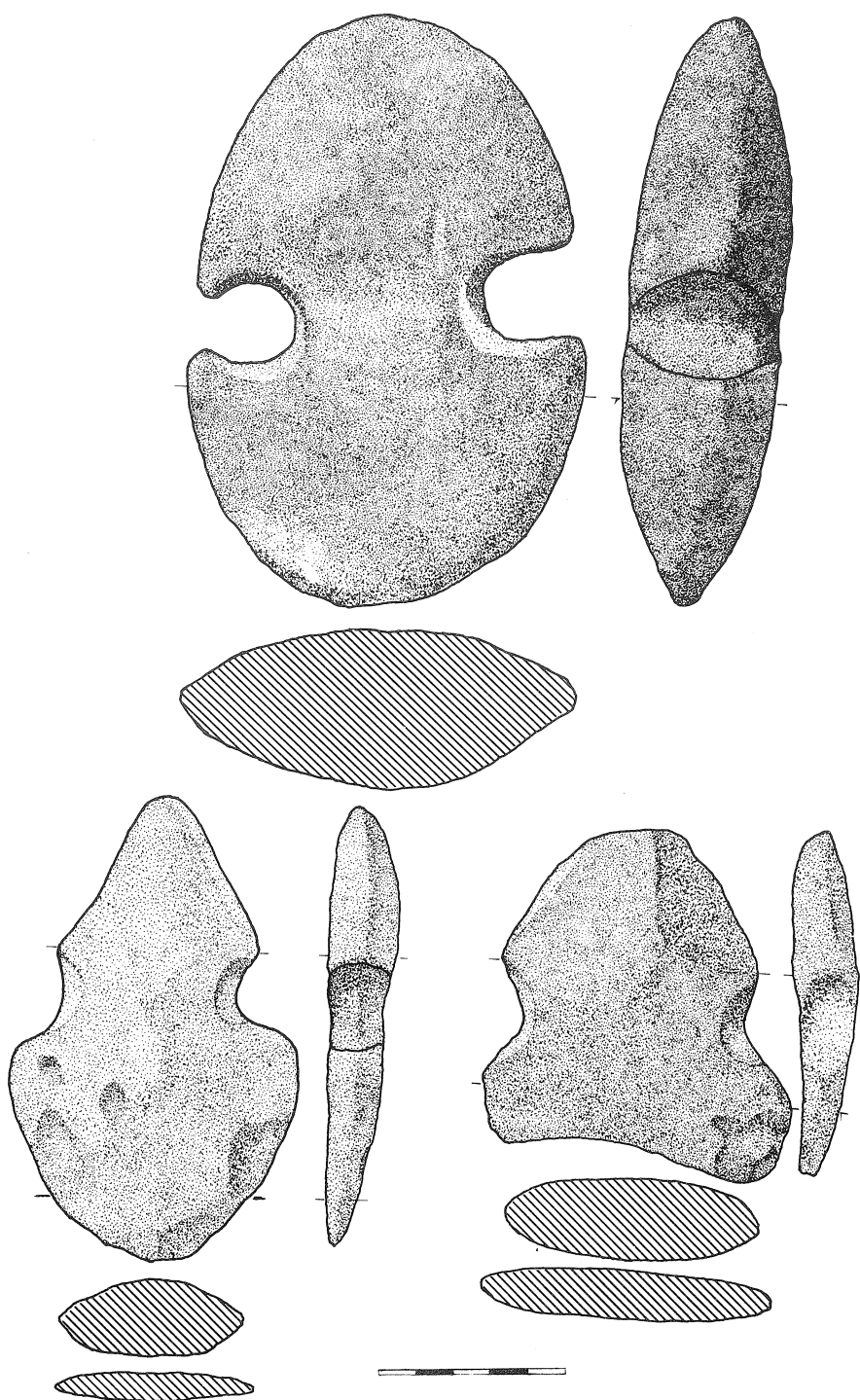


FIGURE 7: 'WAISTED' AXES FROM PANAVILI

Also uncovered at Panaivili were two waisted hammerstones (Fig.8a-b). These artifacts are practically identical in shape to stones used in the recent past to crack the hard shell of the 'ngali' (*Canarium*) nut, a common food source in the Western Solomons (Tedder 1973). Other tools unearthed during the scavenging of the site include a number of water-rounded cobble hammerstones, and a small worn slab which appears to have been used as a whetstone.

