

## A legacy to live up to – and to improve

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At 33 years of age and with 15 years in the discipline, I feel as though I am finally stepping into my era as a maritime archaeologist in Australia. I've worked and studied across the country and had the pleasure and honour of working with some legendary names in the field. My time with these archaeologists both challenged me and moulded me to become the professional and person I am today. I currently hold the joint role of Senior Curator of Maritime Archaeology at the Queensland Museum and at James Cook University.

I often thought that I missed the 'heyday' of maritime archaeology in Australia. Born a few decades too late, the seminal projects that placed Australia on the map of global shipwreck research had already taken place by the time I was old enough to know what shipwrecks were. As a Western Australian, I grew up on the south coast and embraced the coastline we are so lucky to have over there. In my early teens, I stumbled across glossy books from the team at the Western Australian Museum's Maritime Archaeology Department (e.g. Henderson 2007). I was enthralled with the iconic work completed on 'Batavia' from the 1970s (Green 1989), and I discovered SCUBA diving. All this added up to pursuing a career in maritime archaeology.

My university years were filled with analyses of famous sites, from the likes of "Batavia" (1629) wrecked in the Houtman-Abrolhos, to "William Salthouse" (1841) in Port Phillip Bay and "HMS Pandora" (1791) wrecked on the far northern Great Barrier Reef (Nash 2007). I'll admit that I was enamoured by the images of archaeologists working on underwater shipwrecks. The grit displayed by them (often working only in speedos and bikinis like something out of a movie), the exciting diving scenes and the sheer feat of recovering some of the artefacts was the perfect inspiration I needed (Figure 1). I wanted to do that—study shipwrecks in

far flung parts of Australia. Yet, by the time I finished my postgraduate degree, it was 2012, and I quickly became aware that the style of work, old school excavation seasons and nature of being a maritime archaeologist of the 1970s-1980s, was obsolete. Advances in workplace health and safety changed what was feasible and professionals in the discipline had to separate from our counterparts, the vocational maritime archaeologists, who volunteered out of passion and love for shipwrecks. I felt like I'd just missed out on witnessing and contributing to the epitome of shipwreck excavations in Australia. I'll admit it was a devastating reality.

It's taken me up until this year to realise that I am actually lucky. I'm of the generation that has come next. The generation that needs to fill the shoes of our predecessors and, in all honesty, do better than they did. We need to clean up what they left behind, finish the work left in extensive museum collections and publish long-awaited results and reports. We need to reinvestigate sites to answer questions that couldn't be answered then and fill in missing pieces of the puzzle. These delays are sometimes inevitable due to the logistics and size of shipwreck excavations, the lengthy conservation period required for waterlogged material and the inevitable lack of end-of-project funding. In addition, previous projects didn't always go smoothly, and my generation must also mend bridges from past intradisciplinary conflicts before we can move forward. In other words, we have lots to do.

Looking with a 'glass half full' perspective, I'm also of the generation that gets to truly embrace technology and see how far we can take digital and technical advances. With well-documented, excavated, and conserved collections at our fingertips we can dig deeper into these shipwrecks, their stories, impacts and significance. Shipwrecks often lie hidden away from the greater public, and perhaps that was part of the prestige of the excavations

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**Figure 1.** Maritime archaeologists lifting artefacts from “HMS Pandora” during excavations in the 1980s (Queensland Museum Network).

throughout the 1970s-1990s; that a secret part of Australia’s underwater heritage was revealed in an exciting way. We can take this a step further. The digital world is only growing, and the way in which people consume visual media and engage with Virtual Reality, immersive experiences, and 3D modelling perfectly place us to tell the stories of what we do in innovative ways. As always, it’s a balance between research and storytelling, but perhaps one that we should embrace more in the coming decades. I look forward to mentoring and working with the next generation of maritime archaeologists to become better storytellers and use these tools to rekindle the wonder of shipwrecks for the public.

I often hear people say that our world is no longer as big as it once was. Instead, I see it as bigger yet more accessible than it ever was. Digital tools allow us to easily meet ‘face-to-face’ with colleagues around the world, our collaborations are more diverse and multidisciplinary and are pushing the boundaries of conventional approaches to shipwreck research. While this is promising, the future of maritime archaeology also requires us to adapt to more than just digital technology.

We need to improve how we consider shipwreck research. Traditional approaches rarely looked beyond the colonial glory and significance of a shipwreck, and we have not yet found the balance in learning from shipwrecks and adapting our approaches to incorporate community stakeholders.

Admirable work is being completed in the world of submerged cultural landscapes and collaborative approaches to Australia’s deep past (e.g. Benjamin et al. 2020). Yet, shipwrecks sit in a tricky social space. Some of us are taking steps to change this. Maritime archaeologists are beginning to place emphasis on community-led approaches for new shipwreck research, recording and storytelling. We are flipping the tables on traditional approaches and reinvestigating sites like “Foam” (wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef in 1893) with the hopes this will have long lasting positive community benefits (McAllister and Miller 2022). We need to strive for accessibility and build alliances with our community partners.

Another interesting challenge (although certainly not a new one) is the bridge between traditional maritime archaeology and archaeology. Does a sub-discipline exist? Should it? If we pose questions that require a suite of interdisciplinary researchers to answer them and ultimately contribute knowledge to more than just the tale of one shipwreck, surely this is a start. Current Australian Research Council (ARC) projects are already highlighting this evolution (such as the new ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous and Environmental Histories and Futures). Moving towards bigger thematic ways of investigating archaeology is also reflected in our museums. Discipline-specific exhibitions are becoming obsolete; instead our stories are being told

through expansive, themed spaces that cross science and culture, merging various disciplines together. A prime example is Western Australia's new Boola Bardip Museum in Perth.

Yet, there is still a gap evident between Australian terrestrial archaeology (predominantly focusing on Indigenous cultural places) and maritime archaeology (traditionally shipwrecks). We are slowly changing (with underwater surveys for submerged cultural landscapes particularly developing), but we have a long way to go to synthesise land and underwater research, particularly where shipwrecks are concerned. Perhaps the answer lies in bigger questions and broader approaches to themes, drawing on multidisciplinary approaches. In some ways, the new Commonwealth Legislation, the *Australasian Underwater Cultural Heritage Act 2018*, has made steps to move away from just protecting shipwrecks and is a space to be watched. Ultimately, embracing interwoven stories and research, being capable of moving across disciplines and seeking alternative approaches may also make future 'maritime' archaeologists appealing in an ever-changing job market.

It is an exciting time to be an archaeologist in Australia. With the technological advances of the last decade, it's hard to comprehend what Australian archaeology might look like in 50 years. We are poised to reveal incredible aspects about our heritage and embrace new approaches. For the next generation of maritime archaeologists focusing on shipwrecks, we have our work cut out for us. We have a lot to 'finish', a lot to reinvestigate

and, hopefully, new shipwrecks that will become the next seminal sites for maritime archaeology in Australia.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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