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## PART B: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

### CHAPTER 8

#### HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MUA

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The island of Mua in Western Torres Strait has been a focus of two of the largest archaeology research projects in Torres Strait. The first of these took place in the early to mid 1980s through St Paul's community; the second began in 2000 through the Kubin Community Council and Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation. This paper reports on the archaeological work undertaken during these projects. □ *Archaeology, Torres Strait, Kubin community, St Paul's community, archaeological sites, Mua.*

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Archaeological research on the island of Mua in Western Torres Strait has had two distinctive phases. The first phase was funded, and in large part executed, by academics from overseas in the 1980s, who, unlike Australian counterparts, recognised the significance of the Holocene culture historical record of Torres Strait in the 1970s (Harris, 1975, 1979). With some exceptions (e.g. Coutts et al., 1978; Golson, 1972; Lourandos, 1977), Australian archaeologists were largely pre-occupied by seeking the oldest evidence of human occupation in Australia, and Torres Strait was viewed (within Australia) as an unrewarding area for archaeological research (e.g. see Vanderwal, 1973). This first phase began in 1980 when a team of British and Australian archaeologists, geographers and palaeoecologists led by David Harris and Anthony Barham (Institute of Archaeology, University College London) commenced a major research project spanning Cape York, Torres Strait and PNG. This project had in turn developed from anthropological work (again from overseas) pioneered by Judith Fitzpatrick-Neitchsmann and Barney Neitchsmann on Mabuyag. Much of the 1980s Torres Strait field work completed by the University College London (UCL) was conducted from a field base on Mua, at St Paul's (as well as on Saibai and Mabuyag). In 1985 the archaeological fieldwork for the UCL project ended. The completion of a PhD thesis by Barbara Ghaleb in 1990 (Ghaleb, 1990) signaled the cessation of University-based archaeological fieldwork

across Torres Strait until the late 1990s, although publication continued into the 1990s (Barham, 1999; Harris, 1995).

The second phase of archaeological research is community-led and largely funded from sources within Australia. The focus has been much more orientated towards Mua's cultural history, rather than trans-Torres Strait prehistory issues as viewed from afar. This phase began on Mua in 2000 when Bruno David (Monash University), Ian McNiven (then at University of Melbourne, now Monash University) and John Brayer (University of New Mexico) visited Kubin to discuss with the Kubin Community Council potential future research projects on the island. This research has been ongoing ever since, and members of the Kubin community have remained in telephone, email and fax contact with Monash University archaeologists (communication has averaged many dozens of times a year). Members of the Kubin community have visited the Monash University archaeological laboratories during the research process.

This paper reports on the archaeological work that has taken place on Mua since the beginning of research in the early 1980s, focusing in particular on the post-2000 research. It results from a request by members of the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation committee – representing the Kubin community Elders and Indigenous representatives – to document this research for

the benefit of present and future generations on Mua. It is also presented as a resource for future researchers on the island.

#### 1980-1985: THE FIRST PHASE OF RESEARCH

Following initial exploratory archaeological excavations by David Moore on Muralag in 1971 and 1973 (e.g. Moore, 1978), archaeological surveys on numerous islands and limited excavations on Pulu and Dauan by Ron Vanderwal in 1972 (Vanderwal, 1973), and surveys on Dauan, Mabuyag and Saibai by David Harris in 1974 and subsequent years (e.g. Harris, 1977, 1979), Anthony Barham, a member of the British archaeology team led by David Harris, initiated the first combined archaeological and palaeoenvironmental research on Mua in 1980. The programme sought to identify sites where a sea-level and coastal record of environmental change could be linked to the antiquity of human occupation of the Western Torres Strait islands, especially where such sites could be used to date the origins of gardening and horticulture. Some cultural sites were recorded which were then at risk from, for example, grass fires and feral pigs (e.g. rock art sites and shell scatters at Bera Hill; Sigan Point; Bulbul and near the old mining airstrip in the interior near Ith Hill). This work produced the first systematic recording of a range of cultural sites and environmental locations with good potential to reveal information on the past history of Mua (e.g. at the St Paul's village swamp). Following meetings with then-St Paul's Community Council chairmen Sam Kris, and subsequently Gayai Newi, Barham returned to Mua in 1981 and 1982, when more sites were recorded. Archaeologist Michael Rowland (then of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement) excavated a shell midden at Sigan in November 1981 (Rowland, 1985), as well as sites on Nagi. Mangrove coring was undertaken in the Totalai and Bulbul embayments (three and four cores respectively), and fringing reef drilling in the Wag-Sigan area (seven cores) off St Paul's in August-September 1983. This work was part of a research programme funded by the National Geographic Society in the U.S., which spanned Torres Strait from Saibai in the north to Muralag in the south. The programme recognised that many of the most informative sites on past environments in Torres Strait would probably survive on the larger islands such as Saibai, Mua, Badu and Muralag. In July-October 1984 the focus was both archaeological and palaeoenvironmental,

