

# 21

## **Searching for origins: Archaeology and the government officers of Papua**

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Certain objects of special interest have from time to time been discovered which have passed into the hands of private collectors outside the territory; such for instance are a stone figure of, apparently, a winged serpent [Figure 21.1], found underneath a gravel drift in the old bed of a creek in the Northern Division, and a small stone object representing a man, once perhaps worshipped as an idol [...] (Murray to Minister, 18 December 1907, NAA: A1/15 1921/24811)

In 1906 Australia took control of the colony of British New Guinea, renaming it the Australian Territory of Papua. The following year Judge Hubert Murray, Acting Administrator (later Lieutenant Governor of Papua), wrote to the Australian Government concerned about the loss of significant items of material culture, which were being sold into private collections. Murray was particularly worried about the loss of what he called ‘antiquities’; prehistoric stone artefacts including intricately carved monoliths, large stone mortars and curiously carved pestles (often in the form of zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures), which were no longer being made in Papua. The solution he proposed was to establish an official government collecting program and a museum to house the collection (Murray to Minister, 18 December 1907, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A1/15 1921/24811).



**Figure 21.1. Stone pestle, found on the Aikora River, Oro Province.**

Sold to the British Museum in 1908 by Captain F.R. Barton. This is most likely the 'winged serpent' that Murray refers to in his letter.

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Murray's plans received formal approval in January 1908 and in May his intention to establish an Anthropology Museum was published in the government *Gazette*, including a call for donations from government officers (Government Secretaries Department 1908). In 1911, Murray passed an order that government agents could no longer collect or trade ethnographic or natural history specimens for their own private purposes (Executive Council, Territory of Papua, Executive Order 24 July 1911, NAA: A1, 1911/12991). Voluntary donations soon became mandatory duties as subsequent edicts established collecting as part of the requisite duties of government officers (Edmundson 2013). The passing of the *Papuan Antiquities Ordinance* No 4 of 1913 further extended his control over the collection of significant material culture. The Act ensured that before any export of significant Papuan artefacts could occur, permission needed to be obtained from the commissioner for native affairs. Any artefacts collected in contravention of the Act were to be confiscated and added to the official government collection, which over time became known as the Papuan Official Collection (POC).

Murray's primary objective for the POC was to create a baseline inventory of Papuan material culture (Figure 21.2) before it changed substantially under the impact of colonisation. He often alluded to the value of ethnographic collecting as part of a wider platform for understanding the internal logics of Papuan cultures, but over time he began to realise that the interpretation and care of the collection called for the work of a trained anthropologist (Edmundson 2019). After a visit from the British anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon in 1914 (see also Herle and Wright, **Chapter 12**, this volume), Murray began advocating for a permanent post of government anthropologist: someone who could look after the collections, train patrol officers in the 'rational science' of anthropology and carry out investigations as per the needs of the colony (Murray to Minister, 4 October 1916, NAA: A452, 1959/4708). Up until the early 1950s, most of the archaeological excavations carried out in Papua were conducted by informed, but untrained, amateurs (Spriggs 2013). The majority of these were government officers working under the Australian Administration.<sup>1</sup> From 1920 onwards, archaeological investigations came under the jurisdiction of the newly established post of government anthropologist.

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1 See for example Austin (1939), Chinnery (1919, 1927), Lyons (1911), Monckton (1905), Murray (1925, 1926, 1928, 1932), Strong (1921, 1922, 1923, 1924) and Williams (1930a, 1930b, 1931, 1937).



**Figure 21.2. Mortar collected before 1915 by J.H.P. Murray, location unknown.**

Source: National Museum of Australia, Papuan Official Collection, (1985.0339.1306).  
Photo by George Serras.

## Walter Mersh Strong

Papua's first government anthropologist, Walter Mersh Strong, was a medical doctor who specialised in tropical health and medicine (Denoon 1990). Strong had arrived in Papua (then British New Guinea) as part of a 1904 expedition led by the anthropologist Charles Seligman[n]<sup>2</sup> and sponsored by the American philanthropist Major William Cooke Daniels.<sup>3</sup> Although the expedition was not a success, Strong decided to stay, joining the government service as an assistant resident magistrate, resident magistrate and, finally, chief medical officer. In 1920, while still retaining his position as chief medical officer, Strong became the Territory's inaugural government anthropologist. Although not a keen

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2 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).

