

11. The Past in the Present?

Archaeological Narratives and Aboriginal History

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Introduction

‘Deep Time and Deep Histories’ represents more than our ability to accurately measure time or to construct new versions of human history based on genetics and molecular biology. As such, seeking to understand the human place in nature is to undertake a significant political task.¹ For humans living in the twenty-first century, exploring these issues is central to our self-understanding and our aspirations for the future.

This review of archaeological accounts of the past has as its subject the transcendental idea of human progress, which presents human history as passing through a series of progressive stages defined by essentialist criteria. A great number of theories based on these ideas have been placed before the public over the past 200 years. However, despite differences in subject matter and emphasis, it is apparent that these are of the same basic nature and follow the same historical logic. While archaeologists are stringent critics of many of these ideas, the historical schemes they have attempted to replace them with, based on newer evidence, are often variations on the same theme. Through repetition, the newer schemes constantly reinforce the older ones.

In presenting a review of archaeological versions of human progress, the aim is to come to grips with their ideological basis and to further the process of mapping out more accurate accounts of the human story.

Historicising human variability

One of the earliest attempts to explain human variability began as a psychological rather than a historical theory. This was based on Aristotle’s ideas as transmitted through the writings of Thomas Aquinas to the Catholic Church. Aristotle considered that non-Greek peoples were ‘natural slaves’ on the grounds that, while they had the capacity to think rationally, they chose not to. He did,

¹ Huxley 1906; Mulvaney 1971b.

however, consider that Greek male children could develop a rational faculty after correct tuition. The Catholic Church in Spain grappled with these problems in trying to decide the legal position of Amerindian people. Should the Indians be considered slaves and incapable of learning, or as children, who could be denied their civic rights until they demonstrated rationality? In the event, the Church accepted that the South American Indians should be considered 'natural children' under the tutelage of the Church and Civil authorities.²

Locating ethnographic peoples in this manner fitted with the idea of the 'Ages of Man', a metaphor frequently used by classical authors. The concept transferred seamlessly into Christianity, and Augustine made complex use of it:

The earliest period of the human race, when men first began to enjoy the light, can be compared ... to the first day of creation ... We must consider this age as the infancy of the world, for the world in this instance is to be thought of as a single human being ...³

In later historical works, the secular goal of continuous human progress replaced spiritual improvement, transforming Aristotle's psychological/developmental theory into a historical one. The evolutionary historian Peter Bowler notes that the Victorians were deeply attracted to the idea that human social development paralleled the progression of an individual from the simplicity of a single cell to the complexity of a mature adult:

Once we begin thinking of the history of civilization, or of life on earth, as following the same pattern as the growing embryo, we are locked into a model in which evolution is seen as the ascent of a ladder towards ever-higher states of development.⁴

Such ideas have been applied to all ethnographic peoples and conceptualising the Australian Aborigines as children during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries was common across the scientific, religious and political spectrum.⁵ Such teleological and organic ideas have little to do with an archaeological understanding of the past. However, in incorporating growth from simple beginnings to a more complex maturity with time broken up into Ages, they form a template for the historicist theories which follow.⁶

2 Adams 1998: 141–142; Heath 2008; Pagden: 60–79; Smith 1983: 109–122.

3 Quoted in Archambault 1966: 203.

4 Bowler 1989: 10.

5 See Gsell 1955; Broome 1982: 104; Spencer 1914: 38; Staniland Wake 1872: 82.

6 Both Broome and Stanner document that these ideas had a profound impact on public policy directed towards Aboriginal people. Broome 1982; Stanner 1979 [1962]: 152–153.

A second set of influential ideas arranged human societies into a temporal sequence in terms of their economic form: hunters, pastoralists, gardeners, and finally, mercantilists.⁷ Adam Smith was the most important of the Scottish Enlightenment writers to advance such a materialist theory of human development.⁸ Smith's scheme began with an 'Age of Hunters' followed by an 'Age of Shepherds', noting:

when a society becomes numerous they would find difficulty in supporting themselves by herds and flocks. Then they would naturally turn themselves to cultivation of land and the raising of such plants and trees as produced nourishment ... And by this means they would gradually advance into the Age of Agriculture ...⁹

These speculative schemes combined *stage theory* with the idea that human history moves through a sequence of successive stages, *conjectural prehistory*, a speculative account of the past based on the logical premise that movement is from simple beginnings to a more complex present and, the *comparative method*, which used accounts of contemporary societies as both analogues for past societies and as the evidence for sequential change.¹⁰ To this list might be added the functionalist idea that the manner in which a society gained its livelihood determined its social and legal arrangements.¹¹ Although not writing within an evolutionary framework, the French political philosopher Montesquieu classified the political systems of 'nations' as belonging either to Savagery, Barbarism or Civilization. That this classification represented progressive and successive stages of development emerged only later.¹²

In 1800, Joseph Marie, Baron de Gérando (Degérando) published his *Considération sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l'observation des peuples sauvages*, which interpreted the emergence of political systems in developmental terms. Degérando gave the following advice to members of Nicholas Baudin's scientific expedition to the Southern Ocean:

The philosophical traveller, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time; he is exploring the past; every step he makes is the passage of an age. The unknown islands that he reaches are for him the cradle of human society. [They] ... recreate for us the state of our own ancestors, and the earliest history of the world.¹³

7 Burrow 1966; Bryson 1945; Meek 1976.

8 Barnard 2004.

9 Smith 1762–3 quoted in Meek 1976: 117–178.

10 Adams 1998: 29–34.

11 Meek documents the influence that the Scottish Utilitarian philosophers had on the development of Karl Marx's ideas. Meek 1954.

12 Meek 1976: 32–35; Montesquieu 1949 [1748]: 275.

13 Degérando 1969 [1800]: 63; see also Jones 1992. Fabian and Gamble observe that such theories arrange coeval societies along a scale turning space and economic form into a temporal difference. Fabian 1983; Gamble 1992.

