

Rescuing the Remains

Examining the aftermath of fire at the Australian National University Archaeological Store

THE FIRE & ITS AFTERMATH

On the 18th January 2003 a fire front swept through Canberra. The fire destroyed five hundred homes and there were four deaths. This sudden and unpredicted firestorm resulted from bushfires that had been burning in the nearby mountains. It was only in the aftermath that the impact upon the extensive archaeological collections held at the Australian National University (ANU) stores in Weston were fully realised. The building was destroyed, walls caved-in and much of the site was too unstable to access. It was some time before anyone was allowed access to the site and almost six months before the Department of Archaeology and Natural History (ANH) was given the go-ahead to salvage what they could. Many of the collections affected were seminal sites used in the archaeological interpretations of Australian, Southeast Asian and Pacific prehistory. A full-scale salvage effort involving the excavation of remains took place over a period of two months. This poster outlines the processes involved in the initial retrieval process.



1. The area surrounding the storage room soon after the fire.
2. The slab from the floor above had fallen in and had to be lifted clear.
3. Artefacts found around the perimeter of the slab.
4. The ethnographic pot was pierced by steel reinforcing.
5. The site some months later, just before salvage commenced.

RECOVERY & REMOVAL



There were many types of materials stored at Weston and the differential survival rate of each was reflected during excavation.

1. Before we began the salvage it was possible to observe some of the more fire resistant artefacts lying on the surface. This shows a stone adze for Tonga.
2. In most instances pottery collections survived well and those with surviving labels can be easily identified.
3. There were large collections of bone and shell in some areas. Although it is feasible to find which sites these came from it will be impossible to assign detailed provenances suitable for research. Most of these collections have been retained for teaching purposes.
- 4/5. The preservation of materials differed throughout the site. In some areas it was so hot that obsidian flakes welded together (4). In other areas relatively close by microscope slides survived in their boxes (5).
6. Closer to the slab many more of the fire prone objects had survived. The bases of some of the tea-chests used to store artefacts were intact and some contained small bags and labels.
- 7/8. Small cardboard archive boxes and their contents were also found at the base of the slab.



Documenting the Salvage

To begin the salvage a 1 x 1m grid was placed over the store area. Photos were taken of the surface of each square before excavation (far left). Levels were taken to show the varying surface heights for later reference (the base was an even slab).

Each square was recorded on a detailed site form. Concentrations of particular materials were recorded as provenances and their position was recorded on a diagram of the square (left).

All the recovered materials were inventoried and photographic records were kept throughout the salvage.

There was a large amount of film stored at the Weston site. Most of this was unedited footage and interviews from Hayden's 'The Last Tasmanian'. The film canisters did not in general survive well (right) although some lengths of film at the bottom still had visible images (far right).



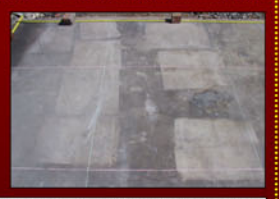
Recovering the Materials

The artefacts were removed from the slab and placed in labeled trays, other material was placed in provenances buckets. All the buckets were sieved and sorted as much of that which remained had become caked with ash and mortar.

Salvaged material was placed on an empty slab adjacent to the storage area relative to its position when excavated. Artefacts and labeled remains were placed in bags, inventoried and placed on the storage slab. Bulk, unlabelled artefacts were placed directly on the slab and later sorted to be used for teaching collections.

Over 1000 sample bags of archaeological material were retrieved much of which can be provenanced. Recovered items primarily include pottery and stone artefacts. Despite the decomposition of storage boxes and bags many of the items were individually inventoried or otherwise identifiable. Collections that were particularly well recovered were the Tongan sites excavated by Poulsen, and the Kuk and Manim sites excavated by Golson in Papua New Guinea.

Impressions of objects/boxes were visible on the slab once excavation was complete (right). These impressions were carefully recorded for reference when provenancing the salvaged objects (below).



Where to Now?

The initial two months of salvage were primarily aimed at removing the material from the building slab (which is to be demolished) and into a new area. The complex task of sorting the material has begun however this is expected to be a long-term task.

There was an absence of a disaster management strategy and a suitable risk management system to minimise the loss and the risk that this posed to the Australian National University. This has highlighted a pressing need for a new storage management system. Temporary storage facilities have been found for the material however recommendations for future management based on our experiences at the store and current research will be provided to the ANU.

In addition to recovering that which remained this presented the authors with a unique opportunity to document the effects of the fire on such a collection. This has wider implications beyond the recovery effort, rarely are archaeologists presented the opportunity to examine the effects of fire on well documented collections. Stage 2 of the project which is now underway concerns the analysis of the archaeological materials to examine the direct effects of the fire.

