

ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

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The purpose of my research is to build up a picture of the traditional material life of the Aborigines, their distribution throughout the area, their exploitation of the environment and its possible effects, their material creations, in terms of dwellings, weapons, equipment, bodily adornment, their initiation and mortuary practices insofar as they are reflected in physical remains, their sacred and creative activities embodied in rock art. In this lecture I hope to give an idea of how the evidence can be used to illustrate these things, and to indicate how mindful one must be of the shortcomings of the evidence, and the problems this creates.

The area under study, the Herbert/Burdekin district, extends north about to the Tully River, inland towards the Dividing Range, and south of Bowen. North of the Herbert River there are extensive areas of rainforest and some traces of rainforest are to be found along the eastern escarpment south as far as Mount Elliott. Inland on the Burdekin and south in the Collinsville-Suttor River region the vegetation is predominantly dry sclerophyll.

The two principal sources of evidence being utilized in this study are the ethnographic literature, and the field; use has also been made of material held in museums and private local collections, and of information provided by a few Aboriginal people who still retain some knowledge of the traditional life. By 'ethnographic literature' I mean literature which concerns traditional Aboriginal life, such as diaries and journals of early mariners, explorers and settlers. Some of this material is available here in Townsville, much more is situated in places like Brisbane, Sydney and Canberra. While the second major source of evidence which I referred to, namely the field, is all within a 150 mile radius of Townsville, much of it is considerably less accessible, involving the constant use of four wheel drive vehicles, once a horse, once a small aeroplane, foreseeably a boat and always, regrettably, the feet. The kind of evidence one looks for in the field consists of campsites, middens or food refuse heaps, quarries, fish traps, ceremonial sites and art sites.

One area where the field reveals very little and the literary evidence has serious shortcomings is in relation to Aboriginal women. Unfortunately

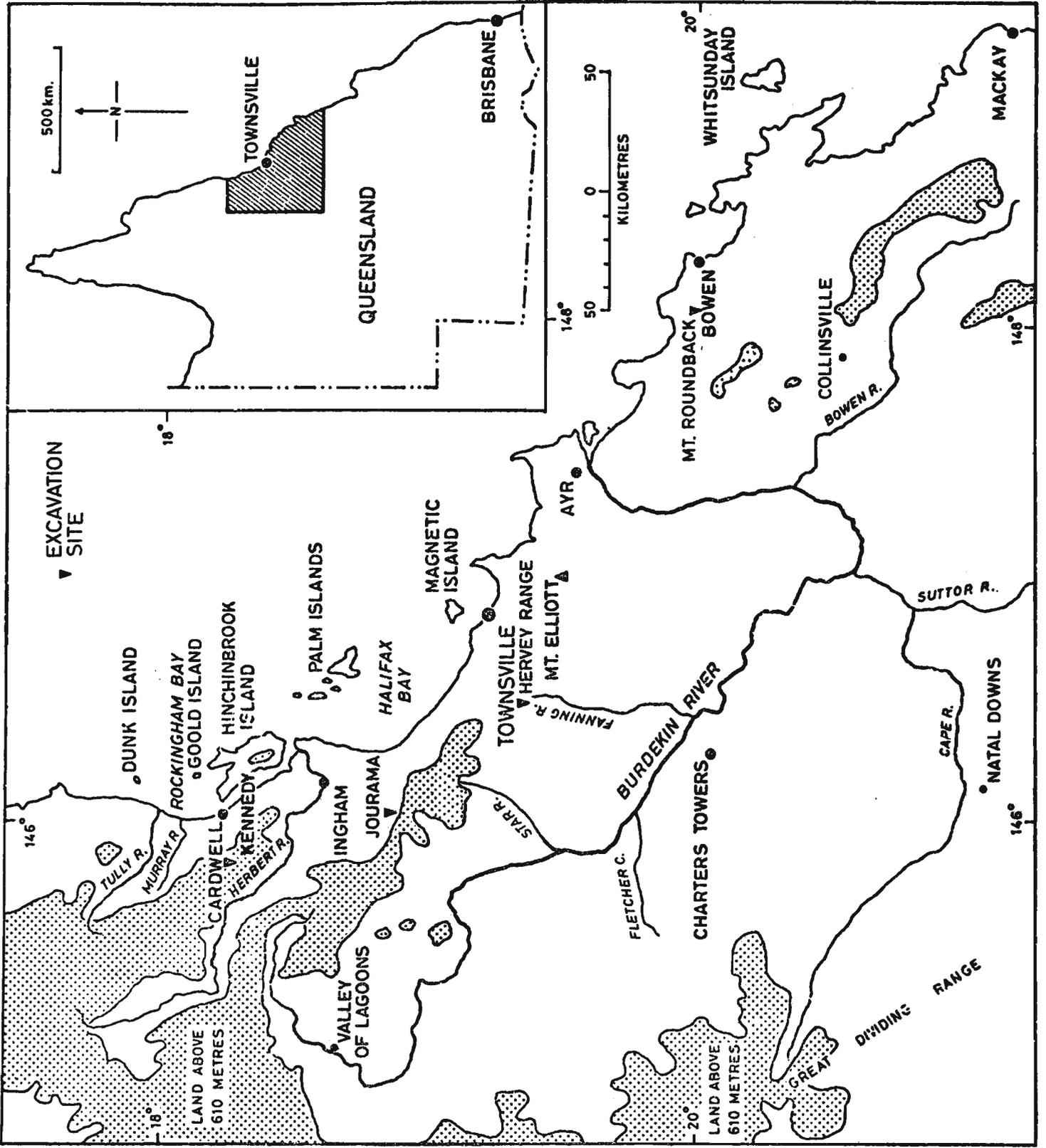
all the early explorers were men, and the picture which emerges from their reports provides vastly more information about male Aborigines, their appearance, their behaviour and their weapons. An illustration of this is that in all the journals from expeditions within the Herbert/Burdekin there is only one reference to that implement of such economic importance traditionally used by women, namely the yamstick, while there are dozens of descriptions of spears, boomerangs, shields and clubs.

