

VOLUME 4
PART 2

MEMOIRS OF THE
QUEENSLAND MUSEUM
CULTURAL HERITAGE SERIES

17 OCTOBER 2008

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National Library of Australia card number
ISSN 1440-4788

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CHAPTER 16

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEYS AT BULBUL AND GERAIN

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David, B. 2008 10 17: Archaeological surveys at Bulbul and Gerain. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series* 4(2): 435-450. Brisbane. ISSN 1440-4788.

The Gelam story tells of legendary events that took place at the beach and on the sandy dunefields at Bulbul, and along the hill side and ridge-top at Gerain. The protagonists, Gelam and his mother Usar, undertook various activities in these locations, including hunting and consuming *geinau* (Torres Strait pigeons, *Ducula spilorrhoa*) on the ridge-top at Gerain, and camping at Bulbul. This paper reports on archaeological surveys undertaken at Gerain and Bulbul, the area of Gelam and Usar's homeland, including radiocarbon ages for a series of surface sites. □ *Archaeology of oral traditions, Torres Strait, archaeology, Gelam, shell middens.*

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The Gelam legend is one of the best known and most widespread oral traditions in Torres Strait (e.g. see Lawrie, 1970: 297-299 for a version from Mer). The story begins at Bulbul and Gerain, Gelam and his mother Usar's homeland in northeast Mua. Here can be seen today various landscape locations that feature in the Gelam story, such as the red-tainted vegetation along the Gerain hill-slope above Bulbul, where Gelam cut his legs bleeding as he ran away from Usar when she disguised herself as a *dogai* (site Mua 119, Fig. 1); the Gerain ridge-top itself, where Gelam hunted and consumed *geinau* (Torres Strait pigeons, *Ducula spilorrhoa*; the waterhole at site Mua 26; Fig. 2); the offshore passage through the reef from which Gelam departed on his final journey to the east (site Mua 122, Fig. 3); the sand dunefields at Bulbul where Gelam and Usar lived (site Mua 23); Gelam's nostrils and nearby footprint transformed into the large boulders in the inter-tidal zone at Bulbul (sites Mua 120-121, Fig. 4); and the offshore rock into which Usar was transformed after Gelam left the island forever (site Mua 24, Fig. 5). Each of these locations is now immortalised as land and seascape features well recognised by the Mualgal, the Indigenous people of Mua. What is not so evident, however, is the historicity of the events retold in the Gelam story. Were Gelam and Usar historical beings, or were they figures of legend, fictional characters in a mythical tale?

There is perhaps no way of telling for sure. Most probably, given that the places of the Gelam story are very real and named locations, is that the Gelam story is founded on actual people and events.

The historical nature of the places of the Gelam story leads us to think that Gelam himself, and his mother, were likely historical people who have entered into legend, rather than fictional characters. In attempting to further understand the historicity of the cultural places in the area of Gelam's homeland, over a period of four years, from 2002 to 2005, detailed archaeological surveys were undertaken at Bulbul (Fig. 6) and Gerain (see Fig. 1). These surveys were aimed at, firstly, documenting the cultural sites in Gelam's homeland and, secondly, to seek archaeological remains that may directly relate to the Gelam story. The latter aim was a longshot informed partly through an earlier project where rock paintings directly relating to another oral tradition – the Goba story (David et al., 2004) – were discovered and enabled an archaeological investigation of that oral tradition. The success of that earlier research led us to enquire as to whether or not paintings would be found relating to the Gelam story at Bulbul/Gerain, or perhaps Gelam's hunting or consumption sites could be found given that no other oral tradition tells of other individuals hunting in this part of Mua in the pre-European contact past. If Gelam was the exclusive hunter on the Gerain hilltop, we would expect small food consumption sites along the hilltop where Gelam hunted, rested and cooked and ate foods. Furthermore, whether or not the presence of such sites related to Gelam could be tested by radiocarbon dating, for if all such sites on the Gerain ridge-top belonged to Gelam, we would expect them to be contemporaneous, within an archaeological timeframe. Of course, there is no guarantee that any archaeological



FIG. 1. Gerain hill-slope above Bulbul, where Gelam cut his legs running through the bushes while escaping from Usar when she disguised herself as a *dogai* (site Mua 119).

site would relate to the period of the Gelam story, but characterising the archaeological sites in the area of Gelam's homeland, and dating individual sites, would potentially enable a better understanding of both the historical timing of Gelam's and Usar's life, and the likelihood that some or all of those sites could relate to the events of the Gelam story. It is towards such a research programme that this paper presents the results of archaeological surveys at Bulbul and Gerain.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEYS: METHODOLOGY

The Monash University archaeological surveys began on Mua in October 2000. Since then, 122 cultural sites have been recorded, including details on site type, location, size, and contents (Figs 7-8). All sites have been given a consecutive reference number preceded by the island name 'Mua': Mua 1, Mua 2 etc. Of these sites, 47 are found at Bulbul, and 27 are found on the hillslopes or ridge-top at Gerain. These sites are listed in Tables 1 & 2.