In addition to tools, the diggings at Panaivili brought to light a range of shell ornaments. These include a small ring formed from the flat top of a *Conus* shell (Fig.8c). This type of ornament is relatively common in both Lapita and later cultural assemblages. It was in wide use throughout the Western Solomons at the time of European contact. Such rings possessed a sacred as well as a decorative significance and were frequently used as offerings at shrines. Another ornament uncovered was a fragment of bracelet (or armband) cut from the side of a large *Conus* shell (Fig.8d). Bracelets of this type were not previously known from the Western Solomons, but have been found in Lapita sites in Tonga and elsewhere (Poulsen 1987:189).

A large slab of worked *Tridacna* shell was also found at the site. This object, which had been ground flat on both sides, had a small indentation 'pecked' into the centre of one of its surfaces. The item appears to have been abandoned before work on it was completed. It bears a strong resemblance to slabs of *Tridacna* which are known to have served as blanks from which shell armrings were cut. Shell rings of this type have been recovered from sites of the Lapita period (Green 1979:39) and are still in use in the Western Solomons today. Throughout the early contact period they were employed as valuables used in exchange, bride price and ceremonies of sacrifice.

A large number of fire-cracked basalt oven stones were present on the surface and within the deposit. Since the small island on which the site is located is composed completely of raised coral limestone, these volcanic stones must have been imported.

By far the most unusual artifact recovered from Panaivili was a stone macehead (Fig.8e). This object is roughly cylindrical in shape and is studded with four horizontal rows of carved knobs. Though they had not been previously recorded from anywhere within the Solomons, weapons of this kind were in use during the historic period on the east and south coasts of New Guinea (Haddon 1900:221-250). While it is possible that stone-headed maces were a commonly-used weapon during this early period of Western Solomons prehistory, it is equally plausible that this one example existed as a high status exchange item, traded in from outside the region.

Faunal Remains

A large amount of marine shell was present within the deposit at Panaivili. A cursory examination of the 'excavation' soil heaps revealed an abundance of bivalves of the type known to inhabit soft, sandy shallows. To what extent the presence of these shells can be taken as representing the true diet of the village's former inhabitants as opposed to an accumulation of naturally occurring species is impossible to determine. The same is true for the limited amount of fish bone uncovered.

An additional question was raised by the discovery of the fragmentary skull and neck vertebrae of a dugong or sea cow (*Dugong dugon*). While no dugong are known to inhabit the

