North of the Cape and South of the Fly: The Archaeology of Settlement and Subsistence on the Murray Islands, Eastern Torres Strait

Thesis submitted by
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September 2004

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology, James Cook University
Front cover: view of Waier (left) and Dauar (right) looking southwest from Mer
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Grandad, Arthur Richard Carter (1914 – 2004)

Thankyou for a childhood filled with flowers and veggie gardens and a lifetime of so many wonderful memories
Abstract

This dissertation describes analyses and contextualises the results of archaeological investigations carried out between 1998 and 2000 on Mer and Dauar in Torres Strait. Along with Waier these small volcanic islands are commonly known as the Murray Islands, and form the most eastern group of the formation of islands scattered between northeastern Australia and southern Papua New Guinea. Unlike the research into human occupation and subsistence in Australia and New Guinea, the archaeology of the Torres Strait Islands is by contrast a relatively recent academic pursuit. Over the last 30 years various researchers have postulated the timing of first human occupation of Torres Strait, the development of maritime and horticultural subsistence systems and the emergence of ethnohistorically documented trade networks. A lack of archaeological data, however, has prevented informed consideration of these issues.

This dissertation presents the results of the first systematic archaeological excavations undertaken in the Eastern Torres Strait, and includes the first detailed radiocarbon chronological sequence for the Murray Islands and for the Torres Strait more generally. The excavations on Dauar revealed extensive archaeological deposits of marine subsistence remains, and previously unrecorded material culture of Torres Strait; most notably, several sherds of earthenware pottery. These artefacts have provided new opportunities for investigating the traditional trade and exchange networks between the Torres Strait Islands and New Guinea that existed at the time of European contact.

The Murray Islands data illustrates the existence of a maritime subsistence base from the time of first human occupation now securely dated to almost 3000 years BP. Although plant macrofossils where absent during the excavations, evidence for horticultural subsistence on Dauar was identified through the extraction and identification of plant phytoliths and starch grains from excavated sediment samples. In combination with the radiocarbon site chronologies and changes to sediment deposition rates and assemblage densities, it is concluded that these results indicate the onset of widespread clearance and horticultural
activities on the island from at least 2000 years BP, providing the earliest date for the emergence of horticulture so far established in Torres Strait.

Dated to between 2000 and 700 years BP, the excavated pottery from Dauar suggests the possibility of sustained linkages between the peoples of the Eastern Torres Strait and New Guinea. Ethnohistoric records suggest southward trade into the Eastern Torres Strait was dominated by southwestern coastal Papuan communities, and particularly by groups of the Fly Estuary. Surprisingly, mineralogical analysis of selected pottery sherds from the Murray Islands revealed the presence of sand tempers sourced to the metamorphic and volcanic lithology of the Eastern New Guinea Highlands. More accurately, these results are concluded to portray linkages between the Torres Strait and the adjacent southern Papuan lowlands through which more discrete movements and transactions with interior areas occurred along key riverways that connected the hinterland to the coast.

The timing of human occupation of Torres Strait, the development of subsistence systems and the relationships that islanders had with the peoples of northern Australia and the western Pacific have only started to be explored archaeologically. It is concluded from the combined ethnohistorical and field archaeological evidence that settlement and subsistence in Torres Strait is a product of late-Holocene human expansions and cultural intensification previously documented for the adjacent mainlands and the broader western Pacific region. This research confirms that the archaeology of Torres Strait must be interpreted within the broader cultural, chronological and geographical context in which it is centrally located.
Acknowledgments

The Murray Islands Archaeological Project would not have eventuated without the support of the Meriam community, members of the Mer Island Community Council, the Mer Gedkem Le, the Council of Elders and the families who consented to excavation on their lands. People that deserve special esso include Chairman Ron Day, Lloyd Maza and Sam Wailu. The Passi family provided friendship and a home for me in 1998. For allowing the work at Sokoli I am extremely thankful to Andrew Passi. Esi Tapim and Walter Cowley consented to the work at Kurkur Weid and Pitkik on Mer. On Dauar life was made much easier by staying at Ormi, for which I extend much appreciation to traditional landowners George and Alan Kaddy. Sunny Passi provided assistance in the field in 1998, whom I also thank for his friendship, sense of humor and envious intelligence. Del Passi offered advice and suggestions on all manner of things, for which I am extremely grateful. Aris Kaddy provided assistance in the field and on the water in 2000, without whom my boating skills (or lack there of) would have left us high and dry more than just the once (sorry Aris, had to mention ‘the beaching incident’). To all the kids (especially Phil, Joey and Richard), thanks for fun and games on the beach and for providing some memorable light hearted moments.

Doug Bird and Rebecca Bliege Bird (University of Maine) were largely responsible for conceiving the project and allowed me the opportunity to work on the beautiful Murray Islands. Your knowledge of the islands and all things ‘Meriam’ is as inspiring as it is remarkable. Peter Veth (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) (AIATSIS) also played a key role organising my involvement in the project, for which I am thankful. Fieldwork was generously funded by a variety of grants from AIATSIS, National Science Foundation and Wenner-Gren Foundation awarded to Doug Bird and Rebecca Bliege-Bird, and a Small ARC awarded to Peter Veth. Grants awarded to the author from the Doctoral Merit Research Scheme at James Cook University (JCU), the Waikato Radiocarbon Dating Fund and AIATSIS also contributed to this research.
Peter Veth, Ian Lilley (University of Queensland) and David Roe (JCU) supervised this research, and have collectively provided valuable comments and insights, for which I thank them. The School of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology provided excellent office and laboratory facilities throughout the duration of this research.

A variety of experts contributed to the technical and scientific detail included in this thesis: Kay Dancey from Cartography at RSPAS, ANU, Jeff Johnson (Ichthyology) and Steve Van Dyke (Vertebrates) from the Queensland Museum, Phil Macguire, Northern Petrographics, Dr Mike Rubenac from Earth Sciences at JCU, Emeritus Professor William Dickinson from the Geology Department at University of Arizona, and Jeff Par from the Centre for Geoarcheology and Palaeoenvironmental Research, Southern Cross University. For your respective expertise and knowledge I sincerely thank you.

Garrick Hitchcock provided a place to stay on route to Mer and some good references from the bountiful literary source that is the TSRA. Heartfelt thanks go to those who assisted in fieldwork including Doug Bird, Rebecca Bliege Bird, Peter Veth, Tony Barham, Sue O’Connor, Jane Harrington, Ewen McPhee and Steve Beck. Laboratory work was made considerably less tedious by assistance and good conversation from Jennifer Richardson and Eleanor Thomas. Tony Barham is also acknowledged for his practical and intellectual contributions to the project. I extend special thanks to Dr Bruno David and Dr Ian McNiven (Monash University) for their collegiality and good grace during the course of this research.

Thank you to my family; Mum, Dad, Ben and Jim, for their support and encouragement during my PhD and during my years at university in general. Yvonne, Stuart, Therese, Jean and Larissa have also offered many kind words of motivation and reassurance. A special thanks also goes to Stanley (“Boogie”) and George (“Scrumple”), whose purrs have provided comfort and a constant reminder of life beyond a PhD. And finally to my husband Marty, whose unwavering love, encouragement and inspiration is embedded in this thesis – thank you for putting up with the tears, tantrums and everything in between.
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