



## Part 1

# The emergence of social archaeology in Australia

*Bevel-edged tool dating to the last 1000 years. It was used by an Aboriginal woman in southeast Queensland to process the starchy rhizome of Bungwall fern (a local staple plant food).*

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## The social archaeology of Indigenous Australia

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A large group of volunteers is helping record and excavate Aboriginal cultural sites during an archaeology field summer school at Wood Wood, near Swan Hill in northern Victoria. The days are exciting, dirty and dusty but rich in the promise of better understanding through archaeological research the local Aboriginal past. The afternoons are abuzz with the day's discoveries, the seventy-odd people sharing ideas and interpretations with a communal sense of research achievement. Each evening the day is capped by a lecture by one of the distinguished staff attending the school.

One evening made a particularly profound impact on the audience. The director of the field program had delivered his daily 'sermon', this time a lecture on the late British archaeologist David Clarke's influential characterisation of what archaeology is all about: understanding how environmental 'subsystems' (the fauna, climate, geology and flora) interact with various cultural 'subsystems' (the economic, religious, psychological, social and material culture). On the blackboard these subsystems are depicted as a set of circles each interlinked by arrows (Clarke 1978, figure 23). Archaeology, it is claimed, concerns these subsystems; it tries to reveal information about each of them, and to understand the past means to understand the nature of their interactions.

Question time. One man stepped forward — a local Koorie man, a stranger to most present — with one deeply simple statement that reached to the heart of the matter. He said: 'This is all very well, but you forgot one thing.' With chalk in hand he reached to the blackboard, drew a large circle over the subsystems diagram, and inscribed the word 'people' into our hearts and souls.

### Towards a social archaeology

If archaeology concerns human history, then by definition archaeology is about people both past and present. For most, this statement seems simple and

self-evident. Think of the archaeology of ancient Egypt and we think of Pharaohs, the worship of animal gods, and the millions of hours worked by people building those same pyramids that continue to entertain our imaginations today. Think of the archaeology of ancient Rome and we think of the Colosseum and gladiators fighting to the death, or perhaps of Roman legions battling it out on some far-flung frontier. In each of these cases the past is filled with people and with forms of social interaction far removed from the daily activities we see in modern Egypt or Italy.

Now think of ancient Australia, the Australia of, say, 2000 years ago, or 5000 or 40 000 years ago. Who do we see? What are they doing? Are these ancient Indigenous Australians hunting and gathering for food in a dry land? Perhaps a man, spear in hand and kangaroo over one shoulder, or a small group of women gathering birds' eggs or digging for goannas?

In what ways do our images of those distant times differ from what we know of Indigenous Australians of the last 200 years? After thousands of journal articles — academic and popular — and hundreds of books written about the archaeology of Indigenous Australia over the last fifty years, why is it so difficult to imagine ancient Indigenous Australians (sometimes many thousands of years past) as anything more than ethnographically known peoples wandering across a timeless landscape in search of food?

In some respects lack of relevant imagery for what ancient Indigenous Australians did in the past reflects a general ignorance of the fruits of archaeological research and poor public education (Balme & Wilson 2004). But we also suggest that the problem lies elsewhere. We contend that the issue is not so much about selling the 'product' of archaeological research as about the nature of the 'product' being produced by archaeologists. We cannot expect the public to easily imagine the rich and varied lives of Aboriginal peoples living 1000, 5000, 10 000 or even 40 000 years ago if archaeology always focuses on diet and stone tools and changing adaptations to different environments through time and across space. The history of 'hunter-gatherer' societies is like the history of any society. It concerns the ways that people interacted with each other in the past, and about ways people structured — and were structured by — their social and ecological settings.

This 'social' archaeology is an explicit attempt to access a peopled past through the material remains of that past. This book explores such social archaeologies and the varied ways of understanding the history of Indigenous Australians through archaeological practice. In doing so, it honours the work of Harry Lourandos who, for some thirty years, has been pivotal to the establishment of a social archaeology in Australia (see Bowdler, this volume).

## **A different social archaeology for Indigenous societies?**

In their influential book *Archaeology* Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn (2000, p. 173) note that social archaeology is 'about people and about relations between people, about the exercise of power and about the nature of organisation.' They present two major approaches to social archaeology. The first, a 'top-down' approach, focuses on inter- and intra-group organisation. The second, a 'bottom-up' approach, focuses on the individual as the smallest unit of social organisation and investigates inter-individual dynamics and issues such as identity, gender and status. But is the social archaeology of Indigenous peoples any different to the social archaeology of any other group of people? According to Renfrew and Bahn (2000, p. 173), the answer is yes:

Different kinds of society need different kinds of question. For example, if we are dealing with a mobile group of hunter-gatherers, there is unlikely to be a complex centralized organization. And the techniques of investigation will need to vary radically with the nature of the evidence. One cannot tackle an early hunter-gatherer camp in Australia in the same way as the capital city of a province in China during the Shang Dynasty. Thus, the questions we put, and the methods for answering them, must be tailored to the sort of community we are dealing with. So it is all the more necessary to be clear at the outset about the general nature of that community, which is why the basic social questions are the first ones to ask.

