

# Archaeological Evidence for South Sea Islander Traditional Ritual Practice at Wunjunga, Ayr, Central Queensland Coast

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of an excavation of a stone mound at Wunjunga at the mouth of the Burdekin River near Ayr on the central Queensland coast. It is proposed that this construction conforms broadly to the South Sea Islander (SSI) ritual shrines described for Solomon Islands, recorded in oral tradition as related to fishing, purification, curing and warfare. This construction provides material evidence of the continuity of traditional ritual belief by Melanesian indentured labour, as they participated in the sugar cane industry in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## Introduction

A number of researchers of the history of the Queensland Melanesian indentured labour trade have written about the retention of traditional religious and magic practices in Queensland, however no material remains relating to this phenomenon have yet been recorded (Hayes 2002; Mercer and Moore 1976; Moore 2001). One of the few archaeological studies focusing on Queensland South Sea Islander (SSI) sites was carried out by Hayes in the Burdekin district near Ayr (Hayes 2000, 2001, 2002; see also Beck 2009). Hayes (2002:78) argues for the importance of locating and recording evidence of SSI sites to position South Sea Islanders physically on the Australian cultural landscape – considered important given the near invisibility today of a distinctive SSI archaeological signature. Although places which represent the history of South Sea Islanders in Australia are likely to have subtle material traces and may be difficult to recognise (e.g. specific locations, vegetation and stories), they have potentially deep meaning for the SSI community (Hayes 2002:81).

Stone cairns thought to have been constructed for ritual purposes appear on the tip of Cape York and in the Torres Strait, however, these have been interpreted as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander turtle increase sites, and they differ morphologically from the Wunjunga site, being circular piles of stones rather than the closely-fitted rectangular construction at Wunjunga (McIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison 2004). Further, the presence of significant SSI populations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Burdekin region, and their retention of many traditional religious and magic practices, prompted us to investigate the possibility of a SSI connection in regard to the Wunjunga structure's origins.

## South Sea Islanders and the Sugar Industry in Queensland

According to Irvine (2004:1), the sugar industry in Queensland began in the late nineteenth century when South Sea Islanders were 'recruited' to provide the labour necessary to establish cane

growing as an economically viable industry. From the early 1860s until 1904, an estimated 60,000 islanders were 'recruited' from more than 80 islands but mainly from the New Hebrides (Vanuatu – approximately two-thirds) and Solomon Islands (approximately one-third). Although instrumental in making the sugar industry a success South Sea Islanders were persistently marginalised in Australia and by the late 1800s laws were enacted which variously 'protected, restricted, and then finally required their deportation' (Irvine 2004:1; see also Moore 2001). Because most of the islanders were only in Queensland for a few years, they continued to practise their traditional beliefs and retained substantial components of their customary belief systems, including the construction of men's houses, and 'to a limited extent managing to establish ancestral shrines and continue worship' (Moore 2001:2). Extensive SSI communities worked and lived in the Burdekin region in the early part of the twentieth century, centred around the sugar cane town of Ayr and indeed at Plantation Creek just a few kilometres from the Wunjunga site on the northern bank of the Burdekin River estuary (Hayes 2002:81).

## Ancestral Shrines of Solomon Islands

Megalithic shrines have been widely-documented throughout Melanesia and the Pacific and are a central feature of the ritual practices of many of these island societies (Sheppard *et al.* 2004; Walter *et al.* 2004). Of the documented places from which South Sea Islanders were 'recruited' for the Queensland labour trade, it is Solomon Islands that have ritual structures most resembling the Wunjunga structure. Those from New Caledonia and Vanuatu, for example, are quite different structurally (Roe and Taki 1999; Matthew Spriggs, pers. comm., 2011).

There are official records of labour recruitment from the western Solomon Islands provinces of Isabel, Choiseul and the Shortland Islands (Price and Baker 1976), however the bulk of the labour trade came from the islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal in the eastern Solomons. Although cultural differences between the western and the eastern Solomons are well-documented, it is clear that some religious elements, including the central role of shrines, are common to Solomon Islands as a whole. These similarities can be attributed to a common ancestry (e.g. proto-Oceanic society) and to long-term social interaction (Nagaoka 1999:48).

Thus we examine here the characteristics of polyolithic structures in Solomon Islands, particularly the well-documented religious shrines on New Georgia, part of the western Solomons cultural block (Nagaoka 1999; Sheppard *et al.* 2004; Walter *et al.* 2004). It should be noted that we are not implying that the makers of the Wunjunga stone cairn necessarily came from New Georgia; rather we are using the detailed ethnographic and archaeological descriptions of the shrines from New Georgia as a means of categorising shrine morphology and content generally.

