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R.J. Lampert
Department of Prehistory
Research School of Pacific Studies
Australian National University

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY ON PORT JACKSON, SYDNEY

Introduction

During the period April to December 1975, the Anthropological Society of New South Wales conducted an archaeological survey around Bantry Bay on the northern side of Port Jackson, Sydney. The area surveyed, formerly known as Magazine Reserve, was controlled by the Federal Government until 1974. The reserve, now under the control of Davidson Park Trust, had been closed to public access for 60 years while it was used as a naval explosives depot. The Society believed that this closure to public use would have assisted the preservation of Aboriginal relics in the area, and felt that an archaeological survey should be undertaken in 1975 to determine the nature and extent of such relics before they suffered damage by exposure to public use.

The Area

The area survey, approximately 2 km² at the head of Bantry Bay, includes several steep-sided valleys and many gullies covered with dense natural vegetation, though such introduced plants as lantana and bamboo are beginning to replace the indigenous flora in some sections. There are many exposures of sandstone appearing as low cliffs with overhangs at their base or as flat surfaces. Several creeks run down the valleys and gullies into Bantry Bay, where the rock platform and mudflats are covered at high tide. This intertidal zone carries a small range of molluscs which are likely to have provided a useful protein element in the Aboriginal diet.

The Survey

Prior to the survey, the only archaeological sites known from the Bantry Bay area were four series of rock engravings reported by W.D. Campbell (1899: Pls. 8:2, 8:2, 8:9, 9:1).

The survey was directed towards -

- (a) relocating and rerecording Campbell's art sites;
- (b) the examination of rock surfaces for other art sites;
- (c) the examination, and testing, of rock shelters which may have deposits resulting from Aboriginal occupation.

Apart from our failure to relocate one of Campbell's sites (Pl. 8:9), all three objectives were realised. Campbell's sites were recorded with texta colour on clear polythene sheeting. These sheets are currently housed with Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney.

In addition to Campbell's art sites, two sets of paintings were located, each sheltered beneath a rock overhang. One is a series of charcoal lines, while the other consists of red hand stencils, three 'foot' stencils and one 'hatchet' stencil. These sites were recorded photographically by P. Gilliland and the negatives are now in the Society's files.

To test whether the three rock shelters contained archaeological deposits attributable to Aboriginal activities, small test trenches were excavated in each. In Ban B 1 (Bantry Bay shelter number 1) very little was found other than a few shells on the surface, which may have been brought by Europeans (V.J. Attenbrow, pers. comm.). Ban B 5 produced a quantity of identifiable shell, and some evidence of post contact use in the form of nails. Ban B 3 was the richest site, revealing charcoal, mollusc refuse and a few stone artefacts. None of the deposits as excavated exceeds about 50 cm depth.

The molluscan remains show a predominance of species locally available on the mudflats and rock platforms at the head of Bantry Bay: two types of oyster, mud oyster (*Ostrea angasi*) and rock oyster (*Crassostrea commercialis*) and the Sydney cockle (*Anadara trapezia*) are most frequent, with small quantities of gastropods, some of which may have been eaten (cf. Bowdler, 1971). Vertebrates were not represented. The economic data is broadly parallel to the picture described by Bowdler (1971) for the Ball's Head site also located in Port Jackson.

Stone artefacts were rare and were made on quartz locally available as small round pebbles in the sandstone and, less frequently, on quartzite and a grey chert. The artefacts are of undifferentiated forms, mostly irregular flakes and do not include the formal types described by Bowdler (1971) for Ball's Head.

One C^{14} date has been obtained for a sample of oyster shells weighing 12.2 g from site Ban B3, test trench A, spit (4 B), from a depth of 20-30 cms below ground surface. The determined age is as follows (R. Gillespie, University of Sydney):

SUA - 593 : 4520 ± 100 BP

Dr Gillespie reports that about 15% of surface carbonate was removed with HCl acid from the shells before processing. The sample was counted for 1440 minutes. Dr Gillespie advises that the real age should be 450 ± 35 years less than the reported BP age because of the fossil C^{14} reservoir effect (Gillespie and Polach 1976). The values for δC^{13} ($0 \pm 2\%$) and Δ ($-430 \pm 10\%$) are assumed. The age is calculated using the Libby half-life value of 5568 years with a 0.95 NBS Oxalic Acid reference standard.

Sample SUA-593 is the first C^{14} date for an archaeological site in the Port Jackson region. The determined age is older than expected, though is not unreasonable in the light of dates for other coastal sites to the south of Sydney (e.g. Curracurrang: Megaw 1974:35). The apparent absence of formal stone artefact types from the three Bantry Bay sites, when considered with the general paucity of stone artefacts and high density of molluscan remains, may be due to a number of factors. Ross (1976) has shown that the Sydney Aborigines used very little stone in their artefact assemblage because of an absence in the locality of suitable stone material. The large amount of shell present is probably due to the fact that rock shelter sites in the Sydney area seem to have been utilized on a casual basis. Worgan (1788) provides a description of how these sites were being used by the Sydney Aborigines when Europeans first settled:

When they have caught enough fish and shellfish for a Meal, and feel hungry, the Men call the Women on shore, and haul up the Canoes for them. They then gather up a few dry sticks, light a Fire under a shelving rock ...
(1788:13)

A detailed report of the survey has been prepared for the National Parks and Wildlife Service of N.S.W. The field notes, artefacts and shell remains have been deposited in The Australian Museum, Sydney.

Acknowledgements

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Postscript

We have deliberately refrained from providing detailed descriptions of the various sites and their locations, and from providing a site location map. Most archaeological sites within the metropolitan area of Sydney have been damaged or totally destroyed by commercial and residential activities, including acts of deliberate vandalism. We hope that by not providing detailed information on the location of the above sites they may be spared similar destruction. Those wishing to obtain more specific location details should seek them through the National Parks and Wildlife Service of N.S.W.

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Anne Ross and Jim Specht
(The Anthropological Society of