

CAVES AND ABORIGINAL MAN IN TASMANIA

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Abstract

The survival of archaeological evidence in Tasmania owes much to the suitable preservational environment found in shelter caves and, to a much lesser extent, in limestone caves. Cave art is almost unknown although hand stencils have been recorded. Recent work suggests that they may be the work of mainland aborigines. Extensive excavations of ancient sea caves at Rocky Cape have revealed an occupation history of some 8,000 years, while excavation of Cave Bay Cave on Hunter Island has yielded an archaeological record dating back nearly 23,000 years. Archaeological evidence from limestone caves is also increasing. In 1975, following the exploration of Beginners Luck Cave, investigations of bone deposits led to the discovery of an underground archaeological site. Dating of charcoal from the site has provided the first clear evidence of the presence of Aboriginal Man in the interior of Tasmania during the last ice age.

The survival of archaeological evidence in Tasmania owes much to the suitable preservational environment found in shelter caves and to a much lesser extent in limestone caves.

Cave painting was not characteristic of the Tasmanian aborigines although there are some historical references indicating that they painted on bark (Stockton 1976). The only cave art recorded consists of a number of hand impressions outlined in red ochre and found in two sandstone shelters in the Derwent Valley near Hamilton. The first shelter was reported by De Teliga and Bryden (1958) and has since been flooded by the Hydro-Electric Commission's Meadowbank Dam water storage. A second shelter in the same area (Meg's Mit Rock Shelter) has been reported recently by Stockton (1975, 1976) who states that "the paintings consist of three clear but faded hands stencilled in red ochre and several indecipherable lines in yellow, while on other parts of the walls of the cave red ochre marks are found, mostly in the form of irregular blobs". Examination of some three hundred other rock shelters in the area adjacent to the site has yielded no recognisable paintings although in some cases blobs of red ochre were found adhering to the walls.

The hand stencils appear to be identical to those found throughout mainland Australia. Jim Stockton has suggested that the stencils may be of post-European contact origin as a group of aborigines were brought from the Sydney area in the 1830's and used in an attempt to hunt down and capture the local natives. Hand stencils are prolific in sandstone caves in the Sydney region. It is quite feasible that Meg's Mit Rock Shelter was used as a camp by the mainland visitors as they are known to have spent some time in the general area.

The Rocky Cape Caves are ancient raised sea caves eroded in Precambrian quartzites. Several of them contain stratified archaeological deposits and two caves on the eastern side of the cape — North Cave and South Cave — have been excavated by Rhys Jones in 1964-65 (Jones 1968, 1971, 1975). He found that in both caves some three metres of midden deposit had accumulated. Aboriginal occupation began about 8000 years ago as the rising postglacial sea began to approach its present level. In North Cave at least, intermittent occupation continued until the time of European settlement. In South Cave progressive infilling gave rise to a room problem and the cave was abandoned about 3,500 years ago.

In early 1967 three children were exploring in South Cave when they discovered an additional chamber ('The Enclosed Chamber'). This enclosed chamber preserves a 'living floor' which was last occupied about 6,700 years ago after which time access was effectively prevented by the growing accumulation of shells in front of the entrance. The floor of the chamber revealed a number of small circular hearths, heaps of discarded shell, pieces of rock, bones and human faeces. Even some fragments of vegetable material had survived. Under the sloping roof, in a crevice at one end of the chamber, two pounding stones were found — one still in position on top of the other. The walls and roof of the chamber were stained by smoke and soot. The discovery was a highly significant one and caused considerable excitement at the time.

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The 8,000 years of archaeological record at Rocky Cape has yielded evidence of interesting changes in the nature of the coastal economy of the area. According to Jones (1975) it saw "the slow but steady attrition of the importance of seal which declined from contributing 95% down to 45% of the non-shellfish meat at opposite ends of the sequence, and the sudden disappearance of fish from the diet 3,500 years ago, a situation which persisted into historical times and for which only a cultural reason can be given".