THE BULBUL SITES. The Bulbul sites can be divided into eight types: shell middens (N=32, or 68% of sites; e.g. Fig. 9); story places (N=5, 11%; e.g. Fig. 4); single stone artefacts (N=4, 9%); shell caches (N=2, 4%; e.g. Fig. 10); and one (2%) each of the following sites: spring (Fig. 11), midden with stone arrangement (Fig. 12), a grinding hollow (Fig. 13); stratified subsurface artefacts. By far the most numerous sites are shell middens, and most are small, short-duration single-event camp sites. The range of shellfish

remains includes predominantly *Nerita undata*, *Turbo* sp., *Lambis lambis*, *Trochus niloticus*, *Syrinx aruanus*, *Melo amphora*, *Anadara antiquata*, *Chama* sp., *Paphies striata*, *Pinctada* spp., and *Polymesoda erosa*, with an increasing proportion of *muđu* (*Anadara antiquata*) present as one nears the littoral sand and mud where *muđu* grow today (Table 2). While these sites are almost all surface deposits, the chance discovery of a subsurface stone artefact at site Mua 116 (see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Bulbul, site Mua 116' chapter 14, this volume) during geomorphological testing of the sand dunes (see Orr chapter 18, this volume) indicates that further archaeological sites occur deeply buried beneath the sand dunes. The surface sites, therefore, are unlikely to represent any but the latest phase(s) of occupation and/or use of Bulbul.

THE GERAIN SITES. The Gerain sites are found both on the slopes of the hill and on the ridge-top. Here five types of sites have been found: 15 middens (56% of sites); nine stone arrangements (33%; e.g. Fig. 14); and one (4%) each of the following site types: single stone artefacts, story site and spring; single glass fragment. While some of the middens are extensive (but generally



FIG. 2. The ridge-top at Gerain.



FIG. 3. The passage through the reef, through which Gelam departed on his final journey eastward from Bulbul (site Mua 122).



FIG. 4. Gelam's nostrils (site Mua 120).

containing sparse distributions of cultural materials; e.g. Mua 84; Fig. 15), like at Bulbul most are small, single-event sites.

DISCUSSION OF SITES. Shell middens are the most numerous site type at both Bulbul and Gerain, and in both areas most of these are small, single-event sites. However, the Gerain ridge-top contains a relatively large number of stone arrangements, including a crocodile-shaped *augadh* (totemic) stone formation (Mua 37; see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Gerain and Urakaraltam' chapter 14, this volume), a line of stones with a *bu* shell (*Syrinx aruanus*; Mua 89, Fig. 16), and small, single stones (or sets of small single stones) positioned atop larger rocks (Mua 104-109, 112; e.g. Fig. 14). Such stone arrangements appear to be restricted to the ridge-top, marking places located away from the gaze of residential places.

Ten single-event sites have been radiocarbon-dated at Bulbul and Gerain. These include eight

small shell middens (Mua 71, 75, 79, 101, 110, 111, 113, 114), a cached *alup* (bailer shell, *Melo amphora*) (Mua 47; Fig. 10), and a stone arrangement containing a fragmented *bu* shell (*Syrinx aruanus*; Mua 89, Fig. 16). In addition, four stratified sites have also been excavated: Mua 84, an extensive but sparse shell midden at the northern extreme of the ridge-top at Gerain, close to where the land meets the sea; Mua 38, also on the Gerain ridge-top 250m to the south of Mua 84. This site has been interpreted as a sentinel's lookout. The dense shell midden of Mua 36 at Urakaraltam at the base of the northwestern end of Gerain hill; and Mua 116 at Bulbul, a subsurface deposit located 44 to 78cm below the surface of an inland dune and containing sparse stone artefacts revealed during geomorphological investigations. These latter, stratified sites have each been radiocarbon-dated to the last 200 years or so, and have been reported elsewhere (David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Gerain and Urakaraltam' and 'Archaeological excavations at Mua 116 ,Bulbul' chapters 16 and 17, this volume). The single-event sites from Bulbul and Gerain are individually reported below (see Tables 1-3).