Approaches based on technology or social evolution

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the popularity of speculative theories waned in favour of those based on physical evidence. As a result, the findings of practical science became a significant element in the creation of a universal natural history.¹⁴ It was in this milieu that CJ Thomsen, working at the Danish National Museum in 1819, reorganised the collections in terms of the Ages of Stone, Bronze and Iron – a set of generalisations about successive developments in Danish prehistory which he presented to museum visitors.¹⁵

Historians of archaeology suggest that Thomsen's Three Ages was an empirically based scheme that relied on the evidence placed before him.¹⁶ In her analysis of the Three Ages, Judith Rodden, however, argues that the Three Ages closely paralleled approaches used by the Utilitarian philosophers as it was based on the notion of ideal or essential types, it used comparative ethnography as an analogue for prehistoric behaviour and it reflected an underlying belief that change in the human past was directional, occurring as a series of technological stages through time, each defined in terms of artefact types.¹⁷

Thomsen's scheme was the first of many to make use of the data of archaeology to create a sequential account of human history based on changes in technology. A series of further elaborations followed. John Lubbock, author of the influential *Prehistoric Times*, divided the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods,¹⁸ further modified when the anthropologist Hodder Westropp inserted the Mesolithic, or advanced hunting era, between the two, using microlithic stone tools as the criteria.¹⁹ In addition, there was the division of the Palaeolithic into Lower, Middle and Upper Palaeolithic divisions (Table 11.1), and the French Upper Palaeolithic into the cultural sequence Châtelpéronian, Aurignacian, Gravettian, Solutrean and Magdalenian, each defined on the basis of particular tool types.²⁰

14 Mokyř 2009; Yeo 2003.

15 Thomsen's usage included both 'Age of Stone' and 'Stone Age' for his earliest period. The formulation 'Age of Stone' invokes a sense of a *World of Stone*, somewhat different in meaning to the contemporary usage of 'Stone Age' (for geological use of the term 'World' see Rudwick 1995). Thomsen 1848: 64–69.

16 Daniel 1943: 16; Gräsland 1987: 20–21, 27–28.

17 In a letter in 1825, Thomsen compared the Stone Age of Europe with the 'Wild North Americans' noting 'They were war-like, lived in the forest, [and] were not acquainted with metals (or only sparingly so)...' (quoted in Rodden 1981: 58). See also Thomsen 1848: 64. Klindt-Jensen also quotes Thomsen as noting that triangular Danish arrow points were quite like those used by the 'savage North American Indians'. Rodden 1981: 51–68; Klindt-Jensen 1981: 15.

18 Palaeolithic is glossed as the Old Stone Age and the Neolithic as the New Stone Age. The older terms were considered to parallel geological usage, for example, the Pleistocene. Lubbock 1865: 2–3; Daniel 1978: 125–126, 251.

19 Westropp 1872: xxiii.

20 Chazan 1995: 462–463; Clark 1969: 51; Daniel 1978: 125; De Mortillet 1872.

Table 11.1: Palaeolithic chronology based on de Mortillet (1872)

Epoque	Industry	Age
Magdélien, Epoque de la Madeleine	Stone blades and bone points	Upper Palaeolithic
Solutréen, Epoque de Solutré	Laurel leaf points, bifaces	Upper Palaeolithic
Moustérien, Epoque de Moustiers	Mousterian points and scrapers	Middle Palaeolithic
Acheuléen, Epoque du Saint Acheul	Handaxes	Lower Palaeolithic

Source: After de Mortillet 1872.

The various ideas discussed above were brought together by Lewis Henry Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877). Morgan demonstrated human progress by combining Montesquieu's terminology 'Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization' with information about economy, technology and social relations.²¹ He presented a scheme of a progression of stages, each divided into lower, middle and upper parts. Thus for Morgan, humans moved from Savagery to the lower stage of Barbarism when they began to make pottery. A middle stage came with the domestication of animals and plants and the final stage of Barbarism saw the introduction of iron smelting.²² Morgan considered that the Australian Aborigines remained at the stage of 'middle Savagery', while he believed there were no contemporary examples of 'lower Savagery', which he termed 'the infancy of the human race'.²³ Furthermore, Morgan was explicit about the connection between geological periods and the use of uniformitarian principles to document human progress through the classification of contemporary tribal peoples. He explained:

Like the successive geological formations, the tribes of mankind may be arranged according to their relative conditions, into successive strata. When thus arranged, they reveal with some degree of certainty the entire range of human progress from savagery to civilization.²⁴

Through Marx, Morgan's view of human history had a direct influence on the archaeology of V Gordon Childe.²⁵

21 Hiatt provides a detailed analysis of evolutionary theories concerned with social relationships as they related to Australian Aboriginal people. Hiatt 1996.

22 Morgan 1877: 10–13.

23 Morgan 1877: 10, 12.

24 Morgan 1877: 422, quoted in Keen 2000.

25 Childe states that he took Morgan's categories from Marx, as they were compatible with the functionalist idea that the economy was determinative of social relations. Engels used his Morgan's *Ancient Society* as the basis of essay 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State'. Engels 1972 [1884]; Childe 1958.

Childe's *What Happened in History*

The English-trained Australian archaeologist Gordon Childe was largely responsible for the development of culture-historical archaeology, one of the major archaeological approaches of the first half of the twentieth century. Childe worked at two levels. The first was the definition of individual cultures and culture sequences based on assemblages of artefact types. Childe thought artefacts in a culture system were analogous to words in a language, where similarities and differences allowed relationships to be traced through time and space. It was assumed that an archaeologically defined culture was representative of 'a people' who resided within a defined territory. Commenting on Childe's archaeological theories, Andrew Sherratt notes their Romantic basis whereby cultural ancestry and relationships follow the form of a genealogical tree.²⁶

Childe's second level is found in his general historical works, in which he presents a universal history demonstrating development through time from Palaeolithic beginnings to the end of the Iron Age.²⁷ This step required abstracting essential elements, such as technology, economy or settlement form from individual archaeological cultures, and grouping these into higher order entities, ages or stages without reference to genetic relationships. The narrative structure of his general historical works presented a progressive sequence of technological stages punctuated by 'revolutions'.²⁸ When it came to creating a framework for these stages however, Childe fell back on ideas put forward by Thomsen, Lubbock and Morgan.²⁹ In *Man Makes Himself* (1936), Childe presented his materialist ideas in terms of successive economic stages beginning with Food Gatherers, the Neolithic Revolution, and the Urban Revolution, later reformulating these stages as Palaeolithic Savagery, Neolithic Barbarism, Bronze Age Civilization, and finally, The Iron Age.³⁰ Childe considered that combining them in this manner represented 'a useful scaffolding'.³¹ Through the use of these ideas, Childe was able to present a historical account that was immediately familiar to his readers.³²

26 Greene documents that Childe projected ideas about the Industrial Revolution onto the past, firstly in terms of the Urban Revolution and later the Neolithic Revolution. Childe was careful to state that these represented processes rather than events. The terminology, however, took on a life of its own. Sherratt 1989: 165–168; Greene 1999.

