

MASSACRE,

Frontier Conflict and Australian Archaeology

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of archaeological evidence relating to frontier conflict/violence in the Australian context. Because of the unique nature of Aboriginal/European frontier encounters, it is argued that a focus on locating archaeological evidence for massacres is problematic. It is suggested that rather than focus on frontier conflict in terms of massacre sites, archaeologists employ a broader social landscape archaeological approach, thus allowing a more holistic contextualisation of Aboriginal/European frontier interactions.

Introduction

Recent revisionist accounts of European/Aboriginal frontier interaction in Australian history have sought to downplay the degree and extent of conflict on the frontier (e.g. Windschuttle 2002). This debate is part of a wider socio-political agenda at the national level in which a largely conservative ideology has challenged what is seen as a left/liberal interpretation of Australian history, one characterised by conservatives as the 'black armband' version of European settlement (Moran 1999; Windschuttle 2000, 2002). These debates have taken place almost exclusively within the domains of European historical discourses, as part of the wider so-called 'culture wars' (Attwood and Foster 2003; Manne 2003). In other countries such as the United States, where oral and historical accounts of frontier conflict between Indigenous populations and Europeans resulting in massacre or even genocide have been recorded, attempts have been made to support the historical record through archaeological investigation (Scott 2003; Scott *et al.* 1989; Smiley 1999). In Australia, however, relatively little research attention has been paid to the archaeology of Aboriginal/European interaction and almost none at all to the archaeology of frontier conflict (although see Murray and Williamson 2003). As a consequence, in this paper I present a few of the many specific incidents of frontier violence recorded orally and/or historically, with a focus on the central Queensland coast and northern Australia. These provide a basis for discussion regarding the archaeological verification of massacres, highlighting the problems inherent in the archaeology of frontier conflict in the Australian context.

Because I want to focus on the archaeological signature of frontier conflict in Australia I do not intend to enter into the semantic debates concerning the 'language of conflict', nor the statistics of conflict relating to 'how many killed constitute a massacre' etc (see, for example, Griffiths 2003 and Broome 2003 for discussions on these aspects of the debate). For the purpose of this paper I define 'massacre' as the 'one-sided', indiscriminate killing of a group or groups of people (Eck *et al.* 2005). This definition can also include single killings if they are part of a systematic and ongoing process of killings, where the single

death constitutes part of a wider event as described in some of the examples outlined below.

The Historical and Archaeological Record

On the central Queensland coast the primary historical sources relating to European/Aboriginal conflict are numerous, consisting in many cases of private hand-written diaries, memoirs of personal accounts of the 'pioneering' experience and newspaper accounts. Similarly, oral traditions relating to massacres are a recurrent narrative of contemporary Indigenous reconstructions of the historical past – a component of the debate that has been almost wholly ignored. The nature of the evidence, much of it in personal diaries and memoirs and thus never intended for publication, or in verified official documents or newspaper reports, means that it is virtually unimpeachable as evidence for the scale and commonplace nature of systematic violence against Aboriginal people in the Bowen/Burdekin region (cf. Brandon 1845-1899; Breslin 1992; Cunningham 1895; Dalrymple 1860; Loos 1971, 1982; Morrill 1863; *Port Denison Times* 1864-1869; *Queensland Guardian* 1863-1869). This strong body of historical and oral primary evidence lacks a corresponding archaeological signature for these events. Although the absence of archaeological evidence could be to some extent due to a lack of focus on this aspect of Aboriginal/European interaction, I propose that it has more to do with the nature of frontier violence in the Australian context and the kind of archaeological signature related to it, rather than a lack of research in this area.

One of the problems for archaeology in terms of finding sites of frontier conflict relates to a lack of locational precision in the 'official' historical documentation, with many accounts being general expressions of the 'Aboriginal threat' in the region. Some personal accounts, however, do provide general locations and document the nature of specific interactions and instances of violence. This is particularly important as it has the potential to help us understand the possible archaeological signature of frontier violence in Australia.

The following accounts are fairly typical of the range of conflict recorded and serve to illustrate something of the opportunistic and relatively small-scale (in terms of numbers of individuals involved in specific incidents) of these violent encounters. One such example comes from the hand-written memoirs of Korah Wills, an eventual Mayor of Port Denison who lived in Bowen from 1862 to 1882. In this account, in which at least three people were killed in reprisal for the killing of a shepherd, the nature of the encounter is graphically illustrated:

When we turned out and run them to earth [on horseback] where they got on the top of a big mound and defied us and smacked their buttocks at us and hurled large stones down on us and hid themselves behind large trees and huge rocks but some of them paid dearly for their bravado. They had no idea that we could reach them to a dead certainty at the distance of a mile by our little patent breach loading "Terrys" when they were brought to

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bear upon them some of them jumped I am sure six feet into the air with astonishment and a clear out for those who were not in receipt of such medicine (in Brandon 1845-1899).