THE BULBUL SINGLE-EVENT SITES

MUA 71. A small shell midden on the boundary of coastal scrub, grassland and woodland, containing *modu* (*Anadara antiquata*), *akul* (*Polymesoda erosa*) and *bu* (*Syrinx aruanus*) shells and a dugong bone. *A. antiquata* shells have been radiocarbon dated to 577±34 years BP (Wk-14433; Fig. 17), corresponding to sometime between AD 1612-1825 (highest probability at 2 sigma).

MUA 75. An *Anadara antiquata* shell midden located between two inland sand dunes, in sub-coastal forest. A radiocarbon determination on *A. antiquata* shells has revealed an age of 537±35 years BP (Wk-14432; Fig. 18), corresponding to sometime between AD 1657-1876.

MUA 79. A small shell midden located at a grassland/vine thicket boundary. The only species of shell present is *modu* (*Anadara antiquata*). A radiocarbon age on *A. antiquata* valves has revealed an age of 521±53 years BP (Wk-14431; Fig. 19), corresponding to sometime between AD 1661-1905 (highest probability at 2 sigma).

MUA 101. A small and very sparse *A. antiquata* midden (2 × 1m in size) located in open



FIG. 5. The rocky islet of Usar, Gelam's mother transformed into rock (site Mua 24).

woodland on the top of the middle sand dune at Gerain. A radiocarbon age on shell indicates that the site was used 602 ± 47 years BP (Wk-14429; Fig. 20), corresponding to sometime between AD 1538-1814.

THE GERAIN SINGLE-EVENT SITES

MUA 47. This site is located at the Gerain/Bulbul interface. A cut *alup* (baler, *Melo amphora*) shell cached in a shallow overhang under a granite boulder at the base of the hill behind the Bulbul sandy flats. A radiocarbon age was obtained on a small piece of the shell, returning an age of 320 ± 50 years BP (OZH124; Figs 10 & 21). The radiocarbon age indicates that this shell was probably placed at Mua 47 during the late 1800s or early to mid 1900s.

MUA 89. An alignment of granite rocks on the ridge-top (site size approx. 2×2 m). Eight rocks, each about $30 \times 30 \times 30$ cm in size, have been placed in a line linking two small granite boulders sitting on a granite pavement. No soft sediments have accumulated between the rocks. Two weathered fragments of a *bu* shell occur in the space between the rocks. A radiocarbon determination on a piece of shell revealed an age of 447 ± 40 years BP (Wk-14430; Fig. 16), corresponding to sometime after AD 1721.

MUA 110. A small (10×8 m) *mu*du (*Anadara antiquata*) (MNI=12) midden located along the ridge-top in the saddle between two hilltops. The site is located in woodland on the edge of a vine thicket. Three metres to the east of the site, as the ridge-top starts to dip downwards, vine thickets and granite boulders appear, but there



FIG. 6. The sandy dunefield and beach of Bulbul, where Gelam and Usar lived (site Mua 23).

are no granite boulders in the immediate vicinity of the site itself. A radiocarbon determination on *mu*du shells revealed an age of 600 ± 35 years BP (Wk-16158; Fig. 22), corresponding to sometime between AD 1558-1805.

MUA 111. A small (12×5 m) *mu*du (*Anadara antiquata*) (MNI=<12) midden situated among woodland on a localised saddle along the ridge-top. Small to medium sized rocks are present in the area surrounding the site. Vine thickets are present some 5m to the west of the site, where the ridge-top begins to dip downslope. A radiocarbon age of 524 ± 35 years BP (Wk-16159) was obtained on *mu*du shells (Fig. 23), corresponding to sometime between AD 1667-1889 (highest probability at 2 sigma).

MUA 113. A small (7×5 m) shell midden consisting of *mu*du (*Anadara antiquata*: MNI=12), one *budi* (*Nerita undata*) shell and one unidentified gastropod shell. The site is located on flat ground in woodland on the edge of, and into, a vine thicket. Numerous granite boulders appear about 2m uphill of the site, but are not present in the area of the site itself. The site occurs 20m from a seasonal creek coming down from the top of the Gerain ridge-top. A radiocarbon determination of 527 ± 32 years BP (Wk-16160) on *mu*du shells dates the site (Fig. 24), corresponding to sometime between AD 1667-1881.