3 Seligmann led the ethnographic expedition; Daniels oversaw the administration and the study and collection of material culture and Strong served as assistant. The findings of the Cook–Daniels Expedition were never formally published but were later incorporated into Seligmann's comprehensive *The Melanesians of Papua New Guinea*, published in 1910 (Haddon 1934:1–4).

fieldworker (Denoon 1990), he was fascinated by debates regarding the origins of Papuan peoples and contributed two publications on possible links between languages and cultural origins while still an assistant resident magistrate (Strong 1908, 1916). After becoming government anthropologist, Strong became interested in the discovery of megalithic sites and artefacts. He recorded and photographed some of the earliest rock art in the territory, along with several stone mortars and a pestle (from the POC) that he associated with the makers of the art (Strong 1922, 1923, 1924).

When Europeans first came across the presence of large stone mortars on the island of New Guinea, they had little idea of what to make of them. C.A.W. Monckton, Resident Magistrate of what was then the Northeast Division, British New Guinea, sent the earliest recorded example (Figure 21.3) to the British Museum in 1904 (Monckton 1905; see also Bonshek, **Chapter 13**, this volume; Seligmann and Joyce 1907; Spriggs 2013). Since local people no longer made these items and claimed no knowledge of their purpose, their origins became a central topic of debate in anthropological discussions on the prehistory of the southwest Pacific.



**Figure 21.3. Stone mortar and pestle, collected May 1904 by C.A.W. Monckton on the Yodda Goldfields, Oro Province.**

Source: British Museum Collection (Oc1904,1123.1.a&b). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

One widely held theory was that these artefacts had been introduced to Papua by an 'archaic civilisation', which had since disappeared. In his first report as government anthropologist, Strong addressed the idea at some length:

Many anthropologists hold that around, say, B.C. 1000, there was a race located in Egypt, which used to traverse the sea of the Pacific in search of gold and other wealth, and that such wanderers settled in Papua. This race is also supposed to have introduced a special culture, associated with a culture found in Egypt and elsewhere, wherever they settled. (Strong 1921:31)

The discovery of stone mortars and pestles (Figures 21.3 and 21.4) on the Lakekamu and Yodda goldfields further added to the idea that they were associated with gold mining. This was the view of Patrol Officer E.P. Chinnery, who was later to become government anthropologist of the neighbouring Territory of New Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Chinnery (1919) proposed that the stone mortars and pestles found on the island of New Guinea had been brought by an ancient 'race' of Egyptians who had used them to crush quartz to extract gold. His work came to the attention of the anthropologist William Perry, who reproduced Chinnery's arguments in his highly successful publication, *Children of the Sun* (1923:29, 80, 199, 836). Perry was a disciple of the Australian anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith, who famously theorised that all human civilisation derived from a single origin – ancient Egypt – whose culture had spread globally through trade and migration, leaving behind telltale signs such as megalithic stonework and sun worship (Smith 1915). Strong wrote:

It has been supposed that the primary purpose of the [Egyptian] migration was for the purpose of searching for gold and other wealth, and that they also brought into the Indian and Pacific oceans the use of stone, terraced irrigation, metal working, house-building, and rice-growing, and that their descendants have remained until now [...] (Strong 1921:31)

This became known as the Heliocentric or Pan-Egyptian school of diffusion.<sup>5</sup>

4 Chinnery was appointed government anthropologist of the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea in 1924. The Territories of Papua and New Guinea came under joint administration after 1949. Papua New Guinea became a fully independent nation in 1975.

5 Diffusion theory was a branch of anthropology concerned with the origins and spread of human cultures across space and time. One of its underlying premises was that human migration and cultural 'evolution' could be reconstructed through studying traces of the past in the form of contemporary material culture, ideas, languages and social behaviours (Winthrop 1991:83–84). Egyptocentric diffusion theories reached their height in the 1920s but were largely abandoned by the 1930s.





**Figure 21.4. Pestle collected in 1911 by Davy James, a miner on the Lakekamu Goldfields, Gulf Province.**

Source: National Museum of Australia, Papuan Official Collection, (1985.0339.1304).  
Photo by George Serras.

The debate over whether a former ‘civilisation’ had brought megalithic (large-stone) culture to the peoples of the south-west Pacific captured the attention of numerous anthropologists during the first three decades of the twentieth century, as well as drawing in government officers, including Strong’s superior, Murray.<sup>6</sup> While Murray initially held that the ‘antiquities’ unearthed in Papua may have been made by a more ‘advanced race’ (Murray 1912:372–374), he began to question this idea the longer he lived in Papua, eventually becoming one of Perry’s staunchest critics (Murray 1926, 1928). Strong was equally unimpressed with Chinnery and Perry’s hypothesis:

I cannot say that this view appeals at all to me. Even the European has never successfully crushed quartz for gold on the mainland of Papua; and if prehistoric wanderers have at all generally profitably worked gold in stone hand-power mortars, surely the present-day miner, with the help of machinery, would long ago have found some of these sources of gold-quartz, and Papua would have ranked as a great gold-producing country (Strong 1921:31).

