THE WORIMI: HUNTER-GATHERERS AT PORT STEPHENS

BY

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PART XIII

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The Worimi were a distinctive tribe located on Port Stephens in a number of groups, associated with territory, known as hordes. The exact number of these territorial groups is not known, and it is hardly likely that this will ever be established conclusively in the future. However, there were at least four or five hordes who belonged to the linguistic group called Worimi. These shared common features in material culture, social organization, ceremonial practices and beliefs. They maintained relations with neighbouring tribes on ceremonial and social occasions (see *H.N.H.* Vol.6, 1974, pp.166-9).

The estimated population density is well in keeping with the wealth of food resources available to the natives, which is the chief governing factor of a hunter-gatherer group. Apparently there were times when the population numbers were controlled by the natives.

The subsistence economy and the material culture revealed efficient exploitation of a varied environment. There was a preference for the marine resources of food by those hordes who had the best access to these, especially the Maiangal, the Gamipingal and the Grewerigal. These hordes derived more from the fishing and the gathering of shell-fish than the hunting of terrestrial animals or the gathering of vegetable foods. The marine sources of food would appear to have been more reliable and more productive.

The pattern of exploitation was associated with the seasonal availability and the relative abundance of certain food sources. These included marine sources, such as fish and oysters, as well as mammals, such as kangaroos and flying foxes, and vegetable foods, such as the gigantic lily and fern-root. Although there was a preference for the marine sources, the terrestrial resources were not neglected, but formed a supplement and a variety to their diet (see *H.N.H.* Vol.6, 1974, pp.233-5; and Table 1). It is possible that the terrestrial food sources became more favoured because of their relative abundance. On the other hand, it may have been a change because of choice rather than from necessity. There is evidence that the marine sources of food had become less abundant and accessible in winter.

Jottings of a Non-Scientist (cont.)

City living and education brings great disadvantages—as well as some advantages with it. One of the greatest disadvantages is that life is entirely man-centred and artificial and "primary" issues of human living and nature often do not enter the consciousness of city dwellers. How can one best put it? Obviously we cannot all go back to subsistence farming, weaving our own wool, growing our own food; but somehow, in a simpler existence, it is brought home to humans that they depend on nature, the soil, other creatures, and other humans. There is a direct relationship, easily seen, between what people do all day and how they do it, and how it all reacts directly on their health, their comfort, and the satisfaction of their needs. There is no such direct and obvious relationship between doing something on an assembly line or in an office or school, and everyday human life. The consequences of what a city dweller does are not immediately brought home to him personally. What a pity that in this most urbanised nation in the world, secondary schools have no rural studies courses. This is not impossible in cities—according to a former H.M.I. colleague of mine, some of the best courses of this sort were in the schools of a big industrial city in the English Midlands. Such courses were not vocational, and not intended to train people for agriculture. They were often well integrated with science—botany, zoology, biology, chemistry, and also with practical subjects, cookery and nutrition, woodwork, construction.

Apart from the benefit of awareness of how man depends on his environment, the most unexpected side effects could come from a wider knowledge of nature. At first blush, one would not think that Botany can be the slightest professional help to a philosophical linguist for instance. Yet in an excellent French book on linguistics—which incidentally contains one of the most balanced critical accounts, beautifully expressed, of Chomsky's contribution, the point is made that Chomsky's teacher, who was incidentally of the same migrant-ethnic background as Chomsky and was brought up (presumably) in the asphalt jungles of a big American city, speculated and wondered on the philosophical implications to be derived from the vagaries of the English language, in a particular example: How in some names differentiating berries, the differentiating prefix had an independent semantic context of its own—like blackberry, where black means something without the berry—and loganberry, where logan has no meaning in isolation. The slightest nodding acquaintance with Botany would have told the learned professor that botanists have a way of naming plants after people, and that Logan happened to be a U.S. judge who first hybridised loganberries! Therefore there is no need, in this instance at any rate, to ponder about the imponderabilia of psycholinguistics to find an explanation!

