



Archaeology of powerful stones in the Australia-Pacific region: an Introduction

Duncan Wright, Geoffrey Clark, E. Jaydeyn Thomas, Sam Juparulla Wickman and Timothy Darvill

DW: DW, The Australian National University; GC: GC, Australian National University; EJT: EJT, University of Queensland; SJW: SJW, Independent scholar, Alice Springs and visiting scholar at Australian National University; TD: TD, Bournemouth University

ABSTRACT

Over millennia, and right across the globe, people have invested time and energy to create cultural landscapes that revolve around or incorporate powerful stones. Questions about the structured nature, distribution, source, or placement of stones (both within physical and meta-physical worlds), pose intriguing theoretical and methodological challenges. Emic and etic perspectives may provide additional insights into the complex (often animate) nature of the stone, the purpose of which varied radically between communities. In this special number of *Archaeology in Oceania* we explore some of the ways in which First Nations and non-Indigenous archaeologists address these potent features and objects, across widely varying chrono-cultural contexts in the Australia-Pacific region.

Keywords: Stone arrangements, Monoliths, Oceania, Dispositions de pierre, Monolithes, L'Océanie

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des millénaires, et partout dans le monde, les gens ont investi du temps et de l'énergie pour créer des paysages culturels qui tournent autour ou incorporent des pierres puissantes. Les questions sur la nature structurée, la distribution, la source ou l'emplacement des pierres (à la fois dans les mondes physique et métaphysique) posent des défis théoriques et méthodologiques intrigants. Les perspectives émiques et étiques peuvent fournir des informations supplémentaires sur la nature complexe (souvent animée) de la pierre, dont le but variait radicalement d'une communauté à l'autre. Dans ce numéro spécial d'Archéologie en Océanie, nous explorons certaines des façons dont les archéologues des Premières Nations et des non-Autochtones abordent ces caractéristiques et objets puissants, dans des contextes chronoculturels très variés dans la région Australie-Pacifique.

Correspondence: Duncan Wright, FSA School of Archaeology and Anthropology, The Australian National University| Banks Building, 44 Linnaeus Way, Acton ACT 2601, Australia. Email: duncan.wright@anu.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

Papers included in this issue were first presented during an online forum hosted in 2022 by Australian National University (Duncan Wright and Guillaume Molle) and Bournemouth University (Timothy Darvill), entitled “Recent Advances in the Archaeology of Powerful Stones.” An intentionally ambiguous theme, this encouraged First Nations and non-Indigenous archaeological perspectives and allowed research directions and priorities to emerge organically. Following discussions with First Nations Pacific and Australian colleagues during this forum, for example, contributors agreed on a broad definition of “stone,” including volcanic and intrusive rocks, volcanic derivatives including welded tuffs/ashes, and carbonate beach rock, and limestone coral—an important building material in many parts of the Pacific including parts of the

Mariana Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Society Islands, and the Tuamotus (see also Molle et al. 2023). Powerful stones in this context encapsulate stone arrangements (placement of stones in a purposeful pattern on the ground surface), carved and/or natural stone monoliths but also stone objects classified by First Nations communities as having primarily non-utilitarian functions.

Powerful stones have been researched for over a century in this region. However, as demonstrated in the Supplementary Materials and recognised by forum contributors, this topic has arguably not been prioritised to the same extent as in the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This is despite compelling studies in which multiple epistemologies co-exist comfortably and with First Nations perspectives providing fascinating insights into animate cultural heritage (David et al., 2004; McIntyre-Tamwoy & Harrison, 2004; Ross, 2008; Thomas

& Ross, 2013). Unquestionably the case for this special issue, features and artefacts are shown to possess complex life histories with their significance continuing into the present (e.g., Ballard; Brennan and Wickman; Thomas et al. 2023). Perhaps most dramatic in this regard is the discovery by an all-Aboriginal archaeological field team of a cylcon (a cylindroconical stone artifact made by First Nations Australians) processing site as reported by Brennan and Wickman (2023).

The special issue further explores the role of stone in broader cosmography; mental maps denoting an ecclesiastical landscape of physical and spiritual places. The partnership between archaeology (specifically artefact geochemistry) and ethnography is arguably particularly compelling in this context, providing intimate detail into cultural landscapes and pathways. While recognising the dangers of non-critical comparisons between temporally and spatially discrete sites (e.g., Ballard & Wilson, 2014), it is anticipated that studies presented here (e.g., Ballard; Mitchell et al. 2023) will be valuable to those interested in transport of powerful stones elsewhere. Examples include the wide distribution of axeheads from selected sources of stone along the Atlantic façade of northwest Europe (Bradley & Edmonds, 1993) or the fifth and fourth millennia BC presence of jadeite axeheads on the Orkney Islands some 1800 km from source outcrops in the Italian Alps (Pétrequin et al., 2012). Arguably, the most potent of all in this context are the so-called “bluestones” brought more than 220 km from a variety of outcrops in west Wales across to Stonehenge in central southern Britain (e.g., Darvill, 2013; Darvill & Wainwright, 2014; Parker-Pearson 2012). More than 80 stones, each weighing around 2–3 tonnes, were arranged and periodically rearranged as a series of circles and ovals inside the familiar structure of Stonehenge. The latter was made of local sarsen stones arranged as uprights with lintels on top forming an outer circle and an inner horseshoe of five trilithons all set out around a principal solstitial axis aligned to the mid-summer sunrise and the mid-winter sunset. Parker-Pearson and Ramilisonina (1998) have already identified the potential of reassessing this site based on (Malagasy) ethnography.

