

# 24

## The vicissitudes of Lapita pottery, 1909–45: The Melbourne witness

Matthew Spriggs

The Lapita culture represents the culture of the initial inhabitants of southern Remote Oceania, that area of the Pacific beyond New Guinea and its satellite islands and the main Solomon Islands chain known as Near Oceania. While Near Oceania has been inhabited for 45,000 or more years, the islands of the western part of southern Remote Oceania (the Reefs–Santa Cruz, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Wallis and Futuna) were first settled around 3,000 years ago, with Eastern Polynesia being, in the main, settled almost 2,000 years later, within the last 1,200 years (Kirch 2017). The 27 sherds of Lapita pottery in the Melbourne Museum collection, from the island of Watom off New Britain, Papua New Guinea (PNG), are the largest number held in any Australian official depository; on grounds of rarity alone they should be considered one of the museum's Pacific treasures.

### Father Otto Meyer

The sherds were donated by Father Otto Meyer (1877–1937). He was a Sacred Heart Catholic missionary based on Watom Island between 1902 and shortly before his death in 1937 (for details of his life, see Howes, **Chapter 15**, this volume; Dotte-Sarout and Howes 2019; Howes 2017; and for how he is remembered on Watom Island today, see 'Rakival Mission, Watom Island Meeting' and 'Statement by Rakival People', **Appendix**, this

volume). The pottery sherds may have been held at the museum for around 100 years – when they arrived is not fully settled – but they have very rarely, if ever, been on public display (Figures 24.1–24.3). For perhaps the first 50 years of their time at what was then the National Museum Melbourne (also known as the National Museum of Victoria), their true value in tracing the migrations of early Pacific peoples was unappreciated and their cultural affiliation was unclear. Only with the rapid expansion of archaeology in the Western Pacific from the 1950s onwards was the Lapita ‘trail’ of pottery from the Bismarck Archipelago through Island Melanesia and into Western Polynesia revealed and dated. Its ultimate connections back into Island Southeast Asia and Taiwan were largely argued on the basis of a shared ‘Neolithic’ culture, meaning in this case agriculturally based subsistence and the use of pottery, as well as an indicative link between the distribution of Austronesian languages and the spread of such pottery-using cultures through Island Southeast Asia and out into the Pacific. The languages could be traced back to Taiwan, and that island produced the earliest dated pottery found in Island Southeast Asia. This further cemented the connection between the spread of languages and culture in the region, a connection that very firmly still stands (Kirch 2017).



**Figure 24.1. Watom Island Lapita sherd from Meyer Donation.**

Source: Museums Victoria Indigenous Collections, (Registration X 032087). Used with permission.



**Figure 24.2. Watom Island Lapita sherd from Meyer Donation.**

Source: Museums Victoria Indigenous Collections, (Registration X 032087). Used with permission.



**Figure 24.3. Watom Island Lapita sherd from Meyer Donation.**

Source: Museums Victoria Indigenous Collections, (Registration X 032087). Used with permission.

None of this was known, however, back in 1909 when Meyer found decorated potsherds eroding out on the beach at his mission station on Watom after a storm caused stream flooding. Local people were little guide as to the origins of the pottery; they did not make pottery themselves, although they offered interpretations of some of the geometric designs on the sherds, and Meyer seemed to suggest that the ‘sophisticated’ pottery was made by an earlier culture (Howes 2017:43). As well as being a priest, Meyer was a keen scholar of natural science, publishing some 30 or so scientific papers during his time on Watom. The pottery was sufficiently notable that Meyer devoted three papers to its investigation, published in the Catholic anthropological journal *Anthropos* in 1909 and 1910 (Meyer 1909a, 1909b, 1910), and was to refer to his findings again in later published and unpublished works. These papers are remarkable for their time, reporting on Meyer’s archaeological excavations where the pottery was generally found at a depth often of 1.5 m below the present ground surface, under a sterile yellow layer we now know to have been a volcanic ash or tephra deposit caused by the major Rabaul Caldera-forming eruption that took place somewhere between AD 667 and 699, some 1,350–1,325 or so years ago (McKee et al. 2015; cf. Specht 1968). Meyer presented drawings of some of the decorated sherds he found, and even attempted a brief stylistic analysis. The work was considerably ahead of its time.