The Worimi...(cont.)

The relative abundance of marine sources of food in summer tended to make the natives more sedentary at that time. Oppressive climatic conditions may have had a bearing. The terrestrial resources must have had great value for the natives to venture inland in the colder conditions of winter. The above pattern of exploitation agrees with the general picture of coastal hunter-gatherer groups in South East Australia.* The use of such specialised equipment as the multi-pronged fish spears and the crescentric shell fish-hooks reflects such a pattern of exploitation, which is supported by the division of labour in the use of this equipment (see *H.N.H.* Vol.7, 1975, pp.113-5; 231-6). The evidence from surface sites indicates the exploitation of shell-fish appropriate to the situation: oysters predominate on the shores of Port Stephens and pippies on the beach fronts.

The horde territories of the Worimi included a variety of habitats rich in raw materials and food resources. This implies that they may have been originally designed with this in mind, since they radiate around Port Stephens. Their exploitation of these, as far as can be ascertained, reflected the availability of the natural resources within their territory (see *H.N.H.* Vol.6, 1974, pp.233-5, Vol.7, 1975, pp.231-6; Vol.8, 1976, pp.31-7). Future excavation of midden sites may confirm the pattern of exploitation revealed by the ethnohistorical sources. At the moment any conclusions have to be tentative.

The division of labour was not clear cut and it seems that necessity may have compelled the natives to engage in fishing at night, and for men to engage in line fishing. Food preparation was not elaborate but adequate for the needs of the natives. The natives may have ahd an influence on their environment by the firing of the vegetation at periodic interals (see *H.N.H.* Vol.7, 1975, pp.113-5).

The excavation of midden sites may also have a potential in revealing further information on the material culture of the Worimi. The ethnohistorical sources demonstrate that there was a predominant use of organic materials. This may have been because of inadequate observation by the early sources of the use of stone artefacts. Surface collections of this century indicate that stone artefacts were widely used once by the natives but not in the ethnographic past (period when the native life-style was observed by Europeans).

The survival of organic materials is known to be limited, especially in archaeological sites; even in ethnographic collections (artefacts of material culture preserved by collectors),

**R.J. Lampert, "Coastal Aborigines of Southeastern Australia", in D.J. Mulvaney and J. Golson, Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia, Canberra, 1971, p.118.*

which are few themselves, there is a paucity of evidence. In W.J. Enright's collection (see *H.N.H.*, Vol.7, 1975, pp.182-8) there is an absence of perishable items such as nets, belts of spun hair or bags. Therefore the preponderant use of organic materials in the ethnographic past will need to be taken into consideration when assessing any future excavations. Archaeological evidence of late stone industries in south-eastern Australia displays a degeneration in the manufacture of stone artefacts,* so the ethnohistorical evidence in this area supports such a development into the ethnographic past.

Surface collections of stone artefacts in this tribal district reveal a range extending from massive crude cleavers to fine Bondi points (see illustrations). This suggests a well-developed stone industry which is not supported by the ethnohistorical evidence. The presence of Bondi points and geometric microliths means that the stone technology that produced these was not of the immediate past. Evidence in northern N.S.W. and Mt Burr indicates that these may be from the recent past. But since these were not from stratigraphic excavations it is impossible to assign them to a definite chronological position in Australian prehistory. It is possible to say that in the prehistoric past the natives in this district had a backed blade industry which had affinities with the Bondaian phase of the Eastern Regional Sequence (see R.J. Lampert in *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia*).

The elouera scraper may have been used in the ethnographic past since it has been thought to have been possibly employed in skin dressing or in scraping weapons and implements (see Mulvaney, *op. cit.*, pp.82-3), and the early sources provide some evidence of the use of stone artefacts in such activities. However, this is very speculative. There is more evidence that shell was used more widely than stone in the ethnohistorical period as well as in the recent prehistoric past. An exception is the edge-ground stone axes, which have been noted by the early observers and collected over the tribal territory of the Worimi. These include grooved and ungrooved heads (see illustrations).

