Preface

This monograph reports on 15,000 years of technological and social change in a region of northern Australia located on the edge of the semi-arid zone amidst mesas, deep gorges and dry basalt plains. It is a region best known for its spectacular rock art, and more particularly the striped anthropomorphic figures known as the 'Lightning Brothers' which decorate the walls of some rockshelters in the south of the traditional lands of the Wardaman people. The region is also known for its rich archaeological record, and has been the subject of intensive archaeological study since Davidson's research there in the 1930s.

This monograph is based on a PhD thesis submitted at The Australian National University in 2004. It employs foraging theory and recent thinking about the strategic organisation of lithic technology to explore changing settlement and subsistence practices in this region since the end of the Last Glacial Maximum. Applying this approach to the explanation of assemblage variability in Wardaman Country offers new insights into the possible reasons for technological and social change in this region over the last 15,000 years. Two chapters that originally appeared in the PhD Thesis, one expounding the role of modern Darwinian theory in the explanation of cultural change and the other exploring technological provisioning across space in Wardaman Country, do not appear in this monograph. The latter has since been published elsewhere (Clarkson 2006).

The ideas about technological responses to different foraging practices developed in this monograph are tested against assemblage data from four rockshelters located in different parts of Wardaman Country. The results suggest that major changes in lithic technology and land use took place in reaction to increased subsistence risk brought on by declines in the abundance and predictability of resources. These declines may have been triggered by the onset of ENSO-driven climatic variability after 5,000 BP, which appears to have reached its greatest severity in northern Australia between c. 3,500 and 2,000 BP.

This study has important implications for our understanding of northern Australian prehistory, including the potential causes of broadly similar technological changes across large parts of the top end and the timing of increased inter-regional contact and the spread of new technologies. It also illustrates the importance of tracking continuity in manufacturing traditions as a means of understanding the kinds of social processes that underlie regional technological changes.