



Project Gallery

The ‘Waiat Archaeology Project’ in Torres Strait, northern Australia

Duncan Wright^{1,*} , Cygnet Repu² & Falen D. Passi³

¹ School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Australia

² c/o Lag Mabuyag Island, Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Australia

³ c/o Mer (Murray Island), Torres Strait Island Regional Council, Australia

* Author for correspondence: ✉ duncan.wright@anu.edu.au

At the time of European contact, Torres Strait, New Guinea and northern Australia were home to highly restricted fraternities focused on warfare, headhunting and mortuary rituals. Masked dancers, representing spirits of the dead, initiated the next generation into secrets reputedly brought by a pantheon of wandering heroes, such as Waiat. A new project explores the deep history of Islander traditions, excavating initiation places associated with Waiat. In so doing, it demonstrates the advantages of collaborative history-building using archaeology and traditional knowledge.

Keywords: Australia, European contact, Islander tradition, initiation, collaborative histories

Introduction

This project focuses on mythologies associated with the ‘culture hero’ Waiat. Our definition of mythologies follows that of the Oxford English Dictionary as “A body or collection of myths, esp. those relating to a particular person or thing, or belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition” (Oxford English Dictionary Online 2020). Waiat, also named ‘Wayath’, ‘Uiat’ or ‘Naga’ in Central Torres Strait (CTS) and Western Torres Strait (WTS), and ‘Waiet’ in Eastern Torres Strait (ETS), brought new sacred knowledge to communities he visited along a 230km pathway from Woeydhul (Widul) in WTS to Waier in ETS (Cygnet Repu *pers. comm.*; Figure 1). This information was shared during restricted male-only initiation and mortuary ceremonies (*tai*, *terai* or *markai*), still practised during the mid nineteenth century (Haddon 1935; Figure 2).

The ‘Waiat Archaeology Project’ exemplifies ways in which archaeologists and Indigenous communities may work together to achieve individual and common goals. The project was initiated in 2014 when one of the authors (Cygnet Repu) approached the Meriam community, through Falen D. Passi and archaeologist Duncan Wright. To protect participants from a culture hero whose powers are seen to be dormant rather than dissipated, Elders from Lag Mabuyag and Murray organised a meeting with a formidable turtle shell effigy representing Waiat. Located at Queensland Museum in Brisbane, this stands five feet tall, and is decorated with human rib and jaw bones. These bones echo sacrifice and/or headhunting elements that reputedly occurred during annual initiation ceremonies (Pasi, in Haddon 1935: 402–403).

