A SEAL HUNTER'S SITE ON TASMAN ISLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Tasman Island was named by Tasman in 1642 and is the site of a lighthouse constructed before 1906, being first lit in April that year. It is separated from the tip of Cape Pillar on Tasman Peninsula by 400 m of sea running through Tasman Passage. This is the southeastern-most extremity of Tasmania (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Locality of study area
On the gently undulating plateau surface of the island, rising to 280 m above the sea, a number of stone tools were found associated with skeletal remains of a seal (*ArctocephaZus* sp.). The find is the first record of Aboriginal seal hunting in southeast Tasmania. Of the stone tools collected, four are made of cherty hornfels and two are of dolerite. The island was undoubtedly rich in food resources, mainly seals, penguins and muttonbirds. Some edible plants occurring on the island are listed. The rugged aspect of the island and its isolation represents an extreme type of environment to be used by humans.

The site (TAS 1738) was observed by the writer during a helicopter visit to the island on 17 June 1982. From all directions, the locality presents a rugged and awesome appearance due to the cliffed coastline, which is comprised of the ragged pinnacles of columnar dolerite, which in some sections fall to a steeply sloping pediment of talus about 100 m above sea level. Elsewhere the cliffs fall direct to the sea. The island has an area of approximately 120 ha with a coastline of 2.6 km.

The original vegetation would probably have been a dense forest of banksia (*Banksia marginata*) and she-oak (*Casuarina stricta*). A few tall specimens still remain, but fires and clearing for grazing have converted much of the plateau into a windswept mosaic of grassland, shrubland and sedgeland.

The first published record of there having been Aboriginal visits to Tasman Island belongs to Crowther and Lord (1922), who describe a female Aboriginal skull which was recovered from a penguin rookery. Brothers (1979) notes a penguin rookery on boulder slopes in the northwest of the island. Crowther also mentions that 'numbers of Aboriginal stone implements are to be found on the island' (cited in Meston 1936 and Jones 1976). Crowther suggests that the owner of the skull might have got to Tasman Island only by accident or as a result of the individual's curiosity. The rich food resources to be got from the island was not invoked as a reason for visiting the island. Jones (1976:253-4) who gives a comprehensive account of many aspects of Aboriginal exploitation of close Tasmanian offshore islands says that 'some islands are small, often being little larger than rocks, but they supported extremely rich food resources, usually seasonally abundant'. Jones lists muttonbirds, fur seals and seabirds as comprising the most important food targets on these islands.

Tasman Island had all these resources (Brothers 1979).

THE SITE

The finds occurred in a soil profile in a small existing excavation near a shed at the top of the old haulageway. The site is on the edge of the plateau at about the 200 m contour.

The soil profile and relative position of the finds are shown in Figure 2. The soil is a uniformly dark grey sand of aeolian origin. Beneath the soil is a 5 cm deep horizon of iron-enriched material which directly overlies deeply weathered dolerite bedrock. Enigmatically, a number of rounded waterworn beach cobbles of dolerite about 15-20 cm in diameter lay directly on the bedrock surface. These cobbles show no weathering rind, are very smooth, and are similar to those found on steep boulder beaches. Their occurrence at the present site is unexplained but this is an aspect of the site which requires closer examination than was possible during my brief visit.
The site is adjacent to an area originally excavated for a horse-operated whim which raised and lowered carriages on the haulageway in the early days. The proximity of the whim to the site will be an aspect to be aware of if the site is excavated, especially when an entry in the Head Lightkeeper's journal states 'Barrowed soil to fill up track around whim worn and washed away' (entry for 27 July 1923; journal held in the Australian Archives, Hobart).

THE STONE TOOLS

Six implements were collected (TAS 1738 1-6) and are illustrated in Figure 3. The tools were found associated with the seal bones within 6 cm of the surface.

Two of the stone tools collected are dolerite, a material rarely used for implement manufacture. Tasman Island is composed wholly of dolerite. Sutherland (1972:18), speaking of implement collections in an area which includes Tasman Peninsula noted that:

Very high contents of hornfelsic rocks (mostly between 85-100%) characterise collections in this area. The hornfels suite consists dominantly of chert hornfels and cherty hornfels, occasionally associated with minor quartzites, and they are nearly all typical of Triassic strata-dolerite contacts.

The nearest suitable implement material would occur at the Permian strata/dolerite contact at Haines Bight and Munro Bight which are respectively 6.5 km and 3 km direct distance from the site. Bearing in mind there has been little systematic site recording on Tasman Peninsula, the nearest of only two quarry sites recorded so far is in the vicinity of Remarkable Cave.

The implements collected from the site are all flake tools. They are described in Table 1.
Figure 3. Implements collected from the site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalogue No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Maximum length/breadth dimensions (mm)</th>
<th>Weight (g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-1</td>
<td>A small flake of cherty hornfels with spalling; heavily patinated</td>
<td>30 x 22</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-2</td>
<td>A small flake of white chert with a hinge fracture on the back exhibiting striking platform and bulb of percussion; appears well weathered and has no signs of usewear</td>
<td>22 x 21</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-3</td>
<td>A small dark grey cherty hornfels flake; hinge fracture; shows retouch and edge damage</td>
<td>35 x 12</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-4</td>
<td>A small amorphous core of cherty hornfels; shows flake scars</td>
<td>55 x 33</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-5</td>
<td>A small amorphous struck flake</td>
<td>31 x 23</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS 1738-6</td>
<td>A large dolerite flake with flake scars</td>
<td>43 x 33</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Descriptions of collected stone tools
FAUNAL REMAINS

The bones found in association with the stone tools are of seal (possibly fur seal *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*). A few single bird bones were noted but these were not collected or identified. Only a few pieces of seal bone were taken from the site to enable identification and these are lodged in the collection of the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service (TAS 1738 la-v). Some of the bones show clear evidence of burning.