## Distributing Watom

Meyer clearly wanted to get further opinions on the origins and date of the potsherds. As well as publishing illustrations of them he sent collections to various European museums. The illustrated sherds and others were sent to the Hilstrup Mission Museum, Münster, in 1910, and are now in the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland. Further depositions were made in 1912 and 1913 to museums in Cologne and Berlin in Germany (for details see Howes, **Chapter 15**, this volume). Australian forces occupied German New Guinea, including New Britain, near the start of World War I in 1914 (Craig et al. 2015). This led to the amassing of the War Museum Collection of some 600 (mainly) ethnographic objects as ‘war trophies or curios’ that came to Museums Victoria between 1915 and 1920. The Watom sherds of Meyer are said to be numbered among them (Craig et al. 2015:210–211).

If the Melbourne Museum's original Accession Register is to be believed, the collection number 32087 for the Watom sherds is part of a series (31956–32419) that originated from the War Museum Loan Collection and was placed on permanent loan on 10 September 1925. Accession 32087 is said to have come from Father Meyer with the locality as 'Island of Watom. New Britain 1909'. The objects before and after this entry are dated as collected in 1919.<sup>1</sup> The description reads:

Pottery – 24 pieces, broken, dug up by Father Meyer on the Island of Watom. They were found at about a depth of 4 feet, about 50 yards from the high water, on one of the very few level patches of Watom. He found in all about 2cwt [c. 100 kg], the majority not being marked. Nothing like it is made by the Natives of the Island. No complete article was found. He dug the first piece up about 1909. The pottery of Peru is the nearest approach to it.

This explains the 1909 date in the locality column of the Accession Register, but not when Meyer presumably donated the collection. It is also not clear to whom he donated it – collectors for the War Museum or directly to the National Museum of Victoria. Craig et al. (2015) assume the former but provide no details; presumably they were following the general note in the Accession Register.

## Dermot Casey and Watom

The collection appears to have gone unremarked until Dermot Casey (1897–1977) was appointed honorary ethnologist of the National Museum Melbourne upon his return from the UK around the end of 1931. Casey, the younger brother of the politician and later Governor-General of Australia R.G. Casey, came from an established Melbourne upper-class family. He had gone to the UK in June 1928 where he pursued archaeological interests, becoming a student and field assistant to Mortimer Wheeler, then the director of the London Museum, who was just starting to teach the first university-level courses in archaeology in London. Wheeler described him as 'one of the most percipient excavators within

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1 This might seem fortuitous, the register being copied out later, but in the Papers of E.W.P. Chinnery, National Library of Australia, is a photograph of some of the Melbourne sherds, presumably sent to E.W.P. Chinnery by the Museum's Honorary Ethnologist Dermot Casey at some stage, which is labelled on the back 'dug up by Father Myer [sic], RC Mission – 1919', MS766, Box 44, File 33. Is it just an error for 1909?

my knowledge' and believed that Casey, 'but for the counter-attraction of his natal Australia, would have risen high as a field-archaeologist' (Wheeler 1955:98). Upon his return, Casey was without doubt the most highly trained archaeologist in Australia. As his publications and activities show, he pursued wide interests in Australian and New Guinea archaeology during the rest of the 1930s (Spriggs 2019:3–4, 2020).

At Casey's urging, Museum Director D.J. Mahony wrote to Monseigneur Vesters, Bishop of New Guinea at Vunapope near Rabaul on New Britain, noting: 'About 1916 the Rev Father Myer [sic] kindly presented to this Museum some fragments of pottery which he had dug up some years previously' (Mahony to Vesters, undated but response dates it to 19 September 1932, Ethnology – Pottery file, First Peoples' Collection, Museums Victoria). Mahony sought further information on Casey's behalf, including an address for Father Meyer. The bishop responded that he had forwarded the enquiry to Meyer on Watom (Vesters to Mahony, 5 October 1932, received at Museum 24 October 1932, Ethnology – Pottery file). Meyer then responded directly to Mahony on 18 October 1932 (original letter in Ethnology – Pottery file, typescript copy AIATSIS [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies], Casey Collection MS 1326.A (I)(5)(i)). He noted that:

In 1922 Mr Stanley, the Government geologist from Papua, made a report about the matter. (Some of his explanations, however, are not quite correct.)

Geologist Evan Stanley had been an enthusiastic amateur historian and thought the pottery had derived from a Spanish shipwreck of the sixteenth century. In a letter from Meyer to his fellow priest, the anthropologist Father Patrick O'Reilly who visited him in June 1935, Meyer recalled: 'Now some weeks ago, I heard that the English [sic – Australians] thought they might find Spanish gold, hence the Government's interest in the pottery' (translation of letter c. 1934–35, in Anson 2000:23). However, Meyer also claimed that he had persuaded Stanley that the pottery was older:

If I can permit myself the luxury of having an opinion, it is this: I believe that if the motifs mainly resemble those of South America, for example Peru, more than others, there could have been contacts between this local ancient culture and that of South America. But I, poor hermit, what do I know of these scientific questions which are still so perplexing, even for you, the scientists, by the grace of God.