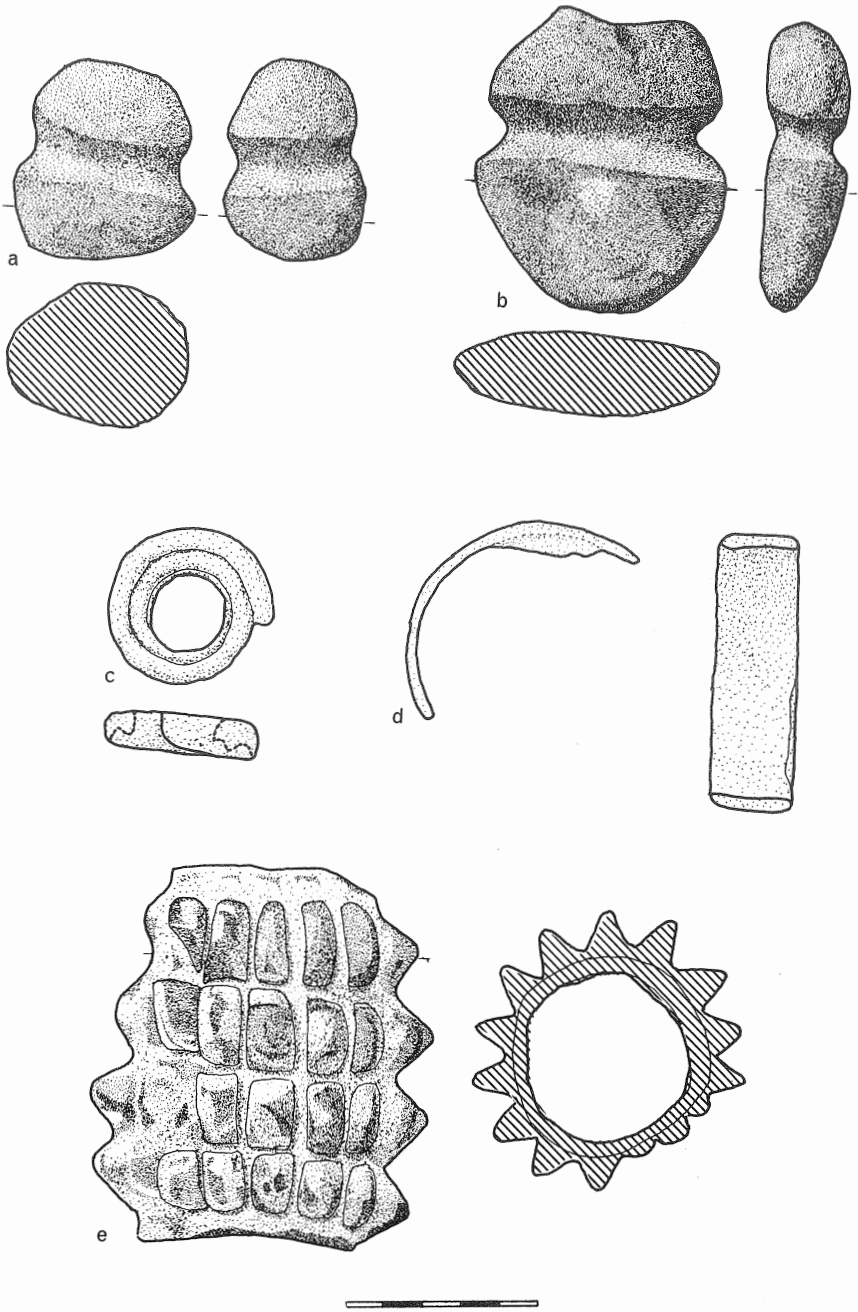


FIGURE 8: STONE TOOLS AND SHELL ORNAMENTS FROM PANAIVILI

area today, the eastern end of the Roviana lagoon, with its calm shallow waters and abundance of sea grasses, would have provided a perfect habitat for these large marine mammals. Again, it is impossible to determine whether these bones entered the deposit as a result of human predation or natural circumstance.

Human skeletal remains were also present within the Panaivili deposit. A fragment of human jawbone and a possible human long bone were recovered. The rough nature of the excavation, however, makes it impossible to reconstruct whether these bones survived as part of a burial, or merely as discarded refuse.

Additional Early Period Sites

Since the discovery of the Panaivili site, inhabitants of the Roviana lagoon area have reported the presence of similar pottery scatters occurring at intervals along the lagoonal shores of the various barrier islands from Nusa Roviana down to Ararosa Point on Petani (Fig.2). Panaivili-like pottery was also found to occur on many of the smaller islands within the lagoon and at points along the mainland coast. Thus the entire eastern half of the Roviana lagoon appears at one time to have been occupied by populations sharing the same ceramic tradition. All of the Roviana sites so far reported have been situated on tidal flats below the high water line.

Pottery sherds similar to those recovered from Panaivili have also been noted from other areas within the New Georgia archipelago (see Fig.2). On New Georgia Island itself, a single sherd was picked up off the surface in the area of Sege near the island's southeastern tip (Wickler, pers. comm.). A slightly larger scatter was located by the author on the inner shore of the tiny lagoon of Koqu Ororovo, situated two-thirds of the way up the island's northwest coast. Here the pottery was found on a raised limestone terrace extending inland from the lagoon edge. The amount of ceramics collected was much smaller and the sherds themselves more fragmentary than at Panaivili, but the material was of the same fabric and thickness and exhibited the same decorative style. The scatter was located in amongst a number of short (c.2m) alignments constructed of coral boulders. These structures were badly collapsed, but their positioning suggests that they may originally have served as foundation supports for wood and thatch dwellings.