Of course as is so often the case, these male explorers did not realize how economically vital women were. The labour involved in procuring and preparing food was divided between the sexes, the men's part being generally restricted to hunting game, fishing with spear and line and cooking flesh foods (Roth 1901, 3:7). As a rule, however, especially in tropical areas, the greater part of the food was provided by the women (Hiatt:7), who gathered fruit, dug roots, chopped larvae out of tree stems, caught small game and where they were available also provided crustaceans and shellfish (Lawrence: 158). The painstaking preparation of vegetable foods was also performed by the women. Casual observers were not aware of these factors, and the clearest statement of women's relative importance comes from Carl Lumholtz, who lived for many months with the Aborigines of the Herbert River:

The husband's contribution to the household is chiefly honey, but occasionally he provides eggs, game, lizards and the like. He very often, however, keeps the animal food for himself, while the woman has to depend principally upon vegetables for herself and her children. The husband hunts more for sport than to support the family with necessities, a matter that does not really concern him.(160)

It would be unfair and inaccurate to overemphasize the fault of the explorers in their failure to provide as much information about the women. Very often there was good reason. There are numerous instances of the women and children deliberately staying in the background or out of sight altogether when white men were about. For example in 1819 when other members of P.P. King's party were talking to a group of Aboriginal men at their camp on Goold Island, Alan Cunningham went off on his own and found ovens and paperbark beds where he thought the women had been very recently, but he never actually saw them. On May 26, 1848, two days after Kennedy's party had disembarked in Rockingham Bay, and although numerous Aborigines had watched

THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN DISTRICT OF NORTH QUEENSLAND



ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

every stage of the proceedings, Carron commented:

We had not as yet seen any of their women, as they were encamped some distance from us. (9)

Still in much the same area, but four weeks later, on June 19 he remarked that:

The women and children always kept further from us than the men. (20)

The only indication that the explorers might have felt the women to be less worthy of mention than the men, possibly because they could not be considered dangerous, comes from Jukes, exploring the mouth of the Burdekin River (which he called the Wickham) in May 1843, when he observed that:

Another small party of natives were on the opposite side of the river with two dogs, but they were probably women. (77-8)

The literature gives no indication of sites that are important to women. The significance of this should not be overstated as the number of specific sites it does refer to are relatively few and these have been discovered by chance, none of the European observers except Morrill having been in a position to be informed of sacred sites. Very little is known of women's sites anywhere in Australia. The fact that some have now been located, for example in South Australia, by women investigators, suggests that they may exist in other areas as well.

In some instances it has been possible to proceed directly from the literature to sites in the field with positive results. For example a note in the journal Man of 1915 (Hamlyn Harris: 167-8) to the effect that

a native axe factory evidently existed at Corner Creek, the greenstone axes being ground on sandstone rocks near the mouth of the Star River,

can be traced to the site of the old gold diggings. The quarry is quite extensive, covering about 800 metres.