with two middens being partially excavated, and coring for pollen analysis undertaken at Swamp 5 and Swamp 9 near the centre of the island (Boigu Gawat) and at the Tiam Point swamp (which Barham termed 'Thomas Swamp', after Thomas Mene [from St Paul's] who worked with the team over two years). Additionally, a vegetation transect was undertaken at Sigan. The middens were given reference numbers Midden 4 (southern end of Wag, 0.5km south of St Paul's community) and Midden 2 (100m south of Midden 4). In July-October 1985, pollen coring and work on reefs continued on the eastern coast of Mua, the Tiam Point swamp, and at Swamp 2, Swamp 3, Swamp 4 and Swamp 5 of the central Mua swamps (Boigu Gawat). Archaeological work shifted to Mabuyag (e.g. see Ghaleb, 1990) and Saibai (Barham, 1999, 2000). Modern vegetation samples were also collected, to enable a better understanding of the island's vegetation and its history, which were lodged with the Queensland Herbarium.

The aims of Barham and Harris and their co-researchers in the 1980-1985 research project in Torres Strait (including work on Mua) were multiple, but fundamentally focused on the pre-history of Torres Strait in relation to cultural connections with adjacent mainland peoples of Cape York and Papua New Guinea. One key goal was to test, and ultimately refute (Barham, 1999, 2000), ideas that the (then) apparent recent age of the human occupation of the Torres Strait islands was some simple function of geomorphological or climatic process origin. The project was successful in laying out research foundations demonstrating the diversity of culture historical evidence preserved as archaeology in the island landscapes of Torres Strait [contra Vanderwal's (1973) negative assessment]; identifying the later Holocene origins of cultural diversity represented in the 'Torres Strait Cultural Complex' (Barham, 2000) and specifically showing that no full understanding of the cultural history of Torres Strait can exist outside a detailed scientific understanding of past coastal environments and seascapes.

In relation to these goals, specifics of work on Mua included:

1. A reef drilling programme to investigate the history of marine flooding of, and reef development in, Torres Strait, which in turn could inform on sea level change and near-shore ecological changes – including on Mua – recent changes known to be important to the community, such as the disappearance of the *modu* shellfish from the fringing reefs. The *modu* comprised a lot of the shellfish in the middens, and had

been collected extensively in the 1950s, but had largely disappeared by the 1970s (as indicated by discussions Barham had with numerous members of the St Paul's community).

2. Modelling the availability of coastal resources and coastal environments over the last 6000 years across Torres Strait; this included making reference collections of fish, shellfish, marine mammals and plants collected for food;
3. Understanding environmental and vegetation change on the island over thousands of years;
4. Understanding the cultural history across Torres Strait, especially including Mabuyag and Mua in the Western Islands.

In order to fulfil these aims, a team of specialists was assembled to undertake the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental research. The team worked closely with members of the Torres Strait community on various islands, including on Mua, Sam Kris, Ben Kris, Gayai Newi, Abel Hosea, Jackson Ware, Thomas Mene and Caleb Ware. In addition to the Project leaders, David Harris and Tony Barham, the National Geographic Society programme brought together an international group of scientists from Europe and Australia which included archaeologists Sarah Colley, Barbara Ghaleb and Michael Rowland; palaeoecologists Sharon Budworth (then of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London), Lesley Head (then of Monash University, now at the University of Wollongong) and Tony Stevenson (then of University College London, now University of Newcastle) along with technical staff (from James Cook University and University College London). Only some team members participated in the fieldwork each year. The results of the programme were produced as a series of widely circulated reports produced for the National Geographic Society, with archaeological and environmental data lodged with the Cultural Heritage Branch in Brisbane, the Queensland Herbarium and Australian National University library. The first PhD thesis on the archaeology of Torres Strait was produced from this work by Barbara Ghaleb (1990). While much of the detailed data from Mua, and other parts of Torres Strait, remains unpublished, summaries of the work can be found in the Reports and Appendices of the National Geographic Society reports (see Barham, 1981, 1983; Barham & Harris, 1987; Harris et al. 1985). Data gathered from Mua (up to 2000) and the connections of Mua's past in relation to the broader history of Torres Strait were reviewed in detail by Barham et al. (2004). Specific publications which relate to the cultural history and environments on Mua include

Barham (2000), Barham & Harris (1983) and Harris (1995).