Ethnographic descriptions of ritual shrines in the western Solomon Islands are relatively common. According to Walter *et al.* (2004:147), at Roviana Lagoon on the south coast of New Georgia

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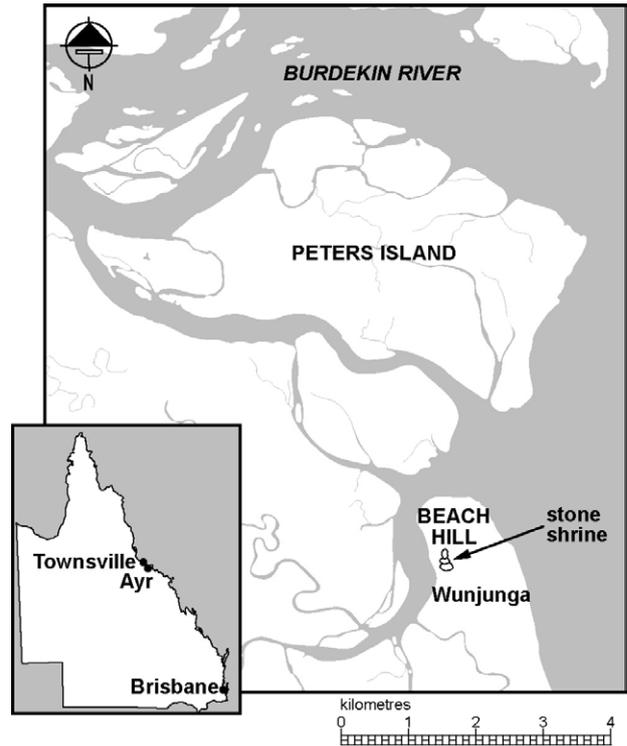
**Figure 1** Shrine at Roviana Lagoon, late nineteenth century (Brown 1908, adapted from Walter *et al.* 2004:147).

there is a wide variety in the size and complexity of shrines as well as in their associated artefacts. Some shrines are as simple as oval piles of coral cobbles 1–2m in diameter and 50cm high with one or two human skulls, some shell valuables and a conch or small clam shell (Figure 1). Food remains such as pig jaws from offerings to the ancestors may also be associated with these shrines, as well as large *Tridacna* shells, and historical European artefacts such as metal axe heads, metal pots, whetstones and ceramics (Walter *et al.* 2004). Although most of the artefacts are typically found on top of the shrine or scattered about, artefacts are also found embedded in the structures themselves (Walter, pers. comm., 2010).

The availability of local materials influenced the morphology of religious structures and the development of localised fashion (Nagaoka 1999:48). Walter *et al.* (2004:149) also comment on the lack of a systematic shrine morphology and content:

Each shrine is in some sense unique: although they can be reasonably easily differentiated from other structures, there are no statistically or perceptually detectable patterns of internal variation. There is no systematic ‘grammar’ of shrine contents or form. Instead, we find what might be termed a creative *melange*, produced out of very particular sets of actions and relationships. Each shrine contains a collection of artefacts in juxtapositions that demand to be interpreted on their own terms.

In spite of their morphological variety Nagaoka (1999:61) argues that shrines can be characterised by their functions

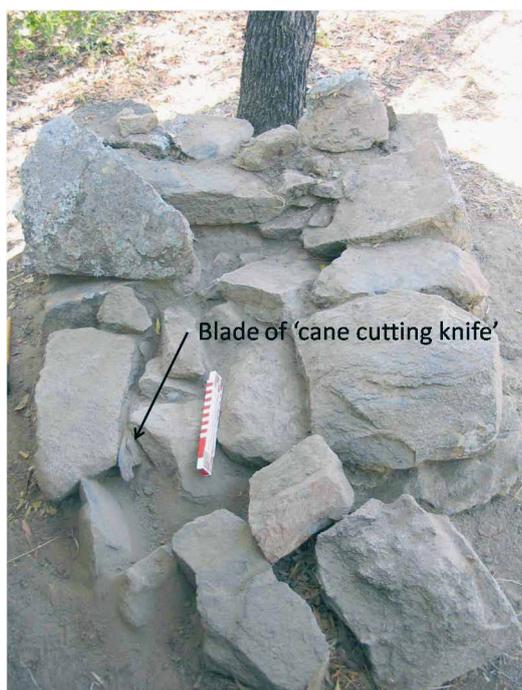


**Figure 2** Location of Wunjunga Shrine site.

(determined from oral tradition), elements of which are common to the whole New Georgia group. Such functions include: shrines for ancestor worship (skull shrines), shrines for ensuring productivity (garden, fishing and hunting), shrines for worshipping a variety of spirits and gods, and cleansing and purification shrines. Skull shrines tended to be more elaborate and larger than other shrine types, with human skulls and shell valuables as prominent features. Other shrine types such as garden and fishing shrines contain no human remains, but rather shell and other valuable items, while cleansing and purification shrines may not be associated with any features or artefacts at all.

