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An Aboriginal burial with grave goods near Cooma, New South Wales

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An Aboriginal site, accidentally exposed during a creek flooding episode in 1991, contained the skeletons of two individuals dated to ca.7000 years BP, together with a suite of rare grave goods. Although highly disturbed, the site is highly significant, both as the oldest recorded burial on the New South Wales southern tablelands and for the rarity of the grave goods. The pierced kangaroo teeth found with the burials and presumably once part of a necklace are the first of their kind to be found in Australia. Similar items recorded previously include a necklace of pierced *Sarcophilous* teeth discovered at Lake Nitchie in western New South Wales (Macintosh et al. 1970) and a headband of grooved macropod teeth at Roonka Flat on the Murray River (Pretty 1977).

Detailed analysis of the grave goods and the skeletal remains was carried out with the concurrence of the Merrimans Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), whose area of responsibility includes part of the Monaro plains. The skeletal remains were reburied close to the grave site, in an emotional ceremony presided over by Aboriginal Elder 'Gubboo' Ted Thomas, with the cooperation and support of the local landowner. Following discussion with Land Council members, the grave goods were not reburied but were held by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) while the National Museum of Australia constructed a showcase. The items are to be housed in a secure location at the Umburra Cultural Centre near the Wallaga Lake Aboriginal settlement on the NSW far south coast.

The events, including discovery and reburial, attracted national and international media attention. Because of the significance of the find, NPWS and the LALC agreed that it should be widely publicised. NPWS Media Officer Stuart Cohen organised the media coverage, and briefed journalists on the sensitivity of the events and the need to report them in an appropriate manner.

A number of individuals have been involved in the project. A paper with details of the burial and analysis of the associated material is being prepared for publication but it may be some time before this appears in print as its authors are now scattered across the continent: Sue Feary in Nowra, Colin Pardoe in Adelaide, Angela Davis in Perth and Graham Taylor in Canberra. Since the site and its contents are of such significance and presently the only published reference is the *GEO* article (Cohen 1993), this brief report is written to provide researchers with published details for reference.

Site context

The grave occurs in late Holocene alluvial deposits immediately adjacent to the present creek channel, in Rock Flat Creek valley at Bunyan about 10 km north of Cooma on the NSW southern tablelands. Quaternary alluvial fan and stream sediments have filled the valley with well-bedded gravels and sands, supporting deep red earths and podzolic soils. The stream deposits comprise an older unit which occurs as a high terrace above the grave and a highly calcareous younger grey unit. The ochre-lined grave was dug into this younger unit which was probably deposited during wetter conditions in the early Holocene when the creek consisted of a series of semi connected pools in a wide swampy meadow. The highly calcareous nature of the grey unit is probably due to the proximity of the limestone. The uppermost layer of dark brown loamy material is believed to be post- European.

Skeletal remains

The incomplete remains of two individuals are present; a young male and an older female, although their genetic relationship is unknown. Although the burial was completely disturbed, initially by creek flooding and then by police examination, the distribution of the skeletal elements suggests that both individuals were buried side by side, at the same time, with heads extending towards the creek. Most of the upper components of both skeletons were washed away during the flooding episode.

The female is estimated to have been of middle age, based on the degree of attrition on the four anterior teeth, with a

height of 1.55 m. The teeth exhibit distinct grooving at the gum line, which is believed to be the result of drawing fine fibres between the teeth in the process of manufacturing string. Cooke (1988) has similarly interpreted such a feature on skeletal material from nearby Cooleman Caves. Dental caries, the oldest known case in Australia, are present on three of the teeth and probably arose from use of the teeth to make string. X-rays of the long bones demonstrate the presence of Harris lines, which signal arrested growth in childhood caused by starvation or diseases (Webb 1984).

The male skeleton is that of a young man between 19 and 22 years with a stature of 1.73 m. He suffered from a mild version of *spina bifida*, shown by incomplete fusing of the fifth lumbar arch, although this was not the cause of death. There is no other visible pathology and it is likely that the *spina bifida* did not preclude his ability to walk.

