

BALLS HEAD: THE EXCAVATION OF A PORT JACKSON ROCK SHELTER

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Plates 17-21. Figures 1-5.

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Balls Head is a small headland reserve jutting into the north side of Port Jackson west of the Harbour Bridge (Sydney sheet, map No. SI 56-5 grid ref. 420818). It has preserved its bushland appearance and been comparatively little interfered with. Vegetation consists of a mixture of indigenous and introduced trees and shrubs; grassy areas are maintained for the benefit of picnickers. Bedrock is Hawkesbury sandstone, with frequent outcroppings, particularly where the headland slopes steeply down to the Harbour. These outcroppings are in the form of both smooth, steep-sided or flat slabs and the characteristically weathered small rock shelters typical of the Sydney area. Many of the slabs are decorated with Aboriginal rock engravings and axe-grinding grooves, and some of the shelters bear rock paintings and hand stencils (Campbell 1899: 14, 17; Miles 1964: 343). There is not a great deal of other Aboriginal occupation evidence apart from the site under consideration, and thin open shell middens which may be detected beneath some of the grassed-over areas.

The rock shelter forming the subject of this paper is approximately 65 feet above mean water-level, of a north-easterly aspect (plate 17). It is not large: about 35 feet long, 7 feet from the drip-line to the back wall of the shelter, and 6 feet from ground surface to underside of overhang are its maximum dimensions (figs 1 and 2). Occupational deposit stretches from the back of the shelter, out beyond the drip-line for about 10 feet, where it then begins sloping downwards in a steep talus. There are faint hand stencils on the rear wall of the shelter and the roof is blackened, perhaps from the fires of the original occupants. The deposit consists of compacted shell midden, looser disturbed material, and less compacted midden. Its maximum depth is 2 feet 9 inches.

EXCAVATION

The original excavation was carried out under the direction of Mr Douglas Miles (then Assistant Curator in Anthropology, Australian Museum; now of the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney), in April, 1964 (Miles, 1964). The discovery of a human skeleton in the deposit excited great public interest.

Two trenches were excavated, to which I shall refer as Trench I and Trench II, the latter being the more easterly (fig. 1). Deposit was removed in areas 2 feet square in 4-inch spits, and passed through sieves of 3/16-inch mesh. Trench I on completion extended 10 feet by 4 feet; Trench II, 6 feet by 4 feet, each with its long axis perpendicular to the rear wall of the shelter. The burial was found in Trench I.

In January, 1970, I visited the site, accompanied by Mr Miles, who indicated the area of the 1964 excavations. These had been backfilled after excavation, but yellow sand had been used as fill to make re-location of the trenches easier. With the help of Mrs Jan Smith (Assistant in the Department of Anthropology, Australian Museum), Miss Kathleen Pope (formerly Assistant in the Department of Anthropology, Australian Museum) and Mr Peter Callaghan (Department of Archaeology, University