Australian Archaeology

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Lithic is a term which has long been used by geologists to refer to sedimentary or precipitated rocks which contain an abundance of rock fragments embedded within the cemented matrix (e.g. Pettijohn 1957:316). Such rocks include lithic sandstones, lithic tuffs, greywackes, orthoquartzites, arkoses, silcretes and detrital or secondary limestones.

Lithic is also a term used by some archaeologists when referring to stone in archaeological sites, but within this discipline the term is more loosely defined. Two points of view seem to be expressed by archaeologists whom I have known to comment on the subject of 'what is a lithic?' One view is that a lithic is a stone which shows signs of having been modified by human activity i.e. worked. Lithics in this sense would include flaked and ground stone artefacts, and the waste material or debitage resulting from these manufacturing processes. The opposing view would be that a lithic is any piece of stone which arrived in its position through human agency, and was not deposited by some natural transporting agent such as flowing water.

Many areas in Australia have outcrops of distinctive lithic rocks. Those with which I am familiar include arkoses in central Australia, lithic bands in sandstones in the Grampians and Otway Ranges of Victoria and the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, and even a lithic silcrete near Abercrombie in New South Wales.

Prehistoric archaeological sites within any of these regions, or those in similar geological settings, could thus be expected to yield lithic lithics, as well as the more commonly occurring non-lithic lithics which are found in the majority of prehistoric archaeological sites. The question which then troubles me, when dealing with stone, is how to recognise and classify a lithic non-lithic or indeed a non-lithic non-lithic occurring within the site.

The Victoria Archaeological Survey (1977:6) goes some way towards dispelling the confusion by defining lithics as 'anything made of stone'. Thus Dan Witter (pers. comm.) has pointed out that this would mean a single rock collected from an Aboriginal hearth should be bagged as a stone, but the entire hearth if collected would become a lithic. Several hearths in close proximity would thus of course represent a lithic assemblage.

It could be that the Old English* or Old Saxon* origins of the word stone have rendered it an unsuitable word for New World archaeologists, in which case the less offensive Greek-originating* lithic could simply replace the English word. If this is the case however, there may be reasons for Australian archaeologists to reject the New World term and return to the use of stone. Having barely emerged from our second phase of colonisation we should not * The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 6th edit. 1968
be too eager to embrace the shackles of the New World colonial power. After all we have now grown accustomed to speaking English.

Therefore in the absence of a commonly acceptable definition of lithic, I believe that Australian archaeologists working at the research frontiers of prehistory would be advised to use stone rather than lithics, if only because the latter are generally too soft to sustain the cutting edge.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