Another personal account comes from Jimmy Morrill, a shipwrecked sailor who lived with Juru and Gia groups between Cape Cleveland and Bowen from 1846 to 1863. This excerpt provides a rare account of frontier conflict from an Indigenous perspective. Recounting an incident at Cape Cleveland in September 1860, Morrill writes:

Nothing is said in the report about shooting the natives, but one raw boned, stout able-bodied blackfellow, a friend of mine, was shot dead by some one in the boat, and another was wounded; and the hideous yelling was the noise they usually make over their dead (Morrill 1863:13).

These are just two examples of the many unreported incidents of violence against Aboriginal people. The events were only documented in the latter case because of the presence of a European/Aboriginal person at the scene. In each case relatively small numbers were killed, all of whom were probably traditionally interred.

By 1861, with the newly-established settlement of Port Denison, Morrill reports increased levels of violence:

Soon afterwards a report came into camp of a lot of white and black men on horseback near Cape Upstart, shooting down people that I had been living with when the Captain died at Port Denison (Morrill 1863:16).

A typical newspaper account from the region further reinforces the nature of the violence:

close down to the town beach and to the immediate vicinity of the official tents, the traces of two natives, apparently acting as spies were observed and followed. They were overtaken [on horseback]: one of the two was shot the other escaped (*Queensland Guardian* 29 June 1861).

Although widespread and large-scale relative to the population size of the indigenes, the *modus operandi* of the settlers and Native Police was to ambush camps and shoot people as they fled, usually resulting in small numbers killed at one time at a single location. In the mid-nineteenth century, the European parties who were involved in this form of frontier conflict were small, generally far from European centres of population and travelling through hostile Aboriginal country in which they often expressed the fear of vast numerical superiority against them (e.g. Breslin 1992).

Thus, the tactic most often outlined in the historical records was of opportunistic hit-and-run attacks. There are no accounts of collecting the dead and burying them, of capturing people alive, tying them up, taking them to a central location and executing them into mass graves. Even if this did occur, it would not result in the densely-packed mass graves found at places such as the Kharkov massacre site in the Katyn Forest in Poland in which the bodies of 6400 individuals were located, or sites such as Crow Creek in South Dakota in which 500 individuals dating

from the fourteenth century were excavated in a mass grave measuring 6m² (Harrington 1997; Willey and Emerson 1993). It is more likely, as with the Morrill incident, that the bodies were left where they died to be retrieved by kin sometime after the event and almost certainly given traditional burials or burnt. In keeping with the relatively small-scale societies the Europeans encountered, killings were more likely to be in the order of a few people at a time dispersed across the landscape as outlined in the examples above.

Three examples of officially examined twentieth century massacres of Aboriginal people, at Coniston in the Northern Territory in 1928, the Forrest River in Western Australia in 1926, and near Mapoon on Cape York Peninsula in 1902, provide strong supporting evidence for this analysis. The Coniston massacre, for example, was a series of punitive raids carried out by police against the Warlpiri people over a period of 'some weeks at various locations' in which the official government enquiry admitted to the deaths of 31 people (Summers 2000:23). Similarly, the Forrest River massacres were a series of punitive raids against Aboriginal groups northwest of Wyndham in the Kimberley region. An account of the nature of this violence is described by the Royal Commission into one of the Forrest River incidents in which four Aboriginal men were shot by a police patrol and their remains burned (Green 1995:211). Another account from the region comes from the Forrest River Mission daily journal in which the Reverend Gribble states: 'News brought to us today that police boys Windie and Tommy killed old Blui-nua with the butt of their rifles and threw the body into the water. When the patrol moved on, two women, possibly Buli-nua's wives, recovered the body and gave it a traditional burial' (Green 1995:135).

Similarly, an account of a massacre by the Native Mounted Police under the command of Constable Hoole near Mapoon on Cape York Peninsula shares many of the characteristics of the examples outlined above. This incident was investigated by the Protector of Aborigines, Walter E. Roth, and subsequently became the subject of an official enquiry (Queensland State Archives JUS/N309/330, cited in Richards 1999):

Soon, the news spread that a number of Aboriginal men had been killed near the Ducie River. Bishop White was visiting Mapoon with Protector Roth when news of the deaths arrived. The Aboriginal people they spoke to recounted how the attacking party had opened fire and then returned the next day to burn the bodies. Roth began his investigation on arrival at the waterhole on the 15th May 1902. He was shown two bodies wrapped in bark [i.e. traditionally interred] and was also shown the remains of a fire 'in which he found human remains and portions of two bodies'. White related how Roth located a lump of lead 'of the exact weight of a bullet' under one of the skulls but no cartridge cases (White 1918, cited in Richards 1999:5).