William Chatfield of Natal Downs Station south-west of Charters Towers, wrote in 1886

In sandstone caves, which are numerous in their country the Pegulloburra make drawings of emu and kangaroo, and also imprints of their hands daubed with red. These latter are found on the almost inaccessible faces of the white sandstone cliffs. (in Curr: 476)

Some of these paintings also have been seen, although possibly not all. Other references to painting sites have proved less easy to trace. Referring to the years 1887-8, Hives records in Journal of a Jackaroo (92) that

HELEN BRAYSHAW

Some of them were not without artistic ability, as my brother and I found out once when we were prospecting among the ranges of the watershed between the Murray and the Herbert Rivers. We came across a large cave, in which there were many indications that it had been used by aborigines in days gone by. On the walls were several very crude drawings, done in coloured clays, representing horses and cattle. One depicted a man astride of a horse, evidently intended to be a European, as the face and hands were painted white. Another was evidently intended to be a sailing ship.

Such a site would have been extremely valuable to find, for although art recording the period of contact with Europeans occurs in places such as Cape York and Arnhem Land none has so far been seen in the Herbert/Burdekin. Efforts to find the site proved as fruitless in this case as in that of a site recorded by the Marquis of Normanby, then governor of Queensland, in a despatch to the Secretary of State in October 1872 (No. 65, QSA Gov/26). He was shown the site by Dalrymple who had found it while looking for a route across the Seaview Range for the telegraph line to the Gulf.

This rock is about 14 miles from Cardwell and has evidently been an old camping place of the natives. It is situated on a hillside over-hanging a creek of running water about 1/4 of a mile from the line taken by the new road. The circumstance however which renders this place so remarkable is that the whole of the overhanging portion of the rock is covered with Native drawings representing men, women, birds and animals. The whole of the surface is covered with a dark brown substance which has much the appearance of paint, but which the native Troopers say is composed of human blood and as there can be no doubt that the natives are cannibals, it is quite possible that this may be the case. The drawings are made upon this substance with a kind of clay of different colours, white, black and blue. They are exceedingly rude but considerable pains must have been bestowed upon them, and it is quite evident that they have been renewed at different times as traces of old drawings can be seen under those of more recent date....Having taken a photographer with me for the purpose of obtaining views of the different places I visited, I was fortunate enough to be able to have this rock photographed....The drawings are not of a very decent character, but I do not think that this will be so apparent in the photograph as in the original

Unfortunately it has so far proved impossible to find either the photograph or the original. An expedition into the Cardwell area soon convinced us that the latter was 'somewhere in the rainforest' and therefore probably secure against discovery for many years yet. These two, alas, remain in the file labelled 'sites unseen'.

ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

In spite of the difficulties Leichhardt seems to have had with his compass on the Port Essington expedition of 1844-45, it is possible to trace his movements quite closely in some areas, so detailed are his geological descriptions of the route. This is true for example of the Burdekin River in the region where it is joined by Fletcher Creek (the site of the town of Dalrymple). In April 1974, a party of us went to this area, at the same time of the year as Leichhardt had been there, hoping to find some evidence of the Aboriginal campsites to which he referred. As it was, the abnormal wet earlier in the year had ensured that there was too much grass to find anything on the ground; however, we did find one of the fig trees as Leichhardt described them.

Among the patches of brush which are particularly found at the junction of the larger creeks with the river, we observed a large fig-tree, from fifty to sixty feet high, with a rich shady foliage; and covered with bunches of fruit....These trees were numerous, and their situation was readily detected by the paths of the natives leading to them: a proof that the fruit forms one of their favourite articles of food. (201)

We actually felt quite close to Leichhardt when we found as he did, that "the figs were of the size of a small apple, of an agreeable flavour when ripe, but full of small flies and ants."

A serious archaeological problem is highlighted by elements contained in Leichhardt's journal. As he proceeded up the Suttor River towards its junction with the Burdekin he referred constantly to Aboriginal campsites, seeing numbers of Aborigines practically every day. On the Burdekin itself he saw noticeably less evidence of the Aborigines until his party reached the vicinity of the Valley of Lagoons where they reappeared in numbers. Gilbert, ill-fated botanist of Leichhardt's party, remarked as they approached the Valley of Lagoons:

Hitherto, with but one exception, we have not met with natives on the Burdekin, and very few recent traces, perhaps it may be accounted for in some measure from the openness of the country, and the very small trees; not being favourable to them for hunting...

