

TEACHING **ANCIENT** **AUSTRALIA**

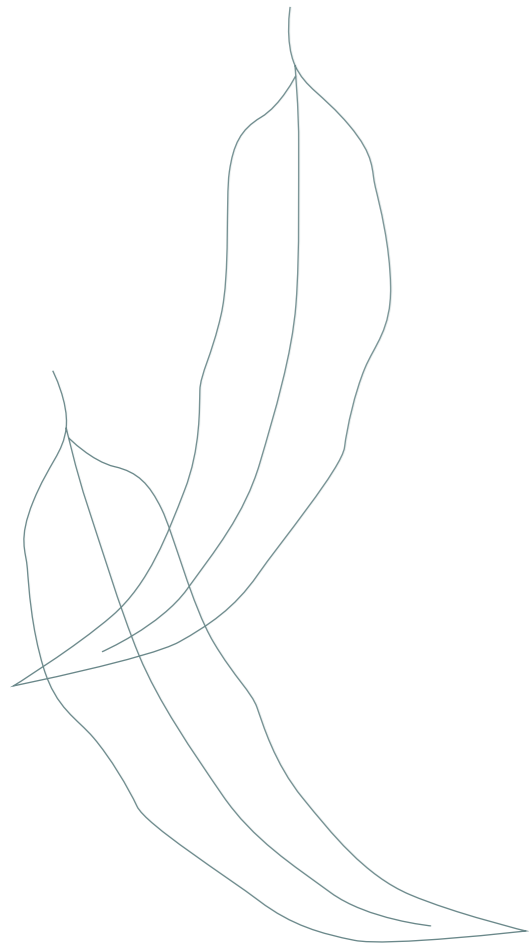
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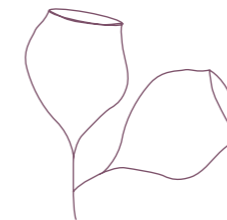
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5 Australian Innovations

Technological Inventions

A **microlith** is a small stone tool that is typically no more than one centimetre in length.

A **backed artefact** is a stone tool that has been shaped along one edge to create a thick, steep angled 'back'.

First Australians can claim many technological inventions, including the woomera or spearthrower, spears with detachable **microlithic** barbs, the boomerang and the didgeridoo. Where these first originated has long been debated.

Communities across Australia manufactured microlithic artefacts, a small tool tradition that incorporated distinctive **backed artefacts**. These expertly flaked stones, many of which appear in assemblages up to 4500 years old, were used for a myriad of purposes such as barbs for composite spears. The discovery of similar artefacts in southern Sulawesi raised the question: were microliths an Australian innovation or did they arrive with migrants or visitors from South-East Asia into Australia?⁸⁵ Early research suggested the former, with stone artefacts seen as part of a 'package' of new arrivals that included the dingo, stone spearheads, Pama-Nyungan languages, and new methods for detoxifying plants.⁸⁶

While this matched the chronologies available to researchers at the time, it is now clear that many of the above technologies appeared in different areas of Australia during different periods, often considerably earlier than examples overseas.⁸⁷ This suggests that they are the inventions of the First Australians. While backed artefacts have been found in 15,000-year-old deposits from a cave in north-east Australia, dates from Sulawesi do not exceed 3800 years ago. In this case, any link that exists must involve either a reverse migration out of Australia or parallel inventions at different times.

The theory of parallel invention can be used to explain the discoveries of inventions from different periods in widely disparate regions, such as the existence of a 10,000-year-old Australian boomerang, a 3000-year-old boomerang inside Tutankhamen's tomb in Egypt, and a 23,000-year-old ivory boomerang excavated in Poland.

We may never know what initiated such technological changes, but it is easy to imagine the implications. Families seated around a campfire. Excited chatter and laughter, changing as the night wears on to discussions about repercussions. What might this mean for the future? What new tools are required? How widely should this new technology be shared?

Shadows of these 'ground zero' moments and places may survive in oral histories. A possible example of this is Sesere of Badu Island in Torres Strait, who was responsible for a major advance in dugong hunting. In this important story, Sesere is credited with crafting a new type of harpoon as well as bamboo platforms that could be positioned over seagrass beds to allow the capture of many more dugong.⁸⁸ According to Torres Strait Islander Elders, this change resulted in a series of community reconfigurations, jealousies and skirmishes, and finally Sesere was forced to flee from persecutors.

