



ORIGINS OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

WHERE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE CAME FROM

The information in this section is based on the work of archaeologists. There are two basic schools of archaeological thought as to where Australia's Indigenous people originated.

The first, and more accepted, viewpoint is that the first Australians came here across a land bridge from Asia. During two ice ages – one approximately 20 000 years ago and the other approximately 60 000 years ago – so much water was in the form of ice that the sea level all over the world dropped more than 100 metres.

As a result, more land was exposed and, consequently, it may have been possible to travel across exposed land bridges without having to cross any great expanses of water.

People who subscribe to this theory believe that Indigenous people travelled to Australia from the north, with the most recent immigration happening only 4 000 years ago (when scientists believe dingos first arrived).

The second school of thought is that human life originated simultaneously in different parts of the world including Australia. Due to the age of early Australian human remains, there is some basis for believing that Australia may have been one of the original centres of human development, and that human life in this part of the world may have actually spread out from Australia.

This theory is based on the age of some remains of Indigenous people which studies have shown are over 60 000 years old. The age of these remains correlates with the first drop in the sea level by more than 100 metres.

Archaeologists who promote this view believe that in previous ice ages the sea level did not drop far enough for a significant land bridge to the north to have formed.

The difficulty with this view is that there has been no evidence discovered in Australia of the lower primates from whom these earliest Australians could have evolved. Nonetheless, these earliest Australians would have been contemporaries of the earliest discovered humans in Africa.

Whatever the origins of Indigenous people, most archaeologists agree that once Indigenous people reached Australia they moved south over many thousands of years to inhabit the coastline of the continent. Gradually, people also moved into the arid interior.

There is ongoing speculation about when the first Indigenous people lived in Australia and new archaeological findings continually add clues, often contradicting earlier theories. Currently, two factors in particular affect this speculation.

Firstly, two distinct kinds of skeleton have been discovered and studied — ‘the Robust’ which is more ancient with heavier bones, and ‘the Gracile’, which is a lighter, more modern skeleton.

The Robust people did not evolve into the Gracile people, and at times they coexisted. Second, the land bridge theory restricts when people could have migrated to Australia. Flood (2004, p 74) offers what many archaeologists believe to be the best estimate, taking into account these two factors:

It is clear that Indigenous roots go back a long way. We know that Gracile people were camped by the shores of the Willandra Lakes more than 30 000 years ago, and it is now generally agreed that they were not the first migrants, but that they were preceded by more robust people.

Since at least 50 kilometres of open sea had to be crossed, even at a time of lowest sea level, it seems most probable that the Gracile people entered greater Australia at the time of very low sea level, about 50 000 to 55 000 years ago, and that the Robust people came rather earlier, perhaps 70 000. This is speculation and may well be disproved by new discoveries, but such a two migrations theory best fits the available evidence.

Although the beginnings of human habitation in Australia remain in dispute, it seems the earliest Australians did not move to Uluru immediately. Recent archaeological work in the Cleland Hills to the north of Uluru suggests that Indigenous people were living in this region at least 22 000 years ago.

HOW PEOPLE CAME

Although the first immigrants may have come to Australia by accident, they could also have seen the smoke of bushfires on the greater Australian mainland – which at the time included what is now Papua New Guinea – from the nearest Indonesian islands.

Even the easiest route from what was then the mainland of Asia would have required eight sea voyages. People could have travelled either through Sulawesi and a number of intervening islands to the Australian mainland near where New Guinea is today, or via a series of shorter island hops through Timor to the Kimberley. Unfortunately, no craft used to make the island hops has survived to be studied. However, they were probably small rafts constructed from light wood, such as mangrove or bamboo. People sailing them would have had to navigate according to the drift of tides.

**WHY THEY
CAME**

The first migrants may have been gradually forced from their previous homes by the rising seas and disappearing hunting grounds as the ice ages receded. Volcanic activity in the area that is now South-East Asia may have also driven people to seek safer homelands. The drier, cooler shorelines of ancient Australia would have provided open woodlands ideal for human habitation and easy movement.

WHO CAME

There are very few examples of ancient Asian remains to compare with what is known of early Australians, and to support the theory of Asian migration. There appear to be similarities between the Gracile Australians and some ancient inhabitants of southern China, the Philippines and Indonesia. The Robust Australians may be similar to an early Javanese inhabitant termed *Solo man*.

**REFERENCE
LIST**

Flood, J 2004, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime: the story of prehistoric Australia and its people*, JB Books, South Australia, ISBN: 1876622504