In all three cases the nature of the violence clearly shows wide-ranging and systematic murders of small groups of Aboriginal people at different locations. In each case the bodies were either disposed of by burning by the perpetrators or were traditionally interred after the events.

In the United States, where frontier conflict is an important research area in historical archaeology, the focus of the archaeological enquiry does not necessarily revolve around

locating skeletal remains, but instead focuses on finding the artefacts of particular incidents recorded historically and orally. Thus at the Sand Creek massacre site in Colorado, where 150 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed by soldiers under the command of Colonel John Chivington in 1864, archaeologists found over 400 artefacts dating to the time of the massacre, including cannon ball fragments, bullets and an extensive material culture signature relating to post-European Native American use (Scott 2003). This was a densely populated village of approximately 500 people, employing an extensive range of European material culture items including tin cups, horseshoes, nails, plates, bowls, knives, forks, spoons, coffee pots, barrel hoops, iron arrowheads and ammunition for guns. Despite the large numbers killed and the numerous historical sources that state that the dead were left where they lay, the archaeological survey recovered *no human skeletal remains* at the site (Borowsky 2002). In this case, it was the rich artefactual material which allowed the site to be located, and the large quantities of ordinance known to have been used by the military which confirmed that it had been the site of a major violent encounter. This type of site is unlikely to be encountered in the Australian context.

In the Bowen/Burdekin region of the central Queensland coast, the only potential physical evidence for frontier violence found in the region comes from Cape Upstart. The evidence consists of the burnt remains of three Aboriginal adults removed non-archaeologically from a sand dune in the 1970s (James Gaston, Giru Dala Council of Elders, pers. comm., 2004). The precise *in situ* location of these remains is not known and the reason it is thought that these remains may have been a result of violent deaths is the fact that they were burnt – a mortuary practice not commonly known from the region (James Gaston, Giru Dala Council of Elders, pers. comm., 2004). These individuals, if indeed their deaths were the result of frontier violence, further support the idea of small numbers of a group being murdered. Because of the proximity of the site to Port Denison, the bodies in this case were possibly collected and an attempt made to dispose of them by burning, a similar scenario to the Forrest River, Myall Creek and Ducie River killings where cover-ups were deemed necessary (Green 1995; Yarwood and Knowling 1982). Thus, I contend that the nature of the murders, although widespread, systematic and unrelenting, generally did not involve high numbers of deaths in any one location, did not result in mass graves, and left little material evidence in the form of human bones.

It is thus considered that a research project that specifically sets out to find a massacre site in Australia is potentially problematic.

Firstly, the nature of frontier violence in Australia makes it unlikely that a massacre site, in which relatively large numbers of bodies have been concentrated together in a clearly defined place, will be found. Secondly, dense concentrations of artefactual material relating to European/Aboriginal violence, such as found at sites like the Sand Creek massacre site in the United States, are also unlikely to be found in the Australian context. Thirdly, it is probable that in many cases the victims' bodies were retrieved by kin and traditionally interred. Finally, there are problems in determining whether human remains, if located, were indeed the result of frontier violence. This relates to the often poor condition of skeletal remains in the Australian context and the rarity of physical remains resulting from gunshot death. The fact that no archaeological project has yet documented a massacre or

a suspicious death in relation to Indigenous remains bears these factors out to some degree; although it is also acknowledged that the fact researchers are rarely looking for such evidence when excavating skeletal remains may also be a factor.

Aboriginal Perspectives

For archaeology in Australia, the other important issue to address is the marginalisation of the Aboriginal perspective in this debate. What do Aboriginal people feel about being put in the position of being obliged to search for their ancestors' remains in order to confirm for 'white people' what they themselves already know? That nearly all Aboriginal communities retain a strong memory of massacres as a component of their history is testimony to the reality of these events and the devastating impact they had, and continue to have, on Aboriginal people. However, Aboriginal communities are generally highly averse to the disturbance of their ancestral remains, especially those that may have been killed through frontier violence. Godwin and Weiner (2006:131) argue that such places 'constitute one of the most important and impassioned categories of contemporary 'sacred' places for all indigenous communities in Australia'.