27 Allen, 2000: 109–111.

28 Greene: 97–109.

29 Allen 2000: 109–111; Childe 1958: 72.

30 Childe 1954 [1942].

31 Childe 1956a: 93.

32 Childe exemplified Marx's dictum that at the moment of creating a new version of history, we disguise the fact by conjuring up 'the spirits of the past'. Childe was also returning to an evolutionary view of history, one which had lost favour during the 1920s and 1930s. Grahame Clark was critical of Childe's later books and considered that he contributed little of importance to archaeology after 1930 (but for an opposing view see Thomas 1982). Clark 1976: 3; Marx 1926; Piggott 1958; Sherratt 1989: 178–182.

While his Stages or Ages followed the same sequential order, Childe warned that this did not mean that they were everywhere synchronic.

The distinctive assemblages of tools have been shown stratigraphically to follow one another in the same order wherever they occur. But the archaeologist is fortunate in having to hand independent time scales with which to compare each local sequence. So he has come reluctantly ... to realise that his Ages are in fact not everywhere contemporary; they are just homotaxial and might therefore more legitimately be called Stages.³³

Australian Aboriginal people and culture presented an example. Childe accepted that their gathering economy corresponded with the Palaeolithic period and with Morgan's Savagery, noting that the Old Stone Age lasted until the present in Central Australia, 'at least in economic terms'.³⁴ On the other hand, Childe warned against thinking that any savage tribe was primitive, unchanging or unthinking.³⁵

Childe was too good a historian to write a Whig history of the world. He thought that the historical process could be disorderly and was neither automatic nor inevitable, that the outcome lay in our own hands.³⁶ Childe's *What Happened in History* was written at the height of World War Two, partly to provide readers with a lesson of hope during a time of despondency about the future:

Progress is real if discontinuous. The upward curve resolves itself into a series of troughs and crests. But ... no trough ever declines to the low level of the preceding one; each crest out-tops its last precursor.³⁷

The weakness of versions of history organised in stages lies in the fact that all change has to occur in that abstract moment when one stage shifts to the next.³⁸ This leaves the process of change under-theorised and amenable to either an evolutionary or a particularist understanding of history. Most archaeologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries invoked both evolutionary and particularist approaches, arguing that while overall human progress might be assumed, movement from one culture to another, or from one stage to the next, could be abrupt, attributable to ethnic replacement, the diffusion of ideas

33 Childe 1944: 7. Homotaxial relates to relative position in a geological sequence rather being contemporaneous, thus allowing that the Stone Age might continue in some places into the twentieth century.

34 Childe 1936: 43; Childe 1954 [1942]: 24.

35 Childe 1936: 46–47.

36 Childe 1947: 60, 65–67; Childe 1956a: 164–165.

37 Childe 1954 [1942]: 282.

38 Groube 1967.

or trade, or individual inventions stimulated by biological or environmental change.³⁹ This understanding of history survived the challenge of Darwinian thought almost unscathed.⁴⁰

The deep history emerging in these accounts creates its own sense of time, and as a result, could equally fit Biblical or geological time frames. Prior to the discovery of radiocarbon dating, archaeologists were forced to connect their sequences with the chronologies of Egypt or the Middle East, or to use differing proportions of artefacts (seriation), or to make assumptions based on artefact styles in order to date their sites.⁴¹ There was, however, a chronological blind spot between the Pleistocene dating of geological fossils and the emergence of written records and dynastic lists; a period of prehistory that is highly significant as it was during this time that the domestication of plants and animals, the advent of metallurgy and the beginnings of urban settlement took place.

The radiocarbon revolution

The advent of radiocarbon dating in 1949 provided a dating mechanism independent of artefacts and their typology.⁴² Since that time, the archaeologist's arsenal has been augmented by an increasing range of chronological methods based on isotopic and luminescence dating techniques.⁴³ This has freed archaeology from the necessity to date sites through artefact types, and it ultimately allowed archaeology to move beyond culture-history to approaches that are less taxonomic in nature.⁴⁴

Given our enhanced ability to date the material evidence of archaeology plus the sophisticated methods of recovery and analysis now available, it might be considered that progressive staged versions of a universal human history should have collapsed under the weight of critical evidence arraigned against them. Two examples will demonstrate, however, that this has not been the case.

There continues to be a debate as to whether the Neolithic represented a rapid and abrupt shift, or alternatively, the slow emergence of a range of food procurement techniques. Smith argues against the concept of a 'Neolithic Revolution', noting that the apparently sharp boundary between hunting-gathering and agriculture is a construct, produced by reclassifying anomalous societies as 'Complex

39 Breuil 1912: 174; Chazan 1995: 451–452; Clark 1976: 15; Daniel 1978: 45; Murray 2007: 245.

40 Bowler 1988; Bowler 1989: 175–219; Freeland 1983.

41 Childe 1956a: 57–83.

42 Arnold and Libby 1949; Renfrew 1976 [1973].

43 Macdougall 2008; Roberts 1997.

44 Hodder 1991.

hunter-gatherers' or 'Incipient agriculturalists'.⁴⁵ Smith does not entirely avoid the pitfall of considering low-level food production as an intermediate phase between hunting and gathering and agriculture. His emphasis, however, is on the variability of human economic responses to individual circumstances. Harris has similarly modified the concept of a Neolithic Revolution seeking to replace it with an ecological understanding of human–plant interactions across a broad spectrum of occurrences.⁴⁶

The second case involves Grahame Clark's proposal that stone tool technology could be divided into a succession of modes dating from the Lower Palaeolithic to the Mesolithic.⁴⁷ Clark, and more recently Foley, argue that the shift from one mode to another is associated with progressive changes in hominin speciation and cognition.⁴⁸ Clark's sequence of modes is shown in Table 11.2 below. Within this scheme, artefacts act as typological and staged markers, blades in the case of the Upper Palaeolithic and microliths for the Mesolithic, just as polished stone axes and pottery were previously taken to be indicators of the Neolithic.

