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A NOTE ON THE DISCOVERY OF STONE TOOLS ON ERITH ISLAND, THE KENT GROUP, BASS STRAIT

Rhys Jones and R.J. Lampert

A calcrete flake found by R. Newton of La Trobe University on the surface of a sand dune on Erith Island, the Kent Group, Bass Strait, was shown to us in November 1974 by S. Murray-Smith and D. Anderson, and its location on this island was published (Jones 1977:335, 348) in a general paper dealing with the late glacial history of the Bassian region as the sea rose to re-drown the low lands which between c.24,000 and 12,500 BP had joined Tasmania to the Australian continent. Erith Island nowadays is a hard place to get to. Forming part of the Kent Group, together with the outer main islands Deal and Dover, it is situated some 75 km southeast of Wilson's Promontory with only the small Curtis and Hogan Groups and a few steep rocky stacks in between. In the other direction it is some 55 km northwest of the northern tip of Flinders Island again with only rocks and reefs in the intervening water (Jennings 1959). Standing in the centre of the stormy and treacherous eastern portals of Bass Strait, the Kent Group was way beyond the capacity of either Tasmanian or mainland Aboriginal watercraft to reach it (Jones 1976, 1977:322-332).

In area the entire Kent Group is only 28 sq km, Erith and Dover combined having an area of just under 8 sq km. Although Erith and Dover are joined at low tide, they are separated from Deal by the deep and dangerous Murray Passage which is flanked on both sides by high cliffs. As a refuge from the inundation of the Bassian Plain, the group would have had negligible potential for maintaining a long term viable human population. Prehistoric tools here can mean only one thing, that they were dropped on the island when it was one of three high peaks dominating the eastern edge of a cold and recently salty plain.

The explorer Hovell was shipwrecked on Erith, Oxley visited it, but nowadays it is uninhabited. Over the past 15 years a series of expeditions run by Murray-Smith, his family and colleagues have re-kindled scientific, historical, artistic and emotional interest in Erith as in the rest of the Kent Group (e.g. see Marginson and Murray-Smith 1969; Turner 1975:41). An invitation to join the 13th expedition in January 1978 gave us an opportunity to visit Erith Island and assess its research potential. This was a purely speculative trip and we were not sanguine of gaining any results.¹

The Swashway Saddle site²

Between Erith and Dover there is what is known among the local fisherman as 'The Swashway', a low spit of pebbles linking the two islands at low tide but covered by broken surf at other times. Overlooking this swashway is a saddle some 40-50 m above sea level

mantled with deep sand deposits, part of which is now being scoured away by the wind. It was here that the first flake had been found, and we quickly confirmed this find by discovering about a score more flakes and tools mostly heavily wind eroded on the floor of this saddle.

We left these artefacts for systematic plotting and investigation at some future date, but returning the following day in a strong westerly wind saw the sand literally covering them before our eyes. They had only been briefly exposed by the previous easterly which had also delayed our arrival on the island. We therefore decided to pick up the few flakes we could still see, and plot their positions on the site.

We found the sand deposit to be a complex consisting of at least four episodes, the bottom three each being capped by a calcreted layer, and the top by the present soil. Bones of seal, wallaby and other fauna are strewn on the eroding surfaces. While trying to make some geomorphological sense of this sequence, we noticed tiny specks of charcoal in the bottom heavily cemented unit, which also contained fragments of egg shell of what we think is emu. While absentmindedly poking into this unit, one of us came across a small flake of shining white calcrete, well embedded in the cemented sand. Charcoal samples now under examination should give an order of antiquity for this basal sand deposit.

The Great Cave of Erith²

This huge cave (Marginson and Murray-Smith 1969) like the ones at Rocky Cape and at Cave Bay on Hunter Island (Jones 1966; Bowdler 1974) was formed by an old high sea level. Its roof 30 m above sea level and its floor 20 m, the cave 8 m wide at its mouth extends 23 m into an enormous cliff of granite. A phallic shaped inclined rock of granite called locally 'Captain Brown's Prick' points up to it (see Clifton Pugh's painting in Turner 1975:Plate 6a). With vertical cliffs all around, and the foot of its steep talus being washed by the sea, it is difficult and dangerous of access, the only land route involving a dash between waves on an inclined slippery floor at the foot of a sheer 10 m wall. Accordingly, having carried some food, gear and firewood into the cave, we camped and lived there for several days.

Our aim was to dig a small sounding into the floor of this cave and to stop as soon as, or if we reached any indisputable archaeological layer. We laid out a 1 m square pit and dug through approximately 1 m of totally sterile water sorted grit. Below this we reached a brown clay containing broken fragments of bones of large animals including wallaby and wombat. One bone was heavily charred and calcined and there was plenty of charcoal. There were waterworn stones foreign to the cave. We think that this material probably evidences human occupation, but without discovering definite artefacts we cannot be certain. Beneath this was another metre of grey-brown gritty clay containing thousands of bones of rodent and marsupial mice.³ At a depth of 2.20 m, with the density of bones declining and difficulties in getting out of the pit becoming severe, we abandoned further excavation for the time being. The pit was back-filled.

In the details of its stratigraphy and the general nature of the finds, there is a strong similarity between the contents of this site and those of Bowdler's Cave Bay Cave. We believe that the clays below 1 m depth are Pleistocene in age, and that there had been a brief visit by man, though further work would be necessary to prove this.

Erith Island, although beautiful is a harsh place, and except fleetingly in the summer months or as an anchorage against winter storms it still lies beyond the realm of the human environment. Once with the sea 100 m below its present level it was a prominent landmark on the road south to Tasmania. Men camped here and we should be able to determine the approximate antiquity of such visits.

Acknowledgements

Without the logistic and moral support of the 13th Erith Island expedition, this work would not have been possible, nor would it even have been conceived of. All members gave tremendous support to us and it is invidious to pick out particular names. We must, however, especially thank Stephen Murray-Smith, Nita Murray-Smith, Ian Turner, Leonie Sandercock, Don Anderson, and our skipper to and from the island, Robert Goold. Our hosts at the Port Albert Hotel, the Brewer family, made our enforced stay because of force ten gales in the home town of John Mulvaney, particularly enjoyable.

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Notes

¹ All finds will be forwarded to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.

² We are grateful to Stephen Murray-Smith for giving us information about the vernacular names in local use for various features on Erith and other islands of the Kent Group.

³ This material is being examined by Jeannette Hope, Department of Prehistory, RSPacS, ANU.

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A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF PREHISTORIC COASTAL SETTLEMENT AT NELSON BAY, WEST COAST OF TASMANIA

Don Ranson

The survey

This paper describes the results and interpretations of a preliminary survey of archaeological sites on the west coast of Tasmania undertaken as part of a PhD project into the prehistory of the area.

During June/July 1977 I spent four weeks on the west coast of Tasmania surveying the area for archaeological sites. The purpose of this preliminary fieldwork was to familiarise myself with the archaeology of the area prior to formulating a more specific research proposal.