#### 2000-ONGOING: THE SECOND PHASE OF RESEARCH

The second phase of archaeological research began on Mua in 2000. Australian archaeology in general had changed significantly since the 1980s. Most apparent was the increasing realisation that the late Holocene across Australia – the last 3000 years or so – was in itself of great interest, partly because of the richness of cultural sites from that period of time, and partly because it was this most recent period of history that could be most easily related to the ethnographic record. Therefore, the origins and historical transformations of cultural practices documented by anthropologists and Elders and other present-day community members could be best tracked over the long-term by reference to this late Holocene record, which Torres Strait amply possessed. More significantly, however, was also a realisation that the archaeological past really concerned the past of Indigenous peoples today; for Mua, the Mualgal. Archaeological research on Mua was thus not anymore simply about the mapping and chronological characterisation of *archaeological* deposits; rather, by the 1990s many Australian archaeologists had come to realise that what was at stake was the history of the people whose lands and waters were being investigated. This late realisation that archaeological research from the onset concerned an acknowledgement (implicit or explicit) of who owned the past – that archaeology on Mua was about historicising *present-day* Mualgal pasts – enabled the exciting prospect of doing collaborative history projects that began by asking what aspects of Mualgal history local people themselves most wished to document (if any). The first phase of research on Mua involved St Paul's community representatives, but the social assumptions were different; it is only later that Mualgal ownership of the research process was fully realised. It is in this changed atmosphere of community-university researcher relations and understanding that the second phase of research on Mua was initiated: essentially, Mua's past belongs to the people of Mua, and any historical research on the island would need to be jointly guided by the Elders and other community members with the scientists, in all project undertakings from project conception and formulation to funding application to field operationalisation to analyses and writing up of results and community reporting. One outcome

of this was an awareness that research on Mua was not simply archaeological 'work', but rather involved a commitment to unfolding social relationships with, and understanding of, the people of Mua (including community protocols). The Western Torres Strait Cultural History Project was thus formed with these notions at the fore-front, as a series of collaborative research endeavours between community groups on Mua, Mabuyag (including Pulu) and Badu (each co-ordinated by their respective Elders and committees) and a team of archaeologists and geographers co-ordinated by BD (for research on Mua and Badu) and Ian McNiven (for research on Mabuyag and Pulu; cf. David & McNiven, 2004).

*3 May 2000.* This second phase of archaeological research began on 3 May 2000 when Bruno David, Ian McNiven and John Brayer were invited by the Kubin Community Council to visit Kubin to discuss possible research projects with community Elders and representatives. At that time, the archaeological team was mapping cultural sites for the Dauan Island Council to the north of Mua. Staff from the Native Title Office of the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) had contacted the Kubin Community Council to let them know that a group of university archaeologists were in the area. Saila Savage, the council Chairman, thus contacted McNiven and David with an invitation to visit Kubin for discussions to see if together we may be interested in starting a collaborative community-university archaeological project on Mua. No archaeological work as such was done during this trip, but David and McNiven were invited to return to Kubin later that year.

*31 October-1 November 2000.* David and McNiven had the opportunity to return to Kubin for two days in late 2000, as they had been invited to attend a major ceremony on the neighbouring island of Badu a few days before. During this brief visit, further discussions were entered into with Elders Whap Charlie, John Manas and Oza Bosun, Kubin Community Council Chairman Saila Savage, and councillors Paul Tom and Roy Genai. Following these discussions, the council Chairman showed David and McNiven a rock-art site on Bera Hill just to the south of St Paul's community (this site was then-recorded as site Mua 1), and a second site subsequently recorded as Turau Kula (Mua 10) near Uma. A proposal was made to the council for Monash University to apply with the Kubin Community Council for funding and to return in 2001 to then commence archaeological research at Turau

Kula. After David and McNiven returned to Melbourne, the research proposal was discussed within the community and approved.