MUA 114. A sparse scatter of six *mu*du (*Anadara antiquata*) valves spread over an area 10×5 m. The site is located among vine thickets on the edge of the ridge-top, where the hill begins to slope down into a creek bed on the eastern slope

TABLE 2. cont...

Site Number	Dugong Bone - Dhangal	Turtle Bone - Waru	Dugong or Turtle Bone	Fish Bone	Unidentified Bone	Nautilus	Nerita sp. - Budi	Turbo sp.	Limpets	Lambis lambis - Yatha	Cypraea sp.	Terebralia sulcata	Trochus sp. - Kabar	Syrinx aruanus - Bu	Melo amphora - Alup	Murex sp.	Nautilus	Chama sp. - It	Anadara sp. - Mudu	Clam	Polyplocophera	Rock Oyster	Monodonta labio - Budi	Large Pinctada sp. - Awidth	Paphies striata - Sijel	Small Pinctada sp. - Awidth	Polymesoda erosa - Akul	Unidentified Bivalve	Unidentified Gastropod	
Mua 89														x																
Mua 90							x						x	x					x											
Mua 91																				x										
Mua 92	x						x						x	x					x				x							
Mua 93										x				x																
Mua 95																				x										
Mua 96																				x										
Mua 97										x			x	x					x											
Mua 99														x																
Mua 100																		x	x									x		
Mua 101																				x										
Mua 110																				x										
Mua 111																				x										
Mua 112																														
Mua 113							x													x										x
Mua 114																				x										
Mua 118	x						x	x		x			x	x	x			x	x	x				x		x	x		x	

TABLE 3. Radiocarbon ages and calibrated ages, single event surface sites at Bulbul and Gerain (calibrations using Calib 5.0.2; $\Delta R-32 \pm 20$, Sean Ulm, pers. comm., 2007). * = cannot calibrate due to nuclear testing ^{14}C .

Site	Type of ^{14}C date	^{14}C laboratory #	Material dated	$\delta 13C$ ‰	% Modern	^{14}C age (years BP)	Calibrated age AD (68.3% probability)	Calibrated age AD (95.4% probability)
Bulbul sites								
Mua 71	conventional	Wk-14433	Anadara antiquata	0.7±0.2	93.1±0.4	577±34	1649-1725 1740-1755 1789-1801	1592-1609 1612-1825
Mua 75	conventional	Wk-14432	Anadara antiquata	0.9±0.2	93.5±0.4	537±35	1688-1776 1782-1805	1657-1876
Mua 79	conventional	Wk-14431	Anadara antiquata	1.1±0.2	93.7±0.6	521±53	1685-1830	1661-1905 1920-1950*
Mua 101	conventional	Wk-14429	Anadara antiquata	1.2±0.2	92.8±0.5	602±47	1581-1718	1538-1814
Gerain sites								
Mua 47	AMS	OZH124	Melo amphora	1.6	96.07±0.60	320±50	?	?
Mua 89	conventional	Wk-14430	Syrinx aruanus	3.1±0.2	94.6±0.5	447±40	1818-1950*	1721-1950*
Mua 110	conventional	Wk-16158	Anadara antiquata	1.1±0.2	92.8±0.4	600±35	1620-1714	1558-1805
Mua 111	conventional	Wk-16159	Anadara antiquata	0.9±0.2	93.7±0.4	524±35	1696-1810	1667-1889 1947-1950*
Mua 113	conventional	Wk-16160	Anadara antiquata	0.8±0.2	93.6±0.4	527±32	1696-1806	1667-1881
Mua 114	conventional	Wk-16161	Anadara antiquata	0.8±0.2	94.3±0.4	469±32	1725-1741 1754-1789 1801-1893 1942-1950*	1713-1910 1915-1950*