As well as needing to pay heed to these sensitivities, the emphasis on a scientifically-based empiricism in regards to the onus of proof has the potential to undermine an Aboriginal massacre narrative, a tradition that can be central to Aboriginal understanding of their historical and contemporary position in Australian society. The archaeological need for precise locations and material evidence can be at odds with Aboriginal ways of knowing in terms of oral history, and to some extent misinterprets the concept of 'massacre' in terms of contemporary Indigenous knowledge which can be (but is not always) part of a collective memory, a temporally- and spatially-conflated accumulation of events, not necessarily one event at a precise location. This is especially so in regions such as the central Queensland coast where peoples' traditional ways of life were almost wholly disrupted by systematic violence, subsequent removal from land and a sustained and aggressive acculturation process.

In this context the word 'massacre' can incorporate the whole range of frontier violence that Aboriginal groups experienced over a long period of time. So although Juru people can tell you that massacres happened at Cape Upstart, or on the Don River, precise locations are not necessarily a part of that knowledge (or even necessarily considered important) because the massacre may have been a series of events at different locations and times, with one or two people murdered on each individual occasion making up the entire event, and with each body subsequently removed from the location for traditional burial (James Gaston, Giru Dala Council of Elders, pers. comm., 2004). Thus 'location' can be a multifaceted concept, taking in elements of the actual site where the violence occurred, the place where the individual may eventually have been buried, as well as incorporating wider notions of 'place' in regards to broader categories of the landscape relating to the creation myths of the 'dreaming'. As Godwin and Weiner (2006:126) state, researchers 'have shown that the historical events of contact history can take their place within the mythico-cosmological recreation of the landscape' and are thus embodied within a wider ideational framework of place that may or may not relate to precise locations or events (see also Clement 2003). Further to this, Bird-Rose (2003:124) states:

Western historians are heirs to the proposition that historical truthfulness is a matter of reconstructing, as best we can, an event or series of events that happened in the past. Equally significant in Aboriginal oral histories is what we might call faithfulness to the moral content of events. In such stories a range of people are likely to coalesce into one or two people and events that may have been relatively disconnected from the perspective of the participants are organised into connections based on a presumption about their intention. Stories that start to coalesce detail around the participants' intention tend to be placed further back in the past; that is, as events recede, those who tell the stories focus on the intention of the participants rather than the event. The truthfulness, or what I prefer to call the faithfulness, of these stories is directed towards understanding and recounting the *meaning* of what happened (as well as the relationship between past and present). What stands out is the moral content of the process of colonisation.

Another issue in relation to knowledge of precise locations in oral traditions, relates to control of the knowledge of 'dangerous events/places' and how such knowledge may be restricted and circumscribed in Aboriginal society. For example, Biernoff (1978:97) states that Aboriginal groups in eastern Arnhem Land have a range of dangerous places generally referred to as secret or sacred sites, including places which have acquired their dangerous potential in the human past rather than the 'dreamtime'. These dangerous powers have usually accumulated as the result of a local disaster, such as disease, massacre, magic, or the activity of supernatural forces, which resulted in the deaths of large numbers of people. Importantly in regards to precise locations, the stories of these catastrophes are not known to the community at large but are held by the elders who act as responsible guardians of the information:

Unknown places are all potentially dangerous and must either be avoided or fitted into a system which allows them to be defined as inherently safe or dangerous. Accompanying this anxiety is the need for secrecy. That which is truly important is to be carried out in secret. Knowledge is power. Power may be misused. To make misuse impossible, access to knowledge must be rigidly controlled. Only those with proven abilities acquire full knowledge (Biernoff 1978:104).

For the young men who accompanied Biernoff in his fieldwork, it was not uncommon for localities to be identified as dangerous places, even if the nature and explanation of the danger was not known in any detailed way: 'Such information about localities provides minimum identification of danger, sufficient for purposes of avoidance, but detailed knowledge is still lacking' (Biernoff 1978:95). This generalised information was provided to the young men by specific elders before setting out on the field trip. In some cases different levels of explanation were given, corresponding to information available and appropriate to different age and initiation levels; 'vague and fantastic for the young and inexperienced (uninitiated/non-indigenous), and more explicit and rational for older persons' (Biernoff 1978:95).

Thus the importance of an Aboriginal view of past events and notions of place as expressed orally lies in how the past is perceived and articulated. That it can be manifestly different

from a Western view of the past must be acknowledged and incorporated into archaeological research design.