Table 11.2: Modes of stone tool technology

Mode	Technology	Dating and Association
Mode 5	Microliths	Mesolithic, modern <i>Homo sapiens</i>
Mode 4	Blades	Upper Palaeolithic, modern <i>Homo sapiens</i>
Mode 3	Levalloisian prepared core technology	Middle Palaeolithic, Neanderthals and archaic <i>Homo sapiens</i>
Mode 2	Acheulian handaxes	Lower Palaeolithic, <i>Homo erectus</i>
Mode 1	Oldowan – cobble tools and simple flakes	Lower Palaeolithic, Australopithecus and early <i>Homo sp.</i> ,

Source: After Foley 1987.

This model of progressive techno-evolutionary development was linked to the 'Human Revolution', the idea that many aspects of modern human behaviour, including developed cognition and symbolic communication, originated in Europe with the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition. Palaeoanthropologists Sally McBrearty and Alison Brooks have challenged this idea, documenting how the types defining the European Upper Palaeolithic sequence can be found at earlier dates in Africa during the Middle Stone Age (MSA).⁴⁹ They argue that

45 Smith 2001.

46 Harris 1990: 18.

47 Clark 1969.

48 Foley 1987.

49 Foley now accepts that most of the defining elements of Modes 4 and 5 developed in Africa during the Mode 3/MSA period. McBrearty and Brooks 2000; Foley and Lahr 1997.

the classic European sequence, against which other tool making traditions have been compared, is anomalous, being the result of a discontinuous archaeological record in the remote *cul de sac* of Pleistocene Western Europe.⁵⁰

Attempts to locate Australian Aboriginal stone technologies within this modal sequence have proven difficult, as Australian technologies equally represent aspects of both Mode 1 and Mode 3 technologies.⁵¹ A number of archaeologists now argue that it is a mistake to attempt to measure human cultural development in terms of stone tools.⁵²

The 'Out of Africa' hypothesis and increased knowledge of the African Middle and Late Stone Ages have undermined much of the archaeological understanding of the origins of modern *Homo sapiens*. This compels us to reconsider afresh the manner in which the past has been conceptualised as a series of progressive stages. It is now time to turn our attention more directly to Australian archaeology.

Historicising the Australian past

Historical schemes about Indigenous peoples predate both knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and the archaeological discovery of deep time, having previously been applied to both North and South American Indians, and to different groups of Africans. However, once the Australians, and especially the Tasmanians, were discovered they were taken as representatives of primordial man by theorists of human development.⁵³

In the years following the development of anthropology and archaeology in Europe, a number of attempts were made to locate the Australian Aborigines within the frameworks discussed above. The British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor compared the Australians with Palaeolithic peoples, referring to them as the 'lowest savages'.⁵⁴ In his paper 'On the Tasmanians as Representatives of Palaeolithic Man', he observed technical similarities between Tasmanian Aboriginal stone artefacts and those recovered from Le Moustier in the Dordogne,⁵⁵ arguing that stone tool types indicated that the Tasmanians were:

living representatives of the early Stone Age, left behind in industrial development even by the ancient tribes of the Somme and the Ouse ... the condition of modern savages illustrates the condition of ancient stone

50 McBrearty and Brooks 2000: 454.

51 Foley and Lahr 1997: 18, 20, 24; Brumm and Moore 2005: 162.

52 Gamble 1995: 179; Oppenheimer 2003: 97; White 1977.

53 Mulvaney 1958: 297.

54 Tylor 1865: 136–138, 363.

55 Tylor 1894: 147.

age peoples, representatives of a stage of culture at once early in date and low in degree. The Tasmanian specimens and records now place us in full view of the state of a people in the Palaeolithic stage, who may have lasted on their remote and unvisited home from the distant ages when rudely chipped stones grasped in the hand were still the best implements of mankind.⁵⁶

In his book *Ancient Hunters and Their Modern Representatives*, Sollas placed the Tasmanians at the very dawn of history, a Palaeolithic, even 'eolithic' race, considering them to be an autochthonous primitive people. They were thought to have survived in isolation on the island of Tasmania – having been destroyed, driven from or absorbed on the Australian mainland by the later arrival of Australian Aborigines.⁵⁷ While he considered that the Australians had made substantial cultural advances compared to the Neanderthals, Sollas still described the Australians as 'the Mousterians of the Antipodes'.⁵⁸ An argument followed as to whether the Tasmanians and Australian Aborigines represented either a Middle or Upper Palaeolithic technological stage, that is, whether they should be considered archaic Mousterians or members of modern *Homo sapiens*?⁵⁹

By 1953, Frederick McCarthy could confidently state 'there is no such thing in Australia as distinct stages of culture or time periods corresponding to the Eolithic, Palaeolithic or Neolithic'.⁶⁰ Our confidence in his finding, however, is shaken a few lines later, when McCarthy notes:

The most archaic traces of culture in Australia comprise a few Palaeolithic stone-working techniques and types ... Another early relationship is that of pebble-choppers chipped on one side ... They belong to the late Pleistocene and Mesolithic periods between five and ten thousand years ago.⁶¹

A survey of anthropological and archaeological books published during the twentieth century reveals that the term 'Stone Age' was commonly used to describe contemporary Australian Aboriginal peoples. Such works included *The Stone Age Men of Australia*, *Back in the Stone Age: The Natives of Central Australia*; *Exploring Stone Age Arnhem Land*; *Stone-Age Craftsmen: Stone Tools and Camping Places of the Australian Aborigines*; *Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians*; and most recently, *Stone Age Economics*.⁶²

