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Alfred Haddon: A ‘palaeontologist’ in the Torres Strait

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By these various means I succeeded in reconstructing the ceremonies very much in the same manner as the palaeontologist reconstructs extinct animals from fragmentary remains. (Haddon 1893:141)

Introduction

Alfred Cort Haddon is widely acknowledged for his groundbreaking ethnological work in the Torres Strait and south-east New Guinea, and for his impact on the professionalisation of anthropology in the UK and beyond. A Cambridge-trained naturalist scientist, he first went to the Torres Strait in 1888 to study marine biology, but his attention soon shifted to the Islanders with whom he lived and worked. Sharing the concerns of elders that traditional knowledge and practices were rapidly disappearing as a result of missionisation, colonisation and the expanding marine industry, he returned 10 years later as the leader of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait. Haddon's vision of anthropology was remarkably comprehensive. In addition to his broad scientific background, collectively the seven expedition members had expertise in ethnography, medicine, experimental psychology, linguistics

and music (Figure 12.1).¹ With the invaluable input of named Islanders, the expedition members generated an enormous range of information and materials, including field notes, diaries, drawings, artefacts, photographs, film, sound recordings, biological and zoological specimens and extensive publications, most notably the six volumes of the expedition's *Reports* (Haddon 1901–35; see also Herle and Rouse 1998). Within a developing 'science of man', this article outlines how Haddon's interests, methodologies and analyses were deeply informed by late nineteenth-century archaeology. Drawing on recent case studies, the second half of the article assesses the far-reaching impact of Haddon's research and detailed recording for community archaeology in the region today.

Haddon was not involved in archaeological excavations. Yet his focus on salvaging a precolonial Islander past from an assemblage of fragments, his interest in deep history and his underlying research questions closely overlapped with archaeological ideas and practices in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on the universal characteristics of humankind, and working within evolutionary and diffusionist paradigms, Haddon's central concern was understanding human variation and the distribution of populations over time, based on the comparative analysis of material culture, human physical characteristics and linguistics (Haddon 1904; Urry 1998). In addition to his extensive published works, Haddon's personal journals from his Torres Strait expeditions provide insights into his theoretical interests and reveal the broader social, political and intellectual context of his research (Herle and Philp 2020).

1 In addition to Haddon, the expedition members were: William Rivers, a medical doctor trained at St Bartholomew's Hospital and Cambridge lecturer in the physiology of the senses; Charles Seligman[n] and William MacDougall, both physicians at St Thomas's Hospital in London; Charles Myers, a physician and psychologist with expertise in hearing and music; Sidney Ray, a London schoolteacher and self-taught expert on Oceanic languages; and Haddon's former student and recent graduate Anthony Wilkin (Herle and Rouse 1998). According to Seligman[n]'s obituarist, his surname was originally spelt 'Seligmann', but he 'dropped the last letter of his surname after 1914', presumably in response to anti-German sentiment associated with World War I (Myers 1941:627).



Figure 12.1. Members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait with their assistants shortly after their arrival on Mer.

Seated (left–right): Jimmy Rice and Debe Wali. First row: Alfred Haddon, Charlie Ontong, Anthony Wilkin. Second row: William Rivers and Sidney Ray. Back row: William McDougall, Charles Myers, Charles Seligmann. Mer, Torres Strait, May 1898.

Source: Photo courtesy of University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Haddon collection (MAA N.22900).

Haddon's training in natural sciences at the University of Cambridge encompassed zoology, embryology, physiology and comparative anatomy (Rouse 1998). During his first expedition, in addition to his work in marine biology and ethnology, he also recorded the geological features of the islands and reefs, outlining the long-term processes that led to the formation of volcanic islands and coral atolls. Haddon (1935:76) recognised that artefact geochemistry may provide important information about deep human history. On Kiwai island, for example, Haddon managed to obtain one of the large stone adze heads found in the region, speculating that they were used as articles of barter.²

As no stone occurs for many miles and none of this kind is known in the district, the implements have in all probability come down from the Fly River, and it is also probable that stone implements have been out of use for perhaps a century, owing to the natives getting iron from passing ships and wrecks and then bartering it to their neighbours, thus in two or three generations the knowledge of stone implements could readily die out. (Haddon 1898:221 in Herle and Philp 2020:287)

Haddon avidly collected and studied stone clubs and adze heads, comparatively exploring their production, morphology and distribution as a means of understanding distant and more recent history and the movement of people and things. When visiting the Port Moresby compound of customs officer David Ballantine in July 1898, Haddon was fascinated with his collection of over 90 stone clubs and seized the opportunity to produce a descriptive catalogue of all of the types, 'the first time that Papua stone clubs have been systematically described and their areas of distribution demarcated' (Haddon 1898:153 in Herle and Philp 2020:233). This work was readily published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* (Haddon 1900).