During this brief trip, research protocols between the Kubin community and Monash University were mutually established. It was agreed by all parties that each year at the commencement of a project, a formal meeting would be held at the Kubin Community Council; at the end of each field season the results of that year's work would also be presented at such meetings attended by the Elders and Kubin community councillors (after its forming, this role was soon handed over to the Mualgal Corporation committee). Any suggested future research would also be presented at these meetings at the end of each field season. Research proposals would then be discussed: committee members would request certain archaeological research for the archaeologists to consider, and vice versa. It was clearly and enthusiastically agreed by everyone that archaeological research on Mua concerned the history of the Mualgal, and therefore that all research first and foremost began by respecting this basic point. It was therefore mutually acknowledged that all archaeological research on Mua required community permission. David and McNiven also explained the process of university research, publication and funding, and it was agreed by all parties that mutual agreements for research would be made on relationships built on trust and respect (rather than formal written agreements). The committee and council meetings were recorded in committee/council minutes and in the archaeologists' notebooks, so that forthcoming research could be planned and communicated to the broader community and for future reference.

*2-27 July 2001.* A few months before this trip, the archaeologists had discussed over the phone and via facsimile with the Mualgal committee and Kubin community councillors the possibility of PhD candidate Cassandra Rowe and palaeoecologist Simon Haberle joining the research team to investigate environmental history on Mua. This had been approved. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2001, McNiven, David, Joe Crouch (Monash University) and subsequently Row and Haberle came to Kubin for the first season of archaeological and palaeoenvironmental research on Mua. The Kubin Community Council requested that the archaeologists travel by dinghy around Mua with Elder John Manas, local artists David Bosun, Billy Missi and Dennis Nona, and representatives Guy Neliman and Lama Trinkoon to record and photograph cultural sites with important oral traditions. Around St

Paul's, Sam Kris guided the archaeologists to various sites for recording purposes. This was followed by further archaeological surveys in different parts of the island, and excavations at Turau Kula (site Mua 10) with Guy Neliman and Ozzie Bosun as community representatives on the project (see David et al., 2004; see also Brady 2006). Between 17 and 20 July, Rowe and Haberle (accompanied by Guy Neliman, Ozzie Bosun and the archaeologists) collected pollen cores from swamps in central Mua, at the mouth of the river near Poid, at the St Paul's swamp and at Tiam Point (see Rowe, 2005, this volume).

At the end of this fieldwork, the archaeologists asked the Mualgal committee for permission for Joe Crouch to undertake a PhD archaeological project on small islands around Mua. This was granted.

*15 November 2001.* David and McNiven briefly visited Kubin to finalise the following year's research proposal. A meeting was held with the Mualgal Corporation committee and Kubin community councillors, where it was agreed that three research investigations could be undertaken: 1) a systematic recording of Mua's rock-art sites by Monash University PhD candidate Liam Brady; 2) excavation at the Lady Hill site to the north of St Paul's; 3) archaeological research near the large painted boulder on top of Bera Hill to the south of St Paul's. It was also agreed to jointly apply for a grant to undertake such research.

*30 September-16 October 2002.* Archaeological surveys are undertaken by David, McNiven, Crouch and Brady in different parts of Mua, along with excavations at Urakaraltam (site Mua 36) and on the Gerain hilltop (Mua 38; see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Gerain and Urakaraltam' chapter, this volume). The Kubin State School children visit the Urakaraltam excavations. A sample of shell for radiocarbon dating is collected from site Mua 41, near St Paul's. Fieldwork undertaken with Tommy Newie as community representative.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> October, at the invitation of the Mualgal Corporation committee cameraman Matt Thomas arrived at Kubin to begin filming the cultural celebrations associated with the Goba site near Uma and ongoing archaeological research. This filming led to the completion in 2006 of the community documentary film *Keeping Culture Strong*.

*5-25 November 2003.* In 2003 archaeological research by David, Crouch, Brady, university

assistants and community representatives focused on Gerain and Bulbul, where systematic surveys were undertaken (with sporadic surveys elsewhere on the island). An *alup* (*Melo amphora*) shell container flaked into shape from site Mua 47 at Bulbul was collected for radiocarbon dating and photography (see David 'The archaeology of defence' chapter, this volume); a small piece of *bu* (*Syrinx aruanus*) shell from site Mua 89 at Gerain was collected for radiocarbon dating; and shells were collected from Bulbul sites Mua 63-66, 71, 75, 79, 101 for radiocarbon dating (see David 'Archaeological surveys at Bulbul and Gerain' chapter 16, this volume). Archaeological surveys were also undertaken among the hills and plains near Gunagan (here a shell was collected from site Mua 50 for radiocarbon dating). A small archaeological excavation was undertaken at Gerain site Mua 84 (see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Gerain and Urakaraltam' chapter, this volume for details). The community representatives accompanying the archaeologists in 2003 were Walter Manas and Lama Trinkoon.