56 Tylor 1894: 148–149, 152.

57 Sollas 1911: 85.

58 Sollas 1991: 170, 207.

59 Balfour 1926.

60 McCarthy 1953: 246.

61 McCarthy 1953: 249.

62 British Pathé 1933; Chewings 1937; Mountford 1949; Mitchell 1949; Sharp 1952; Sahlins 1974.

In many cases, the term 'Stone Age' was used to gain a reader's attention, much as Karl Lumholtz (1889) used the title *Among Cannibals*. However, there was also a clear relationship between title and content in many of these books. The pre-eminent student of Australian Aboriginal culture in the early twentieth century, W Baldwin Spencer, in the Preface of *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*, claimed it was possible in Australia to study human beings 'that still remain on the cultural level of men of the Stone Age'.⁶³

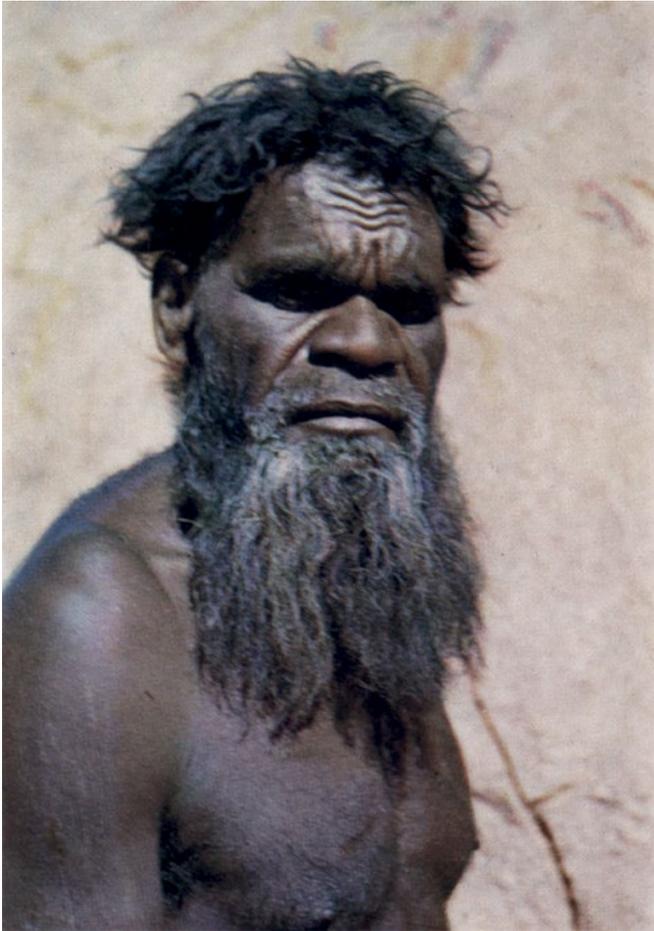


Figure 11.1: A fine portrait of an Aboriginal man, probably from central Australia by Charles P Mountford, which appeared as the frontispiece to Ion Idriess's book *Our Living Stone Age* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963) with the caption 'Stone Age Man'.

Source: State Library of South Australia.

63 Spencer and Gillen 1927. Attwood argues that such statements supported anthropology's bid for legitimacy and he reiterates Fabian's point that the denial of coevalness plays a significant role in maintaining colonial relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the white colonists. Attwood 1996; Fabian 1983: 31–34.

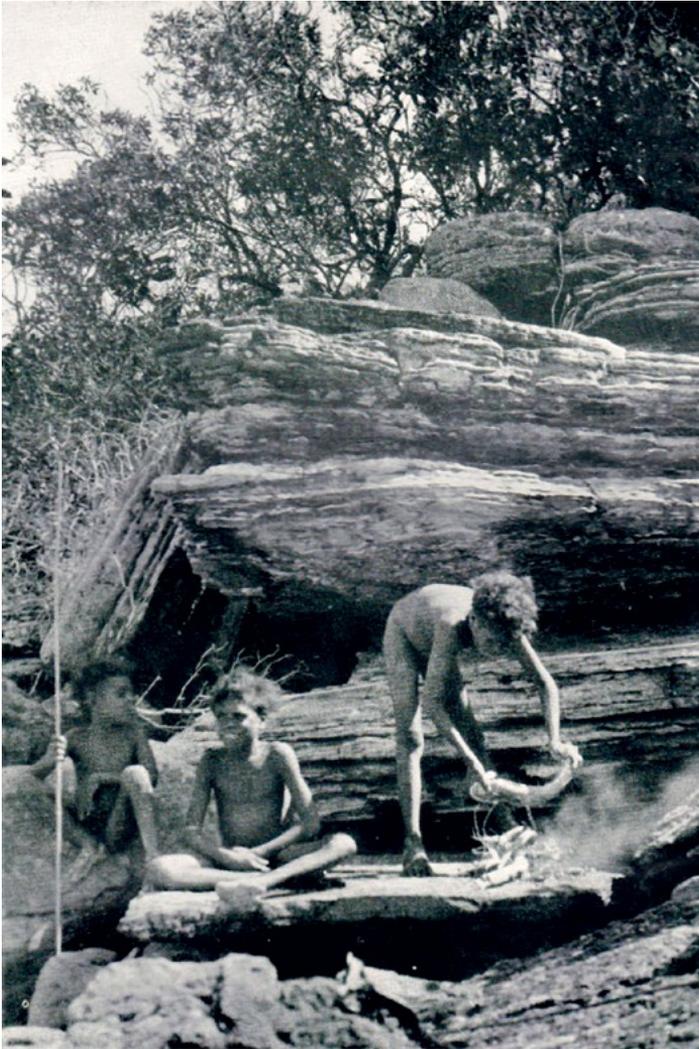


Figure 11.2: A photograph appearing in Charles Barrett's *Coast of Adventure* (Robertson and Mullens, 1941) showing some boys preparing a lunchtime meal and captioned in the original 'Primitive boys prepare a primitive meal on Wessel Island'.

Source: Photograph by Charles Leslie Barrett in *Coast of Adventure*.