We can take this story up using archaeology, which is the study of human history through analysis of artefacts and other physical remains. Evidence on Mabuia and Badu islands suggests advancement in maritime economies, particularly those relating to dugong and turtle hunting, from 4000 years ago. This was followed by a substantial increase in dugong hunting associated with sizeable bone middens at traditional 'villages' postdating 1000 years ago. In Case Study 4: Dabangai, you will see how Sesere's story and this 4000-year event resonate in the sociopolitical and ceremonial activities practised today on Mabuia Island.

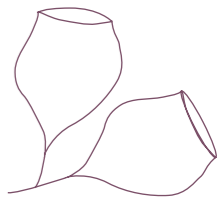
Highways of Trade and Exchange

'After chewing it [pituri] for a few minutes I felt quite happy and perfectly indifferent about my position.'⁸⁹

– John King, 1861

← Source 5.1

Excerpt from the diary of John King.



The quotation in Source 5.1 is from the diary of the only surviving member of the Burke and Wills expedition across the Simpson Desert. Close to starvation, John King met an Aboriginal man on his way back from the Mulligan's River region in south-west Queensland who presumably took pity on this unfortunate explorer. A few leaves of this powerful narcotic changed hands before the two parted, never to see one other again. There are many remarkable aspects to this story, not least the fact that King's benefactor was returning to Coopers Creek in the north-east of South Australia—a round trip of between 800 and 1200 kilometres. Moreover, this was not an isolated occurrence but a well-organised annual trip involving large numbers of people who returned with a harvest of 2500–3000 kilograms of pituri per year.⁹⁰

Oral and written histories suggest that long-distance transfer, down-the-line trade and individual exchange were common across Australia and the Torres Strait during the nineteenth century.⁹¹ Trade items varied substantially between regions: baler shell ornaments and water containers, pipe clay, sting ray spine spears, and canoe logs and nets were exported from the Princess Charlotte Bay region of Cape York, while communities in the south-west Kimberley traded stone axes, spear points, red ochre, bamboo spears, spearthrowers, grass wax and bullroarers.⁹²

Movement of these items spanned unimaginable distances. Pearl shell pendants were reputedly transported 1600 kilometres from their source in the Kimberley to the Great Australian Bight, and baler shells reached the Flinders Ranges in South Australia.⁹³ According to Mulvaney, 'it was possible for a man who had brought pituri from the Mulligan River and ochre from Parachilna to own a Cloncurry axe, a Boulia boomerang and wear shell pendants from Carpentaria and Kimberley.'⁹⁴ It was an incredibly complex system with a remarkable heritage.

Pituri's a drug, and we used it for different purposes. It was very important in our society, not only as a medicine but an item we took to put us in a different space. It was an item that was well sought after across the arid region, and we traded it widely across the arid regions of Australia. Archaeologists talk about it but they don't talk about its medicinal qualities and putting-you-in-different-space purposes. Women used it during birth. Men used it in ceremonies. Both men and women used it.

People put it behind their lips because it gives access to the blood vessels. Even when they take it out of their lip and put it behind their ear, there's blood vessels there that absorb it. It's only enhanced by the ash it's mixed with. I know people who use gumtree bark ash. Other people prefer the bark of the wattle. See I was fortunate as a child that pituri grew around. My mother was a consumer and all my aunts that grew up in the 50s and 60s. I was fortunate that I used to collect it from the hills around Alice Springs and riverbanks. The hill pituri is much more preferred than the river [pituri] because it's got much greater potency than the river one. I started putting it together for my aunties. Some liked it mixed with tobacco; some with ash; some with ash, tobacco and sugar.

No doubt in my mind Aboriginal people in the day had ample supplies to travel along ceremony. Not only for their own consumption but for trade. It was traded for ochre, for stone material. It was top of the trading pile, you could say. All those trading tracks were part of the Dreaming. Songlines. Ceremony.

– Wati Sam Juparulla Wickman, Central Australia

Wide-ranging trade and exchange patterns observed in the recent period, and described by Aboriginal Elders, appear to have a very long history. Stone axes, excavated in deposits slightly younger than 2000 years ago, were geochemically sourced to Mount William and Mount Carmel quarries in Victoria.⁹⁵ These axes, which have been found up to 700 kilometres away from their source, mirrored stories about clan connections and trade provided by Traditional Custodians. Another example involves stone 'fighting knives' and Leilira blades traded across northern and Central Australia. These knives, which measured 15–20 centimetres long and were mounted with spinifex resin on short wooden handles, have been excavated in deposits less than 1000 years old.⁹⁶ Graham and Thorley suggest that production of these knives may be considerably more recent—an innovation by communities who wanted to access exotic goods circulating within northern Australia after European arrival.⁹⁷ Finally, baler shell artefacts, which were possibly used for water containers and/or pendants, do not appear to have been transported into the arid interior until 2300 years ago.⁹⁸ Radiocarbon dates from shell fragments located near wells in the Great Sandy Desert suggest multiple incursions of these artefacts over the subsequent 2000 years.⁹⁹

