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HIGHLAND NEW GUINEA
HUNTER-GATHERERS:
THE EVIDENCE OF
NOMBE ROCKSHELTER, SIMBU
WITH EMPHASIS ON THE
PLEISTOCENE

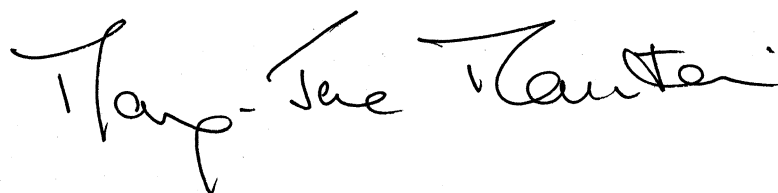
by
Mary-Jane Mountain

A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of the
Australian National University

July 1991

Declaration

Unless otherwise indicated, this
thesis represents the original work of the author.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary-Jane Mountain". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Mary-Jane Mountain

ABSTRACT

HIGHLAND NEW GUINEA HUNTER-GATHERERS: THE EVIDENCE OF NOMBE ROCKSHELTER, SIMBU WITH EMPHASIS ON THE PLEISTOCENE

Nombe rockshelter was excavated by M-J. Mountain between 1971 and 1980. Human activity is first documented at the site at about 25,000 bp and continues through to the present. Four extinct Pleistocene herbivores, *Protemnodon nombe*, *Protemnodon tumbuna*, *Dendrolagus noibano* and a diprotodontid, occur in late Pleistocene strata together with human artefacts. Large quantities of animal bone were recovered and the analysis of these supplies the major data for the research.

Three main issues are addressed:

1. The nature of the relationship between the early humans and their environment through the period that covers the late glacial maximum at about 18,000 bp.
2. The relationship between humans and the extinct species, including the thylacine, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, which was a major predator at the site, contributing bone to the deposits during the Pleistocene.
3. The use of faunal evidence as an indicator of economic and subsistence activities as well as local environmental changes.

The data show that the human activity during the late Pleistocene at Nombe was sporadic over the period from about 25,000 bp to about 15,000 bp. Hunters were probably targeting the large herbivores living in high altitude forest and other species adapted to high altitude cold environments. Humans and large herbivores coexisted for about 10,000 years before the animals disappeared from the record. This coexistence does not suggest a rapid demise through human overkill.

Palynological evidence suggests that people were deliberately firing small patches of highland forest as early as 30,000 bp. Such clearing could have been used to promote forest-edge plants especially *Pandanus*, which has rich oily nuts. These small clearings could also have been used as an aid to hunting.

By the end of the Pleistocene, human hunting had switched to emphasise medium and smaller forest animals, especially fruit bats, macropodids, phalangers and possums. Bat hunting was especially important at Nombe, which is in a limestone area with many caves.

In the early Holocene the temperatures rose and sub-alpine grasslands were greatly reduced as forest spread to higher altitudes. The archaeological evidence shows that more sites were occupied by 10,000 bp than before and the faunal

data at Nombe indicate a steep rise in the grassland wallaby, *Thylogale brunii*. This species adapts easily to forest disturbance and may indicate that forest clearance was increasing in the locality. The early Holocene was the period of intense human settlement of the site.

The faunal analysis employed in this study is designed to test the broad questions about human-environment relationships rather than to supply detailed information about the size and sex representation in the species present. Species are often dealt with as a group and no individual bone measurements have been taken. The computer database has been designed to produce a flexible data set that can easily be adapted to taxonomic change. The success of the approach suggests that faunal evidence can be a sensitive indicator of environmental change and can be used to examine human predation strategies and changes in economic subsistence.

NOTES

This thesis is in two volumes:

Volume 1 contains the text of the thesis and all supporting material.

Volume 2 comprises the site profiles.

References in the text to the site profiles such as:

" ... Dasyurid bones occur *P2, P4*... "

refer the reader to site profiles 2 (*P2*) and 4 (*P4*) in Volume 2.

Unless otherwise stated, all data in this thesis relate to excavated material from the site of Nombe, Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea. Unless tables and figures specify otherwise, they refer to the site of Nombe or data from that site.

Figures 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.6, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 were drawn by Winifred Mumford from site drawings prepared by the author. Figures 2.5 and 3.1 were prepared by Barry Shaw from original drawings by David Gillieson. Uncited photographs were taken by Barry Shaw.

"New Guinea" is used to refer to the island of New Guinea which today includes "mainland" Papua New Guinea and the Indonesian Province of Irian Jaya. "Papua New Guinea" refers to the country of Papua New Guinea. The "highlands" refers to the highland region (over about 1300 m above sea level) of the island of New Guinea and includes Irian Jaya.

Totals in the data were originally added to one more significant place than is shown in the text or tables. However the nature of the samples and the accuracy of excavation does not justify such detail so the data and totals were then reduced by one significant place to avoid spurious accuracy. This may result in totals differing slightly in the final digit. In addition, some data is presented as <1, meaning "present", but less than one. Where <1 appears several times in a sum, the resultant total may differ even more. Nevertheless, data totals are correct.