The essentialist notion that Australian Aboriginal people inhabited the Stone Age remained commonplace. In his assessment of Australian archaeology, *The Stone Age of Australia* (1961), John Mulvaney noted: 'In 1788, Australia emerged from a stone age society of hunters and gatherers into the era of the Industrial revolution.'⁶⁴ Similarly, Peterson in his 'Ethno-archaeology in the

⁶⁴ Mulvaney 1961b: 57.

Australian Iron Age' suggests that the years between 1939 and 1976 'saw the end of the Stone Age in Australia: [as] everywhere stone tools have been replaced by those of iron'.⁶⁵

There is a considerable archaeological literature criticising the idea that Australian Aboriginal people in any way represented Palaeolithic survivals or Stone Age peoples.⁶⁶ However, it is difficult for archaeologists to conceive of the past outside the Three Age system.⁶⁷ Archaeologist Clive Gamble similarly observes, 'Today's prehistorians reject progress as a guiding principle, but continue to follow the agenda into human origins ... set over 150 years ago'.⁶⁸

The Neolithic problem

There are two dimensions to the 'Neolithic Problem' in Australian archaeology. The first involves attempting to explain why Australian Aborigines had not, in this formulation, 'achieved' agriculture.⁶⁹ The second attempts to account for the presence of polished stone axes in Australia. Polished stone was the defining artefact of 'Neolithic' gardeners, yet the Australians were clearly hunters and gatherers. The latter problem, however, only emerges when archaeologists approach stone artefacts from an essentialist point of view, as the defining criteria of a stage of human development.

Tylor, previously discussed in reference to the Tasmanian question, argued the presence of stone axes was evidence for cultural degeneration.⁷⁰ On the other hand, he explained the absence of hafted tools, including axes, from Tasmania in terms of isolation and of stalled development, observing 'in their remote corner of the globe they have gone on little changed from early ages'.⁷¹ The majority opinion was that the Australians had obtained their axes through external contacts, from Neolithic New Guineans, Oceanic peoples or through a migratory wave of settlers.⁷² The most extreme view was that of WJ Perry, who believed that polished stone axes had come from Carthage to Australia aboard Egyptian triremes.⁷³

65 Peterson 1976: 265.

66 Mulvaney 1961b: 5–107.

67 Rowley-Conwy 2007: 3.

68 Gamble 1995: 3, 244.

69 Allen 1974; White 1971.

70 Tylor 1865: 186.

71 Tylor 1894: 148.

72 Heine-Geldern 1932 quoted in Skinner 1957: 206; McCarthy 1953: 246; Sollas 1911: 179, 209.

73 Perry 1923: 99, 501–502.

Summarising the position, Mulvaney pointed to the different contexts of axe use in Australia and Melanesia, that edge-grinding was the sole 'Neolithic' component of Aboriginal culture and concluded their presence represented a recent addition, one that had 'diffused to Australia from New Guinea or other islands to the north'.⁷⁴

Similar problems involved explanations for the presence of small stone spear points and microliths in Australia. For example, small, leaf-shaped stone points are a hallmark of the Upper Palaeolithic Solutrean culture in Europe, while microliths and various other backed implements first appear in Europe during the European Mesolithic and are definitional for this period.⁷⁵ Because of their status as markers of progress in the European sequence, their presence in Australia has been taken to indicate Aboriginal advancement to a higher level of technical production and social organisation.

That polished axes, small stone points and microliths might be associated with hafted tools (with a handle), together with the fact that the Tasmanians only used hand-held tools, led John Mulvaney to divide the Australian archaeological record into two phases: a *nonhafted phase* followed by a *hafted phase*.⁷⁶ He argued that the hafted phase, which began at about 5,000 years BP, represented a major shift in technical ability and initiated an accelerated pace of change in Australia.⁷⁷

The discovery of Pleistocene axes with hafting grooves in contexts dating back to 35,000 years BP in northern Australia provoked serious questioning of the hafted phase concept.⁷⁸ Conceptually, however, the sequence proposed to supersede it, 'The Australian core tool and scraper tradition' followed by the 'Australian small tool tradition' used the same evidence and replaced the hafted/non-hafted sequence in everything but name (Table 11.3).⁷⁹ Based on the presence of new types of stone artefacts post 5,000 years BP in Australia, Mulvaney reiterated his belief that there were at least two widespread and major technological stages in prehistoric Australia and he, along with a number of authors, continue to argue that the presence of Pleistocene axes in northern Australia does not invalidate the 'Hafted Phase' concept.⁸⁰

74 Mulvaney 1961b: 93.

75 Phillips 1981: 88–90, 137–141.

76 Mulvaney 1966; Mulvaney and Joyce 1965: 192–193.

77 Mulvaney 1966: 89–90, 93.

78 Geneste et al. 2011; Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 220–221; White 1967.

79 Bowler et al. 1970; Gould 1973: 18–20.

80 Mulvaney 1971a: 374; Gould 1973: 19; Smith 2013: 289.

Table 11.3: Technological stages proposed for Australia

Defining artefacts	Technological stages, proposed by Mulvaney 1966	Technological stages, proposed by Jones and Allen in Bowler et al. 1970; Gould 1973
Backed artefacts, polished stone axes	Hafted Phase	Small Tool Tradition
Core tools, flakes, scrapers	Non-hafted Phase	Core Tool and Scraper Tradition

Source: Mulvaney 1966; Jones and Allen in Bowler et al. 1970; Gould 1973.

While the presence of Pleistocene axes is discounted in some contexts, in others they are given a prominence beyond their technical significance. Firstly, there are claims that the Australians either ‘invented’ edge grinding, or at least that they were one of the first people in the world to adopt the process.⁸¹ Secondly, it is claimed that the manufacture and use of polished stone artefacts involved a higher investment of labour and more complex relations of production than is evidenced by the flaked artefacts that make up the bulk of the Australian archaeological record.⁸² Polishing stone and attaching handles are techniques that are likely to have a technical explanation. Within current understanding of Australian archaeology, it does not necessarily follow that polished axes and microliths should be treated as indicators of a stage of human advancement as they have been elsewhere in the world.⁸³

The Intensification debate

In 1953, Joseph Birdsell, an American palaeoanthropologist, set out a number of propositions concerning Australian Aboriginal populations which have proved to be very influential. Firstly, that Aboriginal hunter-gatherers were relatively uniform both in their material culture and the efficiency with which they utilised their environment. Secondly, that the population of inland tribes was proportional to the rainfall. Thirdly, that the population densities of Australian tribes were rigorously subject to environmental determinism. And, finally, Aboriginal populations were in equilibrium with their environment.

