

# 32

## **An emerging major centre: Pacific archaeology at The Australian National University (1961–79)**

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Pacific archaeology at The Australian National University (ANU) developed out of the (then) Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPaS), which was ‘geared to the systematic extension of knowledge by theoretical and empirical study of the vast Pacific region’ (Firth 1996:5; Stewart 2008). Although archaeology was not explicitly within the initial vision for the school in 1946 (Firth 1996:5), by 1959 an advertisement had been placed in the *Canberra Times* for a fellowship in ‘prehistory’ within the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. Cambridge graduate and formally trained medievalist Jack Golson took up the position in 1961, arriving at ANU from Auckland, where he was previously appointed and had conducted much pioneering Pacific archaeology (Jackson 2014; see also Furey, **Chapter 31**, this volume). The aim of Golson’s appointment was to ‘devis[e] a programme of research in the archaeologically underdeveloped fields of Australian and Southwest Pacific prehistory [...] with a particular commitment to Papua New Guinea’ (Golson 2006:109). Eight years later, in 1969, the Department of Prehistory – the first dedicated archaeology department at ANU – was formed with Golson as foundation professor (Department of Prehistory 1970; see Figure 32.1).



**Figure 32.1. Founding members of the Department of Prehistory during the early years.**

Left to right: Unknown, Ron Lampert, D.J. Mulvaney, Leslie Howard, Jack Golson, Eleanor Crosby, Brian Egloff and Ian Glover, undated.

Source: Wal Ambrose.

Early Pacific archaeology at ANU emphasised the complex technological and social changes among Pacific Island cultures throughout Melanesia and Polynesia, in particular the ‘labour intensive cultivation’ systems of highland New Guinea, the place of Vanuatu in the settlement of the Pacific and the expansion of Lapita cultures throughout Island Melanesia and Polynesia. Much of this early research laid the foundation for future archaeological enquiries across Australasia and the Pacific (Department of Prehistory 1971). A large body of archival and archaeological materials were amassed from the early investigations and are today mostly located in the departmental archives (now the Department of Archaeology and Natural History), in personal collections and in the Pacific Archives at ANU. In 2020, as part of the larger international multi-institution exhibition *Uncovering Pacific Pasts*, some of these objects and archives were selected for display in the Menzies Library in order to showcase early ANU Pacific archaeology. This chapter provides the background for that exhibition.

## Regional focus<sup>1</sup>

### Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) was the major focus of archaeology at ANU during the 1960s–70s (Golson 2006; Murray and White 1981:261). Following in the footsteps of Sue Bulmer (see Summerhayes, **Chapter 34**, this volume), John Peter White (Figure 32.2) embarked on PhD fieldwork in the Eastern Highlands in 1963. His thesis ‘Taim Bilong Bipo: Investigations Towards a Prehistory of the Papua New Guinea Highlands’ (1970) investigated the time depth of human occupation and spatial variation in the archaeological record of the region. White also produced two films, *The Bowmakers* (1964) and *Axes and Are: Stone Tools of the Duna* (1977), that documented skilled senior village men manufacturing stone and wooden tools.



**Figure 32.2. Jack Golson and J. Peter White in New Guinea.**

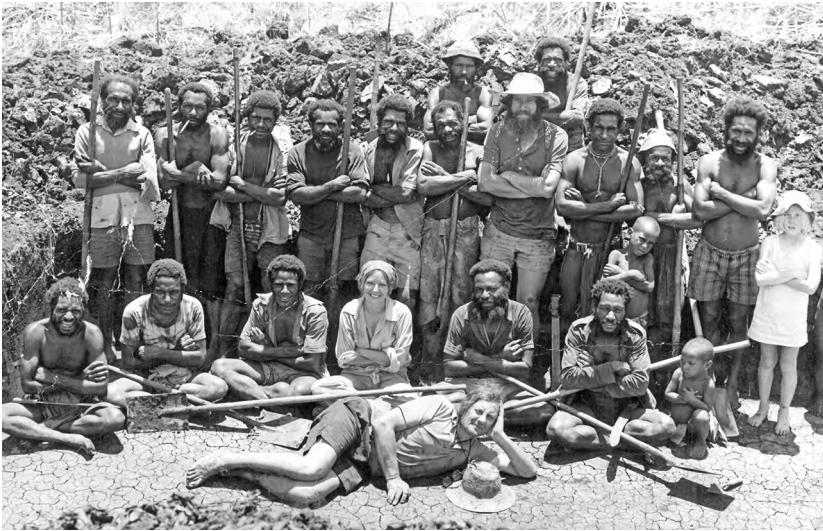
Source: J. Peter White.