Towards an Explicitly Australian Archaeology of Frontier Conflict

It is not being suggested here that archaeology as a discipline should not look for the physical evidence for frontier violence. What is suggested is that a better strategy than going into the field to explicitly look for 'massacre sites' is to employ a broadly-based social landscape archaeology approach, in which all the elements of frontier interaction can be examined, thus contextualising the frontier conflict in a more holistic way. This would involve a complex multidisciplinary research focus (involving professional and local historians, Aboriginal traditional owners, European descendants of early settlers and archaeologists), in which the material remains of this interaction would comprise just one of **the many layers of knowledge relating to frontier violence** (cf. Shackel 2003). Although some Australian archaeologists have already foreshadowed this type of study (Cole 2004; Rowland 2004; Smith 2005) few of these researchers have explored (or published) the archaeological component of their case studies.

Archaeologically, the focus should not necessarily be on skeletal remains but on the more tangible and durable material culture relating to frontier interaction. This is present in the form of Native Mounted Police barracks and camps, Aboriginal fringe camps around settlements and homesteads, shepherd's huts, known areas of large Aboriginal camps and general locations identified through oral histories. **Once locations are identified, methodologies could be geared towards spatially plotting oral traditions relating to massacre events (dangerous places), relative to known locations of Native Mounted Police barracks, or areas of initial European frontier settlement, for example.** It is these kinds of 'core' locations that provide the **most visible archaeological manifestation of frontier activity**, within which more focused evidence for violence could be sought in the form of expended ammunition, or other nineteenth century European artefacts associated with frontier violence. Thus a multitiered accumulation of evidence involving the historical record, oral traditions and the archaeological record relating to generalised and specific locations and/or specific incidents within a broader framework of regional frontier conflict, could bring a greater weight of evidence to bear on the issue.

Conclusion

The risk of exploring the archaeology of frontier conflict in the form of a search for massacre sites is that it could ultimately fail, because even if evidence is found, it is unlikely to be of the kind that will be unequivocal, thus providing succour to revisionists and 'deniers'. On the central Queensland coast, and I suspect elsewhere, the strength of the evidence for frontier conflict is the historical record, found in the multiplicity of accounts in newspapers, diaries, journals and memoirs. Any reading of the historical record of settlement on the central Queensland coast, strongly supported by Aboriginal oral history, clearly indicates that systematic frontier violence occurred as part of European occupation. Similarly, the strength of the oral traditions relating to frontier violence is not necessarily about precise details of where, how and why. Rather the validity of oral testimony lies in the sheer magnitude

and persistence of the 'massacre' narrative in Aboriginal oral tradition relating to country. That such an overwhelming and near-universal history is some kind of invention defies logic. That we have a continental landscape inscribed with the place names of this conflict also suggests that it was endemic, with no fewer than 21 places officially named alluding to some form of frontier violence, including Massacre Bay, Massacre Hills, Massacre Inlet, Massacre Island and Massacre Lake; numerous Murdering Creeks, Lagoons, Gullies and Sandhills; several Gins Leaps; a Skirmish Point and Skirmish Hill; and several Attack Creeks and Waterholes (Committee for Geographical Names in Australasia 2004).

This issue is, however, not about a lack of evidence – the evidence is already there in the historical record and the oral traditions. This debate is part of an ideologically-driven attempt at reshaping how we view the European occupation of the Australian continent. The primary source material relating to frontier conflict is undeniable to all but those adhering to a revisionist agenda. Those who study the past should be wary of pursuing an agenda centred in ideology rather than scholarship in which narrowly determined definitions of words such as 'holocaust', 'genocide' and 'massacre' are analysed semantically and found wanting, because it will not be long before the scientific evidence in the form of the archaeological proof for these concepts is demanded and also found to be inadequate. Archaeology as a discipline should not allow ideology to set its agenda and it should not fall into the trap of accepting that the revisionist criticisms of the historical record and dismissal of Aboriginal oral traditions are valid, therefore raising the bar of evidence to an impossible level of proof.

Mike Rowland (2004) states, in one of the most detailed and moving histories relating to this topic, that the emphasis on 'massacre' reduces decades of all kinds of human suffering (from sexual slavery, beatings, forced labour, rape and forcible removals) to the semantics of numbers and terminology, thus masking the real long-term exploitation and misery of the Aboriginal frontier experience. As Ian Clark (1995) states, the frontier was a complex and diverse place and very few situations were alike. For the central Queensland coast at least, I contend that it is unlikely we will find **evidence for mass killings and even if we were to, I question that it would constitute stronger evidence than the existing historical record and oral tradition.** For archaeology to contribute to this debate it must pursue a carefully thought out and complex multilayered research strategy that focuses on the broader issues of Aboriginal/European frontier interaction.

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