

Backed into a corner

Peter Hiscock¹ and Val Attenbrow²

Descriptive terms for specimens which archaeologists describe as backed seem remarkably varied. Historically-recognised backed forms have been labelled using terms such as 'Geometric microlith' for symmetrical specimens and 'Bondi point' for asymmetrical specimens. In classificatory systems used during the middle of the twentieth century, such as that proposed by McCarthy et al. (1946), these forms were often regarded as separate: the former being classed as a sub-class of the 'pigmy' implements called microliths, while the latter were regarded as a member of the point class. In the latter part of this century it has been more common to place these various backed forms together, thereby creating a need for terminology to refer to the class of backed artefacts as a whole.

More recent terminologies are diverse and reveal a varied conceptualisation about the class. For example, some authors have emphasised smallness in their terminology, opting for labels such as 'small tool' (e.g. Stockton 1982) or 'microlith' (e.g. Bowdler and O'Connor 1991). The value of this concept has been diminished by a recognition that regularly-shaped retouched flakes of small size belong to a class that includes not only specimens with backing but also specimens without backing, some of which are not restricted to the Holocene (e.g. McNiven 1994). Other researchers have emphasised the backing as a key defining characteristic, using labels such as 'backed tools' (e.g. Stockton 1973) or 'backed implements' (e.g. Johnson 1979). On some occasions the notions of small size and backing have been combined, such as in the labels 'backed microliths' (e.g. Morwood 1981), or even 'small microlithic backed implements' (Johnson 1979). However, the most common label employed for this class remains 'backed blade' (e.g. Bowdler 1981; Bowdler and O'Connor 1991; Flood 1995; Morwood 1984), a label which implies not only that the items were retouched in a particular way, but that only 'blades', not other kinds of flakes were worked in this way. While on many occasions authors have not discussed this implication of the term, there are many instances when it has been made clear that the label is interpreted literally as a description. For example, Morwood (1981:19) argued that:

The correlation between backed microliths and blades is not difficult to explain: the presence of a median ridge along the dorsal surface on the majority of backed microliths, indicates that these were manufactured on snapped blade sections.

In retrospect, connecting the blade concept with backed specimens in the term 'backed blade' seems dubious. In itself the existence of a dorsal arris, even one parallel to the chord (i.e. unretouched margin), is no indication that the flake being retouched was elongate and/or had parallel margins. On some backed specimens it is clear that the flake was relatively squat and without parallel lateral margins. Indeed many features

taken to be typical, such as the hooked tip on Bondi points, are not readily explicable as indicating manufacture on 'blades'. Furthermore, Hiscock (1993:74-5) has demonstrated that in eastern Australia there is often no strong relationship between the production of elongate flakes and the presence of backed specimens, with assemblages almost without elongate flakes containing specimens with backing retouch. For all of these reasons it is clear that objects that have been identified as 'backed blades' are not necessarily made on 'blades'.

In such circumstances the continued use of the phrase 'backed blade' as a label for this class is misleading. For example, it has allowed the ridiculous situation where authors actually discuss how the artefacts they continued to call 'backed blades' are not made on 'blades' (e.g. Hiscock 1993). Similar concerns have been expressed in the past. Commenting on the situation in Sulawesi, White and O'Connell (1982:121) suggested that the term 'backed flakes' might be more appropriate in the absence of a 'blade core technique'. However they continued to employ the term 'backed blade' in an Australian context. While the application of 'backed flake' as a label in Australia is tempting we consider that it still contains ambiguity, since in this context 'flake' could be misconstrued as being in opposition to, and hence excluding elongate forms ('blades'). And so we advocate, and shall employ, the term 'backed artefact' as the most useful label for that class of objects that have been backed. As a label this emphasises the presence of a backed edge as a definitional requirement, while not suggesting the exclusion of particular flake sizes or shapes.

References

- Bowdler, S. 1981 Hunters in the highlands: Aboriginal adaptations in the eastern Australian uplands. *Archaeology in Oceania* 16:99-111.
- Bowdler, S. and O'Connor, S. 1991 The dating of the Australian small tool tradition, with new evidence from the Kimberley, WA. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1:53-62.
- Flood, J. 1995 *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*. Angus and Robertson.
- Hiscock, P. 1993 Bondaian technology in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. *Archaeology in Oceania* 28:65-76.
- Johnson, I. 1979 The getting of data. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- McCarthy, F.D., Bramell, E. and Noone, H.V.V. 1946 *The Stone Implements of Australia*. Australian Museum Memoir IX.
- McNiven, I.J. 1994 Technological organisation and settlement in southwest Tasmania after the glacial maximum. *Antiquity* 68:75-82.
- Morwood, M. 1981 Archaeology of the central Queensland highlands: The stone component. *Archaeology in Oceania* 16(1):1-52.
- Morwood, M. 1984 The prehistory of the central Queensland highlands. In F. Wendorf and A. Close (eds) *Advances in World Archaeology* 3:325-80. Academic Press.
- Stockton, E.D. 1973 Shaw's Creek shelter: Human displacement of artefacts and its significance. *Mankind* 9:112-17.

1 Department of Anthropology, Northern Territory University, Darwin, NT 0909, Australia.

2 Division of Anthropology, Australian Museum, PO Box A285, Sydney South, NSW 2000, Australia.