Echoes of earlier trade lie buried at Puritjarra, a large rock shelter located in the Cleland Hills 350 kilometres west of Alice Springs. **Geochemical analysis** of ochre found in layers more than 15,000 years old suggests that people were using Karrku quarry 125 kilometres to the north-west.¹⁰⁰ Karrku ochre declined rapidly after this point and was replaced by ochre sourced locally before increasing once more within the past millennium. This may reflect either responses to episodically drier and wetter conditions towards the end of the last glacial period, or altered priorities among the communities who knew about and utilised this resource.¹⁰¹

Linguistic evidence suggests that a major population expansion occurred in Australia at least 4000 years ago. Prior to European arrival, speakers of Pama-Nyungan languages occupied 90 per cent of the continent (Source 5.2).¹⁰² The Kimberley region may have been the last refuge for speakers of much older and more diverse non-Pama-Nyungan languages. Linguistic distribution is eerily emulated by artefacts. Backed artefacts are restricted to Australia's southern margins, while **bifacial points** are only found in the north-west of Australia. Moreover, ground stone axes are absent outside northern Australia until 3000 years ago, at which point these artefacts proliferate.¹⁰³ While a long chronology of backed artefacts in Australia suggests internal innovations rather than external arrivals, the proliferation of many of these artefact types after 3000 years ago indicates that major changes occurred across the continent in the wake of Pama-Nyungan expansion.¹⁰⁴ Source 5.3 shows the distribution of lithic artefacts between the early and late Holocene.

← Source 5.2

The extent of the Pama-Nyungan language family across Australia.

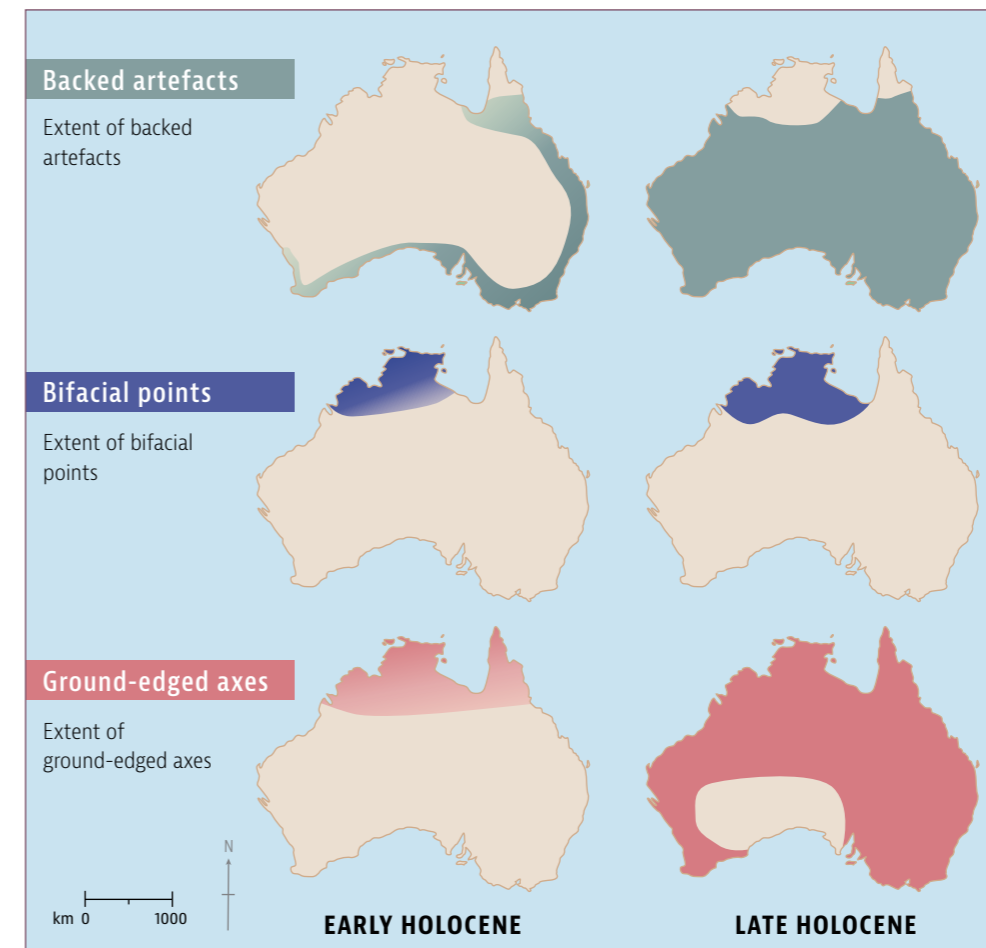
Geochemical analysis is a process by which scientists can identify the chemical compounds that make up rocks, soils and surface materials, as well as the Earth's atmosphere and its fresh and ocean waters.

