Chapter 6

Maritime Archaeology at the Land-Sea Interface

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

Ever since the inception of Australian maritime archaeology in the late 1960s, researchers have been recording terrestrial and intertidal sites associated with maritime industry, navigation and port infrastructure, as well as sites related to shipwrecks through survivors or salvage (Stanbury, 1983; McCarthy, 2003). Much of this activity, however, took place as an adjunct to what was perceived as the core focus of “shipwreck”, “nautical” or “underwater” archaeology. In part this was because most practitioners were employed developing listings and monitoring sites that fell within the legislative framework of the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976, so other sites and places were by necessity given a marginal status in their work and research commitments.

Although the first indications of a broadening perception of the scope of maritime archaeology dates to the mid-1980s, in the last ten years there has been a significant shift in Australian practice. In part this is because of international trends towards a broader framework, redefining the concerns of maritime archaeology as:

[the] study of human interaction with the sea, lakes, and river through the archaeological study of manifestations of maritime culture, including vessels, shore-side facilities, cargoes, and even human remains (Delgado, 1997:259).

The process of embracing this wider conception has progressively blurred the land-sea divide that allowed maritime archaeology to define itself in terms of marine methodologies or narrow legislative responsibilities, and consequently extended its interests towards a greater range of sites, questions
and approaches. For Australia, this has meant an increasing interface with other sub-disciplines, especially "historical" archaeology, which has the most obvious overlaps in terms of thematic interests, temporal range, artifacts and datasets. Interplay between the sub-disciplines over terrestrial and intertidal sites has also seen the progressive shift from a historical particularist focus on the specifics of particular events and technologies (characteristic of most maritime archaeological investigation), to a concern with anthropological understandings of cultural processes (Green, 1990:235). Increased interaction with the university sector and a flow of students into maritime archaeology, including established practitioners engaging in higher degree studies, has hastened this shift.

This chapter reviews two examples of terrestrial research in Australian maritime archaeology where these transformations are most evident. The first is the study of shipwreck survivor camps, which was a part of the advent of maritime archaeology in this country but continues to be of interest several decades later. The second is the investigation of the nineteenth century shore-based whaling industry, which has seen some of the most successful linkages between "maritime" and "historical" archaeologies. A short historical overview of the nature, aims and results of major projects on each theme is provided here, although primarily the intention is to direct the reader to the original and more detailed sources and discussions. Although the focus of this chapter is on published papers and books, there are some significant works that are only available as unpublished reports or as theses.

6.2. SHIPWRECK SURVIVOR CAMPS

Survivor camps are one of the most direct linkages between maritime and terrestrial archaeologies. Following the catastrophic sinking, grounding or destruction of a vessel, it was not uncommon for survivors to strike for land and, unless salvation was immediate, establish a base at which to wait for deliverance, attempt to effect their own rescue, or otherwise ensure their continued existence. In many instances, this included an ongoing relationship between survivors and the wrecked vessel with its salvageable materials, at least where access remained possible. Consequently, the connections between the marine and terrestrial sites are often immediate and comprise a series of linked events and behaviours easily traceable within both historical and archaeological sources. Despite this, a systematic approach to survivor camp archaeology is only relatively recent (Gibbs, 2002a, 2003a).

People had been aware of the existence of "historic" survivor camps associated with the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch VOC shipwrecks off the Western Australian coast for some time prior to the discovery of the wrecks themselves. Although industrial activity, collectors or well-intentioned amateur archaeologists had extensively disturbed some sites, identification of these assemblages often became the first step towards the underwater investigations that resulted in the establishment of professional maritime