

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Australian Aborigines are held by anthropologists as classic examples of hunter-gatherer societies, and are often used as 'models' of past so-called non-agricultural peoples, including those of the Pleistocene period. Recent studies, however, including those in anthropology, ethnohistory and archaeology, are revising more traditional opinions concerning Australian Aborigines and, more generally, hunter-gatherers of both past and present. It is now acknowledged that a much broader range of hunter-gatherer societies existed throughout the world and in all periods of time than was previously considered to be the case. Similarly, perceptions of Australian Aborigines and their history have also changed, for many reasons, and this history has been seen afresh as significantly more varied as regards socio-cultural factors, demography and economy, to name but a few aspects. The effects of colonialism, introduced diseases, population decimation and social dislocation left their mark on the continent long before anthropologists arrived. In this book I have tied together information from disparate sources – social anthropology, ethnohistory and archaeology – so as to discuss the varied Australian Aboriginal socio-cultural patterns in both time and space. This material is set within archaeological and anthropological debates concerning the history and development of hunter-gatherer societies in both the long and short term.

In some ways it forms part of a revisionist anthropology and archaeology of Australian Aborigines, and hunter-gatherers in general. It explores new directions and new interpretations and, hopefully, offers new insights on and models of Australian hunters of the near and distant past. In my examination of the ethnohistorical and ethnographic information I have focused upon regional variation and on aspects at variance with more traditional models of Australian Aborigines. With the archaeological evidence, which encompasses such

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enormous stretches of time, I have highlighted socio-demographic processes within a broad ecological setting.

The Australian past

The traditional model viewed Australian prehistory with an emphasis on long-term equilibrium between numbers of Aboriginal people and natural resources. That is, Aboriginal demography was seen as largely under the control of long-term environmental forces, and socio-cultural changes (where they could be identified) were largely negligible. This viewpoint is clearly expressed by Joseph Birdsell in the following two quotations.

It is now realised that these economically simple peoples, and all of the Pleistocene occupants of Greater Australia, live in fact in a skilfully regulated state of homeostasis. Such people were in equilibrium with their environment and this balanced condition was maintained, despite some fluctuations, by a rather complex series of actions, beliefs and traditions. (Birdsell 1977: 149)

Birdsell viewed Aboriginal economy (and extractive efficiency, or production, in particular) as being relatively homogeneous and unchanging.

A hunting and collecting economy of the most generalised sort was present throughout the entire continent and the material culture upon which extractive efficiency was based showed only minor regional variations. (Birdsell 1957: 53)

Today, as we have seen, much greater socio-cultural variation is acknowledged throughout Australia, in both space and time, than traditional models allow. Undoubtedly the more recently obtained wealth of archaeological and palaeontological data, and revision of ethnohistorical and ethnographic information, have helped form these new impressions. While present interpretations generally acknowledge the more *dynamic* nature of past socio-cultural, demographic and environmental processes, they also appear divided on two fronts: they either emphasise natural environmental forces, or view socio-cultural (including demographic) factors as less *directly* tied to environment.

Hunters and gatherers

Since the first international conference on hunter-gatherers in 1966 – the *Man the Hunter* conference (Lee and DeVore 1968) – there has been a considerable widening of the approaches to the study of hunter-gatherers and their past. Emphasis has been placed upon a wider range of social, political, economic and demographic themes concerning these societies. It has also been appreciated that a considerable overlap exists between hunter-gatherer and other societies: agriculturalists, for example. As well, the evolution of hunter-gatherer societies towards varying levels of cultural complexity is being considered.