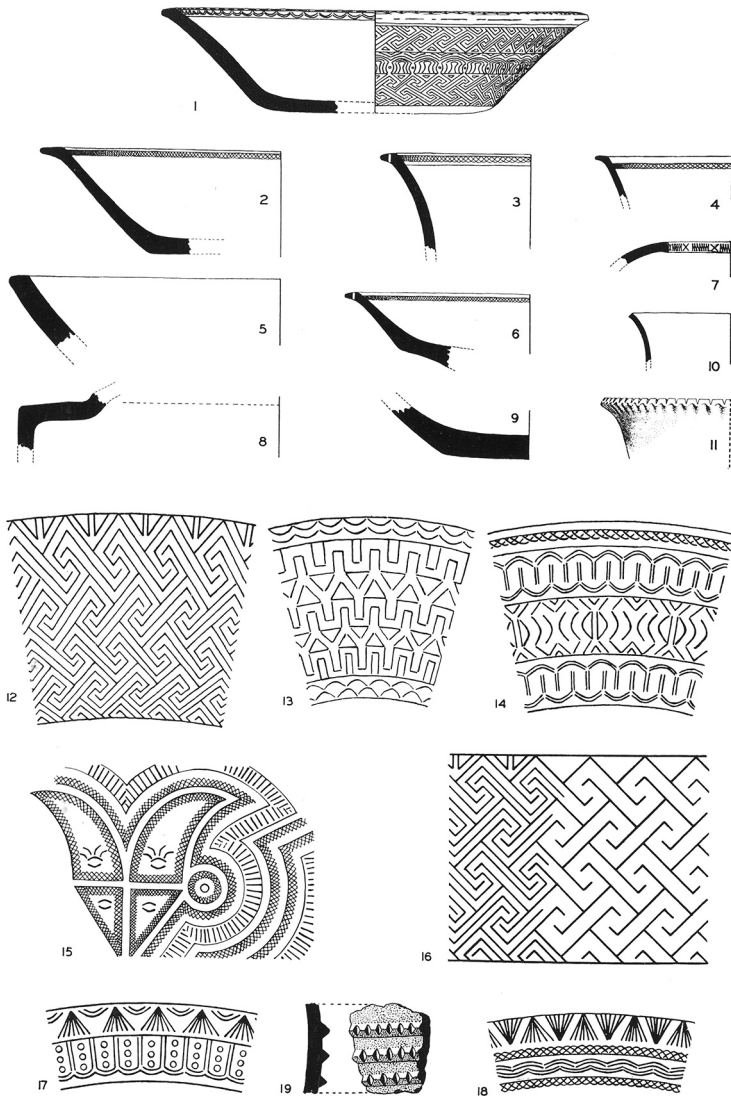
Meyer had clearly thought there was a Peruvian connection before meeting Stanley in 1922, from his reading of Buschan (1910) and one of the editions of Hoernes's *Urgeschichte der Menschheit*, where illustrations of Peruvian designs – presumably those shown to Stanley by Meyer – were seen as similar to the Watom pieces.<sup>2</sup>

Casey's interest in the Watom pottery was revived early in 1936, when he wrote to Meyer that he had seen very similar designs on pottery from the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia in both the British Museum and the India Museum in London,<sup>3</sup> during a visit in the second half of 1933. He asked Meyer to send him some further examples of the Watom pottery for study and return, and also requested that Meyer ask the Vunapope Catholic Mission's museum for a further loan of potsherds. He noted that he had written to Territory of New Guinea Government Anthropologist E.W.P. Chinnery to see if further specimens could be lent from the Rabaul Museum (Casey to Meyer, 17 March 1936, Ethnology – Pottery file). His letter to Chinnery of the same day can be found in the Casey Collection in AIATSIS but seems to have got no response; no pottery was sent from that museum (AIATSIS, MS 1326.A (l)(5)(i)).

