

The 30 thousand-year-old Polish boomerang versus Australian archaeology

Boomerang from the Oblazowa Cave in situ

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For two weeks in June, 2019, Professor Wayne Atkinson, Senior Fellow at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, and School of Archaeology at the Latrobe University, Australia, visited Kraków and the Institute of Archaeology, Jagiellonian University. He had previously established contacts with Barbara Chmielowska and Carlos Panek Soares de Araujo from the JU International Relations Office as well as with Dr Radosław Palonka from the JU Institute of Archaeology.

Prof. Atkinson is a descendant of the Yorta Yorta people, an indigenous people of the Riverine Region of Australia, renowned for its rich culture, river history, and agriculture. In his archaeological and anthropological investigations and research Prof. Atkinson also uses traditional knowledge and native oral tradition. This is also a very important branch of the anthropology and study of the human past in terms of archaeological research in other parts of the world, like the United States and Canada, where many native cultures have survived and

even are flourishing. Also, one of his main current studies focuses on the land, cultural heritage and issues of indigenous rights which are based on the history of the first human occupation of Australia, dating back at least 40,000-60,000 years.

A very rich history of different indigenous Australian cultures, languages, and ongoing connections with the land and its traditional owners are also part of the vibrant Indigenous Studies programme at the University of Melbourne, where there are now over 400 indigenous students from diverse backgrounds and regions of Australia.

During the meeting at the Institute of Archaeology, Prof. Atkinson and his wife had a chance to get acquainted with the major activities and research conducted at the Institute and to meet its director, Prof. Paweł Valde-Nowak and some of the faculty, including Dr Magda Cieśla from the Department of Stone Age Archaeology and Dr Radosław Palonka from the Department of American Archaeology, as well as some Ph.D. candidates. Although this visit coincided with the exam session, we were able to organise a small seminar focusing on some aspects of Australian as well as Polish and American archaeology.

Prof. Atkinson presented some of the latest news and discoveries about the oldest dates of the possible first human habitation of Australia. Recent studies and archaeological data (shell middens and a potential ancient hearth) from Moyjil, Point Richie, on the far south coast of Victoria, as well as new DNA studies, potentially shifts the moment the first people appeared in Australia to as far back as 120 thousand years ago.

One of the issues discussed during Prof. Atkinson's visit was also an unusual find recognised as a boomerang, discovered at the Oblazowa Cave archaeological site in the region of Podhale in southern Poland. This is geographically almost as far as possible from the zone usually associated with boomerang hunting. Although specialists mostly agree that this artifact, a large (70 cm) fragment of a polished mammoth tusk, arch-like and plano-convex in cross-section, has all the characteristics of a boomerang, the interpretation of the item is still a subject of discussion. It was discovered in an archaeological excavation campaign in 1985 led by Prof. Valde-Nowak as part of a larger prehistoric assemblage. This assemblage



*Presentation of a copy of the boomerang to the Australian guests.
From left: M. Cieřła, P. Valde-Nowak, W. Atkinson, C. Guinness*

is considered just as interesting as the 'boomerang' itself. The discovery was widely published in many prestigious journals, including *Nature*.

Together with the boomerang, surrounded by a circular construction of large, granite pebble boulders, were objects of unusual, if not unique character. Among them were several types of flint artifacts – cores (large pieces of stone that served as a tool-making material reserve) and tools. An interesting trait of the stone artifacts assemblage is the variability of rocks used for the tool production. Not only were they brought to the cave from very distant locations, but also some of them – like the quartz of crystalline structure – were quite unsuitable for cutting or performing any other regular work. This led to the suggestion that they were not necessarily used as working tools, but probably as ritual or symbolic objects.

In-between stone boulders that formed the circle were a number of

artifacts made of organic materials. Two pieces of cut and polished antler (interpreted as mining wedges), some pendants made of perforated arctic fox teeth, a single minuscule bone bead and finally, three incised fossil shells of *Conus sp. mollusks*: pendants or perhaps simple musical instruments?

However, apart from the boomerang, the most valuable finds were two human phalanxes. They belonged to two different individuals and are even today considered the oldest bones of anatomically modern humans ever found in the territory of Poland. And the entire archaeological feature was sprinkled with red pigment – mineral ochre – and placed on the previously dug out earthen step in a niche by the side wall of the cave chamber.

The Obłazowa Cave site yielded more than ten levels of early human culture preserved in sediments that had been accumulating there for approximately 100,000 years. Over the years, new methods have been introduced in archaeological research, resulting in greater precision of chronological estimations. Hopefully, in the future, we will be able to establish the time of the construction of the above described deposit site in a more detailed manner. Research and excavation work at the site are still underway. However, even now, absolute dates obtained for bone fragments and human phalanx from the close vicinity of the boomerang point it to a time around 35,000-30,000 years



Presenting how to throw a returning boomerang; from left: W. Atkinson, R. Palonka, M. Cieřła, P. Valde-Nowak

BC. This is the early phase of the so-called Upper Palaeolithic period – a time in which anatomically modern humans arrived in Europe, and a whole new era of human culture began to which Obłazowa Cave bears witness. The meaning of the site for the Palaeolithic people remains unknown, although we are probably dealing with a symbolic or even ritual place of the Ice Age hunters.

A copy of the boomerang from the Obłazowa Cave was presented at the meeting with Prof. Atkinson (the original artifact is currently in a safe at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków, the institution that conducted the Obłazowa Cave research during the first ten seasons).

The boomerang elicited unusual interest from the Australian guest, and a debate took place during the meeting and seminar regarding the possible interpretations and functions of this artifact of the past, mainly as to whether it was a returning boomerang or a non-returning boomerang (sometimes called a hunting boomerang). This was also a good point of departure for the proposal made by Prof. Atkinson about the possibility of having students and scientists from Australia study this artifact as well as arranging potential visits and exchange of students from the Jagiellonian University, and also enriching our library resources with literature and the latest doctoral dissertations devoted to the boomerang, a true icon of Australia.

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A view of the Obłazowa Cave