Bifacial points are stone artefacts that have had flakes removed from both of their sides.



↓ Source 5.3

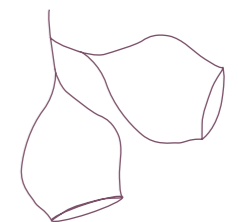
Distribution of lithic artefacts.¹⁰⁵



Australia may have a long history of interaction and trade but it does not necessarily follow that societies were open and movement was unregulated. At the time of contact, the complex 'ceremonial exchange systems' in place were structured through totemic geographies, and Dreaming trackways followed routes taken by spirit ancestors.¹⁰⁶

In an Australian context, we didn't have shops. This meant that it was all about exchange. All about relationships. This is something that Isabel [McBryde, an Australian archaeologist and emeritus professor at the Australian National University (ANU)] talked about. It was important that people had access through their neighbours, and this wasn't just about objects but also marriage ties and ceremonies. You can see that in the movement of pituri. This wasn't something that people needed for survival. It was something they wanted, and they travelled a long way to get it! Exchange was much more than swapping goods.

– Dave Johnston, Indigenous Australian archaeologist





↑ Source 1

Dabangai from above. Photograph courtesy of Associate Professor Duncan Wright.

This case study draws on permission and advice from Cygnet Repu, Chair of the Goemulgaw Kod, a cultural heritage organisation on Mabuiag in Torres Strait.

Dabangai: The First Turtle and Dugong Hunters

Roughly 8000–9000 years ago, the **Torres Strait** Islands were formed when the land bridge connecting present-day Papua New Guinea and Australia was flooded by rising seas. Communities living in this region had to make a difficult decision. Should they abandon their homes and make a break for a fast-receding mainland, or stay and adapt to new island environments? A deep bay on Mabuiag Island in the western group of the Torres Strait Islands tells us part of this story.

Before looking at archaeology, let us turn to the history of Goemulgaw, the traditional owners of Mabuiag Island. Dabangai is the headquarters for the dhangal or **dugong** clan.¹ This village was famous for great dugong hunters including Sesere, who brought new hunting methods to the Torres Strait. These included the construction of bamboo platforms over seagrass beds from which dhangal could be **harpooned**.²

The kod (ceremonial men's meeting place) in this village was an important **ceremony** centre in which formal **rituals** took place to encourage the availability of food, including dugong and turtle meat. Early European visitors describing these ceremonies noted 'enormous **banyan trees**, in the massive trunks of which the bones of the dugong were so deeply [embedded] as to seem one with the wood'.³ Although banyan trees no longer grow at Dabangai, a dhangal bone mound can still be seen on the foreshore facing great seagrass beds that are still used by present-day Goemulgaw hunters.

Archaeology digs initiated by the Traditional **Custodians** of Dabangai revealed burnt turtle bones and charcoal that directly dated between 7200 and 6500 years ago.⁴ These bones, found alongside large stone flakes and a range of nearshore fish bones, suggest that small camps

Torres Strait

A narrow body of water between Australia and New Guinea that contains many islands.

dugong

A mammal that lives in the sea and feeds on seagrasses in coastal waters. It is often referred to as a 'sea cow'.

harpoon

A spear-like tool used for fishing. The spear is attached to a long rope so that a speared animal can be pulled onto a boat or onto the beach.

ceremony

A significant public event that is often spiritual in nature.

ritual

The formal and repeated process by which people perform spiritual and other socially significant acts.

banyan trees

A member of the fig tree family, banyan trees are known for aerial roots that allow the tree to expand across a large area.

custodian

Someone who cares or protects someone or something.

Case Study 4 – Worksheet 1

'Values, Identities, Actions' Thinking Routine

Consider the case study closely and respond to the following prompts.

Values

What values does the case study invite us to think about?

Identities

Who is this case study speaking about?

Actions

What actions might this case study encourage?

Dig a little deeper. Whose actions—yours or others? Which others? Why?

Case Study 4 – Worksheet 2

'I Used to Think... Now I Think' Thinking Routine

Consider what you have learnt from this case study. It could be the key knowledge, or ideas such as fairness, truth, understanding or something else. Then, complete the following sentences.

I used to think...

Now I think...