Bone tools are found throughout the earlier part of the sequence but for unknown reasons their use was abandoned about 3,500 years ago. The sequence of stone implements shows an increasing emphasis on the use of exotic materials for the manufacture of tools – some of the raw material having come from as far as 80 km away from the site.

Of outstanding significance in recognizing the antiquity of Man in Tasmania has been the excavation of Cave Bay Cave on Hunter Island off the north-west coast of the state by Sandra Bowdler of the Australian National University (Bowdler 1974a,b, 1975).

The main period of Pleistocene occupation of Cave Bay Cave was between 23,000 and 18,000 years ago with an isolated hearth dated at 15,500 years BP. During this time the last Ice Age was still in full swing and sea level was much lower than it is today. Hunter Island was not then an island but connected to Tasmania which itself had a land connection with the Australian mainland. At that time the site would have looked out across extensive plains instead of the waters of Bass Strait as it does today.

After the island had been cut off by the rising sea it was still visited by the aborigines from time to time using bark canoes. Holocene shell middens which overlie the older Pleistocene deposits have been dated at approximately 2,500, 4,000 and 7,000 years ago (Bowdler, pers comm).

The Pleistocene deposits have yielded significant amounts of bone materials – both mammals and birds are represented. Well made and beautifully finished bone points have also been recovered. Some of the mammals recorded from the deposits are no longer present on Hunter Island but are still found on the Tasmanian mainland to the south. None of the bones belong to extinct species despite the considerable age of the lower layers of the deposit. This is all the more curious since a non-archaeological cave bone site, recently excavated by Peter Murray and the author near Montagu in northwestern Tasmania, has yielded remains of no less than six extinct species (Murray and Goede, in press). The site appears to be significantly younger than the basal deposits at the Cave Bay Cave site on the evidence available so far. This raises interesting questions about the relationships between early Man and many extinct Pleistocene marsupials (Jones 1968).

Another reason for the importance of the Cave Bay Cave site is that it is the first cave in Tasmania from which a pollen stratigraphy has been obtained (Hope, pers comm). This has given valuable information about the vegetation at the time when early Man was living in the area.

Archaeological evidence from limestone caves is limited but increasing. Gill (1968) recorded a bone implement from a cave fill, exposed in a limestone quarry at Flowery Gully. Unfortunately no stratigraphic information on this site has been recorded. Carbon 14 dating of the deposit was carried out on a mixed sample of bone and charcoal and suggested an age of some 7,000 years. However, bone is a notoriously unreliable material for carbon 14 dating and often yields a date significantly younger than the true age.

In 1975, following the exploration of Beginners Luck Cave in the Florentine Valley, investigations of bone deposits by Peter Murray and the author have led to the discovery of an underground archaeological site (Goede and Murray, in press). Finds included one probable bone point and four stone artifacts (Plates 1 and 2) associated with charcoal and charred bone fragments as well as spirally fractured and butcher-marked bones. The bone material identified belongs to eight species of mammals and two of birds. Figure 1 shows an interpretation of the evolutionary sequence of cave development and depositional phases that appears to have occurred at the site.

Carbon 14 dating of the associated charcoal has provided a date of 12,600 \pm 200 years. This is the first clear evidence of the presence of Aboriginal Man in the interior of Tasmania during the last ice age. The find is of considerable significance since it had been widely believed that during late glacial times the interior of Tasmania was inhospitable and probably uninhabited (Jones 1968, Davies 1974).

