

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part I

Regional Archaeology in Australia

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ABSTRACT. Regional archaeology requires units that are defined by past material culture distributions and a defined sampling strategy. The latter has become common in Australia, but geography or environment has been the basis of areal definitions. On these bases, Attenbrow's studies of the Sydney region are fine examples of what could be done more widely with the archaeological data now available.

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“Regions” in Aboriginal Australia are a slippery concept, and regional archaeology is no exception. In 1976 Peterson suggested that there were three levels of grouping in Aboriginal Australia: bands, congeries of bands and regional or culture-area populations. He outlined “culture areas based on drainage divisions” but noted that although twelve drainage divisions are generally recognized, at least seventeen culture areas need recognition “on the basis of general knowledge of linguistic and cultural differences” (Peterson, 1976: 65). These areas were closely paralleled in the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, which claimed they were linked (if not too precisely) to differences in “language families, styles of body decoration, weapons, art styles and initiation and burial procedures” (Horton, 1994: 935). The extent to which this is, or was, true probably needs further research. For example, in both publications the Southeast Region stretches from the Divide to the coast and from Brisbane to Mt Gambier, and so it might therefore be surmized that what makes this a region is primarily climate and nearness to the coast. Certainly a more recent study of Australia at the threshold of colonization (Keen, 2004) looked at the people in seven “regions.” These were named groups but not tribes, which implies separate societies living in smaller areas than either Peterson's or Horton's and chosen for their environmental, linguistic and social organizational contrasts as known from the ethnographic record. The definition of region in this case is primarily social, with the

regions being largely identified by specific Aboriginal names (Kunai, Ngarinyin, etc.).

Regions on this scale or of this type have never been the focus of directed archaeological approaches: titles such as *Australian Coastal Archaeology* (Hall & McNiven, 1999) or *Pilbara Archaeology* (Morse & White, 2009) do not overtly deal with areas whether geographic or socially defined, nor is there an over-arching approach to them. In fact, single-author archaeological syntheses (e.g.; Lourandos, 1997; Hiscock, 2008) have divided Australia into areas of gross environmental difference (coastal, inland, arid; tropical, temperate, Tasmania). At a smaller scale within these regions, the prime focus has been on localities in which particular studies have been undertaken. Thus Lourandos, for example, writing of the “Tropical North,” discusses Princess Charlotte Bay, the North Queensland Highlands, the Alligator Rivers and similar areas. At a general level, each can be described environmentally, but none has clear boundaries and there is no reason to equate any with a culture-area, whether in modern or archaeological terms. One of the few deliberate attempts to define a regional archaeology in both archaeological and biological terms is Pardoe (2003). He sees the people living along the Darling River as distinct from those along the Murray or Murrumbidgee, but also notes that sharp boundaries are difficult to draw. Nonetheless, as Ulm (2004: 191–192) recently pointed out, distinct local and regional trajectories have been observed in the Holocene