

THE SEA PEOPLE

Late Holocene maritime specialisation in
the Whitsunday Islands, central Queensland

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The Research Question

THIS MONOGRAPH describes research from the Whitsunday Islands, a group of 73 offshore islands on the central Queensland coast in north-eastern Australia (Fig. 1.1). These islands range in size from 0.4 to 10,935 hectares, averaging 333 hectares overall. They are the northern section of the Cumberland Group, a chain of islands which extends from north to south for ca. 200km.

The work presents evidence of maritime hunter-gatherers from the tropical east coast of Australia. The concept of maritime hunter-gatherers has emerged from research which demonstrates significant differences between some Holocene coastal peoples and hunter-gatherers who exploit the terrestrial inland. Most of the literature dealing with prehistoric maritime cultures relates to northern hemisphere peoples of the north-west coast, east coast and Arctic regions of the Americas and the coasts of Eurasia, especially Scandinavia and Japan (Akazawa 1988; Ames 1985; Braun 1974; Marquardt 1985; McGovern 1985; Renouf 1984; Rowley-Conwy 1983; Sheehan 1985; Yesner 1980). Such literature focuses largely on 'complex fisher-gatherers' of the Holocene, where there is clear evidence of dense populations of sedentary and politically and socially hierarchical peoples living within clearly defined territorial boundaries and closely resembling food-producing societies.

The ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence from tropical islands and coasts in Queensland clearly indicates a major emphasis on marine resources. The archaeological and historical evidence also points to permanent island-based populations exploiting a coastal fringe with an open-sea hunting subsistence base and little or no access to hinterland resources (Banfield 1908; Barker 1991a; Rowland 1983). This system, or systems, is reminiscent of the so-called 'sand-beach' peoples described ethnographically and historically on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula (Chase and Sutton 1987; Hale and Tindale 1933; Thomson 1934, 1956). These systems cannot be adequately described in the sense of 'generalised' Australian hunter-gatherers or in terms of models of generalised Australian coastal hunter-gatherers. These coastal people were/are marine hunter-fisher-gatherers, whose marine resources were the basis of their economy and whose country was composed of tracts of sea, reef and mangrove forest. It is in this context that they are best described as 'maritime hunter-gatherers', hunter-gatherers who derive the major part of their subsistence from the sea. The

social and cultural systems we are investigating, therefore, are as much social seascapes as social landscapes.

The degree of marine specialisation described in the ethnography and historical records on the tropical north-east coast has seldom been recognised archaeologically. A notable exception to this is Rowland (1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1987, 1989), whose research indicates a highly specialised prehistoric Australian marine-based coastal people occupying the Keppel Islands (see also O'Connor 1992). Indeed, I would argue that, with few exceptions, coastal peoples from the Tropic of Capricorn to Torres Strait relied heavily on marine resources for the greater part of their subsistence needs in a way similar to that described for the Whitsunday Islands and the 'sea-beach' peoples of eastern Cape York Peninsula (see Chapter 3 for discussion). Furthermore, I argue below, based on the results of the case study presented in this monograph, that these specialised systems date largely to the late Holocene, that is, after 3000 BP, and emerged from less specialised but still largely marine-based economies. I also posit that the emergence of highly specialised marine-based settlement/subsistence 'systems' some 3000 years ago in the Whitsundays was related to internally driven social forces, causing a demographic redistribution of populations in the region (see Chapter 12).

The research presented in this monograph arose from a climate of general dissatisfaction with dominant archaeological/anthropological models, which characterised the prehistory of the Australian continent as essentially conservative, static and culturally uniform (Birdsell 1979; Jones 1977b; Maddock 1982; Radcliffe-Brown 1931). Culture change, if it was acknowledged to have occurred at all, was viewed largely in terms of external factors such as environment, technology, biological population increase or outside cultural influences, over which people had little or no control (Beaton 1985; Rowland 1989). A contrast exists, therefore, between simplistic, deterministic archaeological models on the one hand and more complex, holistic anthropological and sociological models of human culture and society on the other. In all, this debate has served to polarise discussion largely between ecologically and socio-culturally oriented approaches, impeding their integration.

In the late 1980s, when the research described in this monograph was initiated, debate in Australia centred on perceived socio-cultural change during the mid- to late-Holocene period. Archaeological evidence for 'change' throughout this period has been observed in all the major biogeographical zones throughout mainland Australia. This evidence takes the form of greatly increased numbers of sites being occupied and greater intensity of site use after the mid- to late-Holocene period, as well as a range of other factors, discussed elsewhere (see Chapter 2) (Attenbrow 1982; Barker 1989a, 1991a; Beaton 1985; David 1994; Hall and Hiscock 1988; Hughes and Lampert 1982; Jones 1985; Lourandos 1983, 1985b, 1988; McNiven 1991; Morwood 1987; Ross 1981, 1985; Ross et al. 1992). While this late Holocene trend is generally acknowledged by most archaeologists in Australia (but see Bird and Frankel 1991a), it remains the subject of considerable debate. Generally, most related models in Australian prehistory have so far tended to focus on external forces of change. This is in contrast to Lourandos (1980a, 1980b, 1983, 1985b), for example, who was one of the first archaeologists to question the largely ecologically based, static models of Australian prehistory. In their stead, Lourandos (1983) proposed a model of dynamic social process effecting regional change during the mid- to late Holocene. These differences in interpretive approach have become what is known as the 'intensification debate', and its relationship to coastal archaeology in Australia is discussed further below (see Chapter 2).

It was within the framework of this debate that I began looking for a study region in which to address the issue of late-Holocene change in Australian archaeology. My objectives, therefore, were to initiate a regional study investigating mid- to late-Holocene change, in which issues concerned with 'forces of change', as proposed in various models, could be addressed. To this end, it was considered that offshore island systems would provide an appropriate source of data, as most offshore islands are remnants of older mainland coastlines. As such, they promised to reveal long Pleistocene/Holocene sequences which have been subject to marked environmental change, in particular the latest post-glacial marine transgression. Thus, the Whitsunday Islands, a group of large continental islands off the central Queensland coast, were considered to have all the requisites for the proposed research.

The specific aims of this research were:

- 1) to ascertain if archaeological changes such as have been observed during the mid- to late Holocene in other parts of Australia were also evident in the Whitsunday region;
- 2) if this was so, to examine the role of the physical environment in this process of cultural change, specifically the effects of post-glacial sea-level rises; and
- 3) to develop a model of change in the Whitsunday Islands which acknowledges the great complexity of cultural systems and also the role of internal social processes in bringing about change.