

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK IN NORTHWEST QUEENSLAND

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In recent years there has been a sharp increase in interest in the archaeology of Northwest Queensland. The area has hitherto been neglected by archaeologists due to both the prohibitive cost of fieldwork and the coastal orientation of archaeological questions in Australia. The following summary is presented to inform QAR readers of the work that has been undertaken in the area and that which is still in progress.

The geographical area of concern here is the extensive arid and semi-arid landscape west of the Great Divide and north of the tropic of Capricorn. Much of this area is subject to the marked seasons that typify the climate of tropical northern Australia.

Excellent ethnohistoric information has been gathered from parts of this region, principally by Roth (1897, 1904). Until recently, archaeological work had concentrated on the coastline of the Gulf. Tindale (1925/26) undertook ethnographic and archaeological work on the islands and along the coastline of the gulf of Carpentaria. In the 1940's through to the 1960's competent amateurs such as Gresser (1962, 1963a, 1963b, 1964) commented briefly on, and collected large numbers of artefacts from, many open sites throughout the western part of the state, including the northwest. More recently Richard Robins and David Trigger have conducted preliminary site survey work on the Wellesly Islands and on the adjacent mainland.

Deposits in two Aboriginal archaeological sites in the Mount Isa Uplands were dated by means of thermoluminescence (Mortlock, Price, and Gardiner 1979); however, the purpose of the excavation has never been explained. Aboriginal rangers and Honorary wardens of the Archaeology Branch of the DAIA based in Mount Isa made periodic surveys of selected areas throughout the 1970's. The area has been subject to large scale mining and related development but none of these have been accompanied by systematic archaeological survey and assessment work.

In 1979 Philip Hughes initiated an interdisciplinary investigation into the archaeology of the Lawn Hill Gorge area. This project was undertaken for the Archaeology Branch of the DAIA on National Estate Grants Program funds from the Australian Heritage Commission. In the first stage Hughes and Ken Aplin excavated four test squares in Colless Creek Cave and intensively surveyed the adjacent gorge area. Hughes enlisted a variety of researchers to analyse the material derived from these preliminary investigations:

- * Stratigraphy and geomorphic history - Philip Hughes and John Magee (Hughes 1983, Magee and Hughes 1983).

- * Radiocarbon dating of shell and charcoal - John Head of the ANU radiocarbon laboratory.
- * Faunal remains - Ken Aplin, University of New South Wales.
- * Stone artefact analysis - Peter Hiscock (Hiscock and Hughes 1981, Hiscock 1984a).
- * Petrology and flaking qualities of the stone materials - Alan Watchman, consultant geoscientist, Canberra, and Peter Hiscock.
- * Human teeth from the Pleistocene deposits - Peter Brown, University of New England.
- * Parietal art in both the cave and numerous sites elsewhere in the gorge system - Michael Morwood, University of New England.

Colless Creek Cave has proved to contain material older than 20,000 years BP and it is possible to infer dramatic change in the environmental and human history throughout this period (see Hiscock 1984a). David Trigger of the University of Queensland has visited the area with members of the local Aboriginal community to record modern patterns of resource use.

It is planned that the results of this work will be drawn together for publication in a future monograph. A progress report drawing together the results of preliminary analyses and already published material is currently being prepared.

In 1980 Philip Hughes, Peter Hiscock, and Michael Morwood, accompanied by honorary wardens from Mount Isa, surveyed a 30km stretch of the O'shannasy River, northwest of Mount Isa. During the survey 66 sites, mostly scatters of stone artefacts, quarries and rock art sites, were found and recorded.

In 1981 Peter Hiscock began a PhD thesis centred upon Lawn Hill Station, the property on which Colless Creek lies. The purpose was to expand upon the work initiated by Hughes, concentrating upon the stone artefacts. To this end Hiscock has re-excavated Colless Creek Cave as well as seven other sites on the station. In 1982 Hiscock also undertook detailed field surveys aimed at obtaining information about site location and the transportation of artefacts throughout the landscape. Preliminary results of one part of this research are contained in this volume (Hiscock 1984b).

Meanwhile other projects were being initiated elsewhere in the northwest. Michael Morwood undertook wide ranging surveys of uplands in the vicinity of Hughenden, Croydon, and Georgetown during late 1980. During these surveys Morwood excavated Mickey Springs 34, a sandstone rockshelter. A charcoal sample from the base of the excavation yielded a date of 8310 ± 80 (Beta-4225) (Morwood and Godwin 1982:52). Luke Godwin has analysed the faunal remains found in the test square. In June 1983 Morwood returned to the site and excavated further squares. Morwood intends to undertake further excavations in a number of locations within this region.

In 1981 Iain Davidson initiated archaeological and ethnographic research in the Toko range area of far western Queensland. In conjunction with local Aboriginal informants he undertook site surveys, recording artefact scatters, rock art sites and the remains of gunyas. To date Davidson has concentrated on the implications of this data for the spatial distribution of archaeological 'implement types' (Davidson 1983).

Much of the current research mentioned above is yet to be published. When the results of these projects are known and their implications have been considered it is probable that further investigations into the region will be stimulated. The management of archaeological resources in northwest Queensland awaits these developments.

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