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Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology

edited by

Jim Specht and Robin Torrence



Papers in Honour of Val Attenbrow

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Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part I

Regional Archaeology in Australia

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ABSTRACT. Regional archaeology requires units that are defined by past material culture distributions and a defined sampling strategy. The latter has become common in Australia, but geography or environment has been the basis of areal definitions. On these bases, Attenbrow's studies of the Sydney region are fine examples of what could be done more widely with the archaeological data now available.

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“Regions” in Aboriginal Australia are a slippery concept, and regional archaeology is no exception. In 1976 Peterson suggested that there were three levels of grouping in Aboriginal Australia: bands, congeries of bands and regional or culture-area populations. He outlined “culture areas based on drainage divisions” but noted that although twelve drainage divisions are generally recognized, at least seventeen culture areas need recognition “on the basis of general knowledge of linguistic and cultural differences” (Peterson, 1976: 65). These areas were closely paralleled in the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, which claimed they were linked (if not too precisely) to differences in “language families, styles of body decoration, weapons, art styles and initiation and burial procedures” (Horton, 1994: 935). The extent to which this is, or was, true probably needs further research. For example, in both publications the Southeast Region stretches from the Divide to the coast and from Brisbane to Mt Gambier, and so it might therefore be surmized that what makes this a region is primarily climate and nearness to the coast. Certainly a more recent study of Australia at the threshold of colonization (Keen, 2004) looked at the people in seven “regions.” These were named groups but not tribes, which implies separate societies living in smaller areas than either Peterson's or Horton's and chosen for their environmental, linguistic and social organizational contrasts as known from the ethnographic record. The definition of region in this case is primarily social, with the

regions being largely identified by specific Aboriginal names (Kunai, Ngarinyin, etc.).

Regions on this scale or of this type have never been the focus of directed archaeological approaches: titles such as *Australian Coastal Archaeology* (Hall & McNiven, 1999) or *Pilbara Archaeology* (Morse & White, 2009) do not overtly deal with areas whether geographic or socially defined, nor is there an over-arching approach to them. In fact, single-author archaeological syntheses (e.g.; Lourandos, 1997; Hiscock, 2008) have divided Australia into areas of gross environmental difference (coastal, inland, arid; tropical, temperate, Tasmania). At a smaller scale within these regions, the prime focus has been on localities in which particular studies have been undertaken. Thus Lourandos, for example, writing of the “Tropical North,” discusses Princess Charlotte Bay, the North Queensland Highlands, the Alligator Rivers and similar areas. At a general level, each can be described environmentally, but none has clear boundaries and there is no reason to equate any with a culture-area, whether in modern or archaeological terms. One of the few deliberate attempts to define a regional archaeology in both archaeological and biological terms is Pardoe (2003). He sees the people living along the Darling River as distinct from those along the Murray or Murrumbidgee, but also notes that sharp boundaries are difficult to draw. Nonetheless, as Ulm (2004: 191–192) recently pointed out, distinct local and regional trajectories have been observed in the Holocene

archaeological record, although these have usually been overlooked in attempting to develop an Australia-wide history, in which regional variation is subsumed into an over-arching continental narrative.

Rock art researchers such as Morwood (2002), McDonald (1999) and others focus on particular stylistic sets, which are often related to particular geological features. Layton (1992: fig. 7.6) analysed 112 samples of motifs by area on an Australia-wide basis and showed that his maximum-link clusters did not display tight geographical patterning and did not show any links to the culture areas as defined above.

It thus seems appropriate to raise the question of what is actually meant by the term “regional archaeology.” Initially, as McBryde (1986) pointed out, it referred to both field survey and excavation of the total range of sites within an environmentally definable area, so as to understand the life of society in the past. Kantner’s (2008) recent overview draws attention to the common variable of human entities interacting both with each other and with the surrounding environment. He notes that “settlement pattern”, i.e. the archaeological record, should be distinguished from “settlement system,” which is the interpretation of the archaeology and that quantitative methods for discussing spatial data have been widely used. But such analyses continue to face the problem of how to define a “region” since prehistoric archaeology, unlike, say, geography or ethnography, generally cannot directly observe behaviour—it must be inferred from the patterning of the data. In this context, he suggests that researchers should work from the actual distribution of material culture rather than from any specific geographical focus.

Three early Australian studies which attempted to define their archaeological studies in terms of environmental parameters were by McBryde (1974) with a transect across New England’s varied landscapes, by Hallam within the Swan valley (McBryde, 1986: 19–20) and by Flood (1980) for the Southern Uplands. In each case the area to be researched was very large, not well defined environmentally, and the research was partly focussed on excavating stratified sites in search of chronology. Each, however, did attempt to survey a wide range of both surface and subsurface data. But all these studies lacked a clearly defined sampling strategy.