Recent evidence from pollen profiles (Macphail 1975) indicates that Tasmanian vegetation in late glacial times was much more open than it is today. It now appears that the broad valleys of the interior of Southern Tasmania were much more accessible to Man at that time than they have been ever since and probably contained a more varied fauna. The present day natural vegetation of the Florentine Valley is a dense wet sclerophyll forest poor in animal life. There is no evidence that the area was visited by the aborigines at any time during the Holocene. Late Pleistocene excursions

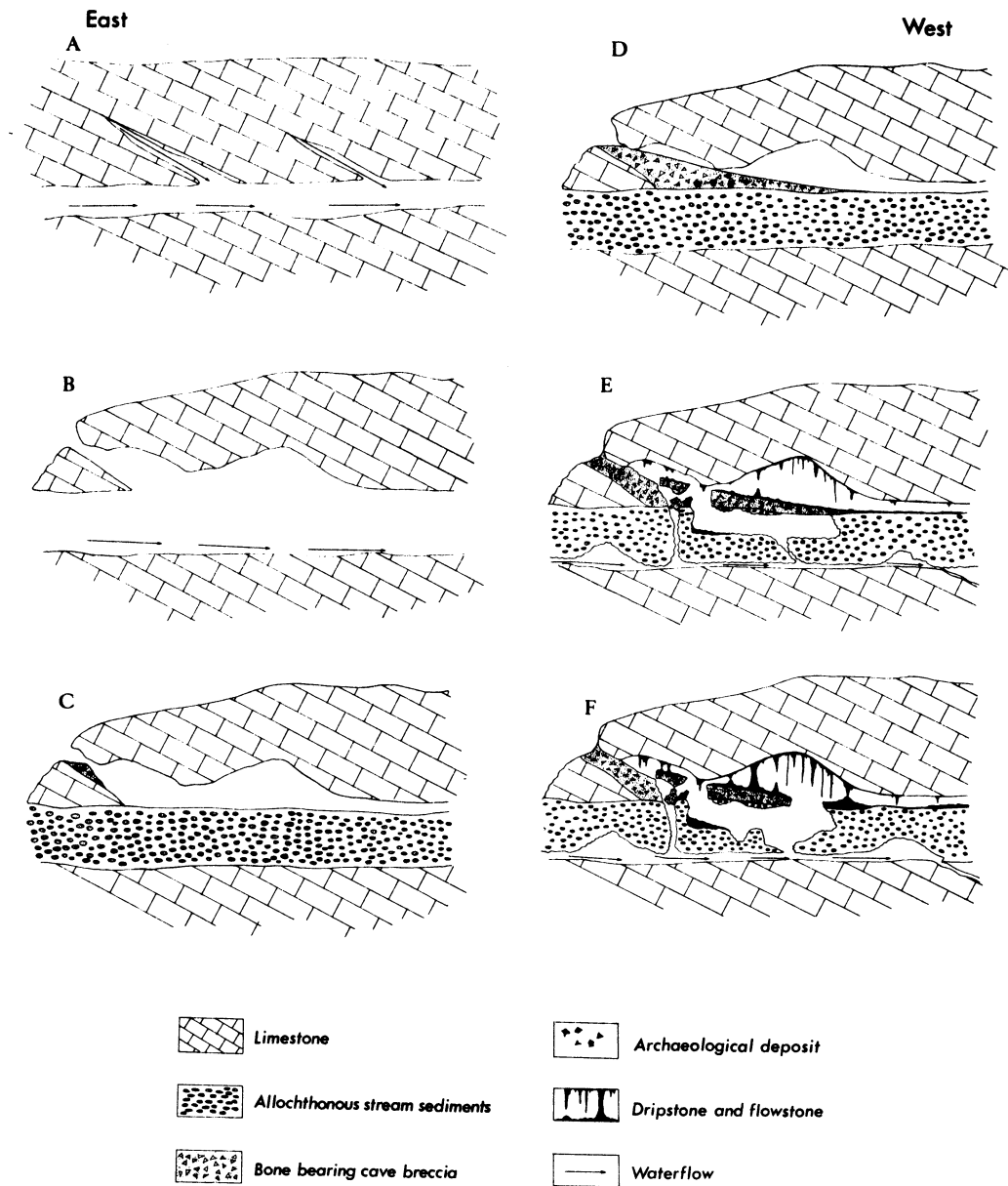


Fig. 1. An interpretation of the evolutionary sequence of cave development and depositional phases at site P, Beginners Luck Cave, Florentine Valley.

