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A SURVEY IN THE SHORTLAND ISLANDS, B.S.I.P.

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During April and May 1970, a field survey and test excavations were conducted in the Shortland Islands, which are located in the Bougainville Strait in the Western District of the British Solomon Islands.

The Shortland group comprises three major islands and numerous smaller ones. The major ones are Shortland, Mono and Faroe, and these are of raised coral and volcanic formation. Shortland, the largest, is about 20 miles across. The population is quite low, being under 2,000 for the group, and this figure includes some 350 Gilbert Islanders who have been recently resettled in the area. The economy is essentially a subsistence one, and is based on root crops, tree fruits and seafoods. Copra provides the only cash crop. The present inhabitants are Austronesian speakers, but their physical anthropology has not yet been studied. Historical records of recent inter-marriage with neighbouring non-Austronesian speakers suggest this may be complex. Prior to this survey, no archaeological investigation had been undertaken, and such exploratory and rather general aims as establishing the cultural sequence and obtaining some idea of the settlement pattern, particularly in terms of its ecological, demographic and economic aspects, seemed appropriate to this level of study.

Before commencing fieldwork, an examination of ethnographic and environmental information enabled the formulation of a number of predictions about possible or likely forms of site location and distribution. Firstly, it seemed probable that the same sites could have been occupied all year round, most of them being permanent living sites, with the possibility of small briefly-occupied hamlets located at some distance from these. Secondly, the population was likely to be dispersed and of relatively low density. Thirdly, it was thought that most sites would be situated on or near the coast. A field survey was conducted and the results suggest that the predictions are largely substantiated.

Test excavations were made, the main object being to provide a time dimension for the distribution evidence, but the limited scale of excavation possible largely precluded the recovery of structural and

economic evidence in quantity. A large amount of material, including some 23,000 potsherds, was recovered, both by surface collection and excavation, and this is at present undergoing analysis.

The pottery analysis is taking the form of a multivariate attribute study, the attributes relating to classes such as sherd size and shape, paste, decorative technique and decoration location. Matrix analysis by computer will firstly seriate the sites to discover chronological order, and clusters of attribute combinations will represent a hypothetical typology which can be partially tested against vessel reconstruction. Afterwards, thin sections will be made for the study of temper and some sherds and clay samples will be re-fired to ascertain whether variations in properties such as colour and hardness can be related to chance variations in original firing conditions, or if they derive from culturally significant factors.

As the analysis is still in progress, it is not possible at this stage to give more than an impressionistic account of the pottery sequence. There are three major classes of pottery present, one of which was described at contact, while the other two are presumably both earlier and unlikely to be contemporary. The rarest class, which may be the earliest, consists of small, round-bottomed and very finely made vessels. Some have everted rims, while others are rimless bowls. Apart from lip-notching, this ware is completely plain, and a radiocarbon date suggests that it may be dated 1040 ± 95 B.P. (ANU-796).

The second class is marked by a variety of decorative techniques which are apparently associated. These include tool incision, a form of punctated strip applique, surface brushing, and a small amount of carved-paddle impression. The vessel forms are much the same, but are larger and thicker-walled.

Finally, the ware that was reported ethnographically is characterized by a different form of notched or shell-impressed strip applique, often associated with carved-paddle impression. Brushing and incision are rare. The pots are now rather crudely made, with very thick walls, and the paste is untempered. It is hoped that analysis will reveal whether and to what degree continuity exists between these three ceramic categories and whether or not they are internally subdivisible.

One of the decorative techniques characterizing the later wares, as mentioned above, is carved-paddle impression. The fact that each carved-paddle is unique has enabled the identification of individual potters with some level of confidence in a small number of cases.

While recognizing the dangers of trying to reconstruct patterns of descent and residence from this information, nevertheless by studying the distribution of sherds impressed by the same paddle, it may be possible to suggest something about either the movement of pots or of potters.

It seems likely that the carved paddle offers possibilities for interesting sociological inferences in parts of the Pacific where the technique is found, while offering advantages over inferences which depend upon the identification of ceramic micro-traditions. A carved paddle is not defined by complex inferential statistics, it is an empirical fact. Certainly the chronological implications are significant, particularly in cases where distribution covers areas large enough to admit the possibility of spatial variation in material culture.

It is hoped that the results of the analysis of all the material will enable the isolation of the settlement pattern at given points of time, detection of changes over time, and identification of changes which occurred in the largely undocumented early post-contact period. Historical records suggest that by the time detailed information became available a number of important changes must already have occurred. It appears that the strategic location and the maritime culture of the Shortlanders enabled them to act as middle-men in the trade between Europeans and the inhabitants of nearby areas. The effects of this situation are to be seen in profound sociological changes within the Shortlands and also in their political ascendancy in the surrounding area. The archaeological evidence suggests that this trade was based on a prehistoric prototype, there being close contact within the group over a long period and evidence of possible early contact with Bougainville.

Another problem is that traditional and linguistic data suggest an invasion of Shortland Island by nearby Mono people, with the subsequent expulsion of the former to Bougainville - the "Torau" of the east coast area near Kieta. However, the archaeological data does not entirely support these suggestions and some modification of them may be necessary.

With regard to the external formal affinities of Shortland Island pottery, while distant and probably often indirect relationships with nearby areas are suggested, they each appear to have enjoyed largely independent and divergent ceramic traditions. At this stage in the analysis it is not possible to speculate on "origins", nor to relate the Shortlands to the overall scheme of Melanesian prehistory.