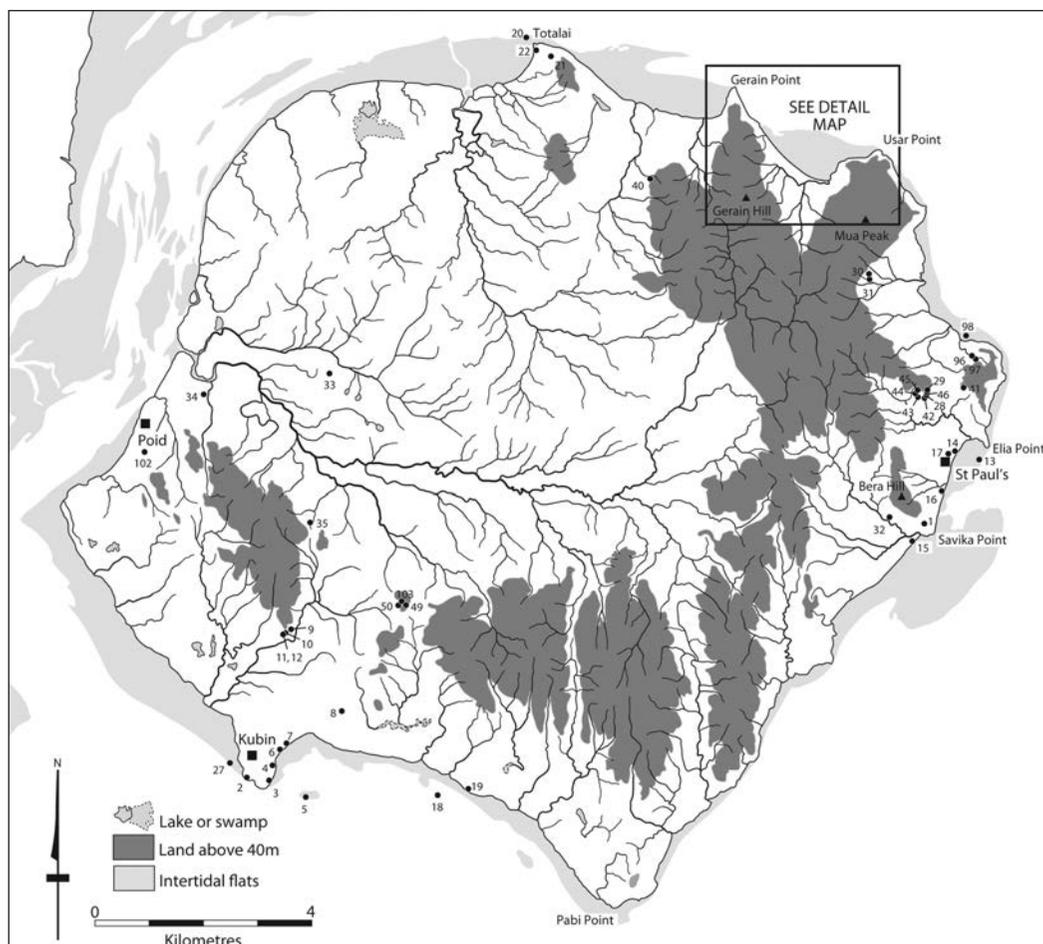


FIG. 7. Mua, showing location of study area. Recorded cultural heritage sites are shown (see Fig. 8 for details of Gerain and Bulbul).

of Gerain hill. Granite boulders occur within 2m of the site. A radiocarbon determination of 469 ± 32 years BP (Wk-16161) on *mudu* shells dates the site (Fig. 25), corresponding to sometime between AD 1713-1910 (highest probability at 2 sigma).

DISCUSSION

All of the radiocarbon-dated single-event sites date to the last 450 years, and most if not all date to the last 350 years or less – that is, to the mid seventeenth century or later (Table 3). The small *mudu* shell middens on the Gerain ridge-top in particular are probably the remains of small meals undertaken while one or a very small number of people passed through the

area – the middens are too small to indicate any more than a brief stop by a very few people. The radiocarbon ages do not allow us to determine whether or not sites Mua 110, 111, 113 and 114 were all created by a single person on a single journey, or by one or more people in a series of trips spread over days or years or even tens of year. What they do reveal, however, is that they were all created over a short period of time measured from anything from a single day to tens of years – probably all within the span of a single generation (most likely during the 1600s and/or 1700s). This in itself is rather telling of how this area was used: despite thousands of years of occupation of this and neighbouring islands, there is no archaeological evidence that anyone ever came to this ridge-top except for a

