Chapter 1

Maritime Archaeology in Australasia: Reviews and Overviews

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1.1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s the noted British underwater archaeologist Keith Muckelroy, stated that maritime archaeology was the “scientific study” of the material remains of humans and their activities in, on and around the sea (1978:4). In essence, maritime archaeology can be seen as the archaeological investigation of any coastal or shore-based society.

Australia was initially settled via the sea by both Aboriginal and European cultures and the majority of the current population still remain near the coast. Thus the maritime trades became some of the most important early industries. The Indigenous trade in pearl shell, for example, stretched from the Kimberley coast into the deserts and later outwards across the sea, carried by Macassan traders from the Indonesian archipelago. During the colonial period, boat and shipbuilding for the exploitation of whales, seals and sandalwood helped transform Sydney and Hobart from introspective penal colonies into thriving economic centres. As other colonies and immigrant population centres developed on land, water-borne transport by sea and river was initially the glue that held them together, both socially and economically (Broeze, 1998). To fully comprehend the development of these coastal societies over the ages, an understanding of their interaction with the sea became critical. In this way, maritime archaeology, as defined by Muckelroy, has become an essential tool in the examination of the lives of those inhabiting the shores of the Australian island-continent as well as in the Australasia region.
1.2. MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

Maritime archaeology in Australia was initially museum-based, primarily because the mid-1960s discovery of five bullion-carrying East India ships off the Western Australian coast forced authorities to turn to the nearest state museum (the Western Australian Museum) for their protection. At the time only the fabled General Grant (1866) in New Zealand, the elusive “Mahogany Ship”—reputedly a manifestation of a Portuguese or Chinese landing—and the mythical pirate treasures of Victoria, excited the public imagination to the same degree. Recreational diving was in its infancy and the undersea realm was a source of wonder, excitement and interest. Thus, the 1969 amendments to the Western Australian Museum Act and the recruitment of staff to act as “site police” heralded the first attempts to protect (and manage) maritime archaeological sites in Australasia. These initiatives were also manifestations of a broad-based public, political and academic desire to preserve and present the wrecks and their relics.

Concerns grew in the late 1960s as the extent of the archaeological deposits at the East India wrecks became better known and Museum staff had difficulty coping with the spate of looting that occurred. Despite attempts to shift site investigations and management to the University of Western Australia (Tyler, 1970), and in the absence of suitably experienced Australian candidates, the Western Australian Museum looked towards Europe. In 1971 the Museum secured the services of Oxford graduate, Jeremy Green. Green who was a protégé of Teddy Hall, the inventor of the magnetometer, and a colleague of Keith Muckelroy. The employment of overseas talent was a common feature in many disciplines in Australia at that time, including archaeology.

Green’s scientific background and his focus on the East India ships was complemented by the interests of staff member Graeme Henderson who enrolled in a Masters course in maritime history at the University of Western Australia and by those of staff member Scott Sledge, another graduate in history. These influences served to broaden the scope of the Department’s work into colonial maritime history, shipping practices, and the transition from sail and wood to iron and steam (Henderson, 1977; Sledge, 1978). All these developments were conducted under the guidance of an Advisory Committee which was comprised of representatives of the academic and diving communities advising the Museum Director on the way forward in the new field.

In 1973, the Western Australian Maritime Archaeology Act was passed, allowing for the protection of all wrecks lost before 1900 and encompassing the existing Australian Netherlands Committee on Old Dutch Shipwrecks Agreement. This provided a legal and logistical framework for the joint operations of the State of Western Australia, and the Dutch and Australian governments with respect to the Dutch East India Company vessels. Members of ANCODS (Australian Netherlands Committee on Old Dutch Shipwrecks) included overseas archaeologists and Australian university-based historians Geoffrey Bolton and John Bach, both leaders in their field (Green et al., 1998). Australia as a nation had come to have its first institutionalized stake in historic