

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part II

Abydos Plain—Equivocal Archaeology

MARJORIE SULLIVAN^{1*}, PHILIP HUGHES², AND ANTHONY BARHAM³

¹ Resource Management in Asia Pacific Program,
The Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
heh@bigpond.net.au

² School of Archaeology and Anthropology,
The Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
heh@bigpond.net.au

³ Masters of Archaeological Science Program and Archaeology and Natural History,
The Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
anthony.barham@anu.edu.au

ABSTRACT. The difficulty of distinguishing between Aboriginal shell middens and natural shell deposits has been addressed in various settings. On the Abydos Plain near Port Hedland in northern Western Australia, archaeologists have generally not acknowledged this issue and have ascribed a cultural origin to most shell deposits. Recent investigations have demonstrated that episodic cyclones or storm waves on the coastal marshes have deposited or re-deposited shells that are similar in appearance to midden deposits, and that previous interpretations of the archaeology of the Plain are not justified. A geo-archaeological approach is essential to reveal the stratigraphic sequences and palaeo-processes which have controlled the formation of shell features on the Plain.

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The work reported here commenced as an activity to undertake salvage excavations in two areas, Harriet Point and Wedgefield North, near Port Hedland in northern Western Australia, as part of the consent approval to destroy several shell middens (Figs 1–4). As is the case for most contract archaeological work, there was time pressure. In trying to assemble an appropriately qualified team, the authors invited Val Attenbrow to participate. She considered it, saying she would “love to dig a good midden”, but declined because of her workload (or perhaps because she looked at the late November average temperatures for Port Hedland). In retrospect Val was right again. That “good midden” remained elusive, but undoubtedly these deposits would have re-kindled her interest in shell bed reworking.

* author for correspondence

The shell deposits listed for salvage were registered archaeological sites¹ that were to be buried by spoil dredged from the nearby harbour, as a key component of a port infrastructure upgrading project.

The authors looked at the survey reports (Gavin Jackson P/L, 2007, 2008) and photographs of the sites in each area, and were concerned that the shell deposits might not be middens. They made short preliminary visits to the areas, and those concerns remained, although it was clear that the deposits were equivocal, and questions about their nature and origin could be resolved only by extensive excavations. As a result of those brief site visits, it was recommended that the salvage excavations should take a geoarchaeological approach, to investigate the shell deposits within their