Received: 18 August 2020; Revised: 2 September 2020; Accepted: 9 September 2020

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Antiquity Publications Ltd

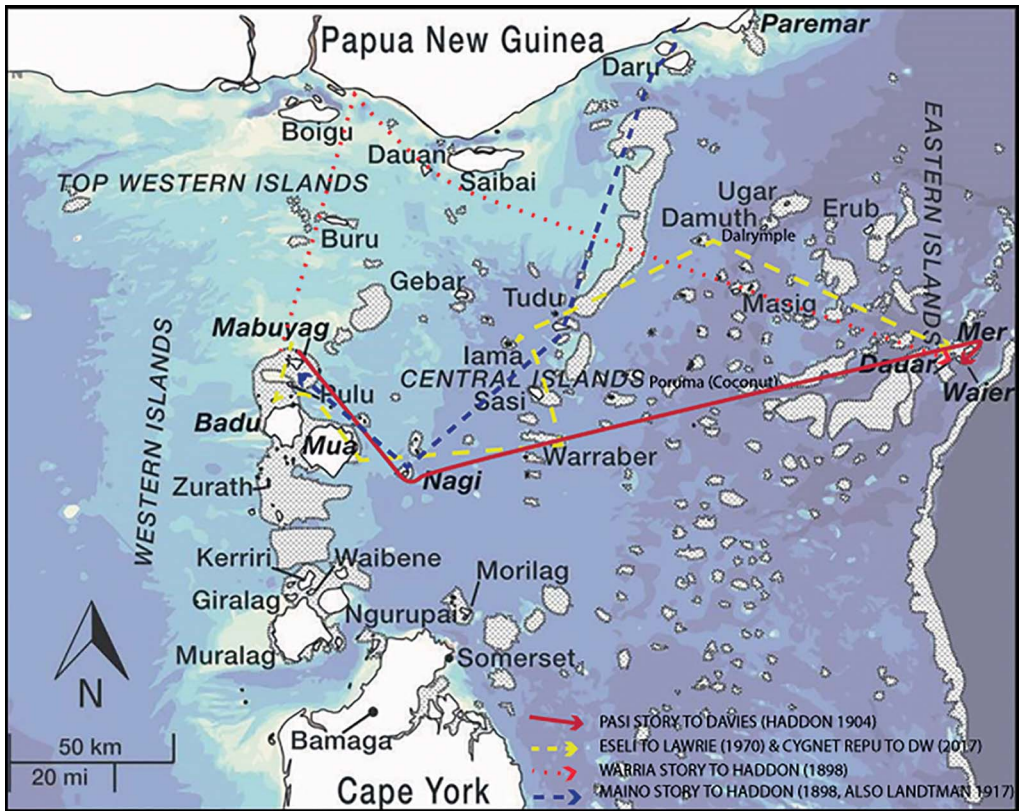


Figure 1. Waiat and Naga's pathway through Torres Strait (courtesy of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge).

Project direction was negotiated between 2014–2017, with discussions involving Elders from Murray and Lag Mabuyag Islands. By the end of this period, decisions had been made about how best to historicise the Waiat mythology. Specifically, the team would:

- 1) Source and collate archival and material information about Waiat, most of which was now located in Australian and European institutions.
- 2) Complete archaeological excavations at initiation grounds in WTS and ETS.
- 3) Provide a forum in which stories and songs about Waiat might be shared, thereby uniting Islander communities in the 'proper way', following culture hero pathways (C. Repu *pers. comm.*).

Method and methodology

Levi-Strauss (1966: 257; see also Whitley 2002) suggested that all narratives about the past (whether historic or mythic) involve human subjectivities, interests and power relations. Systematic history-building requires exploration of consistency and contradiction within



Figure 2. Haddon's 1898 photograph of a Markai dancer (courtesy of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; accession number N.23028.ACH2-003).

and between these datasets and epistemologies. Torres Strait arguably offers an ideal opportunity to develop this approach, with its rich corpus of ethnographic, archaeological and museum materials associated with culture heroes and commemorative (mortuary and initiation) ceremonies.

To examine consistency (or otherwise) across Torres Strait and through time, qualitative data, gathered from stories and songs, were analysed statistically using NVivo, a qualitative data-analysis computer software package. This provides word and concept frequencies as they emerge, and produces matrices facilitating the investigation of relationships between each concept. It is then possible to assess whether themes intersect with archaeology (e.g. the role of dead ancestors and ceremony seasonality).

To explore spatial and temporal aspects of site construction, excavations targeted ethnographically significant features (e.g. shell arrangements and dugong bone mounds) within each initiation site. Radiocarbon dates from these features were compared with relative chronologies obtained from ritual paraphernalia connected with these sites (e.g. turtle-shell masks and effigies; [Figure 3](#)). This made it possible to extend archaeological research 'historicising' Torres Strait ritual (e.g. McNiven & Feldman [2003](#); David & Mura Badulgal [2006](#)) by examining ritual mobility spanning multiple sacred places and islands.



Figure 3. Kursi (hammer-head shark) mask used during the Waiet ceremonies on Woeydhul (courtesy of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, register number SES, MVD 22/2020).



Figure 4. James Zaro, at 'Waiait's fireplace' on Waier (photograph by D. Wright).

