

Tasmanian Pre-History: Recent Research

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Abstract

This article presents a broad chronological outline of Tasmanian prehistory, and looks at some of the recent research findings which have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of Tasmania's past human occupation. High quality research is recognised as a prerequisite for informed present day Aboriginal site management.

Tasmanian pre-history - a broad outline

A land bridge linking Tasmania and the Australian mainland has emerged intermittently over the past 50,000 years (Blom 1988). By 30,000 years ago people were inhabiting the inland central southern and south west regions of Tasmania (Cosgrove 1989), and continued to do so throughout the last ice-age, though perhaps only seasonally, until 11,600 years ago (Cosgrove 1989, Jones 1987) when people appear to have withdrawn from the region. The expansion of forests into areas that were previously grassland/heathland dominated landscapes is the main explanation given for this abandonment (e.g. Kiernan *et al.*, 1983).

Evidence for low intensity occupation of the Bassian Plain during the last ice-age is known from two sites - one on Hunter Island, and the other in the Furneaux Island group.

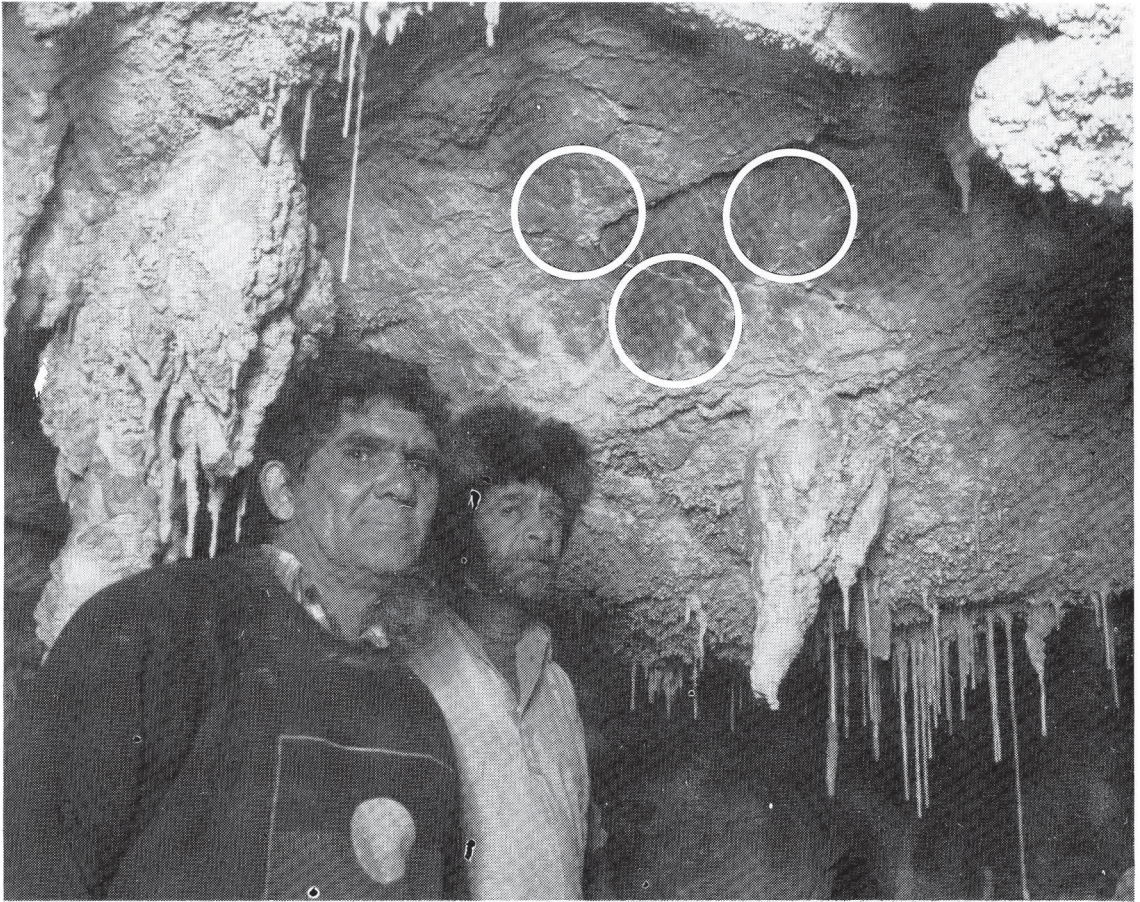
For the period 11,000 to 8,000 years ago there is evidence of low intensity occupation from only northern Tasmania and the upper Derwent Valley. From 8,000 years ago, as sea levels approached those of the present day, there is evidence of permanent human presence on the central north coast (including

Rocky Cape) and south east coastal regions of the State. Also at about this time the land bridge was cut and King and Flinders Island were abandoned (Sim 1989).