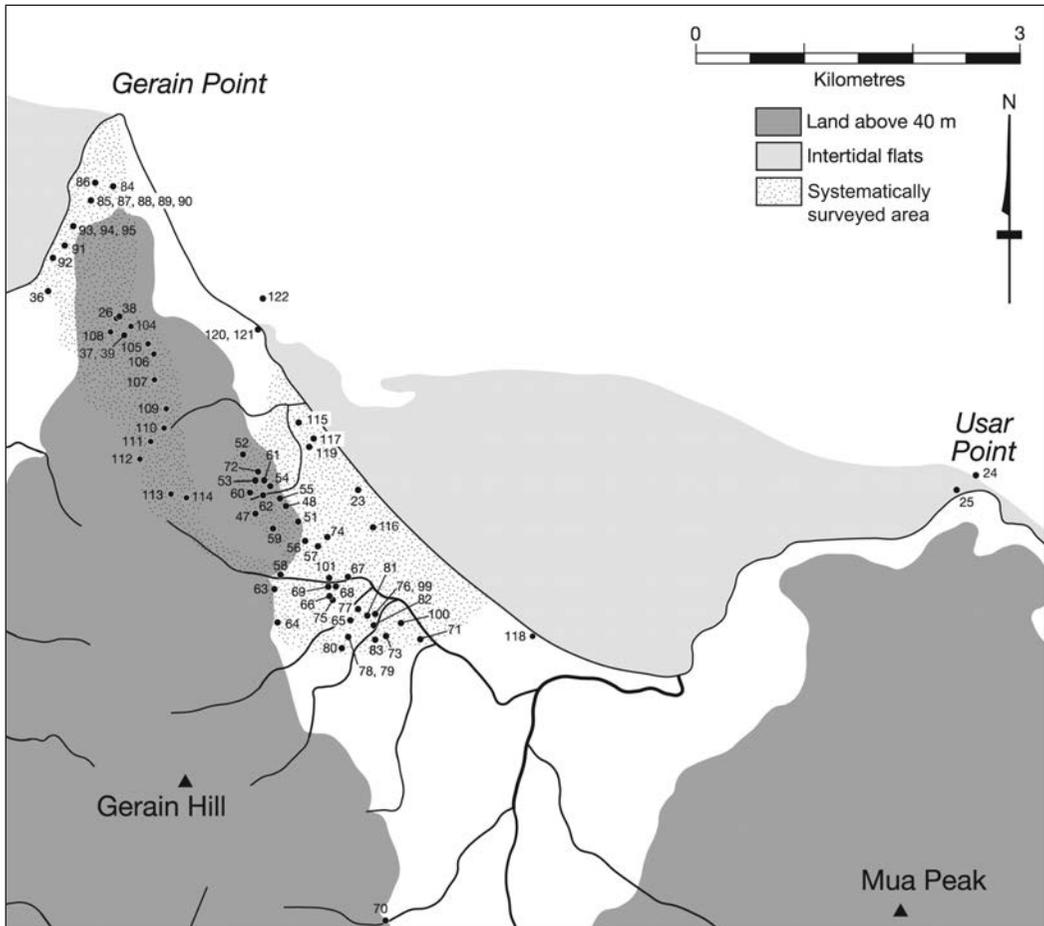


FIG. 8. The northeast part of Mua, from Gerain Point in the west to Usar Point in the east, showing the locations of cultural heritage sites recorded.

few isolated sites all dating to the same period of time. The implication is clearly that someone, or a small group of people, were walking around in this otherwise little-used part of Mua, probably all within a single person's lifetime (as would be expected if these sites were associated with Gelam). These four sites are located precisely in the area that Gelam is said to have hunted, cooked and consumed *geinau* pigeons. Could they have been made by Gelam himself? Yes, there is a chance – the radiocarbon ages have not falsified this possibility. However, we have to be cautious to not run to conclusions too quickly, for alternatively it is also very possible that one or more other people made these sites while travelling across the Gerain ridge-top. What we can say for sure is that sometime most probably



FIG. 9. Small shell midden at Bulbul, site Mua 56.



FIG. 10. Site of cached baler (*Melo amphora*) cut shell container at Gerain/Bulbul boundary, Mua 47.



FIG. 11. Spring at Bulbul, site Mua 117.



FIG. 12. Upright stone at the stone arrangement and midden site, Mua 57.



FIG. 13. Mua 48, a granite rock with a single shallow, circular ground area in the horizontal protrusion in the foreground.



FIG. 14. The stone arrangement on the Gerain ridge-top, site Mua 104.



FIG. 15. Large midden, site Mua 84.



FIG. 16. Stone arrangement with *bu* (*Syrinx aruanus*) shell, site Mua 89.



