

# Editorial

For the audience likely to read this editorial, it goes without saying that the historical archaeological exploration of Australasia's past is a worthy and worthwhile enterprise. We can look back at 30 years or more of exciting discoveries, increasingly sophisticated ways of exploring the ambiguities between the documentary, oral and archaeological data sets, new opportunities to manage the archaeological resource and expanding avenues to portray the results of our research. However, at the same time and despite what must now amount to thousands of excavations on sites covering almost every conceivable thematic type, as a community of researchers we have failed to establish many of the fundamental structures which should underlay our endeavours. In particular I am speaking of the tools and frameworks which should allow us to compare sites, and in the context of this volume, the artefact assemblages recovered from within different sites. I point out that in this editorial I draw no distinction between consultant, academic or any other form of historical archaeologist, since by our nature we are an investigative discipline and that to be a professional archaeologist must inherently mean that you are engaged in these processes of research. It is both simplistic and incorrect to point to one group and see it as 'their' responsibility to advance things. Our collective and common endeavour of better understanding the past should mean that all of us are responsible for progressively building upon our earlier findings (even if through a studied process of disagreement), and that we should all contribute to developing the means to make this both possible and more effective.

Part of our growing sophistication in Australasian historical archaeology is the ease with which we engage with discourses about class, status, gender, aspiration, ethnicity, cross-cultural negotiation and any of a number of other notions and themes which form the basis of our questions and in consequence our research designs. However, faced with that most basic request to exhibit the hard data by which we identify these qualities, contrasted to the hard data from sites which presumably do not have them and therefore prove the case, we tend to get a bit vague and nervous. This does not detract from the importance of interpretive approaches which sometimes make intuitive linkages; nor is it a bloody-minded call for a return to a hard positivist stance. However, it cannot be denied that comparative studies in Australasian historical archaeology are rarities, while a sustained application of a comparative structure across several studies is something that I have not seen at all. Could someone point out to me any instance where we have unambiguously and systematically stacked up the assemblages of a 'convict hut' against a 'free settler home' (or preferably several of each), or either of these against a 'gentry' house, or the servants' quarters associated with that house, or any of the shades beyond or between (such as 'aspirational ex-convict')? If anyone puts up their hand to insist that they have done this – and I would be happy to be proved wrong – I would also ask that they demonstrate the consistent analytical and comparative structures by which they achieved this, so that the rest of us can follow them. In theory the exploration of similarity and difference should be simple, although in practice I am not sure anyone in Australasian historical archaeology has actually done it, and if they have they have been awfully quiet about it.

Despite this, we develop interpretations that confidently assert similarity, difference, representativeness and relative significance, creating each site's role and contribution to the expanding historical understanding. Having access to documentary and oral records allows us to make nuanced associations between socio-economic or other structures and

their material culture; but what do these archaeological signatures and differences actually look like once we get beyond the preconceptions which seems to drive most interpretations?

This is not to say that current claims of similarity and difference between sites and contexts are not genuine. There are any number of Australasian historical archaeologists who, on the basis of years of experience, will generously and accurately identify all your artefacts and authoritatively tell you that similar objects or even similar assemblages were found on sites x, y and z, but not a, b and c. However, the shortfall to this situation is threefold (and this applies to archaeological research in both consultancy and academia):

- a. the intimate knowledge and extensive background research on the artefacts is either locked up in individual's heads, or in guides which have been developed for their personal use;
- b. the structures of conducting artefact identification and analysis are based on models developed and applied idiosyncratically, so if there is comparison it is only between their own sites;
- c. comparative experience tends to be based on what sites the individual has personally worked on over an extended period of time, rarely extending beyond a non-critical qualitative judgement, usually grossly characterising the whole assemblage or focussing on very specific artefact types.

The output which contains or represents this knowledge, and the structures underlying how we approach artefacts, tend at best to be implicit within theses and reports – requiring successive researchers to decode, reconstruct and reinterpret what is required, and usually adjusting these parameters along the way into new and more idiosyncratic processes. Do we need to spend months searching for identifications of what are probably common artefacts? Should we measure, weigh, or count? Do we lump our types or split them? And what should those types be anyway? Do we synthesize our data through graphs, tables, or other means, or leave them in undigested lumps forcing the next researcher to wade through? We find that we cannot compare our work to anybody else's (if we know that other works exist, since our discipline is beset with a ferocious level of data-loss) because we rarely do anything the same way.