Meyer replied in the affirmative and hoped that Casey would be able to throw 'more light on the origin of this strange old potteries' (Meyer to Casey, 23 April 1936, received at Museum 6 May, Ethnology – Pottery file). Sent even earlier than this but received the same day was a letter from Vunapope saying that they were sending a case with 19 small packages of pottery in it (P. Ischler to Casey, 16 April 1936, Ethnology – Pottery file). An attached note lists 85 potsherds in this consignment. Museum Director Mahony responded on 12 June in letters to Meyer and to Father Ischler, noting receipt of both the Vunapope and Meyer collections and enclosing a money order to cover the postage (Mahony to Meyer, 12 June 1936, Ethnology – Pottery file). The pottery was returned soon after 26 August that year, when a requisition order to send back the pottery was filed (Requisition Order, Ethnology – Pottery file).

2 There were several editions of this work and it is not clear which one Meyer was referring to.

3 This was in fact a collection known as the 'India Museum' in the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. The collection retained its separate identity until 1945: [www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/collections/europe/india-museum-london](http://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/collections/europe/india-museum-london), retrieved 15 May 2020.



**Figure 24.4. Plate VIII illustrating Watom Lapita pottery sent to Dermot Casey from Father Meyer and from the Mission Museum at Kokopo, East New Britain in 1936.**

Source: *Memoirs of the National Museum Melbourne* 9, September 1936 (Casey 1936).

There is no record of how many sherds Meyer sent, but the weight of his package of 12 lbs compared to the package of 85 sherds from Vunapope weighing 20 lbs might suggest about 50 sherds were included. Casey's report in the *Memoirs of the National Museum Melbourne* published in November 1936, however, talks of 'several hundred pieces' (Casey 1936:95). About 17 of the sherds are illustrated in Casey's article, the precise number being unknown as some drawings are schematic renderings of the designs, others show the vessel shape in section and two show decorations on the inside of the rim from what may be vessels whose main design fields on the external surface were illustrated elsewhere on the page (Figure 24.4). Only one illustration seems to be from the collection already held by the National Museum, and even that could simply be illustrating a sherd from the loaned collection with a similar motif.

The lack of overlap between the earlier, retained, collection and those illustrated by Casey is significant because his 1936 report is the only record of these 'several hundred' pieces. During fighting between Allied forces and the Japanese in World War II, the Vunapope Mission was levelled by bombing and the Rabaul Museum too was destroyed (Specht to Casey, 6 December 1965, from information gathered on his first trip to Watom, AIATSIS, MS 1326.A (1)(5)(i)). A few years before, Father Meyer had died on a ship docking at New Farm Wharf in Brisbane on 14 December 1937. He had been convalescing at the Mission Procure in Coogee, Sydney, after illness and was returning to Watom to die among his flock. He was buried the same day in Nudgee cemetery.<sup>4</sup> After his death one assumes that his possessions were removed from Watom to Vunapope for safekeeping, and thus were subsequently destroyed there during the war.

Meyer was the conduit for procuring further important Pacific specimens for the National Museum Melbourne, hand-carrying obsidian artefacts and stone mortars from New Britain, New Ireland and Lihir to Sydney and then shipping them to Melbourne in October 1937. This was on behalf of Father Neuhaus of the Sacred Heart Mission, just two months before

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4 Father Meyer's death on board the SS *Nellore* was reported widely in the Brisbane and regional Queensland and New South Wales papers, as well as in the Catholic press. See, for instance, *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 14 December 1937, p. 1; *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 15 December 1937, pp. 1, 13 (retrieved 9 November 2019 from Trove: [trove.nla.gov.au](http://trove.nla.gov.au)).



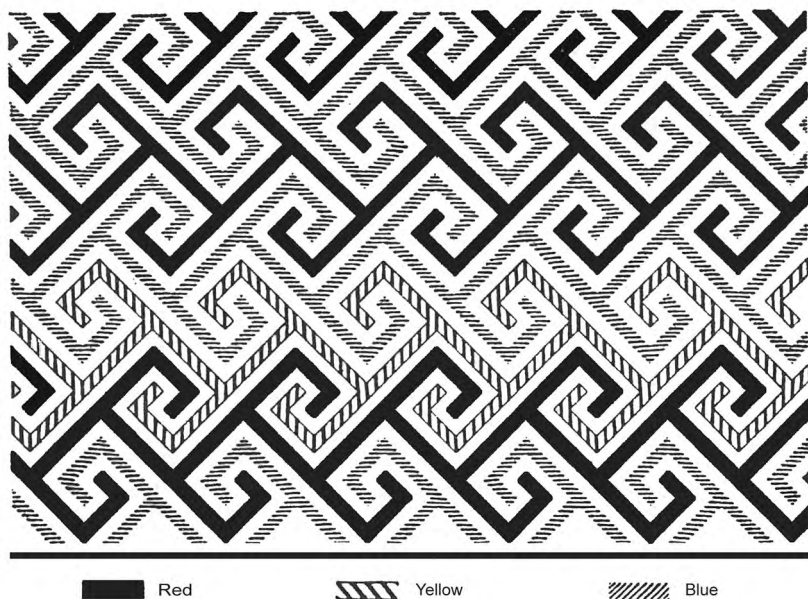
Meyer's death (see Museums Victoria, First Peoples' Collection, Neuhauss (sic), Father (PNG) (1937–41) file and AIATSIS, MS 1326.A (j)(1) and (2)).<sup>5</sup>