The sort of evidence of Aboriginal occupation which they had seen so often on the Suttor River, Leichhardt describes:

The inhabitants of this part of the country, doubtless, visit this spot frequently, judging from the numerous heaps of muscle-shells. (185)

and again,

HELEN BRAYSHAW

Bones of large fish, turtle shells, and heaps of muscles, were strewn round the fireplaces. (187)

The problem is indicated by another observation, to the effect their camp was in the bed of the river amongst some small casuarinas. (162)

During the dry season it was the Aborigines' habit to camp in the sandy bed of the river, as this statement suggests. They also favoured areas immediately beside the river near waterholes. The regular flooding of the rivers each year would ensure that any debris would be effectively removed. Today, in the vicinity of the Suttor River, there is ample evidence that the Aborigines inhabited the area, in the form of small worked stone quarries, gidyea trees with holes chopped in them in the search for honey and possums, and some surface campsites where a few pieces of stone showing signs of utilization can be found, but the heaps of mussel shells and other remains observed by Leichhardt and which in other places endure for thousands of years, are nowhere to be seen. If it were not for the literature in this case we would be unaware that the environment had destroyed so much of the archaeological evidence, a process which is still going on. For example, a campsite by Rutherford Creek, a tributary of the Suttor, which I first observed in 1973 was considerably altered and reduced by mid 1974 as a result of the extraordinary wet season. Any statistical conclusions and predictions based on collections from sites subject to such variation would obviously be of dubious validity.

The literary record highlights other archaeological difficulties, difficulties which in this case may be a function of rainforest environments or at least of areas of high rainfall. There are numerous descriptions of campsites on the islands and along Rockingham Bay, for example that of Cunningham who was on Palm Island in June of 1819.

Native gunyahs or huts were standing on this shore, and the fresh remains of fires of these wanderers indicated those houses had been occupied at a very recent period, probably last night. Many beautiful shells strewn'd around and procured only from the neighbouring reef, some of us regretted were so much spoiled by the action of fire in roasting for the fish (of which the Australians had had abundant repast).

In June 1848 Carron recorded this description of a campsite near the Murray River:

ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

We came to a native encampment, consisting of eighteen or twenty gunyahs, (huts) of an oval form, about seven feet long and four feet high; and at the southern end of the camp, was one large gunyah, eighteen feet long, seven feet wide, and fourteen feet high....In the centre of the camp were four large ovens, for cooking their food. These ovens were constructed by digging a hole in the ground, about three feet in diameter and two feet deep. The hole is then filled to within six inches of the top with smooth, hard loose stones, on which a fire is kindled, and kept burning till the stones are well heated. Their food, consisting principally of shell and other fish, is then placed on the stones and baked. (15)

That the area was well populated was confirmed by Dalrymple, who when just a few miles to the south in February 1864 commented:

The whole of the open ground of this portion of the floor of the valley was dotted with old and recent "bora" (or ceremonial) grounds of the blacks...over these "bora" grounds the soil was beaten down hard and bare over a space of a quarter of an acre, like an oriental threshing floor, and generally surrounded by clusters of small, round-topped huts, covered with melaleuca bark. (1865)

Under ideal circumstances the sort of archaeological evidence one could expect to find from this kind of occupation would include the flattened areas of the bora grounds, the huts, the ovens, and the remains of fish and shellfish. The high rainfall, however, would ensure such a rapid regeneration of thick vegetation that all evidence of ceremonial grounds, where they consisted merely of flattened earth, would disappear within a couple of seasons. Huts too would disappear very rapidly as wood and other vegetable matter soon decays in damp humid conditions. The ovens described by Carron, consisting of pits filled with stones, should endure; however their presence could also be obscured by lush growth. It is possible to detect the presence of fireplaces with a proton magnetometer, but it is at its most efficient in an open environment where it can be used to cover a large area in a short time; it is expected that the dense tropical growth could present considerable difficulties in this respect. Such a device has not been tried in the north for archaeological purposes yet, but it is hoped that this will not be the case for much longer. It is to be expected however that amongst congested tropical vegetation the proton magnetometer would be more effective in assessing the potential of known sites rather than locating unknown sites.

HELEN BRAYSHAW

The food refuse, consisting of fish bones and shellfish, referred to in the descriptions of campsites, may present an archaeological problem with much more serious implications. There are numerous references in the literature to the Aborigines eating shellfish but where is the evidence? None of the observers recorded large mounds of shell refuse heaps or middens, the impression one gets is that they were usually seeing the remains of only a few meals. Roth himself actually comments on the lack of such middens (3: 7). There is a possibility that small ones do exist on various parts of the coast but certainly there appears to be nothing to equate with the numerous and extensive ones such as those further south on the east coast of New South Wales (e.g. McBryde, Figs 62 (I), 62 (II)), and those near Weipa on Cape York Peninsula (Wright 133-6):

Some of the mounds reaching to a height of over 30 feet, and dotted over a distance of from quarter to half a mile in length (Roth 1901, 3: 7).