There is of course no substitute for experience; new archaeologists have to learn the trade, including how to identify and quantify artefacts, and how to interpret the assemblages they encounter. However, as I have noted above, there is much that we could do, very quickly, to download closely held individual knowledge and establish the foundation structures which would start to free us from what seems to be an eternal cycle of reinvention. To be explicit, it is time that those of us who have spent their careers dealing with Australasian historical-period artefacts – and I make no bones that this means the folk in consultancy who spend far more time than I do actually working with artefacts – to get their knowledge down on paper to create these basic tools. The irony is that where guides to archaeological artefact identification and analysis have been made available, we eagerly use them. Most of us will have a dog-eared copy of Olive Jones' 1978 Canadian Parks Service *Glass Glossary* somewhere in our artefact analysis toolkit, close to an equally tatty copy of James Boow's 1991 *Early Australian Commercial Glass*. Brooks' 2005 *Archaeological Guide to*

*British Ceramics in Australia* may well join them, but what about the rest of the library that should be there? Where, for instance, is the guide to early Sydney or Melbourne colonial ceramics? Why have so few of the major studies undertaken either in consultancy, academic or government research been published as longer substantive studies or monographs?

Rather than imagine difficult solutions requiring lengthy syntheses, maybe ASHA as a society needs to consider its role in facilitating these processes. Many will remember that in days of yore the ASHA Newsletter also contained substantive notes on artefacts and site research (with the highlights later compiled into Birmingham and Bairstow's 1981 volume). While not wanting to diminish the Newsletter's valuable role in informing about current events, it may be that practitioners who do not want to engage with the formal refereed processes of the main ASHA journal might instead be willing to publish useful and interesting tidbits on the artefacts that they are encountering in their research – the sorts of material which could probably be taken direct from reports. On the analytical side, while the main ASHA journal should continue to fulfil its role for carefully considered papers on research, we need to discuss whether a *B.A.R.* or *Terra Australis* style series for the growing body of higher degree theses in Australasian historical archaeology would facilitate opportunities to make available longer analyses. This is particularly important, as commercial publishers invariably require the reduction or elimination of the critical methodological and substantive elements – exactly the material required for people wishing to do comparative analyses. The recently revived ASHA Monograph series could do the same for consultancy studies.

Those who have been reading the ASHA journal over the last several years will recognise that this is by no means a new critique (or maybe 'whinge' would be more accurate). Most recently a co-authored paper by Penny Crook, Susan Lawrence and myself (Crook, Lawrence and Gibbs 2003) considered that a significant step would be to try to develop some level of consistency, if not standardisation, in our efforts to describe and catalogue. In that paper we also touched on the differences between description and analysis which I will not repeat here, although the same plea for consistency could be made for analytical structures, for the same reasons of encouraging comparison. When I was originally asked to guest-edit a volume for ASHA, my first thought was that this might provide an opportunity to continue the discussion. The original call for papers asked for submissions which did one or more of the following –

- a. Presented an analysis (not simply description) of one or more classes of artefacts in a clear and preferably quantitative way.
- b. Considered methods or approaches for comparative analysis in Australasian historical archaeology.
- c. Considered how existing historic site databases/registers might be re-framed to derive comparative data, etc.
- d. Considered other aids to analysis – such as approaches to documentary research, synthesis, and so on.

The end result is a diverse set of papers which I believe will provide useful references and benchmarks for future research.

The volume opens with two broad scope papers exploring some of our analytical and interpretive assumptions. Alasdair Brooks considers the development of functional artefact categories in Australasia, raising several challenges to how we construct and employ these categories in description and analysis. Penny Crook examines the relationships between cost, 'quality' and 'value' in nineteenth-century consumerism, and suggests possible material links or indicators of these which we might consider in our interpretations of assemblages.

Maritime historian Michael Nix has contributed a welcome piece on the nature of trade cargoes and the complexities of the international export network leading to Australia, focussing on shipping from Leith between 1820–24. The convoluted processes of deciding upon cargoes, the nature of exports, re-exports, additional goods collected or disposed of en-route, and a host of other factors bearing upon what eventually found its way to the antipodes has clear implications and relevance for archaeologists trying to decode trade and consumerism in the colonies.