Hunter-gatherer societies, such as those of the north-west coast of North

America, which were populous, socially stratified, sedentary, with developed procurement and storage technologies, were once considered to be anomalous. That this level of cultural complexity could have developed without an agricultural component is now being given greater credence in the case of both recent and past non-agricultural peoples. Social structure, demography, aspects of economy, technology and sedentism among hunter-gatherer-fisher peoples are now recognised as being influenced by a range of key factors, including both the natural and cultural environments, together with the individual histories of particular societies. For example, many hunter-gatherer societies have had a long history of contact with a variety of neighbouring peoples, including agriculturalists, and, more recently, with quite complex societies, including states and empires. These external contacts may have produced a variety of changes in the original hunter-gatherer society (Denbrow 1984; Gordon 1984; Schrire 1984; Bird-David 1988; Woodburn 1988). In the course of time, individual societies also have fluctuated between varying degrees of hunting-gathering-fishing and horticulture. Many Southeast Asian and Amazonian horticultural groups, for example, have reverted to hunting and gathering (Lathrap 1968; Keesing 1981; Griffin 1984), while other hunter-gatherers have become specialised economic mediators providing produce to agriculturalists and others (Hoffman 1984).

In this way, the broad models used in the main studies of hunter-gatherer societies traditionally, those focusing upon ahistorical and static factors, have been replaced in recent years by more dynamic approaches. These consider long- and short-term historical processes within and between hunter-gatherer and other societies, together with the question of change (Bender and Morris 1988; Myers 1988). Socially and politically, the traditional emphasis upon the hunter-gatherer 'band' as the unit of study has also been superseded by highlighting the wider system of alliances of which individual 'bands' were a part.

The new focus, therefore, falls upon the complexity of political relations of individual hunter-gatherer societies and their neighbours, and the history of these events. Leadership and territorial disputes concerning land and other resources thus become central themes of discussion (Leacock and Lee 1982; Ingold et al. 1988a, 1988b). Indeed, the very category *hunter-gatherer* has been questioned recently, being seen as yet another narrow classification. This category is viewed as the product of broader world social formations (colonial, capitalist) of which historically these peoples were part, and by which they have been subjugated (Wilmsen and Denbrow 1990; also Lee 1992). In an attempt to surmount this so-called growing crisis, Lee advocates that anthropology and hunter-gatherer studies need to become 'a working discipline that sees science, humanism and critical reflection as three components of a single field' (Lee 1992: 41). While these final issues may at first sight appear only remotely linked to our topic, as I indicated in my Preface, they are of direct concern to indigenous peoples and their history.

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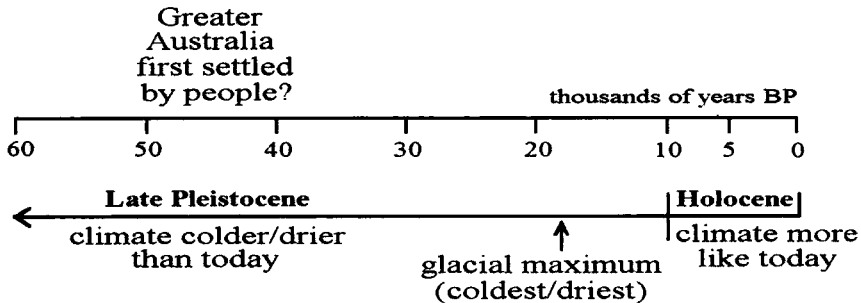
What I have here termed the traditional approach places an environmentally deterministic emphasis in interpreting the hunter-gatherer present and past; it has in the past decade or two been replaced by the acknowledgement of more complex relationships between society, demography and environment. It is now recognised that the traditional dichotomy which divorced hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies is by no means clear. Many now prefer to see a continuum of societies bridging the earlier two economic classifications (Bray 1976; Harris 1977a, 1977b; Lourandos 1980a, 1980b). For example, many hunter-gatherers practise varying levels of land and resource management, which significantly overlap with horticultural-agricultural practices. When viewed through time the continuum becomes, in part, an evolutionary cline along which differential development may have occurred; for example in society, economy, demography and technology among other areas. The cline, however, should not be seen as either unilinear or deterministic, but instead as incorporating a large number of *possibilities* and *relationships*, which may have appeared in different ways at different times in the past.

