



Charlie Dortch: History and archaeology across three continents

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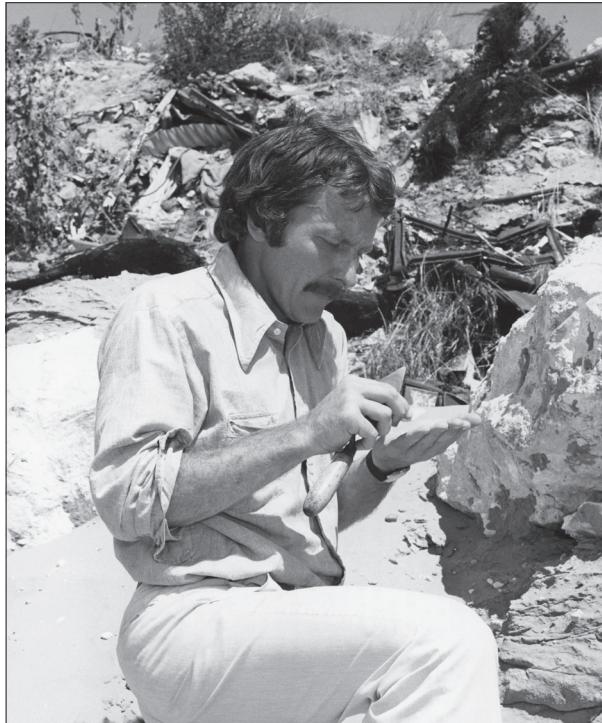
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Charlie Dortch's lasting interest in the human past could be said to have begun in his childhood in Atlanta, Georgia, surrounded by Native American and Civil War heritage. After service in the US Army in Berlin from 1959–1961, he graduated in 1963 from the University of Southern Mississippi with a BSc in history and a penchant for adventure. He fulfilled the latter by working as navigator and surveyor for geophysical crews in Brazil and Libya—valuable experience for running archaeological fieldwork. With support from the *GI Bill*, Charlie undertook an MPhil at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL), submitting a major analysis and review of the lithics from Ksar Akil, Lebanon (Dortch 1970). While enrolled in this degree programme Charlie also spent 14 months on excavations of Palaeolithic sites in the Perigord and Thames Valley. Another excavation in Dorset was also significant because there he met Mary Cavender, his wife-to-be; they married in 1968.

While at UCL, Charlie met Ian Crawford, who was about to take up a position of Curator of Anthropology at the expanding Western Australian Museum (WAM). With Ian's encouragement, Charlie successfully applied for a job as WAM's first Curator of Archaeology, and emigrated on an Assisted Passage in 1970. He almost immediately began work at two important sites at opposite ends of the state: Devils Lair, in southwest Australia, and Miriwun, in the northeast Kimberley.

The WAM Curator of Palaeontology, Duncan Merrilees, had been waiting for the museum to hire an archaeologist so that he could excavate Devils Lair, which contained both megafauna bones and archaeological material. Almost immediately Charlie was whisked off to the site. It took seven meticulously executed excavation seasons to reach the base of the 6.7 m deposit and another to consolidate the trenches, resulting in some 25 publications by the time of Duncan's retirement in 1980. Devils Lair remains an iconic site in Australian archaeology, especially for its deep antiquity and rich faunal sequence within a finely stratified deposit. The Kimberley work began in 1971, initially as a salvage programme in the area that was subsequently inundated by the creation of Lake Argyle. Here Charlie excavated at several sites, notably Miriwun and Monsmont, and collected surface artefacts from open sites.

In 1977 two benchmark volumes in Australian archaeology were published: *Sunda and Sahul* (Allen et al. 1977) and *Stone Tools as Cultural Markers* (Wright 1977). Both contained articles which summarised the first decades of professional archaeological research in



Charlie Dortch inspecting Aboriginal stone artefacts at Mosman Park rubbish tip, Perth, 1976 (photograph by Mike Brown; reproduced with permission of the National Library of Australia).

Australia, and which also set the agenda, both substantive and theoretical, for the next several decades. With respect to the latter, it arose from a conference held in 1974, so the papers in that volume are now some 40 years old. One of those papers is Dortch's (1977) 'Early and late industrial stone phases in Western Australia'. Were it not for that paper, the western third of the continent would not have become such an important part of the ongoing discourse on Australian archaeology. Because of it, these volumes demonstrated an Australia-wide vision of the Aboriginal past that knitted the west and the east together.

On the surface, Charlie's contribution to the Wright (1977) volume was a very straightforward archaeological paper, offering new data from both the north and south of WA, and relatively conservative opinions about them. In fact, it offered evidence and interpretation relevant to what were perceived to be the significant research issues of the day, and also to debates that are still ongoing. One of the interesting aspects of Dortch's work is that he was one of the rare archaeologists of Aboriginal Australia to come from a non-European background, even though

he arrived here via the UK, having worked on material from the Middle East. His early training may account for some of his less conventional approaches. In his Wright volume paper, for example, he invoked the American archaeologists Willey and Phillips (1958) to support his concept of a 'stone industrial phase', which got around some of the difficulties others were having in those days in conceptualising basic archaeological building blocks.