Strong went on to argue that since gold had never been found in local quartz deposits, the mortars must instead have been used for milling grain. However, he was forced to concede that grain was not grown in New Guinea. In the end he was left to conclude: ‘the origin of these stone mortars is the most mysterious anthropological question which I know of in Papua’ (Strong 1921:31).<sup>7</sup>

## F.E. Williams

Strong’s successor, Francis Edgar Williams, belonged to a new generation of anthropologists who began to shift the field of inquiry from the evolution and diffusion of human cultures to studying how extant tribal societies functioned as holistic entities. Williams was employed as an assistant government anthropologist in 1922, and as government anthropologist from 1928 until his death in 1943. He was a dedicated researcher who is believed to have spent more time engaged in fieldwork

6 See for example Chinnery (1919, 1927), Haddon (1925), Murray (1926, 1928), Perry (1926, 1928), Rivers (1914), Seligmann and Joyce (1907) and Seligmann (1910).

7 Modern archaeological techniques, such as radiocarbon dating and analysis of plant residues, have now conclusively proven that stone mortars and pestles were used for processing tubers, forest fruits and nuts by the ancestors of modern day Papua New Guineans as part of an early agricultural complex dating between 8000 and 3000 BP (Field et al. 2020; Shaw et al. 2020; Swadling and Hide 2005:293).



in Papua than any other anthropologist before or since (Young and Clarke 2001). Unlike Strong, who had trained as a medical practitioner, Williams arrived in Papua newly graduated from Oxford University with a diploma in anthropology (Strong 1922:24). In relation to collecting practices, Williams was ahead of his time. He advocated detailed documentation of all objects collected, put great emphasis on ethical collecting and stated that the cause of science did not justify collecting practices that robbed a society of its important material culture (Williams 1923). Nonetheless, as government anthropologist his duties included collecting as well as practical investigations and survey work. Williams was the first government officer to undertake a systematic survey of rock art in the territory, and during his tenure, he conducted at least three excavations in Papua (at Boianai, Wagava and Kitava).

In February 1926, Williams began excavating a stone circle known as 'Wakeke's House' near the Anglican Mission at Boianai in Goodenough Bay. The area of Goodenough Bay was well known for the presence of stone arrangements and petroglyphs scattered in and around four locations: the villages of Boianai, Meitepana and Radava (known collectively as Boianai); Wedau and Wamira; Garuwai; and Taupota (Egloff 1970:147). The most famous of these was at the village of Boianai with its large pavements and petroglyphs in addition to intricately carved stones (Figure 21.5), which drew the attention of European collectors. Boianai's carved stones and pavements were locally associated with mythical beings, the most famous of these being Wakeke, an ancestor hero and founder of the village.

Williams was a keen photographer and his collection of almost 2,000 glass plates and negatives, now housed at the National Archives of Australia, contains 25 photographs taken during his stay at Boianai. At the site known as Wakeke's House, Williams photographed a small stone mortar in situ, said to be around 24 inches in diameter. The stone bowl was said to be the home of Wakeke when he was in snake form. The nearby stone cairns were reputed to be the house posts of what was once Wakeke's House. The photos indicate that although the dig was only active for a day, the material unearthed by Williams during this time included three clay pots either containing or covering human skulls (Williams Photograph, February 1926, NAA: A6510, 994). Although the excavation was too brief to be conclusive, Williams found remains relating to five individuals in association with pottery fragments and concluded that these may have been burial plots (Williams 1931:135–38).



**Figure 21.5. Carved stone, Boianai, Milne Bay Province.**

Collected/donated by J.H.P. Murray before 1925.

