

## ABSTRACT

Previous researchers studying the Australian Aboriginal bark burial mortuary practice unique to the Central Queensland Highlands maintain that these specific burial rites were reserved for young men who died an un-natural death and children only (Morwood 1979; Walsh 1984, 1987). Furthermore, it has been assumed that this practice was a recent phenomenon derived from European influences (Walsh 1984, 1987; McNiven 1996).

However, archaeological and anthropological researchers have based their assumptions on limited ethnographical sources, most of which derive from the southwestern areas of the Central Queensland Highlands during the post-contact period (Morwood 1979, Walsh 1984, 1987; Donovan 1976). In addition, the archaeological literature also relies on methods of age and sex identification that are unclear (Walsh 1984, 1987). The assumptions that age and sex were social distinctions at death in Aboriginal populations throughout the Central Queensland Highlands have never been adequately tested. In addition to this, the issue of antiquity and its obvious implications for management strategies, issues of cultural continuity, and cultural transition for the mortuary practice, have never been adequately explored.

This thesis is concerned with age and sex as possible social distinctions at death in the Central Queensland bark burial mortuary practice. Through employing proven aging and sexing techniques on a sample of human remains from previously opened bark coffins, this thesis identifies who was included within this unique and elaborate mortuary practice.

It is demonstrated that the bark burial mortuary practice was not reserved exclusively for young men and children; all age groups and both sexes were included. Furthermore, although the inclusion of people in the mortuary practice was not based on age or gender,

other basic social divisions within the mortuary practice appear to have existed. It was found that some individuals were isolated and placed for final internment alone, while others were placed together in multiple burials. It is argued that the inclusion of individuals in single and multiple burials was based on basic social/cultural distinctions.

In addition to this, this thesis also examines the age of bark coffins and the associated mortuary practice. Previous archaeological investigations throughout the region suggest that the mortuary practice may extend back to 4,000 years ago (e.g. Morwood 2001). A relative dating technique was developed and applied to a sample of bark coffins to determine if they were pre or post contact in age. In addition, a sample of the bark from crypts floors was also AMS dated. The AMS dates obtained from crypts support the relative dating evidence. It is now clearly established that the bark burial mortuary practice has a long and continuous history that extends back at least 850 years ago, possibly 4,000 years ago, and although modified by European influences, this mortuary tradition is still being practiced today.