All excavated materials from Nombe and other sites, which are at present housed in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University, are the property of the National Museum of Papua New Guinea and will be returned there on completion of analyses together with the site documentation.

All radiocarbon dating results are expressed in conventional radiocarbon ages (BP) with the statistical error range (\pm) supplied with the date (Stuiver and Polach 1977)

Abbreviations:

asl	Above sea level
ANU	Australian National University
ESR	Electron spin resonance
MNI	Minimum number of individual animals
PNG	Papua New Guinea
NISP	Number of identified specimens

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is the product of twenty years of research and there are many people, both in Papua New Guinea and Australia, to whom I am most grateful.

I received an Australian National University scholarship which enabled me to leave the University of Papua New Guinea to pursue this research full time; earlier field work was financed by the University of Papua New Guinea. I thank both institutions for their support.

I also thank the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, the Faculties, Australian National University, for appointing me as Visiting Fellow during 1991 and supplying me with room to work in an already overcrowded Department.

My supervisor, Professor Jack Golson, Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, has been tireless, as ever, in commenting on drafts and encouraging me over many years to complete the task. My work was vastly improved through his high and rigorous standards of interpretation. It was at his suggestion that I made my first visit to Nombe in 1971 for a short (initially 3 months) project that was to become a twenty year project.

Other staff, both past and present, at the Australian National University have encouraged me, especially in the last six months of almost full time analysis and writing. Several people were extremely helpful with advice and encouragement, especially Professor Isabel McBryde, Wilfred Shawcross, Ian Farrington and Nancy Sharp, while at an earlier stage of research I received assistance from Dr Jenny Hope, Dr Phil Hughes, Dr Bryant Allen, Dr Robin Hide, Professor Jim Allen and Dragi Markovic. I am most grateful to all of them.

The secretarial staff of both departments have always been most willing to help, especially Helen Nicol and Debbie McGrath. The staff of the Radiocarbon Dating Research Laboratory, at the Australian National University worked extremely hard on difficult samples and produced many results that enabled a useful chronology to be established for the complexities of Nombe's stratigraphy.

Dave Gillieson also contributed a great deal to this thesis in the early 1980s with his enthusiastic analysis of the sediments. Win Mumford produced superb drawings to guide the reader through the intricacy of Nombe stratigraphy and I am more than grateful for the time and care she has spent in her productions.

Several people assisted me in the lengthy tasks of washing, sorting and cleaning the materials and later identification and weighing of bone. I am grateful to Prue Gaffey, Richard Mulvaney, Alan Lance and others.

Several others assisted in faunal identifications, among whom I especially thank Dr Tim Flannery, Dr Ken Aplin, Dr Colin Pardoe, Dr Jerry Van Tets and Mrs Diane Foley.

While I was in Papua New Guinea, both at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Papua New Guinea and in the villages and settlements of the Simbu Province, I received a great deal of practical assistance, personal kindness and help in various ways. I would particularly like to thank Mark Rosen, Headmaster of Chuave High School for the friendship that he generously extended to Barry, Emma and myself. It was always a pleasure to see students from the school at the site and the school was most helpful to the project. There were other highland residents such as Mr and Mrs Brown, Mr and Mrs Laphorne, Mr and Mrs Bourke and others who most generously extended hospitality and assistance over the several visits made from 1971 to 1980.

To Ian Saem Majnep I owe a great deal, since he was my field assistant and friend throughout our early highland excavations. He was most tolerant and understanding towards an outsider who knew very little about the culture of the highlands and I am grateful for his quiet tuition and support in the field. Subsequently I have benefited even more through his writing.

In the villages of Pila, Nola and especially Nongefaro, we were welcomed and accepted. I must thank all the men, women and children who assisted with the excavations, sorting and cleaning materials, looking after Emma and provided us with vegetables and fruit, often at times when they had little themselves. Special thanks must go to Papa Noibano, traditional owner of the site and his son, Waivo and other family members. Other dedicated field assistants and baby minders were Grace, Catrina, Noibano, Afika, John, Papa Kamba, Mondu, Keage, Kapia, Simon, Council Nomane, Peter, Lucas and, from Pila, Council Nomane, Timothy, David and the school master and his wife.

I also thank Peter White for allowing me the privilege of working at the site that he had already excavated. Hopefully, between us, we have made some sense out of it.

Recently I have had tremendous support from a number friends especially Doreen Bowdery and Chris, Hamish and Rowan McMurray, John and Margaret Tuckwell and Sarah and John Titchen and from all the friends especially the Pike/Fitzpatricks, the Byrnes and Carol Behm who looked after Emma so many times so that I could get on with the task.

I thank Emma for being so patient and helpful while I was 'doing the thesis'. Most of all I have to thank Barry for long tedious hours and sweated labour over the computing, formatting, production and photos. But much more for his many years of help and assistance in so many ways in getting the thesis completed!

Mary-Jane Mountain

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