

A view from the East

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Following her recent arrival in Perth, Sylvia Hallam spent a busy year during 1970. Having travelled metaphorically with the mud of England's Fenlands on her boots, implying a tradition of landscape archaeology, she also needed to complete and have typed her detailed report on early settlement around the Wash, for early publication in *The Fenland in Roman Times* (Hallam 1970a: 170). In addition, she applied successfully to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) for funding to support an archaeological survey of the Perth region, particularly a transect from the coast eastward to beyond the Avon River, centred on the Swan estuary. Her prompt preliminary report on her early activities to the AIAS (Hallam 1970b) makes for interesting reading. She approached the project systematically and comprehensively, which involved careful planning, contacting appropriate local people and scientific experts, field survey, select excavation and full recording.

By May 1970, she had made 33 short field visits with considerable success. With family responsibilities it was impractical for her to spend time on extended field trips, or to make distant forays in search of spectacular sites, as was the practice of many eastern states colleagues. The result was detailed investigation across a territory which otherwise might be neglected, despite the area covering the rapidly expanding urban environs of Perth. In that sense, it was a salvage project in addition to an orthodox survey. Like Isabel McBryde, her contemporary in New England, Sylvia Hallam showed patience and adopted a systematic approach to surveying a region. Both pragmatically recorded evidence as it was found, whether the site had obvious great potential or appeared insignificant. Too little attention to, or credit for, has been directed to Hallam's researches and her prompt publication (Hallam 1971b, 1972b).

Sylvia did not work alone, but she was the right person in the right place at the time to give some direction to Western Australian archaeology, as it blossomed some years later than in the east. A decade earlier, under David Ride's percipient direction, the Western Australian Museum set a precedent amongst Australian museums by appointing Ian Crawford as a staff archaeologist. He was joined by Charlie Dortch in Sylvia's year of action, 1970. Whereas Sylvia hailed from

Cambridge, like most eastern archaeologists, Crawford and Dortch broke the Cambridge mould, for they were trained at London's Institute of Archaeology.

Dortch soon commenced excavations at the significant deep site of Devil's Lair and, like Crawford during the 1960s, also worked on Kimberley archaeology. At this period an influential intellectual experience was provided Western Australians by the presence of Richard and Betty Gould. Young and confident American anthropologists, they ventured into the Western Desert from 1968 to study what Gould termed 'living archaeology'. In fact, they were demonstrating to Australian archaeologists and anthropologists how much ethnographic data awaited close cooperation between Aboriginal people and observant outsiders. I suspect that jealousy prompted by this object lesson from foreigners, was involved in the subsequent vitriolic campaign against their work.

To judge from Hallam's later work, the Goulds' research considerably influenced her. Close contact became possible because all three were based at the Anthropology Department at the University of Western Australia. By 1970 a critical mass of relevant researchers existed in Perth and to some extent, Sylvia Hallam provided the co-ordinating influence and setter of standards. She brought to the task her Cambridge archaeological training in excavation and her Fenland experience of what she termed topographic archaeology (Hallam 1973: 47). This broad perspective approach sought to locate human settlement patterns within the ecological landscape, combining field survey and recording with selective excavation. To achieve this, Hallam sought the cooperation of geologists, biologists, rock art specialists and other experts already interested in linking the human past with natural science.

This transference of Fenland concepts resulted in an innovative approach. She employed a uniform recording method of map grid references for sites; she used simple, easily transported and inexpensive surveying equipment; students unfamiliar with archaeological excavation procedures were trained rigorously (Hallam 1970b). Most importantly for her future research, she understood the landscape as a conditioning factor in site location, while appreciating that it also was subject to environmental change through time.

Equally, however, the landscape was subject to human pressures – nothing was static in the ‘dynamic ecological systems’ (Hallam 1973: 47). Further, using evidence such as Richard Gould’s (or Donald Thomson’s) ethnography, archaeologists ‘can take the ethnographic present as a baseline from which to triangulate back into the past’ (Hallam 1972a: 199). Within a few years, these understandings produced her classic study, *Fire and Hearth* (Hallam 1975). This magisterial work should be read in conjunction with her thoughtful summary of the subject a decade later (Hallam 1985b).

Hallam’s first published reflection on the results of current research (Hallam 1971a: 45) referred to the antiquity of sites in eastern and northern Australia. On the rapidity of revised dates, she aptly observed: ‘Ten years ago we asked how many thousands of years ... Now we ask how many tens of thousands’. She quietly challenged conventional pioneer wisdom that Europeans occupied a virgin land.

‘The west will have its own contributions to make to the study of the ecology of its early [Aboriginal] settlers’, she believed (Hallam 1971: 49), ‘their spread and adaptation to a variety of environments, and their role in shaping the Australian landscapes which the first European settlers encountered’. She wrote in the knowledge that, in 1968, parallel intellectual adventuring produced comparable explanations of Aboriginal impact upon nature. Both Duncan Merrilees (1968) in Perth and Rhys Jones (1968) in Sydney independently stressed the role of firing by Aborigines as a dynamic means of resource exploitation, resulting in environmental consequences. A year later Rhys Jones (1969) coined the happy term ‘firestick farming’.

