

Archaeology of Ancient Australia

Peter Hiscock



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Australia has been inhabited for 50,000 years. This clear and compelling book shows how it is possible to unearth this country's long human history when our historical records are limited to the few hundred years since its European discovery.

Beginning with the first human colonization and ending with European contact in the eighteenth century, Peter Hiscock traces the ever-changing and sometimes turbulent history of the Australian Aboriginal peoples and their ancestors. While they remained hunters and gatherers throughout this time, their culture continually evolved, with their changes in economics, technology, cosmology, beliefs and social life.

Hiscock shows how this human past can be reconstructed from archaeological evidence in easy-to-read style and without unnecessary jargon or detail, yet reflecting the weight of scientific research. Including information from genetics, environmental sciences, anthropology and history, this book encompasses the wide variety of disciplines in the sciences and humanities which contribute to an archaeological investigation.

World-renowned discoveries such as the human bodies at Lake Mungo, the ice-age art sites of Arnhem Land, the deformed human skulls from Kow Swamp, the early ornaments and paintings from remote desert caves, and the puzzling giant shell mounds of the north coast, are discussed and extensively illustrated.

The result is not only a comprehensive and understandable introduction for beginners in archaeology, but also a challenging and absorbing view about the richness and variety of ancient human civilization.

Peter Hiscock is a Reader at the Australian National University where he teaches the archaeology of Australia. His work on Australian sites has concentrated on ancient technology but has also explored human exploitation of coastal and desert landscapes.

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Preface

Popular texts are needed for teaching the next generation of researchers what is known, stimulating them to overturn that knowledge and build more substantial understandings of the world as their own contribution. Teetering on the edge of the hard sciences and the humanities, archaeology has sometimes seen texts that are scientifically detailed but technical rather than intellectual in nature, while at other times texts have embraced concerns about the complexity of understanding human society but have not engaged with the scientific nature of the evidence of archaeology. Luckily there have always been archaeologists, from Gordon Childe to Peter White, who sought to balance the sciences and humanities in such a way that limitations and ambiguity of archaeological methods were acknowledged but an entertaining story of the human past could still be told. Such was my goal here. I brought to this book the conviction that an introductory text on the science of archaeology could be written without much jargon and still convey the essential logic and evidence of the discipline. The *Archaeology of Ancient Australia* reflects this approach and my perspectives as an archaeologist. Many traits in this book reflect my premise that archaeology is at its best when it is simultaneously easily read, without unnecessary jargon and detail, yet reflects the weight of scientific research; when archaeology tells the stories of our ancestors by developing inferences about their lives, without pretending that our ancestors were like ourselves or presenting fiction in the place of reasoned inference; when archaeology conveys the excitement of what we know and may learn about early people while understanding that scientific research is never diminished by acknowledging the limits of evidence and leaving those things beyond existing evidence as uncertain and mysterious.

Note about the case studies

Answers to many questions about human existence in pre-historic Australia have been offered by scientists studying materials preserved from the past; there is room for only some of them in this book. In *Archaeology of Ancient Australia* a selection of questions that have puzzled researchers are presented – questions that exemplify discoveries about the dynamic and ever-changing human past in the Australian landmass.

No book discussing the human past in a continent can be exhaustive; there are too many pieces of evidence, too many sites with interpretive difficulties, too many studies that repeat the same general interpretation. To give a clear and accessible explanation of the complex and diverse evidence that exists, and of the nature of competing interpretations of the evidence, this book focuses on a small number of outstanding examples to illustrate the archaeological investigations and the understanding of pre-history that has resulted. Places described in this book are a small proportion of the millions of archaeological sites that exist in Australia, but they exemplify the kinds of material that record past human lives in ancient Australia. Similarly the activities of pre-historic people who created this archaeological debris are examples of the many different economic and social lives that were led by ancient humans. Additionally, the few researchers featured here serve as representatives of the many hard-working scientists who have studied archaeological material on the Australian continent. Consequently, this book uses a selection of examples to deliver an account of the archaeology of the ancient Australian people, revealing some of the most remarkable and most thoroughly studied archaeological sites and objects as a way to present an understanding of the pre-historic life of this land.