DISCUSSION

Accessibility

While only a short distance from the coast, Tasman Island and its plateau appear at first sight to be inaccessible. Nearby Cape Pillar is bounded on all sides by vertical cliffs which present no obvious route from the top of the Cape down to the sea. Visitors to the island today must go either by helicopter or effect a difficult landing by boat under calm conditions. A consistent southerly swell makes the surrounding waters rarely calm.

Crowther and Lord (1922:168) appreciated the hostility of the region's environment as their description illustrates:

The coast of the mainland, for several miles in both directions from the island, presents a massive bastion of diabase (dolerite) - an inhospitable coast upon which the surges of the Southern Ocean beat with relentless force. Between the Island and the mainland the narrow channel is usually seething with the force of the tide rip.

Prehistoric visitors to the island would most likely have approached from a choice of only two places: Crescent Bay, which is 11 km in a WNW direction, or from steep gullies northwest of Nord Bluff, which would give access to the sea and thence a voyage of 7 km southeasterly and then southerly around Cape Pillar itself.

Prior to European occupation of the island, the only natural practical route from sea level to the plateau surface would have been by way of a steep ramp known as the 'Zig Zag', ascending from the only seal-occupied shore platform, up to the vicinity of the site. This route is on the northwestern edge of the island.

Food Resources

Aboriginal use of Tasmanian offshore islands is well enough documented to show that island resources obviously were a significant component of Aboriginal needs (Jones 1976). The attraction of Tasman Island to Aboriginal visitors was undoubtedly its rich food resources.

There are short-tailed shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) rookeries, a large breeding colony of sooty shearwater (*P. griseus*) and a breeding colony of the little penguin (*Eudyptula minor*) (Brothers 1979). *P. griseus* is harvested as a food resource by the New Zealand Maori. The colony on Tasman Island is the only significant colony in Tasmania.

The estimated extent of *P. tenuirostris* rookeries on Tasman Island and the adjacent mainland covers 100 ha (Naarding 1980) giving an estimated adult rookery population of approximately 1.03 million adult birds. This food
resource could have been harvested between late September and early November (adult birds), late November to early January (adult birds and eggs), January to early April (adult birds) and April and May (chicks in prime condition - 175% of adult weight).

The muttonbird colony was once much more extensive and John Cook (pers. comm.) reports earlier lightkeepers telling him of ploughing up an extensive colony in front of two houses on the island for the purpose of making vegetable gardens.

Although no breeding colony of the fur seal is known in the area, these animals are presently found in small numbers on the only suitable rock platform on the northwestern corner of the island. A colony also occurs nearby at the base of the Blade on Cape Pillar.

While hunting would have been the main activity, vegetable foods may also have been exploited to some extent. Among native plant species which are known to have been used for food (see Ling Roth 1899 for specifically Tasmanian observations and Cribb and Cribb 1975 for inferred evidence) and which occur on the island are kangaroo-apple (*Solanum laciniatum*), wild onion (*Bulbine semibarbata*), cheesewood (*Pittosporum bidicolor*), sea parsley (*Apium prostratum*), pigface (*Carpobrotus rossii*), bracken (*Pteridium esculentum*), *Sueda australis*, *Leucopogon parviflora* and climbing blueberry (*Billardiera longiflora*). These plants are widespread in Tasmania and would not have been a primary food target in such an inaccessible place as Tasman Island.

Seals

Bischoff (1832:52) states that

Seals are very numerous on the coasts and islands, and their skins are sent to England. No use whatever is made of the oil which this animal yields so abundantly, the carcasses being generally left to rot by the fishermen.

The seal bones at the site could therefore conceivably have been the remains of a European's catch. This is considered unlikely however because (1) of the close spatial association of bones and stone tools, (2) most European sealing was carried out in the Bass Strait islands, colonies elsewhere being too dispersed and difficult of access to warrant hunting, and (3) the improbability of an isolated skeleton being the remains of a European hunt.

Stockton (1982) reviews the Aboriginal sealing sites around the Tasmanian coast and asks whether the lack of seal remains in southeast sites is an artefact of the lack of archaeological work or whether it is a reflection of the true distribution of Aboriginal sealing activity. The present find supports the former.

There could be a number of reasons for transport of the seal from its rock platform 200 m below. The shelter of the woodland on top, the sandy dry substrate, the spring of fresh water a few hundred metres away, and the availability of firewood all seem sufficient reasons for carrying the food up the steep slope. The likelihood of bad weather blowing up and making a return to the mainland impractical was an omnipresent hazard. Seal bones on Maatsuyker Island have also been observed hundreds of metres above sea level (J. Cook pers. comm.). An excavation and dating of the Tasman Island site, as well as mapping of other sites on the island would, of course, expand this story considerably.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service

Sandy Bay Tas