Middens of similar dimensions are also to be found in the region of the Blythe River, Arnhem Land, (the subject of a forthcoming thesis by Ms B. Meehan, S.G.S., A.N.U.). This relative dearth of middens seems to extend along the Queensland coast from the vicinity of Hervey Bay to north of Princess Charlotte Bay. Roth (*ibid*) postulated that it

may be due to the continual shifting of the camp owing to a change of season, food supplies and sanitary reasons.

We may also ask did the Aborigines in this part of Queensland not eat as much shellfish as in other coastal areas, and if so is this because for some reason shellfish were not as readily accessible, or is it because their environment was relatively richer and offered greater food resources, thereby rendering a great dependence on shellfish unnecessary; is it in anyway connected with the reef, which seems to coincide with the area where the middens are missing, or is it connected with weather patterns, the wet seasons, or cyclones preventing the accumulation of large heaps of shells. These are just some of the questions which arise out of this apparent anomaly. The archaeological problem may be solved simply by more research in the field, though it is not unique to this tropical environment (Lathrap: 27) and its implications for archaeology as a means of research could be quite far-reaching. The problem may be simply stated: if the Aborigines themselves or the literature did not tell us, it would be very difficult to discover by purely archaeological means that this part of Queensland supported quite a large population (Davidson: 656).

ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

The most obvious type of site in almost any environment is the rock shelter, which often includes cave paintings, and has frequently been occupied for long periods of time. Throughout the Herbert/Burdekin district there are many such examples of rock art, and occasionally there is in association evidence of what appears to be occupation debris. In the literature there is no reference to Aborigines actually living in rock shelters, which may just be because none of the European observers saw shelters where they were living, or it may be that the Aborigines in this area did not actually live in the shelters, or not for any length of time. There are indications in the literature that along Rockingham Bay huts were occupied in the wet months (Dalrymple: 1865) and also in June (Carron: 15), and according to Morrill the Mt. Elliott Aborigines put up small gunyahs to live in during the wet and cold seasons. Thus the literature suggests that rock shelters cannot be regarded as occupation sites used during a particular season; other possibilities are that they may have been used occasionally by hunting parties, or they may have been ritual or sacred sites.

This type of consideration becomes extremely important when one is interpreting the material uncovered in the course of archaeological excavations of which four have been conducted in the Herbert/Burdekin: at Mount Roundback near Bowen, to the South; at Herveys Range, Jourama, and Kennedy in the north. Faunal remains in all but the Herveys Range site were minimal; there were virtually no shell remains at Herveys Range, and only small amounts at the other three sites (cf. Lampert: 1966); minimal utilized stone material was unearthed at Kennedy and Mount Roundback, though more was found at both Jourama and Herveys Range. To add to this apparent confusion, Kennedy, Jourama and Herveys Range all had varying amounts of human bone material in the deposit, which considerably complicates the problem of determining the purpose for which these sites were used. Each of the four sites seems to be unique in important aspects which makes it very difficult to deduce a pattern of usage for rock shelters in the Herbert/Burdekin. At this stage of analysis it is not possible to say with confidence that any of the sites excavated was a typical occupation site, based on the archaeological evidence, and to this extent at least the archaeological evidence concurs with the literature.

HELEN BRAYSHAW

One other area of concurrence between literature and archaeology is worthy of mention in this context, and that concerns knives and scrapers of stone and shell. According to the literature away from the coast some degree of workmanship was involved in manufacturing stone knives and scrapers which were hafted (Chatfield: 471; Leichhardt: 269). Closer to the coast and more particularly to the rainforest regions, the tendency seems to have been to use as a knife or scraper any sharp piece of stone ready to hand, rather than to expend a lot of labour on the manufacture of one. In addition, in these latter areas other materials were used, such as the spines on Lawyer cane (Roth 1901, 3: 7), or more frequently shell (Roth 1904, 7: 21; Lumholtz: 135, 193). From each of the three sites containing shell, a number of shell fragments showing signs of use wear were found, while the amount of utilized stone implements were comparatively few.

The use of independent sources, in this case ethnographic literature and archaeology, often confirms traditional suppositions, but more importantly it can stimulate new lines of enquiry in the instance of conflicting evidence. The literature relating to the Herbert/Burdekin district has shown the archaeological record to contain serious lacunae. This complicates research into the area under study, and it also questions the reliability of archaeology when employed as a sole means of finding out about the past.

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ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN

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