Contributors to this special issue engage with ethical considerations, not least the extent to which powerful stones should be a subject for archaeology research. First Nations contributors including one of us (S.J.W., an initiated Arrente, Luritja, Pitjantatjarra, Yankuntatjarra Elder) suggest that archaeological research, while not always appropriate, is welcomed by some communities:

“We watch you and if you’ve got the right metal, male or female, we’ll bring you in and show you those things. Some things we can talk about, but we won’t tell you everything unless you’ve been in that Tjukurapa [a foundational belief system that underpins peoples understanding of their place within country]...It is changing. We are beginning to appreciate the academics. The academics are appreciating our concerns and they’re taking that on board. Not in great numbers but there are some great scholars out there that are doing the hard

yards. Not only to help European people understand us but also develop relationships with Aboriginal communities and people.”

Decisions must remain with Country custodians and correct cultural protocols (including consultation) maintained at all stages. This is not an isolated view. At Gummingurru (see Thomas et al. 2023), Jarowair-Wakka Wakka Custodians Conrad and Shannon Bauwens (pers. comm. June and November 2022) both believe archaeologists have an important role to play in the future. Archaeological techniques reinforce knowledge, provide new insights, and assist the continuation of traditional practices. Conrad Bauwens “takes pride” in the promotion of such sites as exemplars of a part of Australia’s story that is poorly understood and represented. He adds that archaeological research “helps with public perception in regard to credibility and authenticity, and concretes it [this important story] into the pages of Indigenous and Australian history.” Shannon Bauwens suggests archaeology supports community aspirations to return to (and co-devising management strategies for) country through funding research partnerships and can provide “insight into things we may not have considered” via the tools and methodologies of Western science. The role of archaeologists, in his view, is to “investigate ideas and management strategies... further advancing a co-contribution approach that captures both science and spirituality.” It is noteworthy that this sentiment is strikingly similar to those presented above, relating to the important place of First Nations perspectives when assessing archaeological/scientific datasets.

THE PAPERS

Two of the five papers in this Special Issue concern Australia, two are about the Pacific and a single paper relates to the Torres Strait interface zone connecting these regions. The ratio of First Nations to non-Indigenous authors (9:11) echoes content, and to an extent form, with one paper adopting a non-traditional, narrative format (Brennan and Wickman, 2023). Papers cover a considerable amount of territory and include:

Wayne Brennan and Sam Juppapula Wickman describe their engagement with cylcons. Both scholars have considerable archaeological experience, but also cultural training and this allows them to assess these stones from a variety of perspectives and critique previous artefact assessments. A central element of this paper is an archaeological excavation of a cylcon manufacturing site in the Bowen Basin in central Queensland. This is followed by interrogation of the process put in place by an all-Aboriginal field crew in order to deal with these potent objects. Combined, it provides a fascinating insight into the continued importance of cylcons; also ways in which the notion of “sacred” may morph and be redefined over time.

E. Jaydeyn Thomas, Annie Ross, Shannon Bauwens, and Conrad Bauwens explore the role played by the

Gummingurru stone arrangement in knowledge sharing between Aboriginal people across vast areas of what is now southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. One of the most powerful sites of ritual and exchange en-route to the Bunya Mountains, access to Gummingurru came to a temporary halt due to European activities in the area. In this paper, the authors view stone as a physical embodiment of *yurees* (totems). People and stones are utterly entwined, with the site both created and creating and archaeologists themselves having an important role in the associated cultural revival.

Rod Mitchell, Friedrich von Gnielinski, McRose Elu, Josh Willsher and Duncan Wright undertake a deep dive into the cultural, linguistic and archaeological foundations of Torres Strait Islander *pærapæral kulal* (powerful stones). The authors are particularly interested in exploring the interplay between local and exotic stone, also the ways in which provenance echoes *buway* “totemic moiety-clan” networks. This is an opportunity for Torres Strait Islander elders to provide their perspectives about these powerful stones, rectifying mistakes and oversimplifications identified in the existing literature.

Chris Ballard is interested in the ways in which stones anchor stories and people in central Vanuatu. Using a variety of examples from sites associated with reforming ancestors, traditional chiefly title and Presbyterian missionary activity, this paper examines the agency and mobility of stone in the Shepherd Islands, and ways in which stones give substance to chiefly power. Chris is interested in the complex and educational roles played by stone in these contexts, concurrently providing markers of the passage of time (through a variety of mythical and historical narratives), also marking out space, such as the boundaries of domains.

