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RESPONSE TO BEST

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In his recent review of Christophe Sand's 2003 edited volume "Pacific Archaeology: Assessments and Prospects" in *AINZ* 47(3): 227–229 Simon Best provides an acerbic if not condescending dismissal of a synthetic paper I prepared on current research at the Sigatoka Sand Dune site in Fiji. I normally would not respond to such comments for I believe reviewers have the right to their opinions, and the paper after all was but eight pages in length. Yet it is irksome when the reviewer fails to identify the issue(s) he takes exception with other than to declare a "mangled beyond recognition" interpretation of the early Fijian ceramic sequence. This he attributes to my lack of understanding of Fijian prehistory and to the use of an out of date culture historical framework. Best's remarks surely cannot refer to the paper's treatment of early and late Lapita components, a part of the ceramic sequence Lawrence Birks described as Level 1 in his classic volume on Sigatoka. I say this for Best was a self-identified and supportive reviewer of a paper on Level 1 excavations published by William Dickinson and I in a 2004 edition of *Archaeology in Oceania*. What he refers to then is my reinterpretation of the mid-sequence occupation at Sigatoka, a ceramic assemblage previously characterized by Birks as a single component within Level 2. This matter is deserving of recognition for it has important implications for understanding the Sigatoka site specifically and ultimately the wider arena of Fijian prehistory.

My reconsideration of the Sigatoka mid-sequence as summarily presented in the Sand volume is based upon two field seasons of excavation (2000 and 2002) on the eastern end of the dunes. Given Birks' account, I too originally believed that Level 2 was a single component with a ceramic assemblage transitional between late Lapita forms and those of later prehistory. I was quickly disavowed of the notion, however, as our excavations encountered two very different (stylistic and technological) and completely unrelated mid-sequence ceramic assemblages, each associated with an occupation floor stratigraphically separated from the other by a layer of sand. Lower component ceramics are distinct from but have a clear continuity to Level 1 Lapita forms; the upper

component incorporates incised and applied relief types referred to in Fiji as Navatu phase with continuity into the historic era. Radiocarbon measurements date the two components to within a century or two of each other (1600 - 1400 BP) and faunal remains and other features are suggestive of different economic motivations. In areas to the west of our excavation, including that excavated in the 1960s by Birks, these components are without recognized stratigraphic separation within the Level 2 paleosol. Birks unknowingly combined these as a single component in his published work and they have been treated as such by researchers since. This mixing, thus, has resulted in “a considerable degree of misunderstanding in its wake”, an observation hotly contested by Best in the paper’s review.

It is not my intention here to do more than identify the issue at hand. Detailed results of the 2000 excavations, including my reconfiguration of mid-sequence occupations and its implications for Fijian prehistory, are incorporated in an *Asian Perspectives* paper accepted for publication in 2005. The reader, thus, can evaluate the veracity of the Sand volume synthesis based on a consideration of data, not the mocking dismissal and sarcasm of a Best style review. As for Best’s suggestions that the Birks are “probably spinning in their graves” as a result of my reinterpretation of Level 2, I think not. What I read in Birks’ report was a sincere dedication to a furthering of knowledge on Sigatoka and Fijian prehistory. Since 1996 our research programs at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes have done nothing more than to seek and hopefully move closer to that goal.