Casey's 1936 paper on the Watom pottery was largely descriptive but justified by the fact that at the time it was 'of a type quite different from any of the wares known from New Guinea or the adjacent islands, and the Watom Island natives had no knowledge of it' (Casey 1936:94). In addition (during his 1933 visit to the UK), Casey had noted use of the same technique – what we now know as dentate-stamping – and some of the same decorative designs on nineteenth-century pottery from Perak on the Malaysian mainland in the India Museum collection, London. Examples of similar designs were seen on Malay water bottles and jars in the British Museum as well. Casey made a most percipient observation that at least one design, which he labels as an 'interlocking branched (cymose) key pattern', appeared 'to be derived from plaited basketwork' (Casey 1936:97). He noted that designs of the same general type are found 'on fabrics and basketware from Indonesia, and occasionally on early Chinese bronzes', with further related patterns from Sumatra and Kalimantan (Casey 1936:97).

He seemed particularly taken, however, by close parallels with the design on an embroidered fabric from a grave in Nasca, Peru, dating from 200 BC to AD 200 that he had seen in the British Museum. He had written to a curator there, to secure a photo that he then had rendered as his Figure 5 (our Figure 24.5) (Casey to H.J. Braunholtz, Assistant Keeper of Oriental Antiquities and of Ethnography, British Museum, 16 March 1936, and response 1 April 1936, AIATSIS, MS 1326.A (l)(5)(i)). One wonders if the reference in the Accession Register, doubtless originally from Meyer himself, that the closest parallels to the Watom pottery were with Peruvian ceramics, had led Casey to seek out a Peruvian parallel? He concludes, however: 'It is not suggested that there is necessarily any connection between the two, although the patterns are almost identical, and the writer does not know of this particular design occurring elsewhere' (Casey 1936:97).

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5 Casey later published on these and other artefacts in the *Memoir* series (Casey 1939).



**Figure 24.5. ‘Fig. 5 Ancient Embroidered Fabric, Nasca, Peru (British Museum)’.**

Source: *Memoirs of the National Museum Melbourne* 9, September 1936 (Casey 1936:96).

## The Lapita ‘community of culture’

Casey was the first person to write in English about the Watom pottery in any detail, although the first person to write in English and provide photographs of Lapita pottery was W.C. McKern (1929:115–119, Plate VI) reporting on the discovery of what we now know to be Lapita pottery on Tongatapu, Tonga. The Lapita designs on that pottery were quite simple in form and the connection between pottery from the two areas was not remarked upon by anyone until briefly alluded to by Edward Gifford (1953:68) and later – without reference – by Gifford and Richard Shutler Jr, the first people to record the name of the New Caledonian site of Lapita, their Site 13. They wrote: ‘The roulette (dotted line) marks on Tongan pottery also suggests site 13 and Ile des Pins styles’ (1956:94). Gifford (1951:236) had already noted similarities between the Île des Pins, Tonga and Fiji pottery decoration but at the time believed the pottery to date to late in the Fiji sequence.

The Île des Pins site mentioned is another classic Lapita site at the beach of St Maurice, in the Saint François area, near Vao village. This was excavated in 1947 by Maurice Lenormand, André Arnould and Jacques Avias after Lenormand was alerted to its presence by Father Boutin, head of the Catholic Mission at Vao (Avias 1950:130–131; Lenormand 1948). It was the pottery from this site that Avias and, independently, Father O'Reilly recognised in early 1949 as similar to that from Watom (as recounted by Avias 1950:131–132; cf. Avias 1949). Avias also hypothesised – it seems he had not yet examined any specimens – that a site on the Foué Peninsula near Koné on the mainland of New Caledonia examined by Piroutet sometime between 1900 and 1909 (Piroutet 1917:260; cf. Piroutet 1909) might include similar pottery (Avias 1950:122–123, 136); this was, of course, Site 13, Lapita. It was presumably due to Avias's mention of Piroutet's work that Gifford and Shutler excavated the site in the first place.