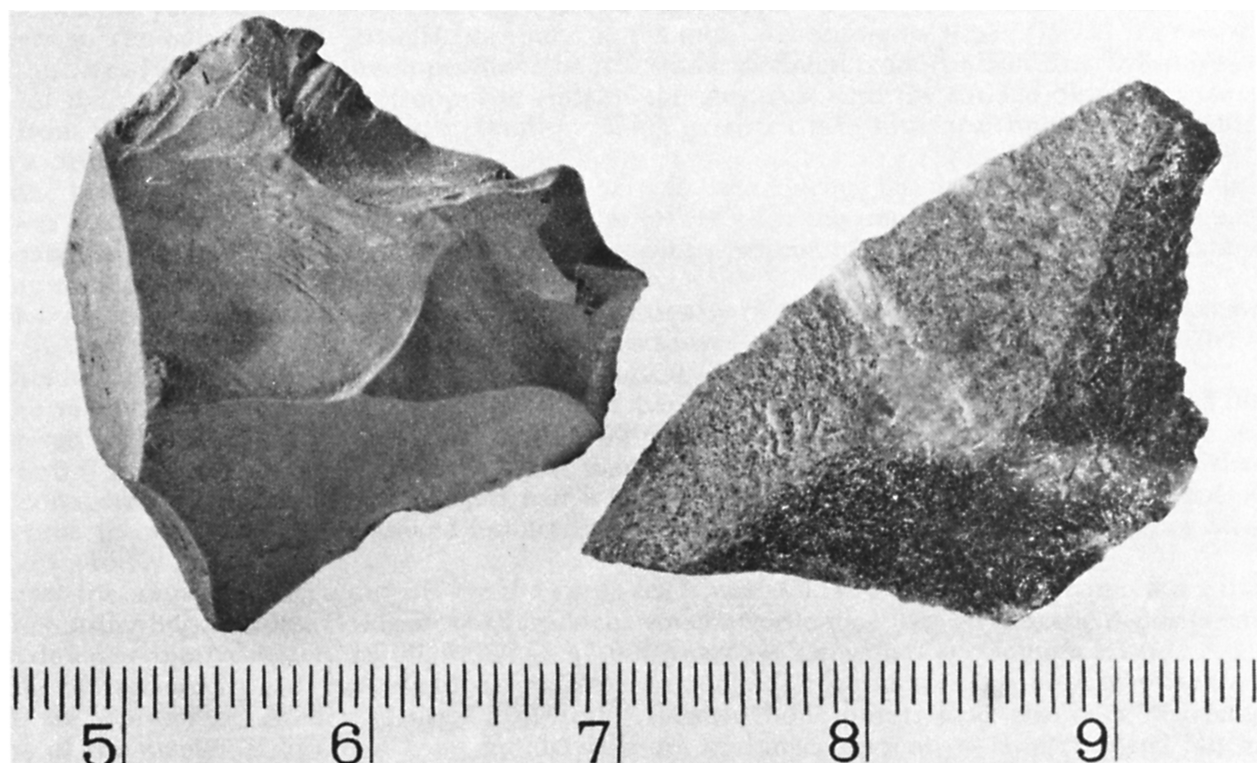
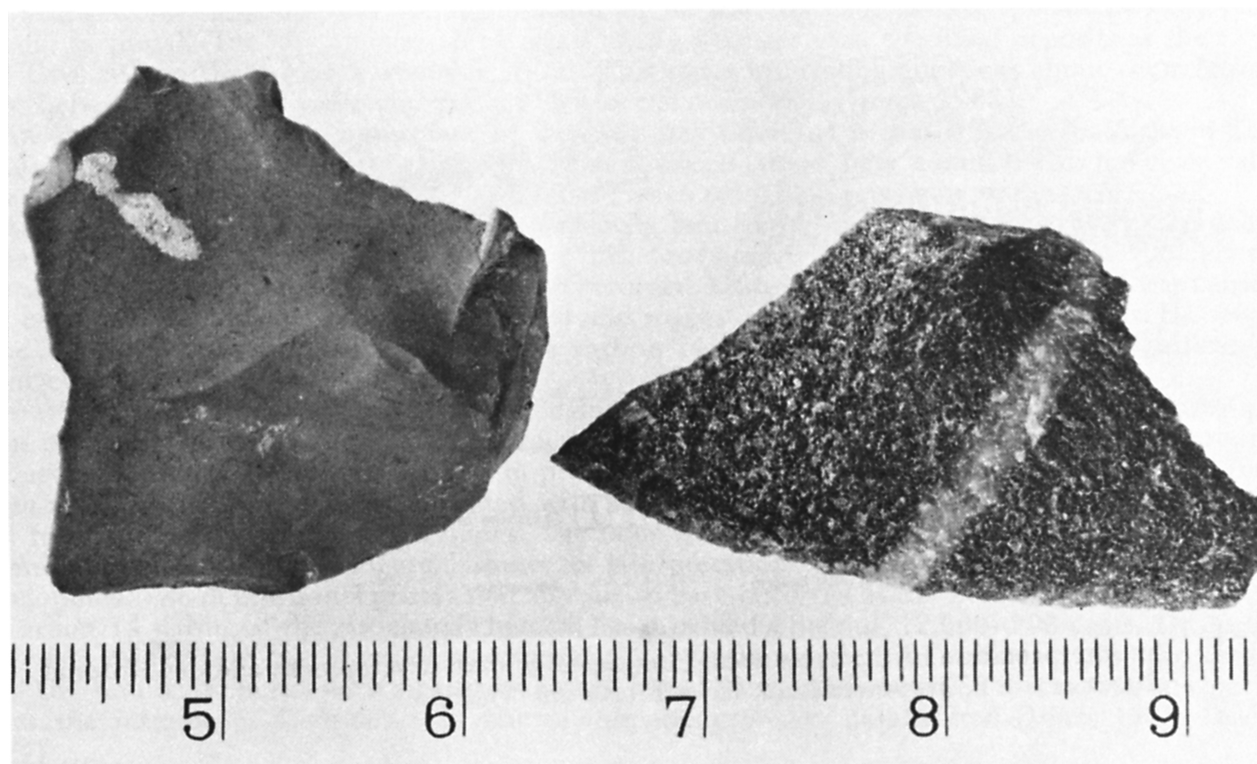