Once again, Haddon (1935:76) recognised the importance of artefact geochemistry for understanding provenance. Wilkin was informed on Mabuig that club manufacture occurred on Dauan, Saibai and Mer. Haddon retorted that 'they [clubs] certainly were not made on Saibai nor by the Miriam [Meriam]; there may have been a factory on Dauan, but I consider this very doubtful' (Haddon 1935:76; see also Haddon 1912:190–193). A 'factory for making – or at least grinding – stone

2 See, for example, the fine-grained Kiwai stone axe blade, 46 cm in length, collected by Haddon on Kiwai in September 1898 (MAA Z 9863).

implements' (Haddon 1935:76) was later 'discovered' on Yam Island by the Mamoose (chief) Maino, and revealed to Haddon during his short visit with his daughter Kathleen in 1914 (K. Haddon 1914) (Figures 12.2 and 12.3).

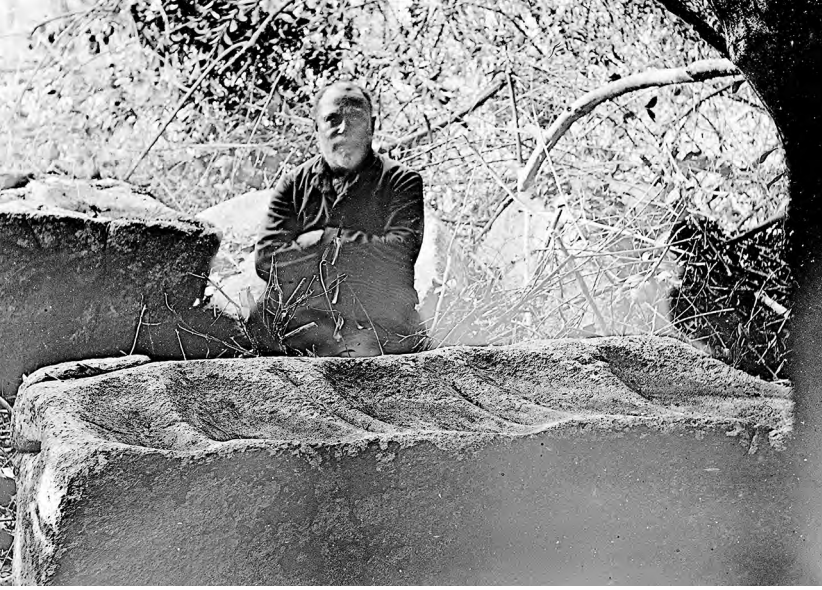


Figure 12.2. Maino, the Mamoose (chief) of Tudu and Yam, sitting behind the stone grinding slab.

Photo by Kathleen Haddon, Damu, Yam, Torres Strait, September 1914.

Source: Photo courtesy of MAA (MAA N.23060).

Despite Haddon's scepticism, a more recent archaeological survey corroborates the existence of a stone artefact quarry on Dauan (Vanderwal 1973:182). This site contained the 'pole end of a broken adze or axe rough-out' manufactured from a 'relatively coarse grained slatey grey to green igneous rock' consistent with the local geology. In addition, geological testing of Kiwai axes from the Queensland Museum and other private collections suggests that the fine-grained granite most likely originates from outcrops common in the Western and Central Islands of the Torres Strait (McNiven et al. 2004), a possibility that Haddon later acknowledged (1935:76). The evident movement of these artefacts across the Coral Sea corridor (and particularly between the Torres Strait and Papua New Guinea) echoes Haddon's expectation that the history of this region was built around symbiotic trading relationships between Papuans and Torres Strait Islanders.



Figure 12.3. Gabagaba club with large biconvex stone head secured with fine binding on a bamboo handle.

These clubs were widely traded throughout the region. L 85 cm; head: D 15.5 cm. Collected by Haddon, Muralag, Torres Strait, 1888.

Source: Photo courtesy of MAA (MAA Z 9807).