Excavations were completed using arbitrary excavation units (not exceeding 50mm), guided by changes in stratigraphy (e.g. Wright *et al.* 2018). Preliminary sorting occurred on site, allowing for the immediate return of human bone and non-cultural materials. Faunal remains, together with lithics, and osseous/bone artefacts and charcoal, were shipped to the Australian National University for specialist analyses.

Preliminary archaeological results

In 2016, Dauareb (who speak for Dauar and Waier Islands) assisted with archaeological excavation of Waiait's Lodge at Ne. This represents the first (and only) sub-surface study of Waier Island, and one of only two academic archaeological projects set in ETS—the other being 'The Murray Islands Archaeology Project' (e.g. Carter *et al.* 2004).

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from Ne on Waier (calibration dataset Reimer *et al.* 2013).

S-ANU#	Sample name	Material	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	\pm	^{14}C age	\pm	Calib 1 σ (BP)	Calib 2 σ (BP)
50407	NE; L2; FIRE	<i>Syrinx aruanus</i>	4.512281	2	564	22	225–286 (0.831) 195–210 (0.093) 149–161 (0.076)	136–297
50406	NE; L2; FIRE (dup)	<i>Syrinx aruanus</i>	4.026614	2	565	22	225–285 (0.848) 196–209 (0.078) 149–161 (0.074)	137–298
50409	NE; L1; LOOKOUT	<i>Melo amphora</i>	3.005983	2	560	21	224–282 (0.781) 194–211 (0.122) 149–161 (0.097)	135–293
52131	NE; SQA; SURFACE	<i>Cypraea</i> (smashed)	6.4	1	519	23	144–246	81–273
52132	NE; SQA; XU3	<i>Strombus</i> (fragment)	8.5	1	1605	24	1172–1245	1123–1275
52138	NE; SQA; XU3 (dup)	<i>Strombus</i> (fragment)	3.9	1	1588	23	1157–1237	1097–1264
52135	NE; SQA; XU9	<i>Tridacna</i> sp.	6.3	1	1851	23	1382–1480	1343–1517
50819	NE; SQA; XU11	Charcoal	–27.29766	1	1489	27	1310–1351	1299–1376
52136	NE; SQA; XU19	<i>Tridacna</i> sp.	7.6	1	2363	27	1977–2084	1923–2125
52137	NE; SQA; XU19	<i>Lambis lambis</i>	6.1	1	2352	24	1960–2065	1917–2112
52133	NE; SQA; XU19	<i>Tridacna</i> sp.	4.5	1	2505	25	2163–2273	2117–2303
55314	NE; SQB; XU1	<i>Tridacna</i> sp.	7	1	2169	24	1755–1852	1704–1883
55316	NE; SQB; XU2a	<i>Lambis lambis</i>	4	1	2155	25	1729–1827	1692–1871
55317	NE; SQB; XU2b	<i>Nerita</i> sp.	9	1	909	23	501–563	493–614



Figure 5. The Waiat gathering on Mer, November 2019 (photograph by D. Wright).

A large embayment flanked by black, volcanic cliffs, Ne is a naturally spectacular site. Rockshelters along the southern margins contained clamshell valves—reputedly used during initiation ceremonies as water containers—and considerable quantities of human bone (Wright *et al.* 2018). Ethnographically important installations (e.g. Waiet’s drinking vessel and fireplace), incorporating two stone and four shell arrangements, were located on natural ledges 3 and 5m above ground level (Figure 4).

A surface cluster of human bone and *Cypraea* sp. shells was found within a Ne rockshelter. Shellfish from this feature, and from the aforementioned Waiet installations, returned radiocarbon dates of 81–297 cal BP (at 95% probability; Reimer *et al.* 2013) (Table 1). This corresponds to a nineteenth-century estimate for the date of associated ritual paraphernalia including turtle-shell masks (Haddon 1935; Philp 2015). Estimates were based on typo-chronologies and the presence of European human bones including ribs from “a white boy” in the Waiet effigy (Pasi, cited in Haddon 1935: 399).