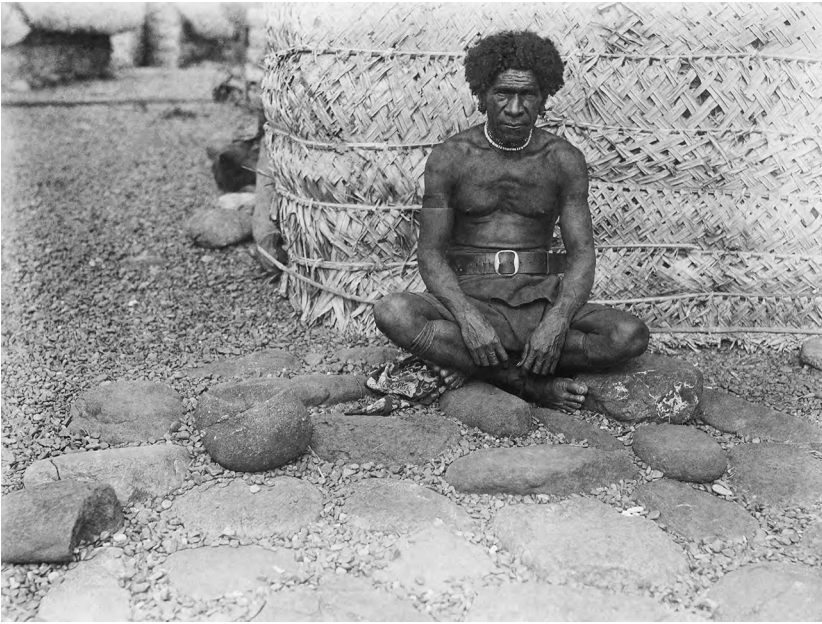
Source: National Museum of Australia, Papuan Official Collection (1985.0339.0856).  
Photo by George Serras.

It may be that the discovery of funerary remains caused distress, or Williams may not have adequately explained the process that was about to occur, but almost as soon as Williams had begun the excavation (Figure 21.6) it was called to a halt:

Thinking I had the full consent of the villagers I proceeded to excavate this site with all possible care, but at the end of the first day's work was informed by the missionary stationed at Boianai [Reverend Wilfred Light] that the people were greatly perturbed in the matter. They thought that some dire results would follow the disturbance of these stones and the remains we had discovered, and they had asked the missionary to intervene. In accordance with the principles we follow in Papua I could do nothing but accede to the wishes of the people to whom these stones belonged, and the excavations were filled in on the following day. (Williams 1931:138)<sup>8</sup>

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8 Unlike many of his contemporaries, Williams did not attribute the stone cairns at Boianai to exotic origins, concluding: 'There is no necessity to postulate some bygone vanished people who have left nothing but these petrographs behind them' (1931:38–39).



**Figure 21.6. Photograph by F.E. Williams, Boianai Excavation, Milne Bay Province.**

Original caption reads: 'Wareki's [sic] "pannikin" and V C "Johnson" – Excavation – February 1926 – Papua, Central, Boianai – Francis Edgar Williams'.

Source: Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (NAA: A6510, 997).

Despite his anthropological training Williams had failed to understand the cultural logics at play. Because they had 'denied all knowledge' of the stones, Williams had assumed that the local residents were not interested in them. However, for the people of Boianai, the disinclination to discuss the stones may have indicated, not a lack of interest, but the exact opposite.<sup>9</sup> For them, these were not scientific specimens, but animate objects, with tangible links to an ancestral hero who was not to be disturbed without the risk of great ill-fortune.

Over time, Williams's experiences in Papua led him to develop a greater understanding of the significance of these types of objects from a Papuan viewpoint. Williams belonged to an emerging school of anthropology known as functionalism, which advocated for the need to study cultural systems in situ, rather than to remove tangible cultural heritage for study

<sup>9</sup> When the archaeologist Brian Egloff visited Boianai in 1968 he discovered that local people still regretted the Williams dig and were wary of anyone else disturbing the stones (Egloff 1970:154).

and display in overseas institutions. The longer Williams spent engaged in fieldwork and observing village life from the inside, the more convinced he became that collectors and the administration had gotten things wrong: ‘From the anthropological stand-point,’ he argued, ‘the ceremony is the thing, and [...] the interests of science would be best served by preserving, not the ceremonial object, but the ceremony itself’ (Williams 1923:19).

## Conclusion

In the first two decades of the twentieth century anthropological research was dominated by evolutionary and diffusionist paradigms; the search for origins. Over time anthropologists and archaeologists alike began to abandon hyper-diffusionist theories and to concentrate more directly on local and regional systems. Although Williams and others observed early on that similarities could be found among the various megalithic sites in Papua, during this early period, scholars of prehistory were hampered by a methodological imperative to look for universal rather than local connections. This meant trying to piece together multiple tides of human movement and ideas over several millennia, based on only a very limited sample of sites and objects. The hyper-diffusionist approach so favoured by early scholars gave way to more systematic research, which began to map in more granular detail the many connections across linguistics, genetics and material culture, which modern archaeologists use to uncover the many waves of human migration to and from the Western Pacific. This is still a work in progress.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the National Museum of Australia from February to July 2020.

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