

Changing Perspectives in Australian Archaeology, Part VIII

Burins, Bones and Base Camps: A Re-analysis of Aire Shelter 2, Glenaire, Southern Victoria

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ABSTRACT. Archaeological studies often conclude that some sites are neatly identifiable as base camps, stopovers or tool specific locales. Task reconstruction and interpretation of on-site activities affect our understanding of mobility patterns and subsistence and our ability to distinguish reconfigured land-use and population change. A re-analysis of Aire Shelter 2 is presented here to consider the potential of usewear and residue studies for evaluating site function, in the context of coastal wetlands in southwestern Victoria. Traces of use were found on 242 stone artefacts. Identified tools include finely retouched flint scrapers and snapped flakes with burin edges associated with graving bone. The usewear and faunal analyses indicate an atypical prehistoric assemblage that implies an alternative site function to that originally proposed. Rather than a base camp, the site is an infrequently used locale associated with hunting and the manufacture of bone points. Although theoretical reconstructions of land use suggest population contraction into winter base camps situated around coastal wetlands, there is no compelling evidence that such a site has been found at Aire Shelter 2, although nearby dune shell midden sites are likely candidates.

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Understanding site function is critical for interpreting land-use and Aboriginal settlement history. However, archaeological studies often create a false impression that some sites are neatly identifiable as base camps, stopovers, activity locations, transit camps or other tool specific locales. Attenbrow (2004: 219ff) was aware of this problem, especially when trying to identify residential bases, mobility and settlement patterns for the Mangrove Creek catchment. Scarcely one base camp could be identified, making interpretations of settlement and logistical mobility potentially problematic. How sites are classified affects our understanding of mobility patterns and subsistence and our

ability to distinguish patterns of reconfigured land-use from the effects of population change. The site of Aire Shelter 2 provides an informative case study in which stone tool form and the nature of site function were dramatically re-evaluated after usewear and residue analysis. The site was one of the first excavated in the state of Victoria and the stone technology was commonly thought to be typical of later Australian prehistory. In particular, retouched flakes were thought to be exceedingly rare and the stone assemblage was regarded as amorphous, lacking distinctive tool forms.

About 2 km from the coast near the mouth of the Aire River, Cape Otway, southern Victoria (Fig. 1), Mulvaney