81 Diamond 1997: 297; Geneste et al. 2011: 11–12.

82 Sutton locates the claims of Morwood and Trezise as a part of an earlier ‘proto-intensification’ debate which argued that the Australians were moving from an expedient technology associated with a foraging economy to a curated technology associated with collecting. Sutton 1990: 102; Balme et al. 2009: 197; Geneste et al. 2011: 10; Morwood and Trezise 1989: 82.

83 Hiscock 2008.

A number of Australian archaeologists were dissatisfied with this approach, which appeared to lock Australian hunter-gatherers into an environmental determinacy without the possibility of change due to Aboriginal agency or inventiveness.⁸⁴ In a series of articles published in the 1980s, a young Australian archaeologist, Harry Lourandos, argued that the division between hunter-gatherers and food producers was overdrawn, and that a number of Mid to Late Holocene changes in the Australian archaeological record was evidence of 'Intensification', an increase in the complexity of Aboriginal social arrangements, which moved Aboriginal societies in the direction of agriculture. Most controversially, Lourandos argued that such changes were the result, not of environmental circumstances, but of humanly induced changes in the social relations of production.⁸⁵

Lourandos placed these shifts within a progressive trajectory believing that the move towards higher levels of resource use and social complexity was 'nipped in the bud by the coming of the Europeans', though elsewhere he denied he was suggesting that Australian hunter-gatherers were 'one step away' from food production.⁸⁶

The evidence in favour of the increased complexity argument was drawn from multiple sources and regions in Australia. When looked at in finer detail, most instances of directional or cumulative change turned out to be either a product of the manner in which the data was analysed, or else, reflected short-term adjustments to local conditions.⁸⁷ Many archaeologists considered the changes Lourandos was talking about represented technical adjustments or adaptations that were compatible with a degree of environmental determinism rather than a shift towards more complex relations of production.⁸⁸ Lourandos' arguments failed to convince on empirical grounds and Australian archaeology returned to the status quo, where Aboriginal populations, technology and social complexity were considered to be in balance with the prevailing environmental conditions.

84 Thomas 1982.

85 Lourandos 1980, 1983, 1985, 1988. Bowdler 1981: 109–110 puts forward a similar argument.

86 Lourandos 1983: 92; Lourandos 1980: 258.

87 Bird and Frankel 1991; Hiscock 2008: 197–198.

88 Beaton 1983: 94–97.

'Out of Africa' and Australian Aboriginal history

The 'Out of Africa' hypothesis and the development of new theories regarding anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* and the emergence of 'modernity' has engendered a reassessment of how and when Aboriginal people moved from Africa to Australia, the nature of the material culture they brought with them, and the changes that took place subsequent to arrival to Sahul.

Studies of the distribution of mtDNA and Y Chromosome lineages of human populations suggest the Australians were a part of the earliest wave of modern *Homo sapiens* to leave Africa, making a rapid transit along the 'Southern Arc' route, where multiple colonising groups utilised boats to cross the water gaps between Sunda and Sahul.⁸⁹ This has stimulated a debate about whether Australian Aborigines, as anatomically modern humans, were also materially modern before they left Africa. There is, as yet, little consensus on this issue. Two camps have emerged.

The first argues that the early presence of art and complex tools, the rapidity of the move to Australia and the possession of boats suggests that complex information exchange systems and symbolic conceptualisation were present from the time the Aborigines made their first steps towards Australia.⁹⁰ The second view is that major changes in the Australian archaeological record occurred after arrival during the Mid Holocene, paralleling the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition in Europe.⁹¹ This view returns us to the vision of Aboriginal people making slow but upward progress *after* arrival. Neither camp can claim a decisive victory as the archaeological record of Pleistocene Australia is marked by inadequate sampling and poor preservation.⁹²

The Out of Africa debate allows us to reconsider many of the ideas discussed in this chapter and to work towards new solutions for old problems. However, the genetic findings also have the potential to return us to older modes of thought without resolving the ideological implications involved. Rasmussen and colleagues suggest that contemporary Aboriginal Australians are:

89 Oppenheimer 2003: 2–13; van Holst Pellekaan 2011; Redd and Stoneking 1999.

90 Balme et al. 2009: 59–68.

91 Brumm and Moore 2005.

92 Langley et al. 2011; McBrearty and Brooks 2000.

the direct descendants from the first humans to be found in Australia, dating to ~50,000 years B.P. This means that Aboriginal Australians likely have one of the oldest continuous population histories outside sub-Saharan Africa today.⁹³

However, the conservativeness of Aboriginal genetic lineages should not be interpreted as supporting the case for the conservativeness of Aboriginal cultural traditions.

Primacy, continuity and antiquity are aspects of the human story that deserve to be highly valued. On the other hand, isolation, an underdeveloped technology and continuity from the earliest emergence of human culture are ideas which have been used to place Australian Aboriginal people on the lowest rung of the ladder of progress. In the context of colonial relationships in Australia, these findings present the danger that the 50,000 years of Aboriginal *change* will be lost sight of.

Conclusion

Over the past 100 years, Australian archaeologists have struggled to come to terms with the archaeological record and to understand the Aboriginal past in its own terms. Part of this struggle has consisted of unsuccessful attempts to apply the findings of European archaeology to the Australian situation. Even where distinctive ideas and terminologies have been applied, such as the concept of hafting, the intensification debate, or documenting movement towards agriculture, they have for the most part replicated the form, if not the content, of the imported approaches. In seeking to demonstrate that the Aboriginal past was dynamic and changing, Australian archaeologists have been on the side of the angels, creating a historical account of the past that was not prejudicial to Aboriginal people. But in giving these changes a linear direction, organising their data into stages and treating artefacts in an essentialist manner, they have left the door open for a return to theories that are demonstrably inadequate.