In southern New Guinea the word *kula* (e.g., the *kula* ring) refers to stone but also stone-like coral, with the latter material being highly prized and often symbolically inscribed across the Pacific. According to Guillaume Molle, Jean-Marie Wadrawane, Louis Lagarde and Duncan Wright, unmodified coral has not always received the attention it deserves in the archaeological literature. Case studies spanning central east Polynesia, New Caledonia and Torres Strait are provided to support this claim.

All of the papers in this Special Issue identify the breadth of research currently pursued in Australia–Pacific and the exciting potential for further collaborative study on this topic. Contributors suggest that cultural stone is often simplistically described by archaeologists—including previously by several of the current authors—in terms of utilitarian function or as markers of trade and exchange systems. These “systems” have an implied significance for comprehending ancient economic relations and the perceived benefit that different kinds of stone collected from different locations had in performing mundane tasks. As demonstrated by research on this topic, including studies outlined above, such an approach ignores the diverse and fascinating use of stone in spiritual and political realms and

in social interactions by Australian and Pacific Islander societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank Annie Ross for reviewing multiple papers from this special issue, also for supporting many of the First Nations authors with their submissions. Annie also provided helpful comments, along with one other reviewer, about this paper. Guillaume Molle is also thanked for his organisational role within the forum and for reviewing articles. Two of the authors (D.W. and G.C.) also acknowledge the ARC for funding research that contributed to this special issue (DP 210102739).

Open access publishing facilitated by Australian National University, as part of the Wiley - Australian National University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

REFERENCES

- Ballard, C., & Wilson, M. (2014). Pacific monumentalism. *Studies in Global Archaeology*, 20, 77–98.
- Ballard, C. (2023). Stones in Motion: monuments and chiefly title histories in central Vanuatu. *Archaeology in Oceania*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/arco.5283>
- Brennan, W., & Wickman, S.J. In Press for (2023). Stones, stories, and ceremonies: a Gamilaraay, Arrernte, Luritja, Pitjantjatjarra, Yankuntjatjarra perspective. *Archaeology in Oceania*.
- Bradley, R., & Edmonds, M. (1993). *Interpreting the axe trade. Production and exchange in Neolithic Britain*. Cambridge University Press.
- Darvill, T. (2013). Everybody must get stones: Stonehenge, materiality and the power of place. In J.-N. Guyodo, & E. Mens (Eds.), *Les premières architectures en Pierre en Europe Occidentale. Du VE au IIE Millénaire avant J.-C. Actes di colloque international de Nantes Musés Thomas Dobrée, 2–4 octobre 2008* (pp. 169–180). Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Darvill, T., & Wainwright, G. (2014). Stonehenge and Preseli. Exploring the Meaning of the bluestones. *Current Archaeology*, 24.11(No 287), 18–25.
- David, B., Mcniven, I., Manas, L., Manas, J., Savage, S., Crouch, J., Neliman, G., & Brady, L. (2004). Goba of Mua: Archaeology working with oral tradition. *Antiquity*, 78(299), 158–172.
- Mcintyre-Tamwoy, S., & Harrison, R. (2004). Monuments to colonialism? Stone arrangements, tourist cairns and turtle magic at Evans Bay, Cape York. *Australian Archaeology*, 59, 31–42.
- Mitchell, R., von Gnielinski F., Willsher, J., Elu, M., & Wright, D. (2023). Cosmo-political landscapes of Torres Strait adhi and misc.ri stones: closing the gap between Islander and non-indigenous perspectives. *Archaeology in Oceania*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/arco.5281>
- Molle, G., Wadrawane, J-M., Lagarde, L., & Wright, D. (2023). The sacred stone from the sea. Archaeological and ethnographic perspectives on the ritual value of coral across the Pacific. *Archaeology in Oceania*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/arco.5284>

- Parker-Pearson, M., & Ramilisonina (1998). Stonehenge for the ancestors: The stones pass on the message. *Antiquity*, 72(June), 308–326.
- Parker Pearson, M. (2012). Stonehenge: Exploring the greatest Stone Age mystery. London: Simon & Schuster, Ltd.
- Pétrequin, P., Cassen, S., Errera, M., Lutz, K., Sheridan, A., & Pétrequin, A. M. (Eds.). (2012). *Jade. Grandes haches alpines du Néolithique européen. V^e et IV^e millénaires av. J.-C.* Robert Schuman.
- Ross, A. (2008). Managing meaning at an ancient site in the 21st century: The Gummingurru Aboriginal stone arrangement on the Darling Downs, Southern Queensland. *Oceania*, 78(1), 91–108.
- Thomas, E. J., & Ross, A. (2013). Mapping an archaeology of the present: Counter-mapping at the Gummingurru stone arrangement site, southeast Queensland, Australia. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 13(2), 220–241.
- Thomas, E.J., Ross, A., Bauwens, S., & Bauwens, C. (2023). Resurrecting the power in the stones, developing a modern narrative of the agency and sentience of powerful stones, and recreating shared knowledge encounters at Gummingurru and its associated site architecture. *Archaeology in Oceania*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/arco.5282>

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Supporting Information