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Harry Lourandos

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**Frontispiece** Garnawala 1, Wardaman country, northern Australia, 1990 (Photo: Bruno David. David et al. 1994. Courtesy of the Binjari Association, Wardaman community).

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*New perspectives in Australian  
prehistory*

**HARRY LOURANDOS**

Department of Anthropology and Sociology  
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*To the memory of my mother and her sisters*

and

*To all Aboriginal Australians*

## CONTENTS

List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xiii
Preface	xiv
Acknowledgements	xvii
Introduction: Changing perspectives	1
<b>1 HUNTER-GATHERER VARIATION IN TIME AND SPACE</b>	<b>8</b>
The question of complexity	8
Long- and short-term trends	9
Theoretical approaches	10
Investigating socio-cultural variation	11
Overview	30
<b>2 AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL HUNTER-GATHERERS</b>	<b>32</b>
Changing perspectives	32
Population size and density	35
Territory	38
Exchange and trade	40
<b>Australian and Tasmanian ethnographic case studies</b>	<b>43</b>
The tropical north	43
The arid zone	51
The semi-arid zone	54
Sub-tropical Australia	57
Temperate southern Australia	59
Temperate island Tasmania	69
Hunters and horticulturalists	74
Overview	76

## viii CONTENTS

3	OUT OF ASIA: EARLIEST EVIDENCE AND PEOPLE	80
	Earliest sites	84
	Earliest claims	87
	People	88
	Environmental impact	95
4	THE TROPICAL NORTH	112
	<b>Pleistocene settlement</b>	112
	Palaeoenvironment	112
	Late Pleistocene: c. 40,000–15,000 BP	113
	Terminal Pleistocene: c. 15,000–10,000 BP	120
	Pleistocene rock art	121
	Overview: Pleistocene settlement	123
	<b>Holocene settlement</b>	125
	Palaeoenvironment	125
	Art and social networks of northern Australia	152
	Overview: Holocene settlement	165
	Overview	167
5	ARID AND SEMI-ARID AUSTRALIA	170
	<b>Pleistocene settlement</b>	170
	Palaeoenvironment	170
	The arid zone	170
	Overview: Pleistocene arid Australia	174
	The semi-arid zone	177
	<b>Holocene settlement</b>	184
	Palaeoenvironment	184
	The arid zone	184
	Overview: Holocene arid Australia	192
	Overview	193
6	TEMPERATE SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA	195
	<b>Pleistocene settlement</b>	195
	Palaeoenvironment	195
	Pleistocene sites: c. 30,000–20,000 BP	197
	Pleistocene sites: c. 20,000–10,000 BP	200
	Overview: Pleistocene settlement	202
	<b>Holocene settlement</b>	204
	Palaeoenvironment	204
	Southeastern Australia	205
	Southwestern Australia	239
	Overview: Holocene settlement	240
7	TASMANIA	244
	<b>Pleistocene settlement</b>	244
	Palaeoenvironment	244
	Overview: Pleistocene settlement	254

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978-0-521-35946-7 - Continent of Hunter-Gatherers: New Perspectives in Australian Prehistory

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS ix

<b>The Holocene: Isolation and transformation</b>	255
Palaeoenvironment	256
Overview: Holocene settlement	274
8 ARTEFACTS AND ASSEMBLAGES CONTINENT-WIDE	282
The Australian Core Tool and Scraper tradition	282
The Australian Small Tool tradition	287
The introduction of the dingo	295
9 INTERPRETATIONS	296
Pleistocene patterns	296
Holocene patterns	300
An evaluation of results	304
Chronological trends and patterns	305
Models	307
Two new alternative models	318
Change or stability?	321
10 CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES	324
Ethnography and ethnohistory	324
Archaeology	326
Three models	327
Greater Australia and world prehistory	330
Glossary	336
Notes on Dating Methods	338
References	339
Index	383



## FIGURES

Frontispiece	ii
a Late Pleistocene–Holocene time chart	5
b Greater Australia during the late Pleistocene and Holocene	6
1.1 Models of hunter-gatherer socio-cultural change	21
2.1 A model of local group interaction	39
2.2 Culture areas of Aboriginal Australia	40
2.3 Social networks of southwestern Victoria	41
2.4 Trade and exchange, Cooper Creek–Diamantina region	42
2.5 Socio-linguistic groups, north Queensland	46
2.6 The Australian arid and semi-arid zones	52
2.7 Social networks, southern highlands	62
2.8 A group of Aboriginal men of the Upper Yarra, 1853	63
2.9 Earth mounds, Victoria	64
2.10 Large-scale drainage systems, southwestern Victoria	66
2.11 ‘Super networks’, central and southern Victoria	67
2.12 ‘Tribes’ and ‘bands’ of Tasmania	71
3.1 Sea levels of the last 140,000 years, Australasia	80
3.2 Sea routes to Greater Australia	82
3.3 An alternative route to Greater Australia	82
3.4 Late Pleistocene sites of Southeast Asia	83
3.5 Pleistocene sites of Greater Australia	85
3.6 Keilor, Victoria	87
3.7 Ngarrabullgan, northeastern Queensland	88
3.8 Ngarrabullgan Cave	89
3.9 Lake Mungo, New South Wales	91
3.10 Extinct Australian megafauna	99