While in some respects we agree with these claims, exactly how and why the study of identity, gender, and status for 'hunter-gatherers' should be fundamentally different to state societies is not clear. Nor is it clear how different questions and methods for different types of societies allow for cross-cultural comparisons. Despite these problems, however, we agree with Renfrew and Bahn for the distinctiveness of 'hunter-gatherer' (and by extension Indigenous) social archaeology, but for different reasons to those given by their explanation.

Indigenous peoples around the world have had their societies and power bases transformed in the last two to five hundred years as a result of European colonialism. In settler-colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples have had to contend with a broad range of onslaughts: the expropriation of land, genocide, assimilation, oppression and neglect. Colonialism has constructed a view of Indigenous societies, and of hunter-gatherer societies in particular, that has fundamentally and uniquely shaped archaeological approaches to their pasts. In the context of this book, a social archaeology of Indigenous societies must therefore incorporate three key dimensions: understanding social interactions

in the past; understanding the contemporary social contexts of researching Indigenous pasts; and understanding contemporary social impacts of archaeological representations of Indigenous pasts.

Immediately apparent is that two of these three dimensions relate to people in the *present*. Social archaeology engages with and interrogates, often with reflexive discursiveness, our opening point that 'archaeology is about people both past and present'. The critical point here is that most archaeological research on Indigenous societies is undertaken in settler-colonial contexts where Indigenous peoples represent a colonised, and numerically a minority, culture (e.g. North America and Australia). In contrast, most archaeologists are inheritors of that hegemonic, colonising, majority culture.

Yet such a power differential is only part of the issue. It is generally accepted that the development of archaeology in colonial contexts such as Australia, North America and Africa, has been (and in some ways continues to be) tied intimately to the colonising project. That is, conceptual frameworks — such as social evolutionism, diffusionism and migrationism — produced archaeologies that represent Indigenous peoples and their pasts in an inferior light (Trigger 1984; McNiven & Russell 2005). Far from simply presenting distorted representations of Indigenous pasts, such archaeologies have helped legitimise the colonial appropriation of Indigenous lands by representing Indigenous peoples as unevolved savages with rudimentary culture tied closely to the environment. William Sollas' (1911, p. 383) extraordinary conclusion, in his famous 1911 book *Ancient hunters*, illustrates the point well:

What part is to be assigned to justice in the government of human affairs? So far as the facts are clear they teach in no equivocal terms that there is no right which is not founded on might. Justice belongs to the strong, and has been meted out to each race according to its strength; each has received as much justice as it deserved. What perhaps is most impressive in each of the cases we have discussed is this, that the dispossession by a new-comer of a race already in occupation of the soil has marked an upward step in the intellectual progress of mankind. It is not priority of occupation, but the power to utilise, which establishes a claim to the land.

In this sense, the link between archaeology and contemporary Indigenous peoples is not new, and the political and social implications of archaeological historicism become abundantly apparent and integral to the birth of 'pre-historic' archaeology, as is equally well demonstrated by the title of prehistoric archaeology's foundational text, John Lubbock's 1865 *Pre-historic times*,

*as illustrated by ancient remains, and the manners and customs of modern savages.*

## **Beyond ecology: socialising Indigenous pasts**

While archaeology has produced many negative images of Indigenous peoples and their pasts, attention also needs to be given to what archaeologists have neglected to say. For example, there has been a lack of research into social processes. The archaeology of Indigenous peoples has traditionally been the archaeology of hunter-gatherers, with an analytical focus on subsistence, settlement and human-environmental interaction. This focus became entrenched during the mid-twentieth century as anthropologists produced sophisticated conceptual frameworks that appeared to support the view that the form and structure of hunter-gatherer societies was conditional on the form and structure of the environment. When this spatialised framework was transposed into archaeology, chronological changes in the form and structure of these societies were linked somewhat mechanistically — and in many cases deterministically — to chronological changes in the form and structure of the environment. Within the Australian context, this environmentally deterministic view is best represented by the work of Joseph Birdsell (1953) and his attempt to link Aboriginal population density to rainfall levels. At least as influential in the English-speaking world was Julian Steward's theory of cultural ecology, which developed out of his work with Shoshonean groups in the Great Basin, USA. Indeed, Richard Lee and Irven DeVore (1968b, p. 5), in their introductory chapter to the classic *Man the hunter*, state that Steward largely founded modern 'hunter-gatherer' studies. Cultural ecology was keenly taken up by processual archaeologists (of the 'New Archaeology' movement) in the 1960s and 1970s, with Brian Fagan (1995, p. 51) suggesting that it 'was, perhaps, the most important theoretical development in North American archaeology in a century'. The key dimension of cultural ecology adopted by archaeologists was the notion of the 'cultural core'. According to Steward (1955, p. 37), this cultural core should be seen as:

[the] constellation of features which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. The core includes such social, political, and religious patterns as are empirically determined to be closely connected with these arrangements. Innumerable other features may have great potential variability because they are less strongly tied to the core. These latter, or secondary features, are determined to a greater extent by purely cultural-historical factors — by random innovations or by diffusion — and they give the appearance of outward distinctiveness to cultures with similar cores.