

The First Excavations at Dampier (Western Australia), and their Place in Australian Archaeology (with Addendum on Radiocarbon Dating of Skew Valley Midden)¹

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Dampier is a small port in Western Australia on the tropical coast of the Indian Ocean (20°30'S 160°30'E) established in 1965 for the exportation of iron ore and salt (Fig. 1). Before the creation of the town of 3000 inhabitants, the rocky sun-scorched coast was almost deserted except for the modest town of Roebourne, 50 km to the east, and some scattered large pastoral properties.

Once, the area was intensively populated by Aboriginal tribes, the Mardudunera and Jaburara N'Galuma (Tindale, 1974).

A. Regional history

The European settlement happened in three phases:

1 A maritime exploration phase beginning in the seventeenth century with the discovery of the entire western coast of Australia by the Dutch, who drew the first maps. The coastal region of Dampier was discovered in 1628 by Gerrit Frederikszoon de Witt who recorded its general outline; it was re-visited by Abel Tasman in 1644 (Schilder, 1976). It was the English navigators, the buccaneer William Dampier (August 1699), and especially Phillip Parker King (February 1818), who described in more detail the archipelago where they anchored (Dampier, 1939; King, 1827). However, it is the French, Nicolas Baudin (1801) and Louis de Freycinet (1818), who set foot onto the western and eastern coasts, who

interest us (Baudin, 1974; Peron and Freycinet, 1824). These mariners were the first foreigners to encounter the local Aboriginal peoples. Their logs are sometimes studded with notes and details of stories from life; they provide a fascinating, although brief, insight into a traditional Aboriginal culture that had developed over millennia in this 'lost' territory of the southern lands, remote from outside influence.

- 2 Settlement followed Francis Thomas Gregory's expedition in 1861. Landing in Nickol Bay and setting out to search for potential pasture and arable land, he explored the extensive interior (Gregory, 1884).
- 3 Between 1863 and 1865, the small port of Cossack and the town of Roebourne were founded and this marked the start of the agricultural and pastoral colonization of the region that was to upset irreversibly the living conditions of the Aborigines.
- 4 First used by Whites as pearl fishers (1866–1890), the Aborigines were soon decimated by the harsh conditions of their work and by severe epidemics of smallpox. The survivors gathered on the large stations of the interior and in the new town of Roebourne, and by the beginning of the century their traditional culture was already extinct.²

The twenty or so kilometres of rocky shoreline are literally covered with petroglyphs, the total number perhaps exceeding 100 000. Shellfish middens and