



NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY



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CORRESPONDENCE¹

PREHISTORIC ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY IN THE PORT MORESBY REGION

To the Editor,

Susan Bulmer's article in the first issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology* (Bulmer 1979) reads in part as a critique of my work in the same area of Papua. While my work and that of my colleagues working on the Motupore project should not be above criticism and alternative interpretations, neither should it be misrepresented to the point where it becomes a straw figure to tilt at, as it has been in this case. The defence and any necessary modification of my previously published statements and an assessment of the hypotheses now put forward by Bulmer will require a full synthesis of Port Moresby prehistory which I cannot immediately undertake without a) the data from the excavations at Motupore, the analysis of which is now nearing completion, and b) the opportunity to study Bulmer's recent doctoral thesis on which her article is based. I therefore limit myself here to two straightforward examples of misrepresentation which require no extensive explanation or documentation.

1) On p. 13, Bulmer states "Allen posited a marked build-up of population in the vicinity of Bootless Inlet (Allen 1977b:400), about A.D. 1000." The dating is the important point here, since a central theme in Bulmer's paper is to show an evolutionary development in the region from about the beginning of the first millennium A.D. until about the 16th century. This interpretation is contrary to mine, which has proposed a number of disruptions in the archaeological record during several hundred years around the beginning of the second millennium A.D.

In terms of the above statement, I would observe that permanent settlement begins on Motupore about A.D. 1200 according to my radiocarbon dates and about A.D. 1100 according to Bulmer (Bulmer 1979:14). More important here is that the reference cited says something entirely different to what Bulmer claims it says. In discussing the European contact period, I noted that the western end of Bootless Bay had no permanent settlement, a situation

in contrast to the *very recent prehistoric picture*, where in addition to substantial village sites at Motupore and Taurama a further dozen sites are known from the immediate perimeter of the bay — a figure that might be doubled with more systematic survey. It is not assumed that these were all permanent habitation sites, indeed the majority would appear to be temporary gardening and fishing camps, *but most contain pottery closely related to the upper levels of Motupore*. In short the field evidence points strongly to a significant build-up of population in the immediate area of the bay *from about 500 years ago* and a rapid depopulation to the situation recorded at contact. (Allen 1977:400) (My present emphases)

2) Bulmer (1979:20) writes "Allen (1977b:411) also argued that in the three excavations at sites of post-A.D. 1000 age all contain earlier material from previous occupations in secondary position." This assertion is construed from a footnote of mine concerning the temporal occurrence of imported obsidian in the Port Moresby region and the apparent disappearance of this import during the second millennium A.D. The only published evidence which contradicted this hypothesis at the time of writing was Bulmer's claim that "obsidian is present in Taurama in all phases of occupation, indicating continued coastal trading as far as Fergusson Island in the Milne Bay District (Bulmer 1975:54)." The footnote in question thus reviewed the available evidence, and the two relevant sections follow:

Of excavated sites of this period, apart from Taurama, Leask's (1943) excavation of a midden produced no obsidian; Sue Bulmer's Nebira 2 site (1975:55-6) has some "tiny flakes of Fergusson Island obsidian" but this site, while predominantly of the later ceramic period, has a layer of earlier ceramics at the base (Bulmer 1969:233 and Plate A), and it is not clear where the obsidian flakes appear in the site. No obsidian is reported from Bulmer's (1975:56) rockshelter site of Eriama 1.

I thus concluded that:

The only possible explanation for the Taurama obsidian which occurs to me is that the later occupants may have been re-using obsidian flakes from the first millennium A.D. occupation period at that site. (Allen 1977:411-2)

It is clear from this that any suggestion of obsidian in a secondary position is confined in this statement to one site only, Taurama. It is ironic that Bulmer now retracts her original claim for obsidian in this site in the present paper, where we learn that Taurama obsidian is restricted to deposits "thought to span a period from about 50 B.C. to about A.D. 1100", while the later deposits covering "about A.D. 1100-1390" contain no obsidian (Bulmer 1979:19).

I wish to stress that these are by no means the only, or even isolated, examples of an erratic use of data in this paper. While my prose style may not always be free of contortions which might lead to misinterpretation, I do not believe that it should be misconstrued to the point of absolute nonsense.

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Editor's note

1. The inclusion of correspondence as a general policy is at present under consideration by the Editorial Board of the Journal.

To the Editor,
Reply to Allen:

I am sorry about the typographical error on p. 14, which made A.D. 1000 out of A.D. 1500. We look forward to Allen's excavation reports.

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