# No intrinsic value in archaeology? Constructing agency and social value from archaeology

**Tim Owen**

**Sharon Veale**

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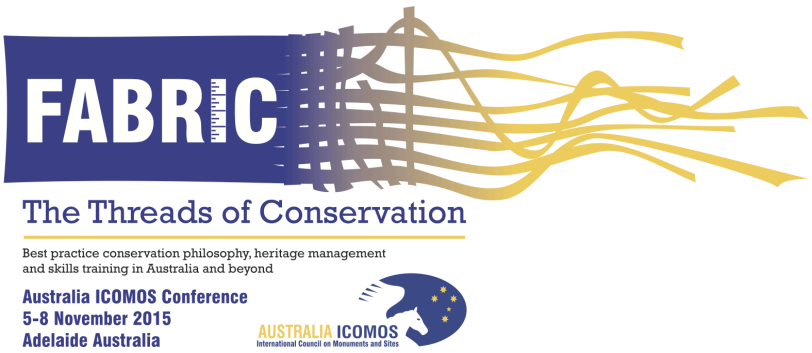

## Introduction

## Understanding Cultural Significance

Cultural significance may be embodied in many different ways and can mean many different things to different people and groups. Aboriginal people, heritage practitioners and archaeologists use the concept of cultural significance to describe, define and explain how a place or site demonstrates cultural values and how such values are expressed tangibly or intangibly. The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter defines cultural significance as:

> *...aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations.*

Archaeology may be represented through objects and items, frequently set within a cultural landscape. An assemblage of archaeological objects and items is often identified within a boundary, referred to as a site or place. The value of an archaeological resource is frequently associated with the place (and the associated elements and use), rather than individual objects. The Burra Charter reflects this thinking further through the description of cultural significance:

> *Cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects.*
>
> *Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups.*

Archaeology within a place is typically recorded as the place itself, or recognised as a component of the associated 'fabric'. Further values can be associated with use, typically reflected by archaeologists in statements connecting the archaeological resource with an ability to 'learn or understand' the past through the investigation and analysis of material.

Yet differences in cultural understanding and attachments to a place may lead to difficulties in 'translating' heritage values between various individuals and groups. Further, cultural significance is not static, and changes over time. This is also true of the use of a heritage place and the extent of a boundary connected with the place which may also change:

> *Places of significance to Indigenous people, and the reasons for their cultural significance, may change as Indigenous traditions adapt and evolve, and as Indigenous people are able to reconnect to places that have been denied to them in the past.*[i]

The process of cultural significance assessment (as described through the Burra Charter process) requires investigation and research into a place's archaeology. Yet archaeological research, into a place, may pose a threat to a place's cultural significance because the archaeological process itself can be destructive (eg archaeological excavation requires the removal of the archaeological resource). Collection of sufficient evidence for a cultural values assessment may need to consider the potential impact, against the resultant archaeological evidence obtained—the Burra Charter's ethos 'do as much as necessary… but change as little as possible' becomes applicable.

**Scientific Values**

When determining the 'value' of archaeology issues can emerge during the evidence gathering stage. The development of an archaeological research design is directly influenced by the given objectives of the different researchers - in this context archaeologists and Aboriginal Traditional Owners. As part of the collection of archaeological data, a values assessment is generally expected for not only scientific values but also historical, aesthetic and social values.

Archaeologists generating archaeological evidence are frequently able to prepare detailed statements of scientific significance. Yet often archaeologists do not often produce historical and/or aesthetic values statements, and feel unable to comment on social values. Aboriginal Traditional Owners frequently voice different values—particularly declining to comment on scientific value.

Scientific archaeological values are often determined without reference to the living knowledge and traditions of Aboriginal people. While scientific value considers the rarity and representativeness of the archaeological resource and its ability to contribute further information, scientific values often become separate and independent of the investigation and assessment of other cultural values (social/spiritual, historical and aesthetic).