3.11 Lancefield, Victoria	101
3.12 Cuddie Springs, New South Wales	107
4.1 Sites of New Britain and New Ireland	115
4.2 Matenkupkum, New Ireland	116
4.3 Princess Charlotte Bay, northeastern Queensland	127
4.4 Temporal trends, southeastern Cape York	131
4.5 Hinchinbrook Island, northeastern Queensland	134
4.6 Fish traps, Hinchinbrook Island	135
4.7 Nara Inlet, Whitsunday Islands	136
4.8 Nara Inlet I, Whitsunday Islands	137
4.9 Excavation at Nara Inlet I rock-shelter	139
4.10 Patinated peckings on rock, north Queensland	140
4.11 Holocene environments, South Alligator River	144
4.12 Sites of Alligator Rivers region, Arnhem Land	146
4.13 Art styles of northeastern Cape York	154
4.14 Social interaction, northern and western Queensland	155
4.15 Rock art, Garnawala, northern Australia	156
4.16 Rock art, Mitchell–Palmer region, north Queensland	157
4.17 Rock art, Mitchell–Palmer region, North Queensland	158
4.18 Sites of southeastern Queensland	160
4.19 Occupation trends, southeastern Queensland	161
5.1 Lake levels, semi-arid zone, southwestern Victoria	171
5.2 Pleistocene sites, arid zone, pre-25,0 BP	172
5.3 Model of arid zone Pleistocene settlement	176
5.4 Sites of southwestern New South Wales	177
5.5 Willandra Lakes and Lake Mungo, New South Wales	178
5.6 Lake Mungo	180
5.7 Holocene sites, arid zone	186
5.8 Millstones from central Australia	189
5.9 Mullers from central Australia	190
6.1 Lake levels of the last 10,0 years, southeastern Australia	196
6.2 Vegetation during period 25,0–18,0 BP, southeastern Australia	197
6.3 Temporal trends, Birrigai, southern highlands	200
6.4 The Bass Point shell midden	203
6.5 Sites of the south coast, New South Wales	206
6.6 Temporal trends, sites of south coast, New South Wales	207
6.7 Study area, Upper Mangrove Creek, New South Wales	209
6.8 Temporal trends, Upper Mangrove Creek, New South Wales	210
6.9 Fish hooks, south coast, New South Wales	211
6.10 Sites of southwestern Victoria and southeastern South Australia	212
6.11 Temporal trends, southwestern Victoria	214
6.12 Bridgewater South Cave	215
6.13 Earth mounds, Caramut, southwestern Victoria	217

**xii** FIGURES

6.14 Earth mounds, McArthur Creek, southwestern Victoria	218
6.15 Toolondo drainage systems, western Victoria	219
6.16 Section of the Toolondo system	220
6.17 Sites and time trends, southwestern Victoria and southeastern South Australia	225
6.18 The Mallee region, northwestern Victoria	228
6.19 Patterns of stone axe exchange, Victoria	230
6.20 Cemetery sites, Murray River Valley	234
6.21 Temporal trends, sites of the southern highlands	236
7.1 Pleistocene Tasmania	245
7.2 Vegetation at the glacial maximum	246
7.3 Cave Bay Cave	247
7.4 Sites of southwestern Tasmania	249
7.5 Pleistocene thumbnail scrapers, Bone Cave	251
7.6 Holocene sites of Tasmania	256
7.7 Holocene vegetation of Tasmania	257
7.8 Rock art, Mount Cameron West, Tasmania	260
7.9 North Cave, Rocky Cape, Tasmania	261
7.10 The West Point shell midden	262
7.11 Warragarra rock-shelter	263
7.12 Louisa Bay and Maatsuyker Island, southwestern Tasmania	266
7.13 Sites of southeastern Tasmania	267
7.14 The Carlton estuary site, Tasmania	268
7.15 Sites of the islands of Bass Strait	273
7.16 Tasmanian stone artefacts	275
7.17 Tasmanian bone tools	276
8.1 The Australian Core Tool and Scraper tradition	283
8.2 Pleistocene edge-ground axes	285
8.3 A waisted tool	286
8.4 Microliths	288
8.5 Stone points	291
8.6 Holocene edge-ground axes	292
8.7 Tula adze flakes	293
9.1 Temporal trends, Pleistocene Greater Australia	298
9.2 An alternative model of population growth	299

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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## TABLES

2.1	Comparative population densities	37
3.1	Late Pleistocene sites of Southeast Asia	83
4.1	Holocene sites, northeastern Queensland	131
6.1	Late Pleistocene–Holocene sites, southeastern highlands	236
7.1	Late Pleistocene sites, southwestern and eastern Tasmania	248

## PREFACE

### **Australian Aboriginal prehistory or long-term history**

In this book I have tried to take a fresh look at the prehistory or long-term history of Australia and its Aboriginal people by moving away from more traditional approaches which viewed people as part of the natural landscape, largely controlled by long-term environmental changes and trends. Hunter-gatherers, and Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines in particular, have been seen in this light; as representatives of the 'original human society', where change was minimal, and where biological and socio-cultural factors, even the number of people on the ground, were largely determined by the natural environment. In contrast, here, hunter-gatherers are seen not as passive peoples, but as people interacting dynamically with both the natural and socio-cultural world over which they had a considerable measure of control. In this way, hunter-gatherer peoples, or those whose lifestyle is predominantly aimed in this direction, no longer need stand apart from others, such as horticulturalists and agriculturalists, and people of so-called more complex societies, with whom they are so often contrasted.

