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Dr Amy Roberts: Dig it Journal Dialogue interview

Biography

Dr Amy Roberts is an archaeologist and anthropologist who primarily works with Indigenous communities in South Australia. In particular she continues to work collaboratively with the Narungga people of Yorke Peninsula and Aboriginal people from the Mid Murray and Riverland regions. Her research with these communities covers a range of areas which reflects her long-term engagement with these groups. In recent years she has focused on the rock art of the Mid Murray, the ways in which Narungga people have and continue to engage with their seascape and its resources and the pre and post-contact archaeology of the Riverland.

Prior to her appointment as an academic in the Archaeology Department at Flinders University Amy worked as an ‘expert’ for a number of native title cases – including for the First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region Native Title Claim which achieved a successful determination. She continues to work as an ‘expert’ in a consulting capacity on a range of native title and Aboriginal heritage matters.

Interview questions/themes

University career

You are a former graduate of Flinders University completing both your undergraduate and Doctoral studies in archaeology at Flinders (as well as graduate studies in anthropology at University of Western Australia). What inspired you choose archaeology as a field of study in particular your interest in Indigenous archaeology?

Like many students I began my archaeological studies with an interest in the classical world – although I had always wanted to learn more about the Indigenous Australian past. As I progressed through my studies at Flinders University I became increasingly interested in developing a greater understanding of the past of my own country. I feel that all Australians should have a deeper appreciation of the full history of this continent.

Combining archaeology and anthropology

In your work you emphasise the importance of combining archaeological and anthropological approaches. Do you think upcoming students in Indigenous archaeology should also get some grounding in anthropology? If so, why is this so important?

Yes – I think it is increasingly important for students of Indigenous archaeology to have more anthropological training. The practice of Indigenous archaeology in Australia should now always include collaboration or consultation with Indigenous groups. Undertaking ethical research in this area
Interview

therefore requires some understanding of the mechanisms by which Indigenous Australians establish ‘connection to country’—increasingly practitioners also need to be able to appropriately contextualise a variety of anthropological issues in the conduct of their work.

Working as an archaeologist
Following your university study, you worked as an archaeologist and anthropologist in native title matters before returning to Flinders University as a lecturer in 2010. What has it been like to be a working archaeologist/anthropologist in native title and subsequently as a lecturer and teacher of archaeology? What have been the challenges? What have been the highlights?

Academia and the native title arena are two quite different working contexts with varying challenges. Upon returning to Flinders University in 2010 I actually continued work in native title as a consultant through Flinders Partners and I still work with some of the same native title groups that I worked with in my former jobs. I think it is a good development that many academics in the discipline have had diverse careers beyond academia—this enables us to bring ‘real world’ experiences and case studies into the classroom and to equip our students with a better suite of skills for entering the workplace.

Working in Indigenous archaeology/consideration for Indigenous perspectives
Your research interest as a student and in your working career is primarily focused on Indigenous archaeology. In particular, you have been concerned about how archaeological research has impacted Indigenous people themselves. What approaches have you developed or adopted that have achieved better trust and working relationships in the work you have done with Indigenous communities?

I think many students of Indigenous archaeology feel that the history of our discipline (and colonialism more generally) is a confronting topic. My response to these issues was to examine them in more detail (through my PhD research) which led me to adopt various collaborative approaches in my own research. My work currently takes place largely at the collaborative end of the ‘collaborative continuum’—i.e., where research goals may be developed together, where information is shared and discussed, where community members are part of the research process and contribute as co-authors etc. (see Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008:11). Whilst such

an approach is undoubtedly more difficult for researchers in that our own understandings may challenged—such work is also far more rewarding and transformative. Indeed, what good is our research if the communities (and their pasts) about whom we write are not engaged in the research outcomes?

What advice for current students?
What advice would you have for current students interested in pursuing a career in Indigenous archaeology?