FIG. 17. Site of the small shell midden at Bulbul, Mua 71.

between 350-250 years ago, one person, or one or more very small groups of people, came to the Gerain ridge-top and rested, eating *mudu* shells, during short-duration stops. This is also the time when a small village existed to the immediate west of the northern end of Gerain, at Urakaraltam. Contemporaneous with this village, the northern end of the ridge-top itself contained a sentinel's station on the lookout for raiding canoes from Badu and Mabuyag (see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Gerain and Urakaraltam' chapter 16, this volume). During that time a crocodile *augadh* (totem) was built of rocks at the northern end of the ridge-top. While not excluding the possibility that sites Mua 110, 111, 113 and 114 were made by Gelam, it is thus also very possible that the sites were made by someone else on one or more than one occasion, given that considerable social activity was taking place along the less

steep and more open ridge-top, and at the base of the hill, a few hundred metres to the north and northwest.

The radiocarbon-dated small single-event sites reported in this paper are each well-defined spatially. Those sites located on the Gerain ridge-top occur on very shallow, hard and sometimes rocky soils (sedimentation here is very slow); if older sites were present in this area we would expect to have seen them on the present ground surface. The fact that older sites have not been found indicates that the Gerain ridge-top only began to be frequented in this way during the last 350 or 250 years or so, in concert with the emergence of village activity at Urakaraltam nearby. On the other hand, the small, single-event shell middens at Bulbul are found on deep, sandy dune sediments well capable of containing older cultural sites. Indeed, as evidenced by the Mua 116 findings (see David et al. 'Archaeological excavations at Bulbul, site



FIG. 18. The shell midden at Bulbul, site Mua 75.



FIG. 19. The small shell midden at Bulbul, site Mua 79.



FIG. 20. The small shell midden at Bulbul, site Mua 101.

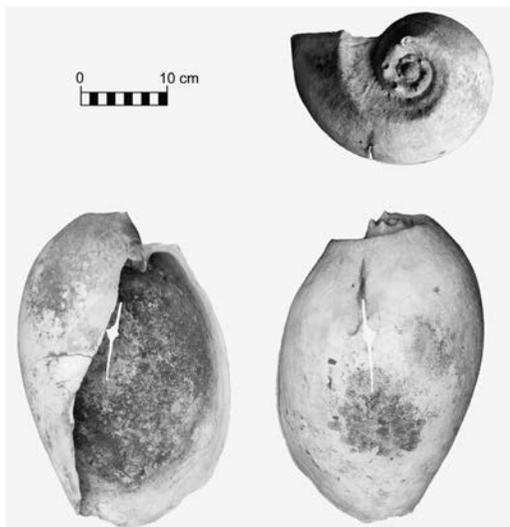


FIG. 21 The cached baler (*Melo amphora*) cut shell container (showing the impact break at its base) from site Mua 47.

Mua 116' chapter 17, this volume), older sites are expected to occur within this dune system. The large number of shell middens at Bulbul, most of which are single-event sites, indicates common use of this area probably by more than one person or single family group during the last 350 years especially. The implication here is that Mua 71, 75, 79 and 101 represent only the latest phase of occupation and/or use of the Bulbul sandy flats and sand dunes. Only a concerted archaeological excavation program within the Bulbul dune system would reveal a detailed history of this area for the period before the mid 1600s AD. Evidently, during the last 350 years, Bulbul has been extensively used

by small groups of people extracting local food resources and making short duration camps. There is no archaeological evidence of any kind for the presence of a village in the northern two-thirds of Bulbul during this time (the southern third of Bulbul was not systematically surveyed for archaeological sites, so it is unknown whether or not archaeological evidence of a village exists there).

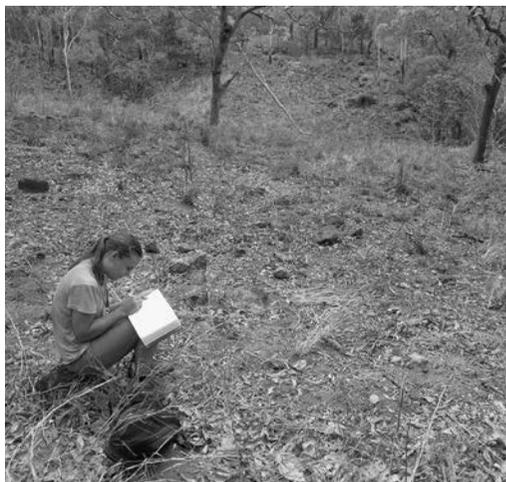


FIG. 22. Jaclyn Ward recording site Mua 110 (foreground), a small, sparse shell scatter.