Australian prehistory – its background and data

Not all readers of this book will be familiar with prehistoric archaeological data, the way they are excavated, analysed and dated, nor with the enormous stretches of time involved (in this case 40,000 years or more), nor with the frameworks in which all this evidence is gathered, ordered and interpreted. These issues are therefore briefly introduced here.

Australian archaeological data incorporate a wide range of site types, among which the most investigated include rock-shelters and caves with their deeply stratified sedimentary sequences. More subject to the vagaries of preservation are open sites which, in coastal and aquatic regions, include shell middens, which are accumulations of shell and other organic remains and sediments. A third important group of sites includes sand dunes, which often incorporate archaeological material within their matrix. These sites are generally excavated stratigraphically by stripping off the 'natural' layers of material which have been accumulated through time, one atop the other. An artificial grid of squares is superimposed upon the surface of the site and individual squares (often one metre square or 50-centimetres square) are excavated in turn. The material from each level is then recorded, and processed either in the field or laboratory, generally both (Connah 1982). Examples of all these can be found in Chapters Four to Seven: these sites include rock-shelters and caves, shell middens and dunes.

Sites are dated most often by radiocarbon (C-14) dating, with samples taken from organic material (such as charcoal, bone and shell). Such techniques often produce generalised dates which can be equated with conventional chronology. In this book I either give the radiocarbon date itself, together with the laboratory number for identification; for example, 3,250 ± 25 years BP (Beta-1234), or a

