

Australian Spearthrowers

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At a recent event, Ray Madden and I were approached by a gentleman with an atlatl he had purchased as an antiquity. It was labeled "found in a cave in Arizona" but we both immediately recognized it as a Northern Australian type. The different forms of Australian spearthrowers are distinctive. Fairly large numbers were collected from the 19th century on, and some are still being made and occasionally used. They are different from the atlatls familiar to most American atlatlists. In general, Australian spearthrowers are relatively large and heavy, sometimes very long. Some were used with solid wood spears, up to 3m long and over 200 gm weight, while others propelled composite spears with light shafts and heavy wooden foreshafts or points of wood, stone, and later metal. But that oversimplifies; there were also light forms, very long and whippy, that threw light darts considerable distances. I don't think we modern atlatlists have experimented enough with Australian forms - I suspect that really long flexible atlatls, and very long heavy atlatls and spears may work differently from the relatively light gear we use.

Historic Australia illustrates how a simple technology, the atlatl or spearthrower and its accompanying projectiles, can develop enormous variability during millenia of use across a large area. What we know about atlatls in the Americas suggests that there too they were infinitely varied and elaborated. In Australia, the prehistoric record of atlatls is not as good. Preserved archaeological specimens have apparently not been found, but Australian rock art documents ancient atlatl use with images that probably go back at least 8000 years and possibly much further (Akerman and McConvell 2002; Lewis 1988; Walsh and Morwood 1999) and in tribal myths, culture heroes of the past world of the Dreaming are credited with teaching humans to use spearthrowers. The great variability in forms and a similarly large variation in the range of words for spearthrowers and spears also suggests great antiquity. They are often called "woomera," but that is only one of the names in the many Australian native languages.

Early anthropologists studied the distribution of spears and spearthrowers in Australia. Figure 1 is a map from Davidson (1936, in Stodiek 1993), showing where spearthrowers were common in Australia. Davidson felt that because they had not completely covered the continent, they might have been introduced as much as a few thousand years ago, but were not as ancient as in Europe and Asia, the probable source. Figure 2 (also from Davidson and Stodiek) shows the distribution of different types of spearthrower over the continent. Most of these forms are illustrated in the photos below. Figure 3 maps tribal territories, and Figure 4 shows the variability of spear forms (Stodiek 1993).

It is not easy to say why there are so many different types of spearthrower in Australia, because many factors are likely to have influenced the distribution of types. Some are functionally different. For instance, in the north, the broad heavy forms that are more characteristic of the central regions are traded into the region and used along with the longer lathe-shaped forms, to throw relatively heavy wooden spears, but these forms also coexist with very long light forms that are used to throw much lighter composite spears (Best 2003; Cundy 1989). Spear form and thrower form obviously affect one another. In some cases the different forms reflect the pursuit of different game, and use for fishing or bird hunting. Some woomera were multipurpose toolkits in one tool. The broad dish-shaped Central Desert form was used as a container, a fire saw, a musical instrument, and a club, and often had a sharp stone flake embedded in resin at the handle to serve as knife and chisel. Available materials also affect the form of atlatls and spears, and the movement of nomadic hunter-gathering peoples separated groups whose tool forms gradually changed and became local traditions and markers of social identity. Movement and trade have also spread technological ideas and confused the distribution patterns of different spearthrower types (Figure 5, Best 2003).

Australian Spearthrowers

- Figure 1. Distribution of spearthrowers in Australia (Davidson 1936, in Stodiek 1993).

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- Figure 2. Simplified distribution of spearthrower types in Australia (Davidson 1936; Stodiek 1993).

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- Figure 3. Tribal territories in Australia (Stodiek 1993).

Figure 4. Different spear forms (Stodiek 1993).

- Figure 5. Distribution of spearthrower types collected in Queensland (Best 2003).

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- Figure 6, 7. Hooks on several forms of Australian spearthrower. Note low angle to atlatl and sharpness.

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- Figure 8, 9, 10. Queensland forms, most typically the two upper examples, broad-bladed with upright peg hooks, notched to produce the right angle to the atlatl.

Australian Spearthrowers

- Figure 11. Northern Territory, Arnhem Land, and Groote Eylant flat form.

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Figure 16, 17, 18. More Northern forms, one of which has a socket instead of the usual hook.

Figure 12-15. Central and Western Desert forms, the stereotypical "woomera." Some are elaborately decorated. The handle is usually knobbed, often with a blob of spinifex resin in which a stone flake is sometimes hafted.

- Figure 19. Two more Northern Territory forms, these very long and intended for use with light darts.

Australian Spearthrowers

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Figure 20. Decorated Groote Eylant or N Territory thrower and spear apparently intended for dance use..

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Figure 21. Various spear points.

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Figure 22. The large quartzite blade, typical of the Northern Territory/ Arnhem Land region, was replaced by the "shovel-nosed" metal point, typically made from scrap iron.

Figure 23. Recent decorated woomera for the tourist trade, often completely non-functional.