FIG. 23. The sparse shell scatter on the Gerain ridge-top, site Mua 111.



FIG. 24. The sparse shell scatter on the Gerain ridge-top, site Mua 113.

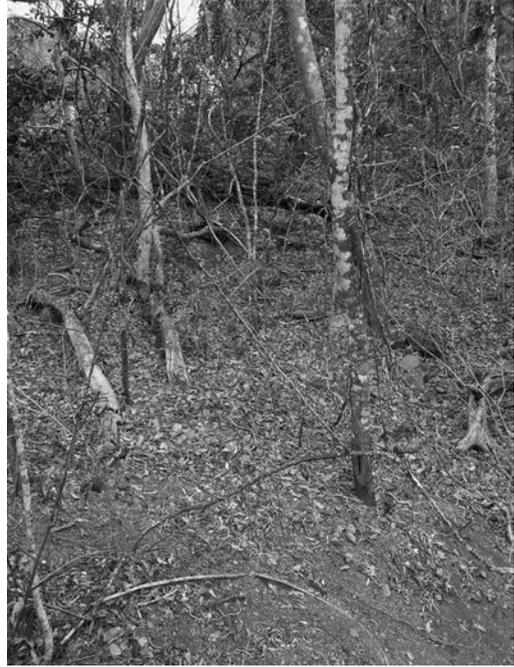


FIG. 25. The sparse shell scatter on the Gerain ridge-top, site Mua 114.

CONCLUSION

Archaeological surveys at Bulbul and Gerain have failed to find definitive evidence of Gelam and Usar. However, a number of sites along the Gerain ridge-top are contemporaneous and of a kind that could have been created by Gelam, who is known by legend to have spent much time in the area. The presence of a village and sentinel's lookout only a few hundred metres away makes it likely that other people would have also frequented this part of the Gerain ridge-top during the last 300 to 200 years in particular. The best conclusion that can be made from this research is thus that archaeological evidence of the presence of Gelam at Gerain may exist, but is uncertain; the archaeological contemporaneity of the sites on the ridge-top makes it possible that they were all created by one person. That person, or persons, must have been alive sometime between about 350-250 years ago. If this area was part of the way the Mualgal systematically used the island in the past, then we would expect to find considerable archaeological evidence in this area, given the general lack of sedimentation on the Gerain ridge-top. The fact that only a few very small

sites were found, with little or no spatial patterning suggests rare and even special use of this area by very few people (perhaps even one person). This is all consistent with the possibility that Gelam may have been responsible for the archaeological materials found here.

It is notoriously difficult to find historical evidence of a single, named person through archaeological research. While such findings are sometimes made by relating oral traditions and/or historical texts to archaeological findings (e.g. in the case of Goba at Turau Kula near Uma, see David et al., 2004), unless one has specific written or oral information relating a named person to a very specific place, archaeological sites more typically tell us about general activities relating to group or even more generally 'cultural' activity. At Bulbul – the homeland of the legendary Mua and Torres Strait hero Gelam and his mother Usar – we can thus generally conclude from archaeological research that there has been considerable short-duration camping activity associated with the extraction and consumption of shellfish by individuals or small groups of people dating back to at least 700 years ago (with confirmed intensive use during the last 350 years). On the adjacent Gerain hilltop, also

associated with the Gelam story, occupation and/or food consumption was less intensive and archaeological evidence appears to be restricted to the last 350 years or so. Here, a sentinel (lookout) point was established at the northern end of the hilltop; small stone arrangements were established, marking this part of the landscape in the process; and an individual or small group of people travelled across the ridge-top on one or more occasions eating a small amount of *mudu* shellfish along the way. Whether these latter events relate to Gelam or not remains unknown. Further archaeological research along the Gerain ridge-top and slopes (in particular around the hilltop waterhole said to have been often frequented by Gelam) is now required to try to better determine whether or not these sites can be associated with the Gelam story with greater confidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Whap Charlie, the Mualgal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation Committee and the

Kubin Community Council for the invitation to do this research; Sem Tom, Moses Kaitap, Jaclyn Ward and Joel Mayes for helping with the fieldwork; and Ian McNiven and Michael Quinnell for comments on an earlier draft. Thanks also to AINSE for a grant for radiocarbon carbon dates, the Australian Research Council for ARC Discovery grants and QEII Fellowships DP0344070 and DP0877782, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for funding this project.

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