<sup>1</sup> Major investigations in Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu are detailed here and form the basis of the Menzies exhibition. Smaller studies were also conducted elsewhere in the Pacific, including New Zealand and New Caledonia, but are not overviewed here.

Soon afterwards, in 1965, Jim Specht began his PhD fieldwork on Watom Island, where missionary Father Otto Meyer first discovered Lapita pottery in 1909 (see Howes, **Chapter 15**, and Spriggs, **Chapter 24**, both this volume). Specht also visited Talasea on the Willaumez Peninsula, around 270 km away, as well as the northern Solomon Islands. Specht (1968) sourced 2,000-year-old obsidian artefacts he excavated on Watom to Talasea, evidencing the Talasea area as a regional centre for obsidian procurement and distribution.

In 1967 two scholars commenced PhD fieldwork. Peter Lauer investigated pottery traditions in the D'Entrecasteaux Islands for his PhD thesis submitted in 1970. Taking an ethnographic and ethnohistorical approach, he analysed surface collections of ceramic sherds in former village sites while also studying active pottery-making (Lauer 1970). Brian Egloff began fieldwork in the Massim, focusing on the Wanigela area of Collingwood Bay. Wanigela had been recognised as an area of archaeological significance as early as 1905 by Charles Monckton and Rudolf Pösch; however, Egloff was the first trained archaeologist to conduct excavations there (Shaw 2016; see also Bonshek, **Chapter 13**, and Howes, **Chapter 14**, both this volume). His findings supported the idea of a large prehistoric interaction sphere encompassing Collingwood Bay, the Trobriand Islands and the D'Entrecasteaux Islands.

In 1969, the foundation year of the Department of Prehistory, Ron Lampert investigated stone axes from the New Guinea Highlands and Eleanor Crosby examined various Melanesian hafted adzes and axes from Australian, New Zealand and Papua New Guinean collections. Les Groube accompanied Ron Vanderwal on PhD fieldwork on the southern coast of mainland New Guinea (Department of Prehistory 1970; Vanderwal 1973). Following the completion of his PhD research, Vanderwal refocused his research to concentrate on the Torres Strait. He undertook the first professional archaeological field research in the Torres Strait in 1972, realising the potential of the region as a contact zone between Aboriginal Australia and Melanesia. His research placed the significance of the archaeology of the Torres Strait on the map, and the questions posed by Vanderwal – particularly those focused on regional trade and exchange networks and his ethnographical approach to investigating archaeology – remain influential on archaeological research programs to this day (Carter 2010; McNiven 2010; McNiven and Green 2010).



**Figure 32.3. Jack Golson, Philip Hughes and team at Kuk Swamp excavation.**

Source: Archaeology and Natural History, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific (CAP) Archives.

The 1970s ushered in a major phase of research, the most significant in scale and outcome being Golson's investigations of agriculture in the Highlands – the 'Kuk Project' in the Wahgi Valley in 1972 (Golson 2017; Murray and White 1981). This multidisciplinary fieldwork program centred on Kuk Swamp (Figure 32.3) in the Highlands of PNG. Golson and his team interpreted their finds as representing the independent origin of agriculture in PNG during the early Holocene (Denham et al. 2003; Golson 2017). The excavations also returned various agricultural tools, including long-handled wooden implements with paddle-shaped blades (Golson 2017). The Kuk Project established New Guinea as a location of independent agricultural development and plant domestication during the early Holocene, leading to the inscription of Kuk Swamp on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008.

Under the guidance of Golson, Ole Christensen joined the 'massive Wahgi campaign' (Department of Prehistory 1975). His PhD research included excavation, ethnographic recording of gardening and hunting and stone artefact analyses in the Manim and Upper Wahgi Valleys (Department of Prehistory 1975). At the age of 29, at an 'advanced' stage of research, Christensen suffered a fatal car accident (Department

of Prehistory 1975). Committed to ensuring his work not go unfinished, Alison Garnett produced site reports from his notes and processed the ‘abundant’ botanical materials from the sites, in particular *Pandanus* seeds (Christensen 1975; Department of Prehistory 1976; Lilley 1994).

