

Waisted Blades in Australia?

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ABSTRACT. Waisted tools from two localities in Australia are compared with the better known, flaked waisted blades from New Guinea. In size, shape and type of edge modification, the two Australian samples differ both from each other and from New Guinea specimens. While waisting itself is seen as appearing in Australia through independent invention rather than as a shared concept, other aspects of the technology, which were universal, are seen as preconditions for waisting. These increased the probability of waisting's being invented in the region more than once.

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The earliest carbon dates of around 40,000 BP from Australia show that the initial human colonization of territories east of the Wallace Line took place in the Late Pleistocene. The sea level was then low enough to join New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania into one land mass, known as Greater Australia, but not low enough to bridge the water barrier separating Greater Australia from the Indonesian islands that form the nearest part of Southeast Asia. Crossing this sea barrier could only have followed the development of suitable watercraft, but other ideas or 'cultural baggage' entering Greater Australia with these early migrants from Southeast Asia cannot easily be recognized.

In addressing this question, Golson (1971) looked for a correspondence in archaeological traits as an indication of the transmission of technological ideas between Southeast Asia and Greater Australia. One trait seen as significant by Golson is the presence of waisting as a hafting aid on certain percussive cutting implements from both sides of the Wallace Line.

'Waisting' is the presence of a pair of opposed flaked notches, one on each long side of an implement. It is a trait most commonly known from New Guinea, where it appears on both edge-ground and flaked tools, known collectively as 'waisted blades'.

At the time of his investigation, Golson was unaware of the presence of waisting on Australian tools and based his comparisons with Southeast Asian tools on New Guinea specimens. However, waisting produced by opposed flaked notches has been recognized on tools from Kangaroo Island, South Australia (Lampert, 1981), and from the Mackay district of Queensland (McCarthy, 1949). In both Australian situations the tools appear as surface finds and are thus almost impossible to date accurately. However, from distributional evidence, the Kangaroo Island tools seem almost certain to be Pleistocene in age (Lampert, 1981).

In view of Golson's argument for waisting as a trait indicating early cultural relationships within New Guinea and beyond, it seems reasonable to examine the proposition that Australian waisted tools are similarly related. Having inspected a sample of 14 waisted tools from Kangaroo Island and more recently a sample of 80 from Mackay, I will compare these with each other and with a group from New Guinea in terms of shape, size and any evidence for function suggested by their working edges.

Characteristics of Tools

New Guinea waisted blades. In the most comprehensive survey of these tools yet carried out, Bulmer (1977) identifies three significant groups. These are: 11 tools from layers dating to around 26,000 BP at the Kosipe open site in the southern highlands; 19 tools from levels dating to a minimum of 12,000 BP at the Yuku site in the highlands; 106 tools from surface sites of unknown age in the Passismanua district of southern New Britain. In comparing these in terms of their shape and size, and type of edge, Bulmer finds some differences between the groups but also a great deal of similarity. Because of their likeness in these same characteristics to unwaisted axe blades, Bulmer argues that both waisted and unwaisted percussive cutting tools belong to the same functional continuum.

Of the three New Guinea groups of waisted blades, I chose those from Kosipe for comparison with the Australian samples, partly because Kosipe tools, being the largest, are the nearest in terms of size to the Australian tools, and partly because the raw metrical data is published (White *et al.*, 1970). All of the flaked waisted tools in the three groups considered by Bulmer have bevelled ends sharpened by either bifacial or unifacial flaking.