Plate 1



Plates 1 & 2. Two of the Pleistocene stone artifacts recovered from site P in Beginners Luck Cave, Florentine Valley.

inland were probably made by small hunting parties making use of spells of fine weather during the summer months.

A particularly interesting discovery supporting this idea was made when bird bones recovered from the Beginners Luck archaeological site were identified by Jerry van Tets of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research (Van Tets, in prep.). They included two bones belonging to the Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*), popularly known as a mutton bird. Van Tets believes that the most likely explanation for its presence is that it was picked up on the coast by Man and carried to the cave as food, or the bones may have been used as ornaments.

The discovery of the Beginners Luck site suggests the possibility that archaeological sites may be found in limestone caves in other inland areas in Western Tasmania despite the fact that such areas do not appear to have been occupied and exploited by Aboriginal Man since the Pleistocene.

Speleologists in Tasmania can be of considerable assistance in adding to our archaeological evidence from caves by reporting the presence of bones, charcoal and artifacts in cave deposits. However, such evidence should *never* be removed from a site by amateur cavers since the position of archaeological material within the deposit and the nature of the sediments surrounding such material can yield information of archaeological value.

Exploration of sea caves could also be very rewarding as it is becoming clear that most of our larger sea caves, whether active or abandoned, predate the last ice age. Many of them would have been located considerable distances inland during the times of low sea levels associated with cold climate conditions. Some would have provided suitable shelter for Aboriginal Man. Where sedimentary deposits are exposed in such caves they should be closely inspected for the presence of archaeological material.

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