Another pottery site was discovered on the northwest coast of the island of Vella Lavella at the present village of Iriqila. The village is situated on a bench of uplifted coral limestone blanketed with sand and sheltered by a line of fringing reef. The waters of a nearby stream have cut a passage out through the reef to the open sea. Sherds of the Panaivili type were picked up close to the village church and in the refuse dump immediately behind the present line of houses. Most sherds appear to have been brought to the surface by the burrowing action of land crabs, indicating the presence of further artifacts in the subsoil. The Iriqila pottery is similar to that collected at Panaivili except for the fact that here shell as well as mineral sands were used to temper the clay.

Later Cultural Assemblages

Exactly when sites such as Panaivili, Koqu Ororovo, and Iriqila were occupied, and how long that occupation lasted is still uncertain. Indications are that populations producing the

distinctive incised and applied relief style of pottery inhabited areas of the Western Solomons at some time following the decline of the Lapita Cultural Complex (c.2500 BP; Green 1979). What took place after this later style of pottery was abandoned is also uncertain. As yet we possess no direct evidence of an evolution in pottery styles. What we do find, however, is the emergence of a somewhat different and much more widespread ceramic tradition in the Western Solomons.

Pottery manufacture as a whole appears to have undergone a process of simplification. The new style of pottery differs from the earlier Panaivili material in that sherds are uniformly thinner and of both shell and mineral temper. Most assemblages possess both a plain and a decorated component, but the material is characterized by a more limited range of decorative techniques. Incision dominates to the virtual exclusion of all other decorative forms. The use of both stick impression and perforation appears to have been abandoned, while appliqué is only rarely encountered. Notching seems to have survived as the only form of rim decoration. The range of vessel shapes also diminishes. Globular and subglobular pots seem to be the only vessels still in use.

The motifs encountered on this new style of pottery consist primarily of simple geometric designs formed by linear and curvilinear incision (Fig.9). Some appear to replicate motifs found at Panaivili, while others are new. Overall, the decoration looks much rougher in execution.

Scatters of this style of pottery, first recognized by Daniel Miller on Choiseul (Miller 1979), have since been reported from almost all the major islands within the Western Solomons. The only exceptions are the islands of Fauro, Vangunu and Nggatokae, all three of which have yet to be adequately surveyed.

X-ray studies conducted on sherds collected from throughout Choiseul in the north and the islands of the New Georgia group indicate that all possess a remarkably similar composition (Spriggs, pers. comm.). This might suggest that they originated from a single manufacturing source, most probably Choiseul where pottery making still survives. Further support for this idea is provided by petrographic analysis undertaken on sherds from Kolombangara (Dickinson and Shutler 1979:1694) which suggests that mineral tempers used in their manufacture originated on Choiseul.

Spriggs also reports having recovered similarly decorated thin sherds from excavations undertaken in the Kieta Peninsula area of southern Bougainville. These are as yet undated, but fall towards the end of his cultural sequence. They bear a strong resemblance to Irwin's Middle Period incised sherds from the Shortlands, between Choiseul and Bougainville. Trade wares from the Shortlands have been found at excavations in the Buin area of Bougainville (Terrell 1977). The Kieta, Shortlands, Choiseul and New Georgia wares all appear to belong to essentially the same pottery tradition.

Other evidence for trade having taken place during this period is provided by four small flakes of obsidian picked up from the surface at Malevenga and Duadua on Choiseul (cf. Miller 1979:87) (Fig.9, bottom). These have been sourced to the island of Lou in the Admiralties (Ambrose, pers. comm.). Another somewhat larger flake picked up in the same area appears to have come from a very low grade local source.