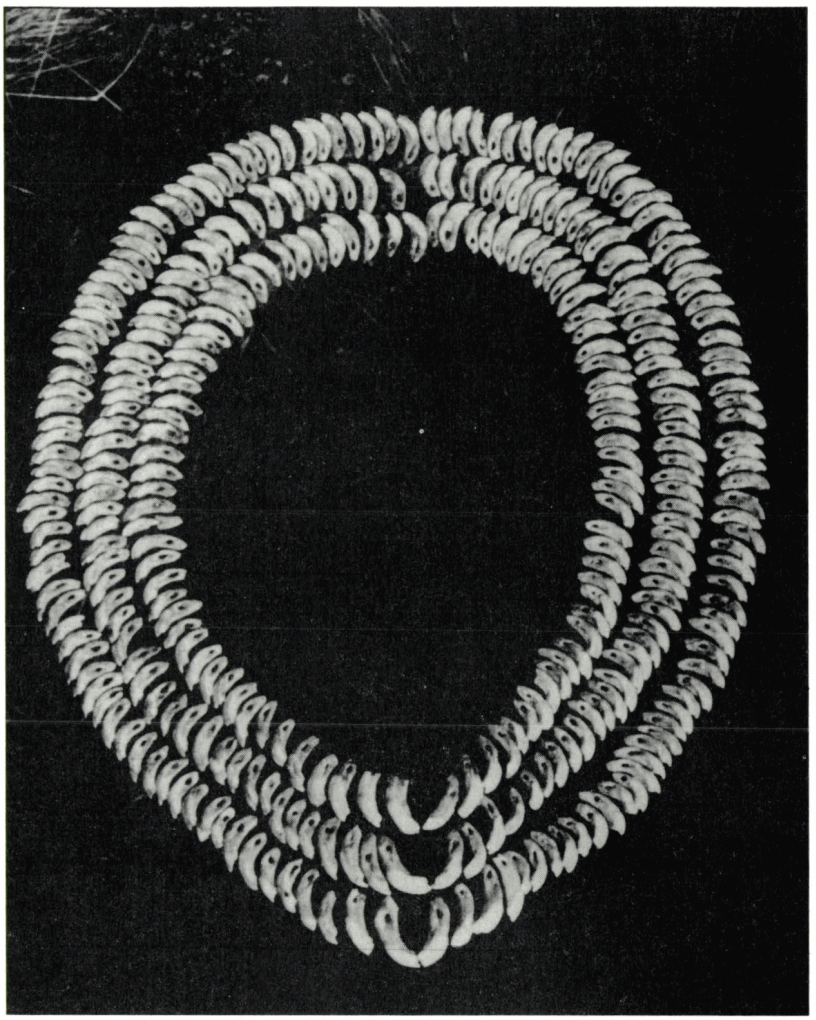

Figure 1 Cooma burial site: Kangaroo teeth arranged to form a necklace. (Photo: National Parks and Wildlife Service)

Grave goods

The collection of artefacts found with the skeletal remains are assumed to be contemporaneous with the burial and comprise a tool kit and items of adornment. The tool kit consists of two pebble hammerstones, exhibiting distinct anvil and hammerstone utilisation; five bone points manufactured from kangaroo fibulae all showing striae and polishing under low magnification; and eight macropod mandibular rami, all but one with the tips of the incisors snapped off from use, for scraping, planing or graving wood or skins. Preliminary analyses of breakage patterns and use wear of the bone artefacts have been undertaken by Keryn Walsh and Phil Boot respectively.

Most spectacular of all the finds was a collection of 327 pierced kangaroo and wallaby incisors, found scattered throughout the deposit. All are upper first incisors, with 159 left and 164 right, with three uncertain. The preservation of the teeth is good with minimal cracking or chipping of the enamel. The teeth were pierced from both sides through the root portion with an awl-like implement. Polishing is visible under low magnification on the lateral surfaces of many of the teeth, probably as a result of sliding against each other while strung together to form a necklace (Fig. 1).

Discussion

The existence of grave goods with the skeletal remains is interpreted as evidence for a ritual burial of one or both individuals who had enjoyed special status within the community, possibly because of their magic powers. Although grave goods are not uncommon (Meehan 1971), the Bunyan burial is remarkable for the diverse and unusual nature of the grave goods, particularly in the context of the archaeology of the southern tablelands. Flood (1980) in her extensive study of the southern highlands makes no mention of grave goods from either ethnohistorical or archaeological evidence. The kangaroo tooth necklace would have required the slaughter of at least 126 individuals. An interesting question is whether this occurred as a single event to provide the means for making an ornament or whether the necklace was constructed over many generations, with new teeth being added and broken or chipped teeth being replaced on a regular basis.