I would advise students to continually reflect on their motivations whilst studying and working in the field of Indigenous archaeology. What is it you hope to achieve and why? When working in the professional sector it is easy to be distracted by the many complexities of practice and to lose sight of your initial aims. Make concerted efforts to understand your responsibilities as a heritage practitioner—and once armed with such knowledge follow your ethical instincts.

Reference
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Jordan Ralph, Editor
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Jordan completed a Bachelor of Archaeology (Honours) degree at Flinders University in 2012. The focus of Jordan’s Honours research was contemporary graffiti of Jawoyn Country. He is an active member of the archaeological community, serving as a Student Representative for the Australian Archaeological Association, and the President of the Flinders University Archaeological Society during 2012 as a member of the World Archaeological Congress Student Committee in 2012-2015 and as a member the Council of the World Archaeological Congress as the Junior Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific in 2013-present. Jordan has considerable experience working with Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and has participated in numerous archaeology surveys and recording projects, with a particular focus on rock art and graphic representation. Jordan now works as a field archaeologist at Wallis Heritage Consulting and is a PhD candidate with the Flinders University Department of Archaeology where he is currently researching modern material culture in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Catherine Bland, Co-editor
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Catherine completed her Honours degree in 2012 where she conducted a technological and functional analysis of stone artefacts from the archaeological site of Ngau Ngau (Devon Down), South Australia. Her current PhD research involves analysing ceramics with elemental and mineralogical techniques in order to explore questions about provenance and technology, which can be used to infer interregional interaction. The archaeological site of Caleta Vítor is the focus of her research and is located in northern Chile, South America. The ceramic record from the site spans the last 2,000 years and thus covers the rise, consolidation and collapse of two Andean cultures - Tiwanaku and Inka. This is a multidisciplinary international project that will provide insight into the ceramic manufacturing process for the site and identify the possible influences that the overarching political states of Tiwanaku and Inka had on the population.

Adrian Mollenmans, Co-editor
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Adrian completed his Honours degree in 2014 in which he undertook an analysis of Aboriginal fish traps on Yorke Peninsula (Guaranda), South Australia. Adrian’s research interests include indigenous archaeology with an emphasis on adopting and promoting collaborative archaeological and community-based participatory research approaches (see also interview with Dr Amy Roberts in this edition for a further discussion on ethical considerations that underlie the need for adopting such approaches). His current PhD research continues his collaboration with the Narungga community of Yorke Peninsula (Guaranda) by undertaking a broader investigation of coastal and marine resource use of this community including how the coastal and marine economy developed over time.

Fiona Shanahan, Co-editor
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Fiona completed an archaeological Honours degree at La Trobe University in 2014. Her thesis deals with the management of World War II aviation sites in Australia and the Marshall Islands. Fiona has presented at a number of international and domestic conferences, including the National Student Archaeology Conference (NASC) and Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology (AIMA) conferences. She has a broad range of fieldwork experience including terrestrial and maritime archaeology throughout Australia: Excavations include the Penitentiary in Port Arthur, Oaklands Guard House, Australian Historic Shipwreck Preservation Project (Clarence) in Victoria, a shell midden in Apollo Bay, survey work at Ned’s Corner as well as consulting work throughout Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia.

About Dig It

Dig It is the student-run, peer-reviewed journal of the Flinders Archaeological Society and its purpose is to provide students - including undergraduates, postgraduates and recent graduates - with the opportunity to practice and familiarise themselves with the processes involved in academic publications, including writing, publishing, editing and reviewing. The publication began in 1997 and after a hiatus of at least five years, it was relaunched in 2012. It aims to offer emerging young academics with an avenue to engage with archaeological dialogues and discourse. In addition, it seeks to keep future and junior archaeologists connected and informed about what is happening in the archaeological community.

Dig It is published once a year and is printed at Flinders Press. Dig It considers a range of contributions, including research articles, essays, personal accounts/opinion pieces, book reviews and thesis abstracts for publication. We welcome contributions from local, interstate and international undergraduates, postgraduates and recent graduates. The guidelines for contributors can be found here: http://flindersarchsoc.org/digit/guidelinesforcouritactors/.

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