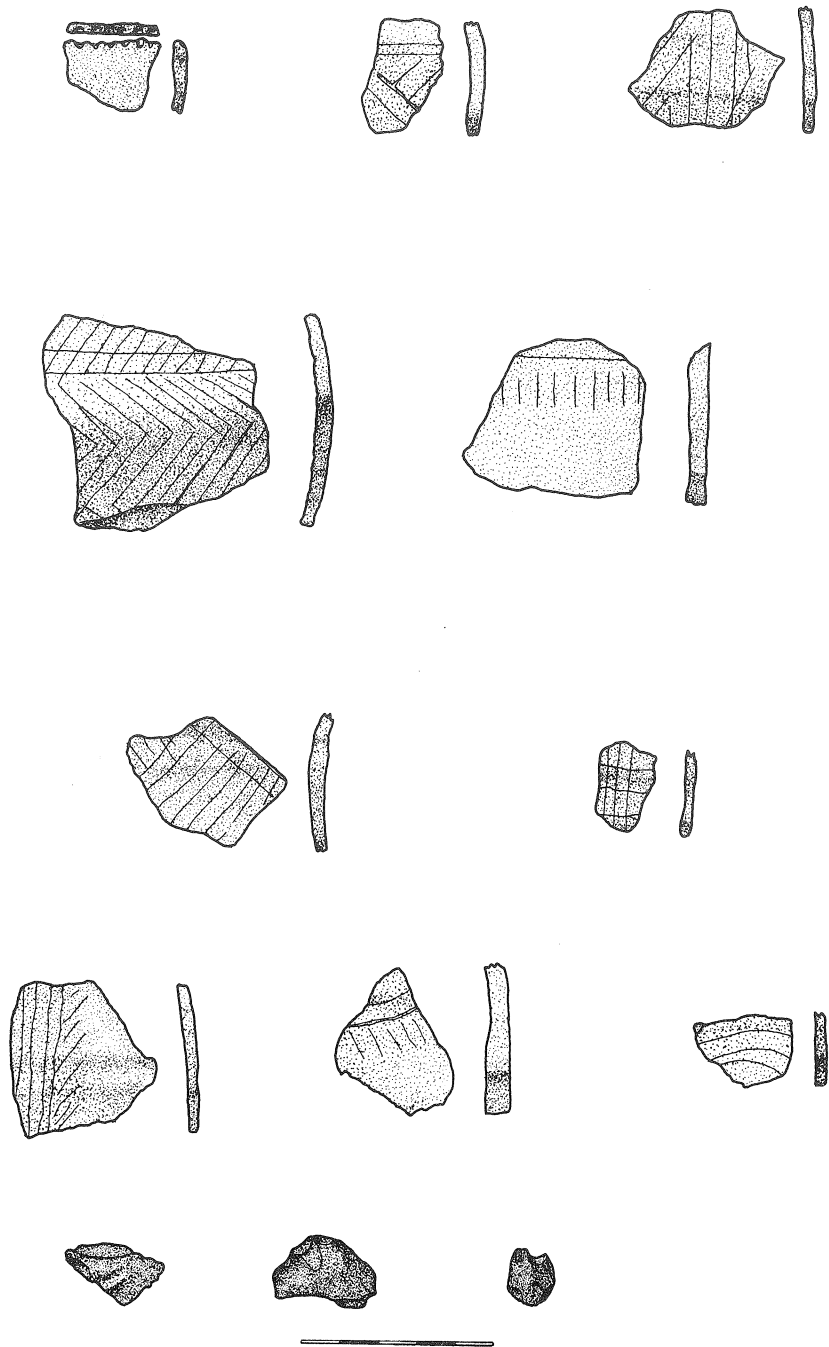


FIGURE 9: POTTERY AND OBSIDIAN (BOTTOM ROW) COLLECTED FROM VARIOUS LATE PERIOD SITES

The majority of these later period sites have been discovered in existing villages. They consist of little more than surface scatters of pottery and occasional shell or stone artifacts. One site however, that of Irii Pasapasa - discovered along a presently unoccupied stretch of coastline - was found to contain a large number of structural remains. It lies on the northwest shore of New Georgia Island, just south of Koqu Ororovo.