Haddon was particularly fascinated by ‘survivals’, artefacts and practices that harked back to a distant and often presumed Neolithic past. In 1888, on Mer, Haddon collected a hoe blade made from a polished *Cymbium* shell, which he had mounted on a wooden handle ‘in old time fashion’,³ and he keenly sought comparative examples in New Guinea. Ten years later in Mowatta, Haddon recorded his excitement: ‘[h]ardly anything during this whole trip pleased me more than to secure some specimens of this very rude and primitive agricultural implement’ (Haddon 1898:225 in Herle and Philp 2020:290). He also noted with relish what he saw as similarities between past and present practices, describing ‘Neolithic man making a canoe at Kerepuna’ (Haddon 1898:116 in Herle and Philp 2020:206) and remarking on witnessing the ‘extremes of culture’ when he saw his Papuan friend Gewe, dressed in European clothes, ‘solemnly chipping a hole in a stone club with a piece of flint!’ (Haddon 1898:140 in Herle and Philp 2020:223). Seeing a man at Inawa ‘sitting on a platform of a house making wooden arrow points with a boar’s tusk’, he ‘bought the lot’ (Haddon 1898:175 in Herle and Philp 2020:246).

3 This hoe is now in the British Museum (Oc,89+.214).

Haddon was initially attracted to the Torres Strait region as a dynamic and intermediary zone for field research in marine biology and later for ethnology. Yet the societies that he wanted to understand were more complex and much older than he envisaged (Wright et al. 2013). His understanding of the chronology of a deep past was rather fuzzy, and, like many of his contemporaries, he erroneously conflated long ago with far away, at times comparing nineteenth-century Islander and Papuan peoples with those of European antiquity.⁴ Through personal contacts and scholarly organisations such as the Anthropological Institute in London, Haddon keenly followed the latest discoveries in archaeology. In both 1888 and 1898 Haddon frequently referred to the recent archaeological discovery of Swiss lake dwellings built on piles, which were deemed to provide evidence for the ‘ascent’ of man between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Haddon outlined what he understood as the evolutionary development of house types, from the Aboriginal wind screens he encountered in Cape York to the raised houses on Saibai island, with their external staircases and lower section enclosed with thatch. He was particularly interested in New Guinea sea-villages and at Hula got the men to demonstrate the process of pile driving, which he duly photographed.⁵ Even the recent history of warfare between competing villages was described in reference to the ancient past. On sighting the charred stumps, which were all that remained of the village of East Kapakapa after it was attacked by a band of Hula men, he commented: ‘All, or nearly all, the inhabitants were killed and the village was destroyed by fire – a repetition of the history of the Swiss pile dwellings’⁶ (Haddon 1898–99:100 in Herle and Philp 2020:192). Haddon (1899 cited in Edwards 2000:114) made further reference to parallel (pre)histories when describing pottery manufacture, going so far as to suggest that the pottery series developed during his research should be published with commentary in ‘The Reliquary and Illustrated Antiquary as it will be of interest to archaeologists, for doubtless our Neolithic ancestors did what our contemporary “Neolithic” Papuans are doing now’.

4 This racist notion was prevalent in Euro-American scientific and popular culture well into the twentieth century. See also Dotte-Sarout, **Chapter 4**, this volume.

5 See: photograph of men demonstrating the process of pile driving with a sea village in the background, Hula, 11 June 1898 (MAA N.36119.ACH2).

6 Kapakapa (Gaba Gaba) was attacked by Hula men around 1880 (van Heekeren 2012:54–55).

Haddon and archaeology

Haddon's collections and the detailed information he published in the *Reports* have continued to be a crucial resource for Islanders and researchers working in the region. His careful documentation of ritual sites has been of particular importance to recent archaeological research, with some work initiated by Islanders as a means of understanding their own past. According to David:

archaeological research on religion and ritual in Torres Strait has largely taken Haddon's anthropological records as a starting point upon which ritual sites and paraphernalia, and systems of cosmological organization (e.g. totemic networks) could be systematically characterised and historicized. (2011:492)



Figure 12.4. Cygnet Repu painting his maternal totem (*awgadh*), the *kaigas* (shovel-nose skate), on a rock off to the side of the Pulu *kod*, Torres Strait, 2001.

Source: Photo courtesy of Ian McNiven (Monash University).

The excavation of the great *kod* of Pulu with the members of the Goemulgal Kod is an outstanding example of direct engagement with Haddon's work on multiple levels (McNiven et al. 2009). Inspired by Haddon's writings and the collaborative project to excavate the *kod*, Cygnet Repu painted his maternal totem (*awgadh*), the *kaigas* (shovel-nose skate or shark), in ochre on a nearby rock (Figure 12.4). The peanut tin containing ochre and the

brush he used were later donated to University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) to join the materials in the Haddon collection.