### The Wunjunga Stone Structure

The stone structure at Wunjunga is located on the western side of Beach Hill – a prominent geological feature on the southern side of the Burdekin River mouth, approximately 30km south of Ayr and just 10km from the historical Plantation Creek SSI community (Figure 2). The structure was well-known by local residents at Wunjunga who variously described it as an Aboriginal grave site, the burial place of the Captain of the *Peruvian* (the 1846 shipwreck) and a survey cairn. We were asked by Gudjuda Aboriginal Reference Group representatives and the local Wunjunga Residents’ Committee, to excavate the structure to determine its origins. The structure is rectangular in shape, is 1.2m in length by 80cm in width and 50cm high at its highest point. A drawing frame was used to map in each rock removed (in 5 separate layers), so that the rocks could be replaced in their correct position after excavation was complete. Subsurface excavation continued below the last layer of rocks to a maximum depth of 33.8cm and a further 100cm was augured below that level (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Partly disassembled stone structure. Note blade of cutting implement (Photograph: Bryce Barker).

## Results

Underneath the top layer of rocks was a range of material culture items including glass, oyster shell and pieces of rusty iron which because of their condition could not be identified. The glass is curved and thin (too thin to be bottle glass) and it is thought to be the glass cover from a kerosene/spirit lamp. These items were found in the centre of the stone structure, underneath each layer of stones (Table 1). Of note was a large, solid, wrought-iron cutting tool in Layer 4 (Figure 3), probably a locally-crafted implement in which the blade was beaten and flattened out at one end (Kate Quirk, Queensland Museum, pers. comm., 2010). The implement most resembles a type of tool described as a slasher, its long cutting edge designed for scrub cutting, and potentially also for cutting cane (Arnold 2002). Layer 5 contained several hooked pieces of fencing wire as well as an intact pig skull (*Sus scrofa*) which sat on the soil surface at the very base of the Layer. No artefacts were located below Layer 5.

It was clear from the artefacts embedded within the structure that the cairn is more than just a pile of rocks such as a survey

marker. Rather the deliberate placement of material items within the structure indicates that it may have had a ritual or symbolic purpose. The Juru/Bindal Aboriginal community has no knowledge of such structures being of Aboriginal origin, and there are no historical accounts of such structures in the extensive ethnohistorical record for the central Queensland coast. The only stone cairn site that has been recorded in the region in over 35 years of archaeological survey is a site just north of Mackay, which is unequivocally SSI in origin.

## Conclusion

Two arguments support the SSI provenance of the Wunjunga shrine: first, the context of the structure is within a known area of intense cane farming and South Sea Islander communities around Ayr. Second, the Wunjunga structure generally fits a broad SSI morphology typified by that described for Roviana shrines; it is a built stone structure, rectangular in shape; and it contains a range of deliberately placed artefacts, including some that are also found in ritual shrines in the Solomons (i.e. shell and pig skeletal material). Although it is clear that there are points of difference between the shrines described from Roviana, and the Wunjunga structure, it is worth reiterating Walter *et al.*'s (2004:149) statement 'that there is no systematic 'grammar' of shrine contents or form' and that of Nagaoka (1999:61) that 'the morphology of religious structures is partly influenced by materials available locally and this influenced the development of localized fashion'. Indeed, photographs of shrines from Roviana and Marovo (cf. Brown 1908 in Walter *et al.* 2004; Hviding 1996) illustrate the wide variation in shrine morphology not only in Roviana but across the Solomons generally. It is likely that differences between the Wunjunga shrine and those described for the Solomons are a reflection of regional variation, relating to such things as availability of raw materials, degree of expertise and knowledge relating to shrine construction and ritual maintenance, and particular circumstances relating to the life of an indentured labourer such as access to land and time available for complex ritual practice.

This site is of considerable historical and archaeological significance because it locates SSI peoples physically on the Australian landscape, and also because it provides a physical and spiritual link to the traditional indigenous societies from whence these people came.

**Table 1** Artefacts found within the stone structure.

Level	Item	Description
2	Shell	<i>Saccostrea cucullata</i> (MNI=3)
	Glass	Thin curved broken pieces (possibly from a lamp)
	Iron	Heavily rusted flat pieces of iron
	Charcoal	Small pieces of charcoal
3	Shell	<i>Saccostrea cucullata</i> (MNI=1)
	Glass	Thin curved broken pieces (possibly from a lamp)
	Iron	Heavily rusted flat pieces of iron
4	Glass	Thin curved broken pieces (possibly from a lamp)
	Iron	Homemade wrought iron cutting implement (slasher)
5	Wire	Pieces of fencing wire with ends curved into hooks (#=5)
	Bone	Skull of <i>Sus scrofa</i> (minus mandible)

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