

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part VII

Aboriginal Use of Backed Artefacts at Lapstone Creek Rock-shelter, New South Wales: An Integrated Residue and Use-wear Analysis

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ABSTRACT. Early models of backed artefact use in Australia proposed that they were typically barbs or tips on spears or ceremonial/ritual objects. More recent models suggested their use as domestic tools, although often with the implication that backed artefacts had a single, dominant use. This paper presents the results of an integrated residue and use-wear analysis of a sample of backed artefacts from Lapstone Creek rock-shelter, an Aboriginal occupation site on the eastern escarpment of the Blue Mountains, New South Wales. The site, also known as Emu Cave, was excavated in 1936 by C.C. Towle, F.D. McCarthy and others, and the artefacts are currently housed in the Australian Museum, Sydney. Microscopic analysis of the backed artefacts revealed a range of craft and subsistence activities occurring at the site during the late Holocene. Evidence for the use of backed artefacts for bone-working and wood-working, as well as non-woody plant processing and possibly butchery was identified, with many artefacts also exhibiting evidence for hafting. Ochre, both red and yellow, was a recurrent residue, and animal hair was also observed. Backed artefacts were used as awls, knives, scrapers and incisors for the various tasks, indicating that they were multi-functional tools. This research makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of backed artefact use and provides insight into activities undertaken during a period of dramatic cultural and environmental change in the late Holocene.

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Backed artefacts were produced in southeastern Australia as early as 8500 cal. BP, but between 3500 cal. BP and 1400 cal. BP they were manufactured and discarded in large numbers in numerous sites (Hiscock, 2002: 167, 2008: 145–161, 239; Hiscock & Attenbrow, 1996, 1998, 2004, 2005). After this period, backed artefact production declined and they were not recorded in use at the time of British colonization. Since the “backed artefact proliferation event” (Hiscock, 2002)

in southeastern Australia may have been precipitated by changing climatic conditions (Attenbrow, 2004; Attenbrow *et al.*, 2009; Hiscock, 2008), knowledge of the role of backed artefacts during this period should contribute to this debate.

For over a century archaeologists have proffered a range of hypotheses about backed artefact use (summarized in Attenbrow, 2002: 101; Robertson, 2005: 7–10; see also Kamminga, 1982; Mulvaney & Kamminga, 1999: 235;