F.J. (Jim) Allen – the first PhD graduate in historical archaeology in Australia – returned to ANU from an appointment at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG). Allen led large-scale investigations on south Papuan trade systems on the small island of Motupore between 1970 and 1975, during which he was accompanied by Sandra Bowdler (then UPNG), Mary-Jane Mountain (then UPNG), Alan Thorne (ANU) and Pamela Swadling (then UPNG). The work on Motupore was continued by staff at UPNG, including Les Groube in 1978 and more recently by Matthew Leavesley in 2016 (Allen 2017a, 2017b). Under the guidance of Allen, Geoff Irwin commenced his PhD research on the small island of Mailu in south-eastern PNG in 1972. Through field surveys, test excavations and pottery analyses, Irwin investigated the emergence of Mailu as a central locale in the region (Irwin 1977).

In 1976 Jim Rhoads – who had previously been involved in the Kuk Project – began ethnoarchaeological research on sago palm use in the Kikori River Delta region for his PhD titled ‘Through a Glass Darkly’ (Rhoads 1980). Rhoads (1980) suggested that the Waira region had been occupied over the last 3,000 years and hypothesised that between 1200 and 1500 BP, intensified coastal trade connected the sago-producing communities of the Gulf with easterly pottery-producing communities.

During 1977–79, research in the Admiralty Island Group was conducted by Jean Kennedy and Wal Ambrose, who were accompanied by Allen and Edward Harris (Department of Prehistory 1978; Kennedy 1979, 1981a). Kennedy had just arrived from Hawai‘i and ‘took up her appointment as research fellow in the field’ to survey with Ambrose and Harris, which resulted in the location of 80 sites on Manus, Lou and other islands (Department of Prehistory 1978; Kennedy 1979). Two excavations of Kohin Cave on Manus Island were undertaken in 1978 and 1979, returning pottery and Lou Island obsidian. Four pottery sherds from lower stratigraphic layers were ‘decorated with dentate-stamped impressions, distinctive of the Lapita style’ (Kennedy 1981b). These results were published by Kennedy in *Science* in 1981.

Arriving from UPNG in 1978, Mary-Jane Mountain joined the department as a PhD scholar. Mountain focused her analysis on the archaeological fauna from the Nombe rock-shelter (Department of Prehistory 1979; Mountain 1991), which had previously been excavated (under the name of ‘Niobe’) by J. Peter White (White 1972). Mountain recovered the remains of four extinct herbivores and also documented sporadic cultural activity at the site from 25,000 BP to 15,000 BP, which was followed by intense human settlement in the early Holocene (Mountain 1991).

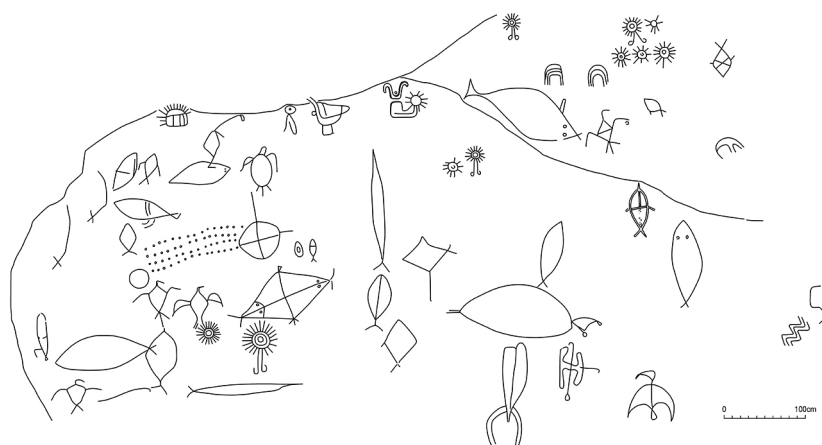
## **Tonga**

Tonga became an early focus of ANU archaeological research in Polynesia. Jens Poulsen built on early foundation work by Golson by excavating six archaeological sites on Tongatapu Island. Poulsen’s investigations focused on pottery and also recovered the oldest tattoo comb in Oceania, dating to approximately 2700 BP (Clark and Langley 2020). Jens Poulsen submitted his thesis ‘A Contribution to the Prehistory of the Tongan Islands’ in 1967.