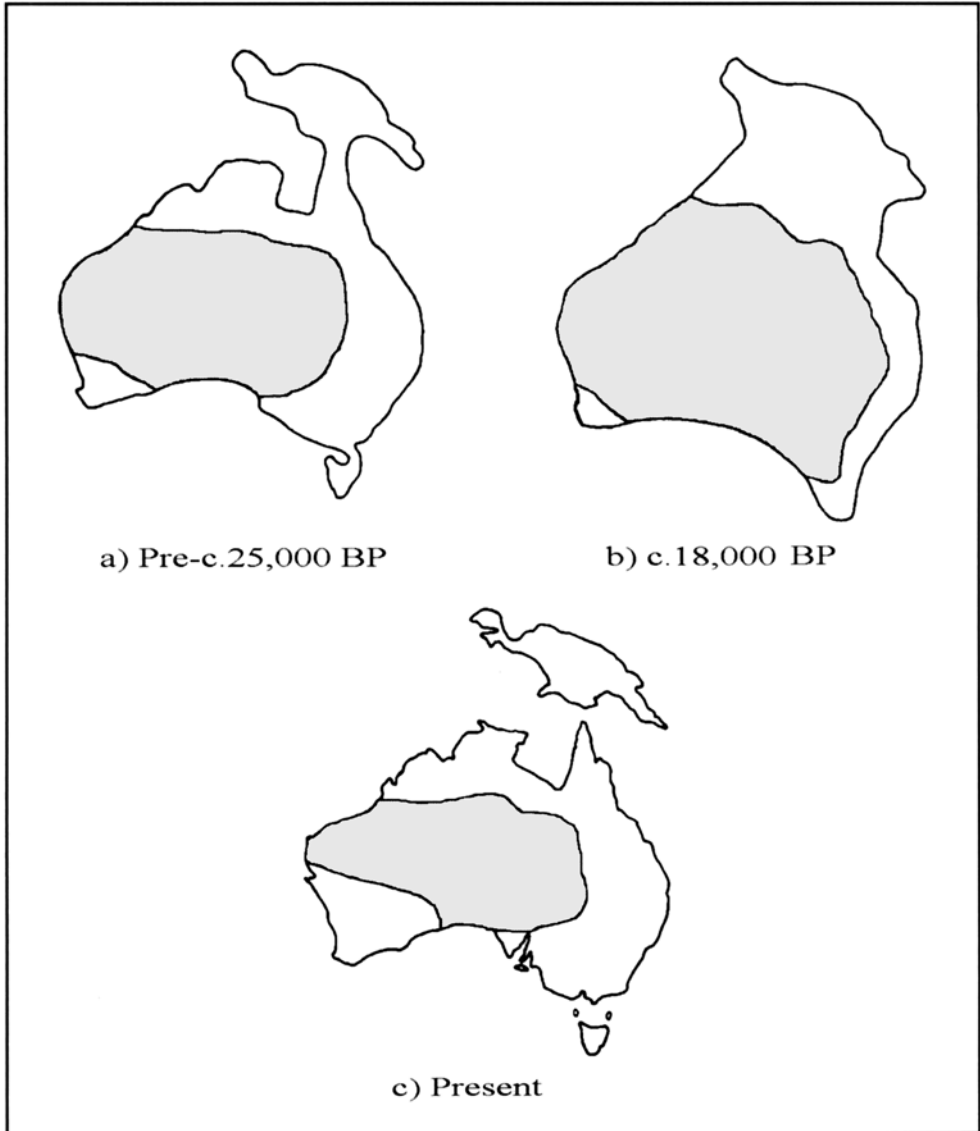


a Time chart of the late Pleistocene and Holocene periods in Greater Australia. A general climatic description is also provided.

generalised date, which in this case would be c. 3,250 years BP (that is, about 3,250 years before the present). Otherwise I present an even more general date, in this example, c. 3,000 BP, as the case may warrant. Other dating methods, based upon various techniques, are also employed.

Given the huge units of time involved in Australian prehistory, geological time periods are generally used as the basic chronological framework. In this case, the two major epochs involve the late Pleistocene (from before 40,000 until about 10,000 years ago), when the climate was generally colder and drier than today, and many parts of the earth were glaciated; and the Holocene period (from about 10,000 years ago until today), when climates more similar to today's predominated (Figure a). Each of these major climatic phases is composed of sub-phases during which changes in climate occurred, which are identified as colder and drier, warmer and wetter periods, with corresponding changes to vegetation types and rises and falls in sea levels. In general, during the period of time covered by this book, the climate became colder and drier after about 30,000 years ago, reaching its coldest, driest phase during the glacial maximum, around 18,000 years ago. Since then, conditions have generally become warmer and more humid, particularly so during the Holocene period, that is to say, the last 10,000 years. During the early Holocene, however, climate was generally warmer and wetter than today. Sea levels also fell to their lowest around the time of the glacial maximum, and have slowly risen since then, stabilising at the present level between 6,000 and 5,000 BP. In general, the archaeological prehistoric data are viewed against this environmental backdrop (Figure b).

Concentrated archaeological research in Australia is less than two generations old (Mulvaney 1975, 1979; White 1981; Horton 1991; Golson 1993), and thus only a minute sample of the potential evidence has been unearthed and analysed. As well, sites are often fortuitously discovered. The interpretations of this material, covering as they do such vast time periods and a continent the size of Europe or the United States of America, which was larger still during the Pleistocene period, can only serve as *general* models. In time, no doubt, they

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b Greater Australia during the late Pleistocene and Holocene periods. Changing sea levels and the general extent of the arid zone are indicated during three time periods (based on Ross et al. 1992: 99, Figure 5.17).

will be modified with the availability of new information and new perspectives, as indeed they have consistently been updated throughout the last forty years or so of research. Nevertheless, the interpretations and models presented in this book represent a sample of competing explanations, and the ways these have been derived especially over the last twenty years of research. The slant or perspective I have taken is of course my own, but I have attempted to focus

upon the main debates and to place these within both a national and international context of hunter-gatherer studies, past and present. I have also attempted to include as much of the relevant data and interpretations as possible, so as to let the reader make up his or her own mind.