Whilst analysis of the site has made a significant contribution to Australian archaeology, it is also an important example of cooperation between Aboriginal people, a regulatory authority and a local landowner. It was unfortunate that the site was extensively disturbed initially by flooding and then by forensic examination, the latter highlighting the need to establish firm procedures for police handling of Aboriginal burials.

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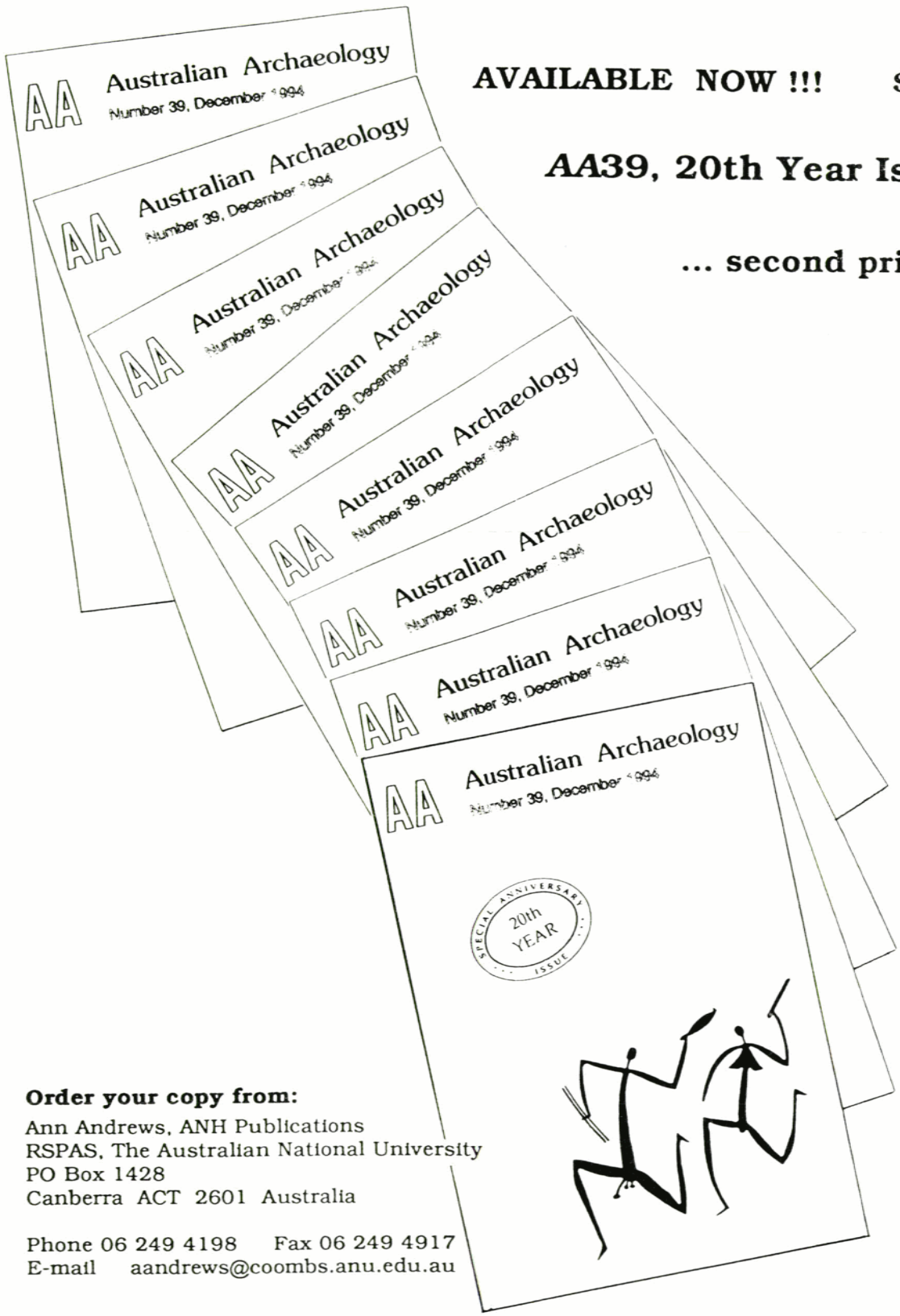

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