The Waiet archaeology project (2013–present)

In the Coral and Arafura Sea corridor (spanning Papua New Guinea, the Torres Strait and far north Australia), communities identify powerful ‘culture heroes’, reforming ancestors who brought sacred knowledge, later to be shared by masked performers during restricted ceremonies (e.g. McConnel 1936; Whitehorse 1996:705). Arguably these were particularly prominent in the Torres Strait, where a ‘national religion’ (i.e. lacking totemic restrictions) formed around ‘a definite personal relation with a superhuman individual’ (Haddon 1908:45). Protean in their ability to transform, these ‘culture hero fetish-based headhunting cults’ were associated with new sacred knowledge relating to warfare, headhunting and mortuary practices (McNiven 2015:173). This was transmitted to future generations through single or (as was the case for the Malu-Bomai Cult on Mer) multiple initiation ceremonies.

In 2013, Cygnet Repu (from Mabuiag in Western Torres Strait, WTS) and Falen D. Passi (from Eastern Torres Strait, ETS) initiated a project that aimed to bring Islanders together the ‘traditional way’ (Cygnet Repu pers. comm. 2016), through shared affiliation with the Waiet (Waiet in ETS) culture hero. An archaeologist from The Australian National University, Duncan Wright, was recruited to excavate important places along the Waiet pathway and locate objects and archives associated with this culture hero.

In 2016, Dauareb representatives, the descendants of the Waiet Zogo Le (ritual practitioners), established a field camp for archaeological research. This was located at Teg on Dauar, a place used centuries earlier by new initiates prior to their transportation to the major ceremony ground on Waier (Balaga Zaro pers. comm. 2016; Haddon 1928; Wright et al. 2018). Mirroring this performance, the archaeology field crew travelled by boat into the Ne embayment on Waier. It was observed that this site had been significantly denuded of ritual installations at the time of this visit; however, detailed records in Haddon (1928), including drawings by Torres Strait

Islanders, allow us to resurrect elements of these rituals. This is further assisted through the discovery of objects once located at this place, now stored in the Queensland Museum, Brisbane (a near life-sized turtle shell effigy representing Waiet), Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow (*Zogo baur* posts) and MAA (models of Waiet and his ‘canoe platform’) (Figure 12.5).



Figure 12.5. Model of Waiet holding a drum.

Made from carved and painted soft wood with pearl shell eyes, cassowary feathers and turtle shell decoration. H 34 cm, L 29 cm, W 7 cm.

Note: The original was made of turtle shell and kept in a cave on Waier. Commissioned by Haddon through Jack Bruce, along with models of *Ad-giz* (ancestors). Collected Mer, c. 1903.

Source: Photo courtesy of MAA (MAA Z 9453).

Shell sampled from installations surviving at the Waiet site on Waier (and described in detail by Haddon approximately 120 years previously) were radiocarbon dated to within the past 300 years (Wright et al. 2018). This supported Haddon's supposition that the Waiet cult represented a recent phase of ritual in the Torres Strait. Conversely, subsurface assessment identified mortuary activities dating back 1,700 years but apparently continuing within the much more recent period (Figure 12.6). A 300 BP shift was observed towards an assemblage incorporating bones belonging to children, as well as association of human bone with a turtle shell effigy. This suggested a long heritage for mortuary rituals, possibly involving a staged and orderly process by which new (but related) rituals were emplaced within existing cosmologies (Wright et al. 2018). Discovery of an exotic (most likely Papua New Guinean) pottery fragment immediately underlying funeral remains (approximately 1123–1517 cal. BP) provided an intriguing insight into transitioning ideas and materials, potentially echoed within the Waiet narrative (Wright et al. 2018:131).



Figure 12.6. Excavation of Square B at Ne on Waier with (left to right) Glenn van der Kolk, James Zaro and Sunny Passi, July 2016.

Source: Photo courtesy Duncan Wright.

Archaeology research has now been completed on Woeydhul in WTS (Wright et al. 2021). Preliminary results suggest a slightly longer chronology for the Waiet cult in this region (>800 BP in WTS), with ritual syncretism also likely to occur at this site (Wright et al. 2021). Metanarratives of widespread ritual entanglement are hard to isolate through archaeology, although a shared late Holocene age provides indirect support for this. Both sites provide evidence for formalised, invariant and regionally variable activities (Haddon 1928, 1935). Startling archaeological and ethnographic comparisons exist at a local scale, including excavation of a range of organic tools that have no precedent in Torres Strait archaeological records but are prominent in Waiet ethnographies (Wright et al. 2021). At the same time, a level of detail is provided by subsurface archaeology that identifies ritual elements unsuspected by Haddon. It is a case study, in short, that demonstrates the power of multidisciplinary research by which the natural limitations of archaeological practice are countered by detailed nineteenth-century ethnographic records. Torres Strait Islanders and academics alike have an enviable situation when it comes to contextualising contemporary knowledge about deep history – a remarkable archive collated by an individual who worked closely with named Islanders to reconstruct and record a precolonial past.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology from March 2020 to December 2022.

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