Around 4,500 years ago there begins a permanent, though perhaps seasonal, human presence in the inland areas of south east Tasmania (Jones and Ferguson 1987) and perhaps also of the central east coast (Lourandos 1970, Brown in prep.). This expansion of 'territory' continued between 4,000 and 2,000 years ago to include the west coast (Stockton 1983, Vanderwal and Horton 1984, Prince in prep), the central highlands (Cosgrove 1988a) and some of the off-shore islands such as Sloping Island (Gaughwin 1989) and Hunter Island (Bowdler 1984).

There were developments coincident, or subsequent to, this expansion - increasingly controlled management of vegetation through firing practices (Jones 1969), emergence of rock engraving and possibly other art traditions (Brown in press), the construction of a variety of stone arrangements (Cane 1980), increased usage of occupation sites, presumed development of watercraft (Vanderwal 1978), extensive trade networks involving such commodities as stone (spongolite for example) and possibly ochre and shell, and also the apparent cessation of eating of scale fish and the decrease in use of bone tools (Jones 1977). These developments indicate that there appears to have been considerable change in Tasmanian Aboriginal Society starting around 4,500 years ago.

At the time of European arrival creative traditions of song, dance and story telling



Hand stencil paintings (circled) on the ceiling of a large cave in south west Tasmania. The paintings were almost certainly produced over 10,000 years ago.

seem to have existed in forms and complexity comparable to those in existence on mainland Australia (Clark 1988). The invasion was met by Tasmanian Aboriginal Society with resourcefulness and adaptive skill - as indicated by the rapid adapting of dogs for use in hunting and by the rapid incorporation of contact events in contemporary dance, song and art (Clark 1988; Brown in press).

Recent Research Findings

One of the most exciting finds in Tasmanian prehistory has been the demonstration of occupation at about 30,000 years ago at three sites in Southern Tasmania - including a cave camp-site in the Florentine Valley (Cosgrove 1989, Allen and Cosgrove 1989). This is over

8,000 years earlier than any previously demonstrated Tasmanian occupation (Bowdler 1984). Additionally caves with hand stencil paintings have been located which are almost certainly contemporary with the ice-age occupation of south east Tasmania (Harris *et al.*, 1988; Cosgrove and Jones 1989, Allen *et al.*, 1988). The suite of over 40 late Pleistocene sites now known from south west Tasmania is one of the most outstanding repositories of information on human lifestyles for this period known anywhere in the world.

Recent investigations at Mannalargenna Cave in the Furneaux Island Group is providing evidence of human lifestyles at the height of the last ice-age 17,000 years ago (Brown and Marshal in press). At this time this region is

likely to have been a cold, arid and hence harsh climatic zone. Shell tools (including scrapes used for wood working) from Mannalargenna Cave are the oldest known shell tools from anywhere in the Australasian region.

The period after 8,000 years ago in Tasmanian prehistory has enormous archaeological significance as it represents probably the longest period of isolation of any population in the world. The way in which Aboriginal lifestyles developed and changed over this time in the island 'laboratory' has created considerable public and scientific fascination. A number of continuing studies are looking at the way in which Holocene Aboriginal society developed and changed in Tasmania, especially in those areas only permanently occupied over the last few thousand years. These studies have included the Port Davey region (Prince in prep.); the coastal and inland mountainous region of north east Tasmania (Ellis and Thomas 1988 and I. Thomas in prep), the inland north west forests (e.g. Lourandos 1983) and the spongolite stone quarries (Cosgrove 1988b, Thomas 1989); Tasman Peninsula (Gaughwin 1989); and the Western Tiers and eastern forests focussing on the Aboriginal occupation of rockshelters (Cosgrove 1988b, Ross in prep). Regional survey programs undertaken by the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage (Cosgrove 1988b; Brown 1986, in prep.; Kee 1987, 1989; MacFarlane in prep.) have contributed substantially to our understanding of human use of the landscape in mid to late Holocene times. Additionally Gary Punnitt, a Ph D student at the Australian National University, is investigating settlement patterns and economic strategies over the last 8,000 years in south east Tasmania.

Concluding Note

High quality research is a prerequisite for informed present day Aboriginal site management. Research is the basis for the scientific assessment of the significance of archaeological sites, and site significance is

the determining factor when considering management options.

Unfortunately in Tasmania there is no tertiary institution, such as the University of Tasmania, which teaches and undertakes research into Tasmania's Aboriginal prehistory - Tasmania is the only Australian state in which this is the case. The task has been taken up by outside researchers (in particular from the Australian National University and La Trobe University) and out of necessity by cultural resource managers in the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage and the Forestry Commission. This situation is regrettable in that it has hindered progress in developing an understanding of Aboriginal prehistory and also the ability to manage Aboriginal archaeological sites in this State.

Acknowledgements

The photograph depicting hand stencils has been reproduced with the kind permission of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Jim Everett and Darryl West.



An eroding shell midden in south western Tasmania. It is evidence of use of this area over the last 2000 years.

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