The onset of mortuary activities is likely to have been considerably earlier. In all three excavations, human remains (including semi-articulated ribs and a vertebra) continued into layers with a maximum age of 1692–1883 cal BP. A shift was noted in layers post-dating 493–614 cal BP, involving increased quantities of culturally pre-dated and ochre-painted shellfish. These mirror elements recounted within the Waiet ethnographies.

Implications

Ritual mobility was, and continues to be, an important activity for human communities. This is demonstrably the case in Torres Strait, where culture-hero mythologies continue to structure relationships and identities (Figure 5). The ‘Waiet Archaeology Project’ demonstrates the important potential of inter-disciplinary research for historicising inter-connected and commemorative ritual (Wright *et al.* in press).

Complex histories of ritual emplacement were demonstrated at Ne, involving the earliest archaeological evidence for funerary activities (<1700 cal BP) so far recorded for Torres Strait. Mortuary traditions alter over time, interpreted by Dauareb as evidence for the negotiated process by which Elders residing in ETS responded to Waiet’s arrival. Alo Tapim and Segar Passi (*pers. comm.*) suggest that similar negotiation occurred when Christianity arrived in Torres Strait, with elements of earlier Malo and Waiet culture heroes embedded within this new religion.

In 2021, the project will expand to Mer, undertaking geochemical provenancing of exotic sacred stones reputedly commemorating the journey of Waiet. A Waiet gathering is planned on Lag Mabuyag in order to share stories, further cementing the contemporary significance of the Waiet culture hero.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Goemulgaw, Meriam and Dauareb (also the Australian Research Council) for supporting this project. We recognise the contribution from Lag Mabuyag and Murray Elders including Terrence Whap, Dimple and Gabriel Bani, Alo Tapim, Segar Passi, Ron Day, James Zaro, Balaga Zaro and Baimop Tapim. Thanks also to Rod Mitchell for linguistic advice; to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge for providing access

to the Haddon archive and [Figure 2](#); and the Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden for approving the use of [Figure 3](#).

Funding statement

This project was supported by Australian Research Council grant (LP140100387).

References

- CARTER, M., A.J. BARHAM., P. VETH, D. BIRD & S. O'CONNOR. 2004. The Murray Islands Archaeological Project: excavations on Mer and Dauar Eastern Torres Strait. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series* 3: 163–82.
- DAVID, B. & M. BADULGAL. 2006. What happened in Torres Strait 400 years ago? Ritual transformations in an island seascape. *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* 1: 123–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564890600870828>
- HADDON, A.C. 1935. *Reports of the Cambridge anthropological expedition to Torres Straits: general ethnography* (volume 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LEVI-STRAUSS, C. 1966. *The savage mind*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.
- MCNIVEN, I.J. & R. FELDMAN. 2003. Ritually orchestrated seascapes: hunting magic and dugong bone mounds in Torres Strait, NE Australia. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 13: 169–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774303000118>
- Oxford English Dictionary Online. September 2020. Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124702?redirectedFrom=mythologies> (accessed 1 December 2020).
- PHILP, J. 2015. KRAR: nineteenth century turtle-shell masks from Mabuyag collected by Samuel McFarlane. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series* 8: 99–125
- REIMER, P.J. *et al.* 2013. IntCal13 and Marine13 radiocarbon age calibration curves 0–50 000 years cal BP. *Radiocarbon* 55: 1869–87
- WHITELY, P. 2002. Archaeology and oral tradition: the scientific importance of dialogue. *American Antiquity* 67: 405–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1593819>
- WRIGHT, D., G. VAN DER KOLK & DAUAREB. 2018. Ritual pathways and public memory: archaeology of Waiet zogo in Eastern Torres Strait, far north Australia. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605318771186>
- WRIGHT, D., S. SAMPER-CARRO, L. NEJMAN, G. VAN DER KOLK, M. LITSTER, M. LANGLEY, R. WOOD, I. CLARINGBOLD & C. REPU. In press. Archaeology of the Waiat mysteries on Woydhul Island in Western Torres Strait, far north Australia. *Antiquity* 95.