Editorial

Archaeological dates and interest are highly correlated. Have you ever noticed at archaeological conferences that interest generated about a site is often proportional to the age claimed for it? When speakers present ages that fall within the last few thousand years, few in the audience are moved to question the dates; however, claim an age which reaches into the Pleistocene and the audience begins to buzz and murmur and questions rain thick and fast. Years ago as a postgraduate student I attended a conference whereat a junior academic made an age claim for a site that was well outside of audience expectations, pushing the accepted regional chronology back thousands of years. The audience not only buzzed, it erupted in a palpable wave of criticism, not about the archaeological substance or the methods employed but simply about the age claimed. Furthermore, within much of that criticism lurked thinly veiled hostility and derision from amongst some of the 'heavyweights' in the profession, a reaction I interpreted as coming from dented or challenged egos. I should add that the paper generated instant notoriety for the speaker within the archaeological community, a factor that could not have failed to accelerate what became a very successful career. I came away from that experience with views about dates and archaeology that I haven't been able to discard completely since. First, it appeared that the older the site the more important it was to the archaeological community. Second, it seemed the older the age claimed, the more intensively the date itself was scrutinised, especially if it exceeded that claimed by established authority. Third, I began not only to suspect that more value was sometimes placed on dates/ages than on the substantive and explanatory aspects of archaeology but also that one's career may be significantly boosted simply by finding the earliest site and thus extending the known chronology. In short, it dawned on me that dates are very important for career building as well as chronology building.

Given this importance attached to dates in archaeology, there are two aspects to their reporting that puzzle me. First, it seems ironic that relatively little attention is paid in the literature by archaeologists to dating methods and their limitations. Many published articles simply present dates as given without much attention to possible errors in the age determinations themselves or to often-crucial contextual matters. As editor of QAR, I have received numerous manuscripts that treat dates in almost a cavalier fashion. To offer a few examples, I regularly find dates incorrectly cited, error margins incorrectly and inconsistently presented, calibrated ages compared with uncalibrated ones, and confusion about the marine reservoir effect. Authors generally seemed unwilling to tackle the scientific or technical side of chronology.

The second aspect concerns access to dates. I have often wondered why lists or catalogues of dates for all parts of the world have not been more regularly published for use by all, especially as most archaeologists work regionally. Access to such databases would seem critical for scholars undertaking analysis on a regional scale and highly valuable to consultants and others – which brings me to this issue of QAR. In 1982 Michael Kelly, then an honours student at the University of Queensland, undertook the first such listing of archaeological dates from Queensland in a report to the Archaeology Branch of the Queensland Government. It became a valuable reference for many researchers, but has become outdated. As a fitting start to the millennium, Sean Ulm and Jill Reid build on the Kelly platform and provide an updated and much expanded database. They have put extraordinary effort into not only researching and compiling this huge list of dates from myriad sources but into designing a reference structure which is user-friendly to a variety of user groups. I am sure their 'Index' will quickly become a valued reference tool and will remain so for years to come.

Jay Hall – Editor