Poulsen was followed by Les Groube, who began excavations in 1965 and 1968, including Vuki’s Mound at Tongatapu. Here, the excavation showed that pottery was made and discarded over only a short period, despite its abundance. Groube (1971) produced an important synthesis in his paper ‘Tonga, Lapita Pottery, and Polynesian Origins’ in 1971. Between 1970 and 1980, interest in Tongan archaeology ‘waned’ (Burley 1998:347).

## **Vanuatu**

By 1970, the Department of Prehistory had identified several avenues for future research, one of which was the position of Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) in the early occupation of the Pacific (Department of Prehistory 1971). Les Groube planned a project in 1970 and two years later had carried out surveys in the south of Vanuatu, focusing on Aneityum, with a smaller period spent on Erromango (Department of Prehistory 1973:6). Groube noted the impressive taro systems on Aneityum, and excavation showed the environmental impacts of intensification. Groube also spent six weeks in the northern Banks Islands, recording surface features (Ward 1979; see also Leach and Leach 2018).



**Figure 32.4. Aname rock art site, Aneityum, Vanuatu, drawn by Winifred Mumford while working with Norma McArthur on her doctoral fieldwork in 1973.**

Source: Winifred Mumford's illustration reproduced from Spriggs and Mumford (1989:18) by CAP Cartography.

Also on Aneityum, PhD student Norma McArthur undertook research into the historical demography of the island (McArthur 1974). McArthur's fieldwork – conducted with the assistance of Winifred Mumford – examined archaeological evidence for depopulation, building on her previous study of historical records from Aneityum, which indicated massive depopulation at European contact. McArthur completed her PhD, 'Population and Prehistory: Aneityum', in 1974. Rock art was recorded by Winifred Mumford and McArthur during this fieldwork (see Figure 32.4).

Later, Graeme K. Ward conducted PhD research on the Banks Islands. He investigated their role in the settlement of the region and the first occupants' adaptations to small tropical island environments. He was supervised initially by Les Groube, then by Jack Golson, who encouraged him to shift focus from recent settlement patterns to settlement and resource exploitation over a longer period. Ward conducted surveys in 1973 and fieldwork in 1974 accompanied by his wife and two young daughters. This was the first detailed archaeological research of the area (Figure 32.5). Ward recovered pottery sherds from Pakea Island that were approximately 2,000 years old. The site also returned many *Tridacna* shell adzes from excavations. His thesis 'Prehistoric Settlement and Economy in a Tropical Small Island Environment: The Banks Islands, Insular Melanesia' was awarded in 1979.





**Figure 32.5. Site BN-PK-1, Pakea Island. Pakea excavation crew taking a break, November 1974.**

Left to right: Okis Taso (Mota), Fred Bolav (Gaua), Christova Lulumle (Ureparapara), Dudley Tula (Mota), Simon Peter (Mota).

Source: Graeme K. Ward.

Matthew Spriggs arrived in Australia in 1977 to commence fieldwork on Aneityum in 1978, where – inspired by Groube’s previous work – he investigated agricultural intensification, in particular taro irrigation (Spriggs 1981). Spriggs had met Groube as an undergraduate in the United Kingdom where Groube had moved after leaving ANU; a Groube lecture at Cambridge about his Aneityum research led directly to Spriggs’s application to ANU. Spriggs spent four months on Aneityum and recorded almost 300 separate examples of prehistoric irrigation systems; he also spent two months on Maewo in the north, and a shorter period at Col de Pirogue in New Caledonia, where he collected information on ‘technical aspects, labour inputs and yields’ (Department of Prehistory 1979).

His research continued in 1979, by which stage he had catalogued over 800 sites on Aneityum and conducted further study of traditional irrigation on Maewo and in New Caledonia (Department of Prehistory 1980).

## Archaeological science and interdisciplinary research

One of Golson's main objectives was to build scientific analytical capacity and breadth of expertise in the staff. From the outset, cutting-edge archaeological science and interdisciplinary research were engaged in RSPacS.