Note on terminology

Choice of language not only is important for clarity, but also conveys theoretical frameworks with which we describe the world. In this book I made two choices about the use of labels. The first is that it will be clearer for readers without training in archaeology to have as few technical terms as possible, and to have complex ideas distilled to their essential meaning. Of course simplification inherent in this approach alters the content and implications of terms and concepts, and for my professional colleagues who correctly observe that, for example, my use of El Niño is not as technically accurate as ENSO (El Niño – Southern Oscillation) or that the word ‘preservation’ is not quite the same as ‘taphonomy’; I ask only for tolerance. Second, and more importantly, I have been particular with my use of labels that designate the identity of people and groups of people. For example, while I have adopted convention in using ‘Aboriginal people’, ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Aborigines’ when specifically referring to historical indigenous peoples of Australia, I have seldom used such terms for much earlier humans, despite the wealth of evidence that they were the ancestors of historic Aboriginal people, preferring instead a number of less specific phrases such as ‘humans’, ‘foragers’, ‘pre-historic people’, ‘ancient Australians’ or even occasionally ‘ancient Aboriginal people’. This was done explicitly to give readers a linguistic device to distance their mental images of pre-historic Aboriginal people in this land from the depictions of Aborigines in historical records. This is a response to the concerns voiced in Chapter 1 that the application to archaeological investigations of ethnographic pictures of Aboriginal people has often created the unnecessary view that Aboriginal people of the past and present were unchanging, a static culture uniform across space and time, a culture which had always been as it was in the nineteenth century. I recognize that such an academic distinction brings with it the danger that some readers may misinterpret this as language that denies the Aboriginality of the past inhabitants of Australia or alternatively denies present-day Aboriginal people their long cultural history. In answer I can only point to the arguments presented in this book, that archaeological investigations challenge stereotypes of Aboriginal people as timeless and unchanging, and that archaeological reconstructions of ongoing transformations in language, cosmology, perceptions of land and self, settlement, technology and economy will inevitably raise confronting questions about identity.

Acknowledgements

Errors found in this work, and in any book this size they can be expected, will, I hope, be judged fairly by readers and corrected by the next generation of Australian archaeologists. Those future archaeologists, and current readers, whatever they may think of the approach taken in this book, will, I hope, also appreciate and applaud the commitment and effort of archaeologists whose labour I have drawn on. The work of scientists, archaeological and other flavours, is exhausting and often unheralded. Fame and wealth come to few in the field of archaeology; toil and even danger have come to many. What I would like readers to take from this book, beyond an insight into the dynamism of past human life in Australia, is an understanding of the lives of so many archaeologists, often supported and aided by local Aboriginal people and interested amateurs, that have worked hard to yield the evidence I summarize here. So many have helped me directly, and deserve to be named as small compensation for their help.

I thank Richard Stoneman from Routledge for his initial enthusiasm for the project, his patience while I completed it, and his final efforts in producing the book. Many thanks also to Amy Laurens for her work in making the book happen.

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1 The veil of Antipodean pre-history

In the late decades of the nineteenth century European scientists arrived at a startling conclusion. They realized that not only had the earth existed for a vast length of time, but also humans had lived in that ancient world. The realization that people had existed in a period so remote it was long before the invention of writing brought with it the puzzle of how modern researchers could learn of those ancient lives. Nineteenth century archaeologists sometimes wrote poetically about their concern that we may never have detailed knowledge about the ancient human past before written records. For example, the Scandinavian scientist Sven Nilsson (1868), one of the founders of archaeology, described the lives of ancient people, prior to the advent of written records, as being enveloped in obscurity, while Victorian politician and scientist Sir John Lubbock (1872) employed a similar metaphor, saying the past is hidden from the present by a veil so thick that it cannot be penetrated by either history or tradition. Nowadays the task of seeing beyond this veil of obscurity, to reveal something of the unwritten past, falls mainly on archaeology, a distinctive scientific discipline. By studying the material remains of past human activities archaeologists make statements about the lives of people long dead, and reconstruct an image of their economy, social interactions and perceptions of the world.

Archaeologists now think that Australia was inhabited more than 50,000 years ago by humans who were ancestors of modern Australian Aboriginal people; but we have written records of their lives for only the final centuries of that long occupation. European sailors left written impressions of coastal dwelling Aborigines from the seventeenth century onwards, British settlers wrote of Aboriginal people and their land at the end of the eighteenth century, while in isolated parts of the continent European explorers did not glimpse Aboriginal people until late in the nineteenth century. Their documents form the foundations of many interpretations of Australian Aboriginal life during the historic period. Of the humans who lived in Australia thousands of years earlier, those historical records tell us little or nothing. For knowledge of the long passage of human occupation prior to written records, called the pre-historic period because it precedes the first written or historical documents, we must turn to other kinds of records. Archaeological investigations of the buildings, artefacts, food debris, quarries, art works and skeletons of ancient Aboriginal people who lived in Australia during pre-historic times