In the early 1970s, Australian archaeology was well set on the path of an archaeology of Aboriginal people located in their specific environments that seems perfectly normal now but, prior to the mid-1960s, had hardly been a concern. The early archaeologists tended to focus very closely on stone tools and human remains, without much concern for how these articulated with living people in their environmental settings. There was also a limited understanding of the role of Aboriginal ethnography and history in interpreting the past. British practitioners, in particular, were often still labouring under the idea that what could be learned about Aboriginal society and culture could be applied to the general deep past of humans in a global context, without caring much about the specificity of Aboriginal lifeways and land relations. There was also a somewhat more American concern for the use of 'ethnographic analogy' in interpreting the past (e.g. Ascher 1961); it was a while before Australian archaeologists became comfortable with the role of ethnography and history as part of an historical continuum from the deep past to the recent lives of Aboriginal people.

In this context, Dortch showed what was, for the time, a sophisticated understanding of the role of environmental research in interpreting the Australian archaeological record, and in working with scientists from other disciplines. He also turned to ethnographic and historical sources, particularly Kaberry (1935, 1938, 1939), to understand better how real people functioned in their environments. He addressed specific issues of the day, such as seasonality, the nature of microlithic industries, the role of shellfish in Aboriginal economies and evidence for long distance trade within these contexts.

Dortch drew on data from all his local colleagues to construct a much-needed overview of the WA Aboriginal past. While not agreeing with all of their ideas, such as Gould's (1971) interpretation of the Puntutjarpa sequence, he nonetheless generously acknowledged their contribution, while also framing questions in the context of the intellectual avant garde of the day (Binford and Binford 1969). He was not afraid to draw on his wider knowledge of world archaeology, for instance in controversially describing the use of the Levallois technique in Kimberley stone artefact assemblages. While the 1970s have been seen as the 'cowboy' phase of Australian archaeology, Dortch's contribution showed a serious concern with bringing together scattered and often exiguous data in the archaeological bedrock exercise of sequence building and defining cultural variation in time and space. For the first time it could be seen that there were pan-Australian similarities in the Aboriginal past, as well as regional differences to be addressed in future research.

Investigation of the effects of changing coastlines dominated much of Charlie's subsequent research (e.g. Dortch 1997, 1999; Dortch et al. 1984). On WA's Southern Ocean coastline Charlie identified the archaeological significance of Lake Jasper (Dortch and Godfrey 1991), the first (and still only) known submerged Aboriginal site in Australia,

and collaborated with the WAM Maritime Archaeology Department and the Manjimup Aboriginal Corporation (MAC) in diving and recording stone artefacts and tree stumps on the lake floor. Charlie subsequently spent many fieldwork hours on MAC projects, revisiting important sites and developing public appreciation for Noongar (southwestern Australian Aboriginal) heritage.

At about this time Charlie encouraged his son, Joe, to embark on postgraduate studies at The University of WA (UWA). Charlie fulfilled a long-standing intention and did the same, so that, in 1996, Jane Balme, newly appointed at UWA, found herself in the unique position of supervising both her former boss and his son. Charlie and Joe completed their PhDs within weeks of each other in November and December 2000 (Charlie was first). Building on Charlie's post-*Devils Lair* work on the southwest coastline, and the work of others across the region, notably Sylvia Hallam and Charlie's former Assistant Curator, Bill Ferguson, they created complementary and integrated archaeological interpretations of the southwest. While cave archaeology provided an insight into deep time and forest occupation, coastal archaeology and a rich historical ethnography indicated intensive coastal resource use and territoriality through recent millennia (Dortch 2002).

Throughout this period Charlie's interest in archaeology was never limited to far-flung or remote locations. Archaeology of the Perth region was revealed variously, from having missed the train one day and discovering fossiliferous chert artefacts in a cutting at a suburban railway station, to excavating the 10,000 year sequence at Minim Cove (Clarke and Dortch 1977). Charlie has been for many years fascinated by the archaeology of Rottnest Island, 19 km off Perth, and it was here that he made some of his most intriguing discoveries, comprising stone artefacts and manuports *in situ* beneath several metres of calcarenite (Dortch and Dortch 2012; Dortch and Hesp 1998)—the subject of continuing research.

As an employee of WAM, Charlie was also charged with outreach, including preparing exhibitions and education. He was always very generous with his time, helping numerous honours and postgraduate students. In his initial years at WAM, the Department of Aboriginal Sites, which administered the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*, was also housed at WAM. The Department was also responsible for training Indigenous site officers. Charlie provided guidance and inspiration to the trainees, who used this experience to further their future careers. Some of these trainees, such as Brian Blurton, have continued their careers in Indigenous heritage, while others, such as Ted Wilkes and Peter Yu, developed their skills to build very successful careers in other areas.

Charlie's personal and academic experiences make for an unusual contribution to archaeology—a blend of historical perspective, processual thought, intuition, curiosity and humour. No one who has done fieldwork with Charlie can forget the trips to the 'Wine Mine' to fill up plastic jerry cans with wine as standard preparation. Looking back to the beginnings of WA archaeology, it is hard to imagine a more useful combination to map out the research questions at this scale, nor, in later life, the capacity to review the cultural history and economic practices of a people such as the Noongar. Charlie always gave generously of his time and knowledge to Aboriginal people, colleagues and students. We hope that this volume in a small way acknowledges his significant intellectual and personal contributions.

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