*10 November-1 December 2004.* Archaeological research by David, university assistants and community representatives continued to focus on Bulbul and Gerain (see chapter 16, this volume), with a small excavation undertaken at site Mua 116 (see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Bulbul, site Mua 116' chapter 17, this volume). Archaeological surveys were undertaken at Meth Hill with Liam Brady. Archaeological excavations were also commenced at Totalai so as to obtain some indication of the antiquity of the old village there (see Ash & David, this volume). During systematic archaeological surveys on Gerain, shell samples were collected for radiocarbon dating from sites Mua 110-111, 113-114. Inter-disciplinary research undertaken at Bulbul and Gerain, with John Stanisic, Glen Ingram, Bruce Wannan, Meredith Orr, Andrew Olds and Simon Drummond undertaking surveys for land snails, vertebrate fauna, plants, geomorphology, and the marine environment respectively (see their various chapters, this volume). The aim of this multi-disciplinary research was to better understand the environment at Bulbul (and, to a lesser extent, Gerain), so as to better contextualise the cultural and natural history of Gelam's homeland. The community representatives participating in the fieldwork during 2004 were Sem Tom and Basu (Moses Kaitap).

At the end of the 2004 fieldwork season, the Mualgal Corporation committee and Kubin comm-

unity councillors agreed for Jeremy Ash to commence his PhD thesis on the archaeology of cultural sites of significance to Mualgal today (focusing in part on Totalai), and for a book on the cultural and natural history of Mua (the present volume) to be published.

*13 November-1 December 2005.* David and Ash, assisted by Crouch, university assistants and community representatives, undertook a second excavation at Totalai, at the site of the church ruins. Lynden McGregor, a surveyor, undertook a detailed mapping of the site. Crouch undertook an archaeological excavation on Sarbi. The community representatives participating in fieldwork in 2005 were Sem Tom and Basu (Moses Kaitap).

*9 October-14 December 2006.* Ash continued to research the archaeology of various sites on Mua, archaeologically surveying (and with Ian McNiven and Lynden McGregor further mapping) at and around Totalai and Poid. The community representatives participating in the fieldwork in 2006 were Charlie Namai and Desmond Neliman.

*13-22 April 2007.* David visited Kubin to finalise production of the Gelam's Homeland monograph with Elders and the Mualgal Corporation and Kubin Community Council committees. This volume is checked and approved for publication by the Elders and committee members.

## DISCUSSION

Archaeological research on Mua began in 1980 under a very different set of disciplinary assumptions than those of the later research. Between the beginning of the fieldwork of this first phase of research in 1980, and the commencement of the second phase in 2000, 20 years later, the world had changed. Intellectually, our understanding of Indigenous pasts across Australia had grown significantly, and in particular the importance of the last thousand years for understanding long-term history and its relationship to ethnography. But even more telling were the political and social changes that signaled a greater preparedness of archaeologists to recognise the legitimacy of Indigenous peoples to direct research into their own histories. Together, these two issues – a greater interest in the archaeology of the last millennium, and a new recognition of Indigenous rights to their own history – converged in a historicising of the present. It is the people of today whose pasts we investigate through archaeology, and present-

day cultural practices and recent ethnography enable archaeological research to be directed in such a way as to track back through time the history of specific cultural or ethnographic details (see David & McNiven, 2004: 203 for methodological details). These new approaches to Indigenous archaeology that recognised the primacy of Indigenous rights to direct and control research into their own history – and on Mua, to the study of the Mualgal past – were located in broader-scale social changes seen across the whole of Australia and beyond, changes perhaps best expressed by Eddie Mabo, David Passi and James Rice's successful challenge of the legal doctrine of Terra Nullius in 1992 and the ensuing Federal government's *Native Title Act* in 1993. It is not so much that archaeological research responded to these new legal domains of land ownership (and the related recognition of who owns the past), but rather that both this overturn of legal understanding and the changing archaeological mood co-existed as a package of changing social attitudes in Australia. This change is aptly represented by differences in research questions and in the way the two phases of research were organised on Mua.

Archaeological research on Mua is ongoing, and continues to be guided by the Mualgal Elders and Mualgal Corporation committee. Future collaborative research endeavours are currently being planned, with a particular focus on the management of threatened sites and landscapes. This ongoing work has been made possible by community awareness initiatives coupled with previous recording and excavation programmes that have testified to Mua's rich cultural heritage.

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