As noted above, Gifford was the first to draw attention as well to parallels between the pottery at the Île des Pins and that found by Lindsay Verrier and Ratu Rabici Logavatu at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes on Viti Levu, Fiji, in 1948 shortly after Gifford's 1947 expedition to Fiji had concluded (Gifford 1951:236; cf. Gifford 1953:68). The Sigatoka find occurred in time for the pottery to be described and illustrated in Gifford's Fiji monograph (Gifford 1951:232, 236, 252, Plate 19). For details of Verrier and Ratu Rabici Logavatu's discovery see Spriggs, **Chapter 27** and **Chapter 28**, both this volume. Gifford does not seem to have been aware of Avias's publications when he wrote his monograph and so does not mention any parallels with Watom. But what is perhaps more surprising is that none of these writers were aware of Casey's 1936 publication. It is never mentioned in the writings of Avias, Gifford, Lenormand or any other researchers working in New Caledonia or Fiji in the 1940s and 1950s and even escaped the eagle-eye of Alphonse Riesenfeld in his encyclopaedic grand synthesis of Melanesian prehistory, *The Megalithic Culture of Melanesia* (1950), although he did refer to it in a slightly later paper (Riesenfeld 1952). Avias and Riesenfeld were, however, well aware of Meyer's own publications on Watom by 1950, as was Gifford by 1953.

Casey's paper is first referred to in print in a Lapita context in publications in 1967 and 1968 (Golson 1968; Specht 1967, 1968), although Jim Specht's correspondence with Casey in 1965 shows he was aware of the publication before his own research at Watom that year (AIATSIS,

MS 1326.A (l)(5)(i)). But what of Lapita itself, used to describe a style of pottery shared between these various areas of Melanesia and Western Polynesia? It is true that Jack Golson wrote in 1961 of:

some early community of culture linking New Caledonia, Tonga, and Samoa, antedating (on present evidence) the 'Melanesian' cultures of the first and ancestral to the historic Western Polynesian cultures of the other two [...] expressed in terms of variants of the same pottery tradition. (Golson 1961:176)

But Golson gave no name to this community! The honour of doing so may rest with Bruce Palmer, director of the Fiji Museum between 1963 and 1973 and a former student of Golson's. The use of Lapita as a name for more than a location where this style of pottery was found first occurs in a 1965 paper of Palmer's and by the following year he was using 'Lapita pottery' in this wider sense in the title of a paper (Palmer 1965, 1966).

Garanger (1966) used Lapita in this stylistic sense in a paper dated as written in Papeete, Tahiti, in February 1965. In that paper he cited recent research by Davidson, Golson, Green, Palmer, Poulsen and Shutler, and discussed a visit he had made to Palmer at the Fiji Museum. This tends to confirm the point made by Kirch (who thought Palmer 1966 was the first published reference) that 'the term may well have been in use colloquially among Oceanic archaeologists prior to this date' (Kirch 1988:1 fn. 1). A probably independent usage of 'Vao-Lapita-Vuatom' to describe the Lapita style occurs in another publication, written some time before August 1965, by French administrator and amateur archaeologist Bernard Hébert (1963–65). Garanger (1966:76 fn. 5) mentioned having examined Hébert's pottery collection in Nouméa. Papers presented in August 1966 at a conference in Japan but not published until 1968 use Lapita in its wider sense (Yawata and Sinoto 1968), as does a footnote in a linguistic paper by Green (1966).

## A last question

We return to the question of when the Lapita sherds entered the National Museum collections. In a later series of communications with Jim Specht, who followed up Meyer's excavations at Watom in 1965–66, Casey quoted an additional phrase from what was presumably a later version of the museum register after his 1936 paper had been published in the *Memoir* series: 'Lent by Father Meyer Sept 1925. See covering letter on file

7.1.26, and Memoir'. He notes that the detailed information contained in the register entry must have come from that letter but was unable to locate it. It is not in the file concerning the Watom collection (AIATSIS, MS 1326.A (l)(5)(i)). Relocation of this letter would at least clear up the question of whether the Lapita sherds entered the museum's collections as part of the War Museum collection or not.

It did not prove possible to mount an exhibition of objects highlighted in this chapter at the Melbourne Museum, despite plans to do so.

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