Issues arise from this separation because without opportunities to share the technical understanding of scientific value derived from the archaeological record, Aboriginal people may not be in a position to reflect upon or articulate the historic or social values attached to the material evidence. A practicing archaeologist's understanding and interpretation of the archaeology is typically based on archaeological theory. This approach does not always engage well with intangible understandings of Country, culture and landscape (a framework for developing interpretation which connects these aspects is presented in Owen 2015).

Typically in New South Wales, if an Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment is focused on an archaeological investigation, the values statement for scientific values may include a page or more of explanation, whereas the social assessment may only be a single statement by an Aboriginal representative, such as "all archaeological sites have high value", or "all archaeology is important because it connects us to our past". Statements by Aboriginal people are frequently not connected to the scientific values, or historic, aesthetic or social values. Furthermore, such values statements are not often investigated or assessed with sufficient

attention or rigor to stand-alone or to provide a continuing cultural connection to the archaeological scientific values.

This disjuncture between social and archaeological scientific values does not assist in decision making particularly with regard to the conservation and management of heritage places. For instance, an archaeologist may hold a particular view of conservation, applying a 'low' level of caution to impact, and/or may consider recovering archaeological materials is the only option so as to further scientific knowledge. An Aboriginal Traditional Owner may want to apply a 'high' level of caution, preventing all impacts, but may not have the knowledge or cultural authority to describe why a place is historically or socially important, and thus may need to fall back on the scientific values in order to demonstrate that values are both present and warrant conservation.

Such practice is common at urban archaeological sites in Sydney where Aboriginal traditions and associated places with the cultural landscape may not be location specific. Intact archaeological sites of scientific value are frequently encountered during the development process; however, the conservation of these sites is rare in environmental impact assessment and development. In this situation significant Aboriginal cultural values are simultaneously discovered and impacted though the archaeological investigation and proposed development activity.

**The Other Values**

Country, ceremony, Dreaming and continuing cultural connections are integral to Aboriginal social values and spirituality. The physical aspects of Country are fundamental to this understanding. In Country, the interpretation of the past, as represented through the archaeological record, is challenging. The archaeological record may have resulted from ceremony, or have been part of the Dreaming, or part of daily subsistence activities.

For Aboriginal communities and individuals who maintain traditional spiritual practices on Country, the archaeological record may be viewed as having lesser importance, to that of Country itself, or specific places associated with Dreaming and ceremony. The archaeology may be regarded as merely the by-product of Dreaming and ceremony. Alternatively, where archaeology is a significant aspect of cultural value it is likely to have protocols associated with gender, initiation or ownership.

Following colonisation some Aboriginal communities were unable to remain on Country and continue to practice Dreaming or ceremony. As a consequence cultural knowledge may be fragmented and difficult to apply to the interpretation of the archaeological record. In the absence of knowledge about the historical context and specific meanings associated with a place, event, or object, the archaeological evidence may only be able to be interpreted in scientific, functional, or utilitarian terms.

In both instances a disconnect between scientific and social values is evident.

**Avenues for Constructing Agency Around Archaeology**

**The Role of Archaeology**

Where scientific values dominate the assessment of Aboriginal cultural values, Aboriginal people may not be afforded the right to create and construct agency around the archaeology record associated with their history and heritage. With a shift in practice, however, archaeology can play a significant role in re-connecting all people with Aboriginal culture today. The archaeological record frequently contributes new understandings of Country, enriching and deepening cultural connections. It can enable Aboriginal people to rebuild cultural connections, and form renewed attachments to place that may have been denied to them in the past.[ii]

Beyond the scientific paradigm of archaeological theory and practice, new meanings constructed through social engagement and discourse can create powerful and productive agency for individuals and communities, resulting in different knowledge and value formations around a place or a subject.[iii]

The construction of knowledge and power around archaeology needs to shared by archaeologists and Aboriginal people. We suggest that integrated values assessment combined with the implementation of the six themes presented below could result in improved outcomes for Aboriginal cultural heritage:

1. **Archaeological Research and Agency**

Archaeological research designs need to consider the basis from which they will investigate and construct agency around archaeological data. Aboriginal communities often require investigations to be designed to identify and record information with no or minimal destruction to their cultural fabric. As such, the role of excavation and its interpretation needs to be assessed and evaluated prior to commencing work—particularly when potential impacts can be redesigned to avoid damage or harm to fabric.