The emphasis by the Worimi, as with other native groups in Australia, was for utility and sparseness in their material culture. Since they were a mobile people there was a need for a minimum of possessions which had to be transported with them. The use of raw materials, with a few exceptions, reflected their availability in the territory of the Worimi. A superior stone was sought from Merewether while opossum fur articles, which were more readily available to the inland hordes, were exchanged by the coastal hordes.

* D.J. Mulvaney, *The Prehistory of Australia*, London, 1969, pp.89-91.

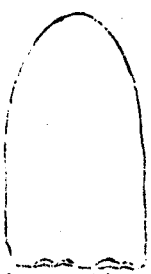
The Worimi...(cont.)

Chopper-scraper (x ½)
(Anna Bay)

Spoke-shave (x ½)
(Anna Bay)

Chopper-scraper (x ½)
(Anna Bay)

Scrappers (Anna Bay) (x ⅔)



Adze (x ¼)
(Fisherman's Bay)

Cleaver (x ¼)
(One Mile Beach)

Elouera scraper
(One Mile Beach)

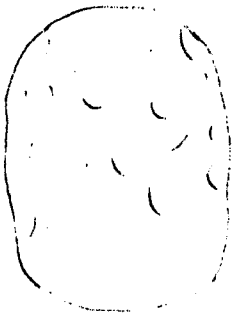
(x ⅔)

(x ⅔)

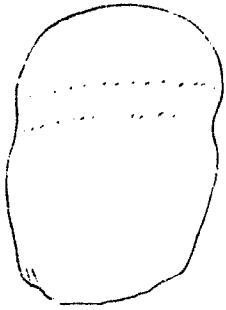
Bondi Points (One Mile Beach)

The Worimi...(cont.)

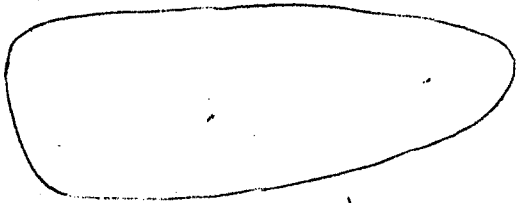
GROUND EDGE AXES



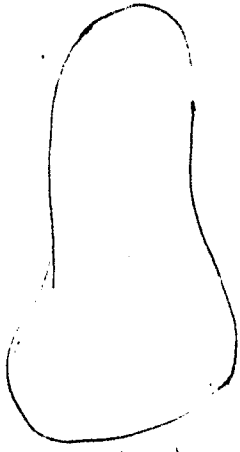
Flaked pebble, hammerdressed (×½) (Myall Lakes)



Grooved, well polished (×⅓) (Kinross)

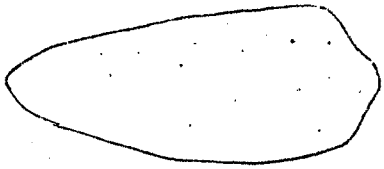


Well polished axe (×¼) (Broughton Island)



Hammerstone (×¼) (Broughton Island)

Fishhook File (actual size) (Morna Point)



Fishhook File (actual size) (Morna Point)

The Worimi...(cont.)

Elements of the material culture were a response to factors in the environment: canoes were developed by the coastal hordes who had a need for these (see *H.N.H.*, Vol.8, 1976, pp.31-7); fur rugs were required more by the inland hordes where the winters were more severe (see *H.N.H.*, Vol.7, 1975, pp.231-6); the fish spears were an efficient means of exploiting the marine sources (see *H.N.H.*, Vol.7, 1975, pp.28-37; 182-8).