I have therefore compared traditional approaches to Australian Aboriginal hunter-gatherers and their prehistory with more recent viewpoints which look to the more dynamic elements of these people's society and history. I have set the Australian information also within a world context of hunter-gatherers of both past and present. Not that there is general consensus among these recent perspectives; nor should we expect it. The interpretations, indeed the collecting of the data themselves, have taken place within a lively, competitive set of debates and discourses both within Australia and internationally. While attempting to include as much of this information as possible, and to make

reference to the growing number of participants in this young and expanding discipline, I have also tried to steer my own course, presenting my own point of view. I have attempted also to trace the development of ideas and interpretations. By presenting the information as clearly and in as much detail as possible (with referencing), I hope I have also made it accessible to readers, so that they can make up their own minds.

The evidence itself is, however, constantly changing or being modified. As we go to press new claims are being made of a radically early chronology for the prehistory of Australia. From the site of Jinmium in the Kimberley of northwestern Australia have been reported fallen panels of rock art engravings dated at between 58,000 and 75,000 years ago, and stone artefacts at between 116,000 and 176,000 years ago. The site lies below an outcrop of sandstone, on which there are circular engravings, and is composed of deep sandy layers, which have been dated by thermoluminescence techniques (*Sydney Morning Herald* 21.9.96; forthcoming in *Antiquity*). This evidence has, however, already been subjected to close scrutiny and is viewed as controversial, largely due to problems associated with the dating methods (see also Chapter Three).

### **Another people's prehistory, or history**

Traditionally, prehistory, like its data, was considered as yet another resource for scientific investigation; as there for the taking. With some notable exceptions, little consideration was given to the descendants of that past – the Australian and Tasmanian Aboriginal people – let alone their viewpoints. This attitude has now changed considerably. Australian prehistoric archaeology is now a highly politicised, complex arena of negotiation. Increasingly it has become mandatory in most states for archaeologists to negotiate with local Aboriginal communities before seeking permits to excavate, and to present them with written reports on the project when completed. Aboriginal participants are generally welcomed in fieldwork projects, and in some states this is compulsory. Today, it is becoming increasingly common for anthropologists and also archaeologists to work on behalf of particular Aboriginal communities who employ them as specialists and direct their research. Archaeology and its findings on the prehistoric past are part of the consciousness of Aboriginal communities, to use in whatever way suits them (see Pardoe 1992; Webb 1995).

The recent renaissance in Aboriginal society and culture throughout Australia and Tasmania has drawn upon, and been empowered by, knowledge of the distant and more recent past; and is embedded in a reassertion of Aboriginal identity and its association with the land. Land rights claims are central to the social and economic betterment of many Aboriginal communities, and the tie to land is often validated through traditional, including archaeological, information. Aboriginal views of the past often complement, and sometimes also conflict with, those of the professional archaeologist and anthropologist.

**xvi** PREFACE

In these ways, the situation in Australia parallels that of other countries where the recent history of indigenous people has been interwoven with that of the past; and where indigenous people have been, and are, striving to shake off the colonial past. The inheritance of colonialism includes the ways indigenous people's history and 'prehistory' was presented and interpreted, often to the disadvantage of the people themselves; often as a means of social control. The story of Aboriginal Australia and Tasmania is much the same. Unilinear evolutionary models of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, presented by anthropologists and archaeologists, which placed these peoples on the lowest rungs of the socio-cultural evolutionary 'ladder', have largely served to preserve the status quo; to keep Aboriginal Australians and Tasmanians in their place – as dependent, 'conquered' peoples, largely divorced from land, society, economy and their past. The traditional models of Australian prehistory, discussed above, with their emphasis upon the dominance of the natural environment over Aboriginal society – assigning to the latter a passive role – producing long-term stability and lack of change, have, in their own way, also reinforced these conditions.

Studies of hunter-gatherer peoples worldwide, many of whom have been subjected to similar recent historical processes, have been coloured in similar ways. These attitudes often have been projected also upon hunter-gatherer societies of the past, including those of the Pleistocene. The more recent research of Aboriginal Australians and Tasmanians has emerged from these historical and social contexts, and much, including this book, is largely reaction to what has gone before. This book, therefore, attempts in some ways to redress these unequal relations between the people whose history is being studied – the Australian and Tasmanian Aboriginal people – and the rest of us who wish to be enlightened by it.

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