The site consists of a series of pottery concentrations stretching for almost a kilometre along the coast. Each concentration appears to mark the former location of a house site or complex of dwellings. Towards the centre of this site stand a number of more substantial remains. The existing topography divides this central area of the site into two levels. Just back from the shore stretches a low terrace, c.30 m wide, of raised reef limestone. It is on this that all of the pottery concentrations are situated. Interspersed among these sherd scatters are a small number of coral boulder platforms, measuring approximately 4x8 m and standing about 40 cm high. It seems possible that these served as communal structures of some form.

Backing this lower terrace is a nearly vertical natural coral face rising c.10 m to a second, broader terrace. Atop this upper terrace stands a collection of even larger structures. These bear a strong resemblance to ceremonial sites in use in this area during the historic period. A detailed survey of the site needs to be completed before we can fully understand the interrelationship of these various structures.

A number of non-ceramic artifacts were visible on the surface at Irii Pasapasa. These include *Canarium* nut cracking stones, large slabs for the grinding of adzes and the polishing of shell armrings, fragments of *Tridacna* shell armrings as well as the blanks for their manufacture, and *Conus* shell ring pendants. All of these artifact types were in use at the time of European contact. The only item found at Irii Pasapasa not noted by early visitors to the island was decorated pottery.

Sizable coastal settlements such as Irii Pasapasa appear to have been abandoned with the emergence of widespread headhunting, possibly sometime in the early 1800s. Although the origins of headhunting itself are still somewhat problematic, archaeological and ethnographic evidence tends to suggest that the introduction into the islands of iron axes, used as items of exchange by European whalers and traders, triggered a major escalation in headhunting raids. These appear to have caused the depopulation of coastal settlements throughout most of the Western Solomons (Woodford 1890). Inhabitants of coastal villages who survived attack often sought refuge in the mountainous interior. There they dwelt in scattered hamlets on easily defended ridges. This dispersed form of settlement differs markedly from large coastal communities like Irii Pasapasa. In this way headhunting dramatically altered the traditional settlement pattern of the region.

While headhunting affected all of the islands within the Western Solomons, the majority of raids were conducted against the islands of Isabel and Choiseul. The possibility exists that these attacks caused disruption in the trade of pottery out of Choiseul, resulting in the gradual abandonment of pottery use within the New Georgia group. This process may have been accelerated by the introduction of iron pots.

With the suppression of headhunting by the British in the 1890s most populations moved back down on to the coast. Here they established new villages, many of them situated atop old

and now forgotten settlements. By this period pottery seems to have gone completely out of use in the New Georgia group. Though pottery making survived in parts of western Choiseul, it was limited to the manufacture of plain, globular pots with notched rims. In the Shortlands the decorative techniques of incision and appliqué survived, but in a much simplified form. Other techniques such as paddle impression and surface brushing came into greater use (Irwin 1973).

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back over what we now know of Western Solomons prehistory, it becomes evident that within the last two to three thousand years the region has undergone a series of major cultural changes. Though we still have no clear idea as to the origins or arrival date of the islands' initial inhabitants, we do know that by some time after about 2500 BP parts of the group were inhabited by populations possessing an apparently Lapita-related pottery tradition. These people established themselves in large communities along the coast where they had ready access to marine resources. This general pattern of settlement continued until relatively recently when the expansion of headhunting forced people to abandon their coastal villages and set up smaller, more dispersed settlements in the interior.

Major changes have also taken place in the range of artifacts in use at various times in the region. Most evident among these have been changes in pottery style. The elaborately decorated ceramics encountered at early sites such as Panaivili appear to have gone through a process of gradual simplification until, in at least one area of the West, pottery was abandoned completely.

The work of the last two years has brought to light a great deal of new information concerning the past of the Western Solomons, and has allowed us to construct a skeletal framework for the region's cultural development. Further research involving a programme of detailed excavations needs to be undertaken before we can begin to flesh out this framework. Only through such work can we hope to place this local sequence within the larger context of Melanesian prehistory.

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