Here was the stimulus for the ecologically aware Hallam to make a sustained attack, using comprehensive ethnographic, historical and ecological research. *Fire and Hearth* (1975) is a major contribution to the debate about Aboriginal land use and resource manipulation. It supplements studies in south-east and northern Australia by drawing upon comparable evidence from the south-west. It represents a first rate piece of thoughtful and concentrated research upon a hitherto neglected region.

Closer to home, Hallam’s 1970 fieldwork set a standard for regional survey that located 120 sites and collected over 10,000 artefacts (Hallam 1973: 48). These included surface campsites and artefact scatters, stone arrangements and rock art, including hand stencil and geometric painted motifs. At Orchestra Shell Cave, Wanneroo, unusual wall markings on the limestone surface were recorded. Hallam’s useful discussion compared the markings with those at Koonalda and elsewhere (Hallam 1971b, 1972b: 18–19).

The 1970s were the decade of the ‘backed blade’, or geometric microithic tools, pursued with fervour across the continent on ever expanding distribution maps. Hallam excavated and dated sites containing these artefacts. Her paper presented at the 1978 Poona conference is an important

analysis; her pragmatic critique was years ahead of much backed blade reassessment. Here was an example of Hallam pursuing an independent or unconventional approach to typological analysis. As she stated elsewhere (Hallam 1972a: 200), ‘it is precisely “the canons of standard typology” which stand in need of examination’.

Hallam’s research maintained an empirical evidence-based approach, across those years when the New Archaeology and theoretical models so dominated thinking. ‘This is how archaeology actually advances’, she stoutly affirmed in 1975 (Hallam 1972b: 200), ‘not by obsessive introspection on significance, relevance, definitions, aims and methodology’, but through the ‘mud, dust and sweat’ of fieldwork. These were brave words during the prime of Lewis Binford. Adding insult to injury, she labelled ‘nonsense’ an assertion by David Clarke, English guru of analytical archaeology (1972b: 199).

In the same challenging vein she reviewed claims concerning Old and New World colonisation (Hallam 1977a: 145). She stressed that interpretations by many prehistorians were unduly fixed – ‘it is important not to become committed to particular conceptual models. More things, in both New Worlds, may turn out to be possible than a hardening orthodoxy seems prepared to admit’.

One of Hallam’s most sustained, but unfortunately neglected, papers was courageously delivered at the 1974 conference on Stone Tools as Cultural Markers (Hallam 1977b); courageous, because in the audience were those who would call themselves New Archaeologists. She showed her familiarity with a wide range of recent American and British publications on theory, best grouped as New Archaeology. She never hesitated to claim their inappropriateness to Australian situations. She championed (1977b: 169) a broad, regional study, through ‘old fashioned distribution studies and field archaeology’.

She condemned current trendy terms as being inadequate in their scope. Such was ‘settlement archaeology’, appropriate to permanent groups, but misleading for mobile hunter-gatherers. She suggested that ‘occupance archaeology’ was a more accurate, inclusive term covering all temporary activities within a region. Of site catchment analysis, she concluded (1977b: 171), ‘though fashionable, [it] is an inadequate and incomplete way of tackling man-land relationships in hunter-gatherer societies’.

These statements might convey a negative attitude towards theoretical constructs, but close reading indicates otherwise – such models had research potential, but they simply did not apply in this context. It is relevant that Hallam freely accepted (1977b: 173) that ‘in the symbolic field, as in the technological, recurrent groupings of significant features’ are identifiable and, in a percipient combination, proceeded to enumerate them.

Following a discussion of ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources for Western Australia, she

turned to demography and faulted static models of population patterning, such as developed by Birdsell and Tindale (1977a: 172). This was a pioneering critique of landscapes changing through time, with consequential demographic fluctuations.

In reviewing Hallam's publications, it becomes evident that, by the mid-1970s, she built upon a solid mastery of the ethnographic, historical and ecological evidence for Aboriginal firing practices and their environmental impact. So equipped, from the later 1970s she began a phase of synthesis relating Australia to broader issues. She also pursued discriminating research into plant exploitation and management in Western Australia. Several of her published extensive studies merit wider citation than they apparently received. Was it due to the east-west factor, where the majority easterners neglect the western third? Or did younger adherents to models and theories react against her more pragmatic philosophy?

Whatever the explanation, Hallam's synthesis of Western Australian prehistory is thoughtful and to the point (Hallam 1981). Similarly, her survey of late Pleistocene to early Holocene Australia covers the field admirably (Hallam 1987). Her critique of Old World archaeology in relation to colonisation of America and Australia is insightful (Hallam 1977a).

Her studies of plant usage and management in the South-West of Western Australia permit greater understanding of their relevance to Aboriginal settlement, population density and the implications for Indigenous society at European occupation (Hallam 1977c, 1986, 1989). Reading these articles in the light of Heather Builth's recent reconsideration of economy and society in the Lake Condah region of south-west Victoria, it is likely that coastal areas north to Geraldton were another area of intense resource exploitation. The area merits further investigation.

In transferring from Roman wetlands to semi-arid gathering societies, Sylvia Hallam made a major but rapid adjustment. She brought a common sense approach, combined with a breadth of reading and systematic fieldwork. Her lectures must have presented her students with state-of-the-art knowledge, tempered by insightful critique. Her emphasis upon sites and artefacts within their ecological and temporal context set a significant standard for archaeology in the West. It is to be hoped that this solid foundation is built upon systematically.

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