The social and ceremonial aspects, as with tribal organizations, are the most difficult to reconstruct from archaeological evidence. Therefore this wealth of information (see *H.N.H.*, Vol.6, 1974, pp.166-9; Vol.8, 1976, pp.100-4, 198-205, 260-7; Vol.9, pp.89-91, 151-5), though incomplete, has relevance for prehistory. Analogies may be used to make more meaningful the evidence revealed by archaeology. The social and ceremonial aspects of the Worimi demonstrates how closely linked they were with nature. Dependent as they were on the products of their environment, the Worimi lived in close partnership with the natural species. The social system emphasised the active co-operation of all members of the tribe. Their spiritual beliefs pervaded their life and was expressed in their ritual and ceremony. This was all aimed at the prosperity and perpetuation of the tribe.

The influence of the Europeans on the traditional way of life of the natives became apparent early in the contact period. The natives soon appreciated the value of manufactured foods and beverages; they adopted the superior materials of iron and glass; the unusual aspects of their culture were frowned on by the Europeans. Consequently, by the late nineteenth century they were in an advanced stage of transition.

The next article will be devoted to the early contact period when the Worimi met with the first settlers in their tribal area and reacted to the changes in their environment.

TABLE 1: FOOD SOURCES OF THE WORIMI

Item	Method of Collection or Hunting	Comment
MARINE/ESTUARINE		
Shellfish		
Rock oyster (Dhir-ra-bwee) Mud oyster (Nin-nung) Pipi	Gathered by women.	Great abundance. A staple part of diet
Crustacean		
Lobster (Wir-rah) Crabs (Tee-rah)	Men acted as lookouts; women dived to crevices.	
Fish		
Mullet (Mi-poo-yoo) Snapper (Ga-ra) Flounder Bream (Coo-pe-re) Flathead (Yu-ka) Jewfish (Gur-ra-wur-ra) Torpedo-fish (Kir-re-poon-too)	Men speared individually and communally; women used hook and line from canoes using crustacea and shellfish as bait. Occasional night fishing by husband and wife using torch light. Nets and stone traps used too.	As important as shellfish.
Tunicata: Teredo (cobra)	Logs hacked with axes, worm extracted.	Eaten raw.
FRESHWATER		
Fish	Waterholes poisoned with narcotic bark; mud stirred in drought time forcing fish to the surface.	
Eel (Too-nang)	Speared with multi-pronged spear; poisoned.	
TERRESTRIAL		
Marsupials		
Kangaroos (Wam-boyn) (Wol-loo-ya) Wallaby (Bur-rid)	Driven into mobs, encircled, then speared or clubbed.	Abundant; a favourite food.
Possum (Bur-run-gee) (Wot-too) (Pilloo)	Tracked by claw marks; trees climbed by notches cut with stone axe; killed by blow on head.	Great delicacy.
Flying Fox (Gun-dee-wi)	Vines and branches tugged down; speared.	Most fancied.
Koala (Goo-la)		
Echidna (Mak-ree)		
Kangaroo-rat (Bul-boo)	Cut out of hollows with stone axe; secured with throwing stick or waddy.	

Table 1 (continued)

Item	Method of Collection or Hunting	Comment
Dwarf Banksia		Bloom eaten, especially by children.
Macrozamia (Boor-ro-wang)	Gathered when ripe.	Treated to remove poison.
Insects		
Honey (Gir-ra-gar) Native bee (Wal-lin-gul-ga)	Agile and swift scaling trees by notches cut with axe; nest chopped out.	Relished by natives, especially the young brood combs.

TABLE 2: INDEX OF ARTICLES ON THE WORIMI IN *H.N.H.*

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	SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY			
II	Food Sources	6	Nov. '74	233-5
III	Methods of Hunting, Fishing and Gathering	7	Feb. '75	28-31
IV	Preparation of Food, the Role of Fire	7	May '75	113-5
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V	Weapons	7	Aug. '75	182-8
VI	Implements & Utensils; Apparel & Ornaments	7	Nov. '75	231-6
VII	Dwellings and Canoes	8	Feb. '76	31-7
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XI	Burial Practices	9	May '77	89-91
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