In 1997, Jared Diamond described the Australians as ‘Stone Age nomadic hunter-gatherers’ and posed the question, ‘Why did the human societies of ... Greater Australia remain so “backward”?’⁹⁴ Tylor asked a similar question a century earlier and Diamond’s answer is Tylorian in its scope, noting that isolation, a poor environment and a low population means that the Australians were ‘left behind’ and, in their isolation their technology regressed.⁹⁵ Diamond is writing

93 Rasmussen et al. 2011: 95; Hudjashov et al. 2007: 8729.

94 Diamond 1997: 298, 316.

95 Diamond 1997: 308–311.

in a populist mode. However, similar terminology continues to be used in both the popular press and the adventurist offerings of tourist brochures. The point is not one of political correctness but rather that a narrative based on concepts of staged history, differential temporal dimensions and the idea of an evolutionary progression from the prehistoric world to the modern state, has entered deeply into the language.

Popular use of terms such as Stone Age, Palaeolithic, Prehistory, Prehistoric and Hunter-Gatherer gained their original meanings during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The archaeologist's dilemma lies in the fact that they continue to use the same terms but argue that these have new meanings. The rub, however, is the singular lack of success archaeologists have had in convincing the public to accept new and technical meanings for long familiar terms. Archaeology cannot easily free itself from concepts which represent a nineteenth-century metaphysic and *episteme*.⁹⁶ In claiming that his stages were 'Homotaxial', Childe illustrates the chronological confusion that arises from mixing archaeological instances with ethnographic observations of contemporary peoples.⁹⁷ Seen in essentialist terms, the continued use of stone tools by Australian Aboriginal people qualified them as a Stone Age people.⁹⁸ Similarly, the classification of their lithic technology as Mode 1 or Mode 3 places them at the lower end of the sequence of human technological development.⁹⁹ Yet Australian Aboriginal use of stone tools is hardly definitive of their culture – a fact that stimulated Mulvaney to remark: 'For a stone age people, the Otway aborigines were singularly loathe to fashion stone implements.'¹⁰⁰

No Australian archaeologist would consider that use of the term 'hunter-gatherer' implies substantive continuity from the deep past. However, the term ambiguously straddles both the period when hunting and gathering was a universal mode of economy and the ethnographic present. At the root of this problem is the conception of history as a series of progressive steps, where hunting and gathering takes on an essentialist meaning, locking the Aboriginal past and present into a continuous temporal dimension. Rather than illustrating the application of uniformitarian principles to understanding the past, this represents the projection of an archaeological understanding onto extant peoples. Apart from the scale of social units and the necessity for mobility, the degree to which hunting and gathering should be considered definitive of Aboriginal society can also be questioned. Within the Australian context, a false distinction is drawn between the simplicity of hunting and gathering

96 Clarke 1973: 14; McNiven and Russell 2005: 218–222; Preucel and Mrozowski 2010: 18–19; Rowe 1962; Shryock and Smail 2011: 44–45; Taylor 2008: 13–14.

97 Childe 1944: 7.

98 Childe 1936: 43; Childe 1954 [1942]: 24.

99 Foley and Lahr 1997: 18, 20, 24.

100 Holdaway and Douglass 2012; Mulvaney 1961a: 11.

as an economic system and the complexity of Aboriginal social and ritual life – a separation of the technical economy from relations of production.¹⁰¹ Given these ambiguities, archaeologists question whether ‘hunter-gatherer’ is a meaningful term, one which places unlike societies with distinctive histories within a single, historically determined category.¹⁰²

Towards the end of his book *Society and Knowledge*, Gordon Childe observed that archaeology did not ‘increase the production of guns or butter’ and hence questioned its ultimate usefulness to society.¹⁰³ This is an interesting comment from an archaeologist who stressed that knowledge was socially constructed, and who was a leading figure opposing the Nazi use of archaeology for ideological purposes.¹⁰⁴

Nineteenth-century ideas and historical schemes criticised above are profoundly ideological. They continue to support a hierarchy of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Australia. In these theories, the nature of these hierarchical relations is portrayed as natural, the outcome of a compelling conceptualisation of history where European Australians drape the mantle of progress and modernity on their own shoulders and give Aboriginal people the burden of ‘catching up’. Aboriginal people have rightly expressed outrage at these ideas.¹⁰⁵

Escaping the ideological baggage of our colonial past represents a daunting task. Anthropologists have long attempted to confront the biological essentialism represented by the term ‘race’. The archaeological task of creating new understandings of human history will prove equally difficult. However, if we are to remain true to our discipline and its responsibilities, challenging the essentialisms of the past is a task that must be undertaken.

Andrew Shryock and Daniel Smail argue that to comprehend the immensity of human time and its dynamic of change, we need new frameworks based on kinshipping, webs, trees, fractals, spirals, extensions and scalar integration.¹⁰⁶ Through the recognition that material changes through time reflect multiple processes and adjustments, Australian archaeologists are moving towards new understandings of the past. Some of these are directional and cumulative, others are non-linear, all, however, are filtered through environmental changes and population responses.¹⁰⁷

101 Jones 1990; Sahlins 1974.

102 Hamilton 1982; Head 2000; Panter-Brick et al. 2001.

103 Childe 1956b: 127.

104 Childe 1933: 410.

105 Gilbert 1977: 194, 268, 301; Langford 1983.

106 Shryock and Smail 2011: 119.

107 Hiscock 2008; Holdaway and Douglass 2012; Smith 2013.

In colonising this continent 50,000 years ago, Aboriginal people opened the chapter of human history in Australia. In tending the light of human culture in Australia and creatively responding to the difficult times which followed, they fulfilled all the requirements we could ask of any people. I remain optimistic that we can arrive at a new history of our human world – one that accepts that *all* twenty-first century human cultures are exactly the same age. And where every history is one of continuities and changes. If humans have progressed, then this is the result of the labour of all individuals, all human societies, all times and all places.

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