Several appointments were integral to the development of archaeological science, in particular Wal Ambrose, who joined ANU in 1963. He established an international reputation in conservation, especially the conservation of wooden artefacts by freeze-drying, and in archaeometry (Department of Prehistory 1970). Ambrose's characterisation of obsidian sources from the Bismarck Archipelago helped lay the groundwork for the highly productive Lapita Homeland Project of 1983–91. His cooperation with the Australian Atomic Energy Commission (now ANSTO, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation) led to the development of the PIXE/PIGME analytical system, widely adopted over the following 20 years (Golson 1997).

In 1965, pioneer archaeological scientist Con Key, who had trained in geology in the Netherlands and South Africa, was hired for a five-year research fellowship in Golson's unit within the anthropology and sociology department at ANU. Key initiated numerous innovative characterisation studies of pottery and obsidian. His studies of ethnographic and prehistoric pottery in the Massim area of PNG showed exchange between the Collingwood Bay area and the Trobriand Islands. Using spectrographic analysis of trace elements, he also undertook the first archaeologically oriented study of Melanesian obsidians, indicating that obsidian at the Lapita sites on Watom Island was derived from the Talasea area of West New Britain, 270 km away. Geochemical sourcing became a broader strength of the department and its research outputs (e.g. Smith et al. 1977; Ward 1977; Ward and Smith 1974).

In 1965, Henry Polach was invited to ANU to set up a radiocarbon lab, which was jointly coordinated between the Department of Geophysics and Geochemistry, the Research School of Physical Sciences and the

Department of Prehistory (Barbetti and Head 1997). Henry Polach had an important role in basic radiocarbon research, from defining how ages are calculated to producing the IAEA-C6 standard (a ‘known age’ sample). This sucrose sugar standard was produced for ANU in 1971 and is still used in many radiocarbon laboratories worldwide (Polach 1976:122). Two seminal papers in *Archaeometry* by Graeme K. Ward and Sue Wilson – ‘Procedures for Comparing and Combining Radiocarbon Age Determinations: A Critique’ (Ward and Wilson 1978) and ‘Evaluation and Clustering of Radiocarbon Age Estimates: Procedures and Paradigms’ (Wilson and Ward 1981) – were initiated through discussions with Polach. These publications continue to be cited widely today.

Key collaborations were also made between the archaeology and biogeography scholars in RSPacS. Significantly, in 1966 Ambrose and Golson joined Lampert and biogeography PhD student Jocelyn Wheeler (now Powell) to investigate a swamp in the Wahgi Valley. These collaborations set in motion the long-running Kuk Swamp investigations and Wahgi campaign (Golson 2006:113).

## Pacific archaeology in ‘the Faculties’

In 1973, Cambridge-trained Peter Bellwood joined a newly founded, second archaeology department at ANU, led by John Mulvaney in the Faculty of Arts. Although Bellwood’s career has focused on Island and Mainland Southeast Asia, during these early years in the Faculty of Arts, he contributed two major works to Pacific archaeology – *Man’s Conquest of the Pacific* (1978) and *The Polynesians* (1978). Prior to his appointment at ANU he excavated in New Zealand, the Cook Islands and also French Polynesia.

## A legacy of Pacific research at ANU

Today, the legacy of these significant early threads of research remains – no longer the Department of Prehistory and Faculty of Arts, but Archaeology and Natural History and the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, respectively. Significantly, the link between biogeography and archaeology continues in Archaeology and Natural History today. Many major recent research programs in Pacific archaeology continue to be driven by ANU researchers. One example is the major investigation of

Teouma, the oldest cemetery in the Pacific, found in Vanuatu in 2003. Stuart Bedford and Matthew Spriggs directed the project, which has since become the subject of substantial international palaeogenomic research (Skoglund et al. 2016). The first major historiography of the region was led by Matthew Spriggs and the Collective Biography of Archaeology in the Pacific Project in 2015–20. Pacific research at ANU has also expanded, fuelled in part by Atholl Anderson's headship of Archaeology and Natural History in the 1990s, to include Niue, Fiji, Norfolk Island, Guam, Lord Howe Island, Tuvalu, Kiribati Island, Palau, Juan Fernandez, Mangareva, Rapa, Galapagos and French Polynesia (Leach 2008).

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Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display in the Menzies Library at The Australian National University from March 2020 to January 2021.

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