Archaeological survey traditionally involves searching for archaeological sites (stone artefacts, shell middens and other less commonly identified objects), without considering their landscape context. Understanding the location of sites in the landscape, and connecting sites to local Aboriginal tradition(s), memory and attachments commences the process of connecting historical, social and scientific values (and is likely to result in further archaeological site discoveries).

## 2. Aboriginal Community Engagement

Aboriginal communities also need to engage with scientific value. Assistance from government is required. In NSW the heritage assessment process requires registered Aboriginal parties to comment on the methodology for 'heritage values assessment' and draft reports. The author's experience of comments provided by Aboriginal traditional owners is that rarely is a critique of the scientific value offered. Development of a framework to guide Aboriginal community assessment would provide both those preparing the assessments and the Aboriginal parties with a greater support and improved assessments. In the first instance, a basic check list for to ensure the adequacy of the work undertaken could be prepared. A thematic framework (similar to the NSW OEH Aboriginal historical themes) could be developed thus allowing Traditional Owners a themes to check and associate with each place.

A more detailed framework could ask traditional owners to comment on the type of places identified and connect a value with the type of site. Presentation of regional mapping of pre-contact sites, could be used by Aboriginal people to develop contemporary cultural mapping of walking routes, places of significant events and other intangible items.

These evaluations need to allow for evaluation of place beyond a study area boundary (as contemporary development boundaries rarely correspond to traditional Aboriginal boundaries). The outcome would be a check list/form that provides a simple means for traditional owners to evaluate and comment on the scientific value of a place.

## 3. Changes to Government Recording Systems

Current government registry and recording of Aboriginal sites and values differs greatly at State, Territory and Commonwealth levels. At the most basic Aboriginal registers present

single point data, which is frequently incorrect in terms of location, and unable to map and define any spatial characteristics associated with either location or temporality.

Advances in GIS mapping and registry mean that cultural landscape mapping is able to represent tangible and intangible values across large areas. Mapping cultural landscape data at the regional scale would provide all practitioners and Aboriginal traditional owners with a more nuanced picture of how the landscape has been constructed through time. It would facilitate connections between identified archaeological sites with those previously investigated and traditions, such as walking routes, ceremonial areas, and aesthetic considerations. GIS mapping can be used to show layers of scientific, social, historical and aesthetic value. This would also provide a simple means of understanding cumulative impact across large areas, providing statutory authorities with an understanding of 'how much' cultural landscape, and thus value, remains in an area.

## 4. Profession and Student Engagement

The majority of practical archaeological field knowledge is gained through active participation in fieldwork itself. Therefore professional archaeologists need to become actively involved in the system of recording sites and cultural landscapes, and be willing to transfer knowledge and technical skills to Aboriginal people and students through their work. Professionals need to be encouraged to take on volunteers, and provide their experience and knowledge through the day to day running of a field project. Students also need to become engaged and participate in professional archaeological fieldwork, beyond the basic requirements of their curriculum. There is an obvious debate required on the use of volunteers in professional archaeology, which is beyond the remit of this paper.

## 5. University Undergraduate Education

For a long time a disjuncture has existed between the content of university courses and the perceived requirements of professional archaeological work. Without prejudice, it is the observation of the authors that recent Australian graduates do not posses a general knowledge of heritage legislation, government heritage policy, the heritage assessment processes or the workings of the Burra Charter. A key problem arising from this gap in knowledge is a connection in students critical thought between the archaeology and its value.

Whilst the authors do not expect universities to teach compulsory in depth programs of heritage management, a basic understanding that archaeology holds values beyond the scientific should be taught.

## Endnotes

[i] The Burra Charter and Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management (Practice Note). 2013. Page 4

[ii] The Burra Charter and Indigenous Cultural Heritage Management (Practice Note). 2013. Page 4.

[iii] Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language.* Pantheon Books. *New York*.
Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77.* Pantheon Books. New York.