This book

This book considers the prehistory of Greater Australia (which includes mainland Australia and the islands of New Guinea and Tasmania), together with aspects of the ethnography and ethnohistory of Australia and Tasmania, in light of the debate on hunter-gatherer cultural dynamics in both the long and short term. Chapter One discusses the above debate itself, focusing upon the issue of hunter-gatherer cultural variation in time and space. Special attention is paid to key factors, including environment, demography, economy and society, which are discussed in regard to both ethnographic and archaeological information and ways that these can be applied to studies of Australian Aborigines. Chapter Two considers Australian Aboriginal ethnography and ethnohistory in light of the preceding chapter, with emphasis upon changing perceptions, and draws comparisons between mainland Australian and Tasmanian hunter-gatherers and New Guinean hunter-horticulturalists.

Chapter Three discusses the Southeast Asian background to the colonisation of Greater Australia, and the earliest archaeological sites. The skeletal information and its varied interpretations are also considered and finally an assessment is made of environmental impact as regards use of fire and extinction of Pleistocene fauna. The next four chapters (Four to Seven) consider in detail the archaeological sequences of both Pleistocene and Holocene periods across Greater Australia, including tropical northern Australia, and its offshore islands, arid and semi-arid Australia, the temperate southern parts of the continent, and Tasmania which has been separated from the mainland for perhaps 12,000 years.

In Chapter Eight I discuss continental changes, in particular stone artefacts and their temporal and spatial patterns, and therefore their role in interpreting the archaeological record. Chapter Nine assesses the interpretations, old and new, of the ethnographic and archaeological data, and provides some new explanatory models for the prehistory of Greater Australia. Finally, Chapter Ten concludes with some general models and by placing Australian prehistory within a regional and world context.

In most chapters, in particular those covering the data, there is a section called Overview which provides a summary at the end of relevant parts; the Overview sections can be either consulted separately or skipped over, as the reader chooses. There is also a glossary of terms and some brief notes on dating methods (and their limitations) at the end of the book.

CHAPTER 1

HUNTER-GATHERER VARIATION IN TIME AND SPACE

If indeed hunter-gatherer societies of past and present did cover a very broad range in socio-cultural variation, and overlapped with other societies such as agriculturalists, how then can this be characterised? And how can we investigate changing patterns in socio-cultural variation on both long- and short-term time scales, sometimes involving thousands of years and even longer? These are the questions guiding the discussion presented in this chapter. They are directed at both ethnographic and archaeological evidence and at hunter-gatherer societies in general, with the aim of evaluating the evidence from Aboriginal Australia in later chapters.

The question of complexity

Recent discussions concerning socio-cultural variation within hunter-gatherer societies have focused upon the question of 'complexity', and in particular how more 'complex' hunter-gatherer behaviour emerged (Price and Brown 1985b; Cohen 1985). Although no consensus exists regarding definitions, the term 'complexity' generally concerns all aspects of hunter-gatherer society, and can be viewed as an elaboration of parts, including economy, demography and society, among others. Some have gone so far as to distinguish between so-called 'simple' and 'complex' categories of hunter-gatherer society and, further, to explain shifts from one group to the other (Cohen 1985; Henry 1985). One problem, however, with the latter approach is that it polarises hunter-gatherers, and thus avoids the general question of explaining the development of socio-cultural variation itself. For variation can occur within as well as between both of the latter categories. Also, by distinguishing so called 'simple' hunter-gatherers from others, it merely relocates the traditional 'towards agriculture'

debate in time – in this case, phrased in terms of ‘towards complexity’. The problem, in this way, remains roughly the same – how to explain shifts from one less ‘complex’ system to another more ‘complex’ one (see also Soffer 1985).