Overtly defined sampling strategies have now become common in Australian archaeology, not least in the contract world (e.g., Rhoads, 1992), but this was not the case when Attenbrow began her fieldwork in Mangrove Creek. While her initial surveys were restricted to an area defined as impacted by future public works, from 1978 she combined this with a research strategy which randomly sampled 10% of a carefully defined set of topographies within a well defined catchment of a reasonable size (101 km²). Thus, she could produce the “firmer, quantifiable statements” whose absence McBryde regretted (1986: 20), and hers was, in fact, one of the first Australian studies to do so. Attenbrow (2004: 218) recognized that the Mangrove Creek catchment “would have been only one part of a clan territory and part of a range of band or bands”: it was not necessarily a meaningful area in cultural terms. The area, in other words, was environmentally defined for archaeological purposes. This does not devalue it, for, as promised by the title of the published Ph.D. which eventually resulted (*What’s Changing: Population Size or Land-use Patterns?*), the research provides “a barometer of a much wider process” (Gamble, 2005: 75), namely the intensification debate (Lourandos & Ross, 1994). “Intensification” is a short-hand term for the apparent increase in complexity as measured by such things as greater site usage, rate of site establishment, more localized rock art

and expansion of exchange networks. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, arguments were made as to whether such changes were the result of population increase allowed by environmental change or social realignments (see review in Attenbrow, 2004: 14–29). Her ultimate conclusion was that neither the social environment nor climatic factors explain all the changes found within this particular catchment. It is this aspect of the Mangrove Creek study which gives it particular importance: it is a story on two levels. At the local level, it is a regional archaeology, looking at the changing relation between a group of people and a specific environment over time. At the broader level it challenges and evaluates the over-arching continental narrative to which Ulm referred. It is not alone in doing so, but the strength of the research is its clearly defined area and the sampling within it. In this respect her study has already addressed two of the three problems which Ulm (2004: 194) identified in current Holocene research: chronology and sampling. We may suspect other studies with similar strengths lurk within the grey contract literature, but so far they remain hidden.

It is perhaps not surprising that the areas around most Australian state capitals, home to nearly all the country’s white population, have been the focus of particular archaeological researches—Hall and his students around Brisbane, Hallam and hers around Perth, for example. In Sydney’s case this started very early, with Governor Hunter’s excavation of a shell mound (Attenbrow, 2002: 5). Research of various kinds continued through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with particular focus on the recording of rock art (Attenbrow, 2002: 5–8), a highly visible and readily recordable archaeological resource. This art has been generally recognized as clearly restricted to the Sydney sandstone and to be identifiable as a regional style although, as Officer (1992) has shown, more sophisticated analysis results in a more complex pattern. Until at least the 1960s there was little attempt at synthesis to define a “Sydney style”. The Sydney sandstone, conveniently, is encompassed largely by the watersheds of the Hawkesbury-Nepean and Georges Rivers and this has been defined, e.g., by McDonald (1999), as the Sydney Region or culture-area, within which four languages were spoken at the time of European contact. Whether this area was distinctive from the surroundings other than in its art is not explored by McDonald, so the basis of calling it a culture area is unclear.

Among Australia’s current regional archaeologies, Attenbrow’s research must be seen as outstanding. Ever since she came into archaeology in the early 1970s, after a considerable career in business, she has been concerned almost entirely with an area of Australia no more than 150 km from the Sydney CBD. Of her 87 published and unpublished writings, more than three-quarters deal with this area. Particular foci have been the Mangrove Creek catchment and the Sydney basin and harbour. Her studies have included excavation and analysis of a range of material from archaeological sites, palaeoenvironments, and historical and ethnographic investigations. These have culminated (to date) in two outstanding works, *Sydney’s Aboriginal Past* (2002) and her re-worked Ph.D. (2004). Along the way she has also contributed extensively to environmental impact studies as both a researcher and assessor and to the study of place-names. These days, if you want to know anything about Sydney’s long-term Aboriginal history, you ask Val, as the Governor-General found out recently.

The Port Jackson Archaeological Project, begun in 1989 was, in many ways, Mangrove Creek writ large. It aimed to investigate the archaeological resources of the catchment

which feeds Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour), an area of 485 km². Divided into sub-catchments and environmental zones within these, it could not, however, randomly sample localities. The modern city of Sydney made this impossible. In this situation, the other recourse is to try to record the whole resource, and this was her strategy. From this, she could select sites for investigation which gave a wide overview of the occupation of the area and, by comparison with other similar catchments, suggest any possible skewing in her picture. The Project continues, but on the basis of its achievements so far, Attenbrow has written *Sydney's Aboriginal Past* (2002). In this encyclopaedic volume the Sydney region is more restricted than McDonald's, stretching from the city centre only as far as the major rivers and excluding their watersheds. It is nonetheless notable that both these regions continue to be defined primarily in environmental terms, rather than being based initially on archaeological materials. Nonetheless, the Port Jackson project is fulfilling the criteria needed to produce successful regional archaeology: careful chronology, defined sampling and taphonomic understanding (Attenbrow, 1991). This project has also produced an elegant challenge to the primacy of historical records. Attenbrow and Steele (1995) showed that the fish remains from a site on Port Jackson were probably obtained by the use of stationary built fish traps even though such were not recorded in the early historical records.

Is this how research should continue? Perhaps the most important outcome of Attenbrow's research is that it has been made public, in an integrated presentation. In a situation where nearly all archaeology is commercially driven, the opportunities to draw together the studies of any given area are rare. As McBryde (1986:20) noted more than two decades ago, "it limits research by limiting the range of archaeological hypotheses we can adequately test on present information." This limitation has been overcome in the Sydney area, because Attenbrow was able to draw on the massive corpus of unpublished data held by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and, as a museum-based researcher, to develop this into an overview. Her example suggests that other cities in Australia could do likewise, so that a series of regional archaeologies could bring out the differences and similarities in the country's history.

Her example will also be of value theoretically. "Regional" archaeology is based on being able to define regions. With the results of Attenbrow's and others' researches, discussion of what constitutes appropriate regional definitions should now be possible. McBryde (1986: 20) noted that "we lack... a substantial inventory of archaeological resources," but the last two decades have overcome this in many areas. Attenbrow has shown what can be done with these resources when handled from a regional viewpoint: others might now follow.

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