The main body of the journal presents a series of papers by both experienced archaeologists and recent graduates considering specific artefact types, usually illuminated by case studies. Michelle Knehans opens with a study of the material culture of pharmacy, based on her analysis of the assemblage from Dow's Pharmacy in Victoria. From this research she also draws out the potential for pharmacy tools and practice to be visible in the archaeological record, as well as the implications for our understanding of colonial health and hygiene. Kirsti Graham's paper provides an important companion piece exploring patent and proprietary medicines, commonly found in many Australasian sites. In this study she reviews advertisements in Melbourne newspapers between 1850 and 1900 to extract information which will allow us a more informed analysis and interpretation, examining factors such as relative costs, origins, date ranges and claimed efficacy, as well as archaeological visibility.

Angela Middleton demonstrates how the development of a regional nail chronology played a vital role in deciphering the development and demolition of the Te Puna Mission Station, one of New Zealand's earliest mission sites. Peter Davies' paper takes two of the most commonly found artefacts – writing slates and slate pencils – and considers not only their function but the reasons behind their persistence into the twentieth century. He also provides an interesting link between slate pencils and perceived threats to hygiene within schools.

The next three papers provide important insights into how we might standardise some of our descriptions of artefact types or classes. Sarah Colley documents a system developed for the description and interpretation of marine shells, drawing upon her experience working with the assemblage from the Quadrant Site in Sydney. Iain Stuart undertakes a critical review of how Australasian archaeologists have undertaken their analyses of bricks and proposes definitions and frameworks which should help us move towards greater standardisation in description and quantification. Maya Veres examines the anatomy of leather shoes, methods of manufacture and repair, and suggests approaches to archaeological recording, based on her analysis of materials from the Lysterfield Boys' Farm in Victoria.

Three case studies close the main part of this edition. Mary Casey explores the interplay between documentary and archaeological evidence in her examination of material culture and the construction of hierarchy at Government House in Sydney. The diverse artefacts recovered from excavations around the former Government Stables (now the Conservatorium of Music) speak about rituals, practices and complex symbols, not only at the Governor's table, but also in the servants' quarters. Martin Gibbs provides an analysis of the faunal materials recovered from a mid-nineteenth-century whaling station, then situated on the edge of European settlement on south coast Western Australia. Despite the remote location, the remarkably conservative nature of the diet gives some insights into the strategies of food supply on an industrial frontier. Barbara O'Brien, Richard Garcia and Susan Lawrence provide a very different aspect to how we approach artefacts, with their case study of the conservation of

a small pistol from a rubbish-filled 1850s mineshaft on the Eureka Lead in Victoria. This paper reminds us of the care required to ensure the long-term survival of the artefacts we recover, while demonstrating how these processes also open opportunities to contemplate the nature of use and discard of objects in particular contexts.

The concluding contribution is listed as a Short Report because it is not directly related to the main theme of the journal. However, the decision to include it in this issue was made because of its relevance to current events and as a reminder of the fragility of our Australasian historical archaeological heritage both on and beyond our shores. Physical anthropologists David Cameron and Denise Donlon report on their 2003 preliminary survey of several areas associated with the Gallipoli (Turkey) battlefields of 1915, highlighting the fact that there has been no wide-scale intensive archaeological investigation and that a variety of artefacts, including human skeletal material, is still present on the surface and vulnerable to collectors and damage. It is a sad fact that in March 2005, several months after his original submission to the journal (and in the gap between our own publication cycle), his general concerns over increasing tourist impacts were outpaced by the wholesale destruction of sections of the site for new roads and parking facilities, without any preceding archaeological investigation. In this paper he also reports on these latest problems and considers efforts to design an appropriate survey method to at least document the sites before further damage occurs.

In closing this editorial, and as a first-time editor, I would like to thank the contributors for their generosity and forbearance, and Mary Casey for both the opportunity to

undertake this and her tolerance in the face of streams of confused emails. I will never be impatient with another editor ever again, nor will I ever hand in a paper after the submission deadline has passed.

MARTIN GIBBS

University of Sydney

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