While in some cases a dichotomous approach might be justifiable, I suggest that in order to avoid classifying hunter-gatherer societies as one category or another we view the general range in socio-cultural variation as a continuum. In this way, particular characteristics or traits can be isolated independently of general categories such as ‘simple’ or ‘complex’. These two classes can then form the two ends of a continuum, with individual societies or traits located along it. Note that the continuum should not necessarily be seen as unilinear or directional in time or space, as no one trajectory is suggested. A varied patchwork of societies may have appeared in both time and space. The viewpoint adopted here, therefore, is that all human societies are in some ways complex, that considerable variation exists within and between societies, and that this can be evaluated best by adopting a clinal model. Individual societies may have moved back and forth along such a continuum in both the long and short term, as well as spatially. This point is well illustrated by ethnographic case studies which indicate short-term changes (for example, annual or seasonal) as well as long-term ones. Changes can be expected, therefore, in all variables, including economic, demographic and social aspects, and the cline can overlap with different societies, including agriculturalists among others. Also, we should not assume static conditions, but that these are potentially always dynamic, with general limits set by both socio-cultural and natural environments.

Long- and short-term trends

The uniqueness of the hunter-gatherer past, as compared with other human societies, is the extraordinary length of time involved. Time is often scaled in thousands of years. In order, therefore, to understand and analyse these vast periods varying temporal scales need to be employed, and on both long- and short-term time axes. Similarly, varying spatial or geographical scales also need to be considered: for example, local, regional and even more general (including continental). Questions directed at one temporal or spatial level may take on quite a different meaning in another context or at another level. For example, it would not be accurate to directly compare a short-term with a long-term observation (or interpretation), nor a local with a regional or continental one. Likewise, general questions aimed at long-term, regional or continental scales, would be inappropriate if directed at a short-term, local case study. In other words, all analyses and their frames of reference need to be clearly defined from the outset. This applies equally to the application of different bodies of theory (Marquardt 1985).

There are also obvious problems in interpreting historical processes taking

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place within these long time-frames. For example, general ecological and socio-cultural theory was not developed with these problems in mind, but usually operated on smaller time scales. Geological time-frames, on the other hand, while in nature long-term and thus able to be employed here, are generalised and therefore also limited. These general issues have been discussed in relation to large slices of hunter-gatherer time including the Eurasian Palaeolithic (Bailey 1983a) as well as Australian prehistory (Frankel 1988; Lourandos 1993), although no clear resolution is apparent. Therefore, in order to confront some of these issues, I have attempted in this book to distinguish, where possible, between different temporal and spatial scales, so as to allow for more accurate comparison between epochs, regions and their varied and sometimes competing interpretations.

Theoretical approaches

We must also consider more general theoretical approaches to issues of hunter-gatherer socio-cultural variation in time and space. The traditional approach has been to emphasise both cultural and biological adaptations (in a neo-Darwinian sense) by hunter-gatherer societies to particular natural environments. This perspective is essentially ecological (Bettinger 1991), and has a strong emphasis upon general systems theory (Flannery 1968). In North America, for example, this perspective can be traced to the school of 'cultural ecology', which has been associated closely with Julian Steward (1955), and was adopted by the so-called 'processual' archaeologists (Binford and Binford 1968; Binford 1983; Wenke 1981). The most recent developments of this approach lie in what are called 'optimal foraging' studies, which consider the underlying ecological structure and evolutionary significance of hunter-gatherer subsistence practices (O'Connell and Hawkes 1981; Winterhalder 1981; Hawkes et al. 1982; Hawkes et al. 1985).

The importance of socio-cultural factors in the process of adaptation also has begun to be more fully appreciated and, therefore, their role in long-term cultural change in the archaeological record (Flannery 1968, 1972, 1976; Struever 1968). In this way people were viewed as adapting to both a natural and a socio-cultural environment. When considering questions of adaptation, therefore, the parameters of both these environments need to be defined for particular points in time.

The debate concerning the relative importance of natural or cultural influences is complex, but generally it can be characterised by approaches either emphasising the dominance of *external* influences like environment and demography (Binford 1983: 221), or of *internal* dynamics, including socio-cultural factors (Bender 1978, 1981, 1985; Lourandos 1983a, 1985a, 1988a; Ingold et al. 1988). Often the former approach takes on a techno-environmental hue, with social factors being relegated to secondary status. At best, this theoretical divide between ecological and social or structural approaches has