What do the National Museum of Natural Histories’ collections from A.C. Haddon’s first voyage (1888-9) to the Torres Strait tell us about Haddon and local Torres Strait communities’ trade relationships and agencies?

Background: Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) went to the Torres Strait Islands in 1888 to examine marine biology and reef systems. Transformed by the experience, Haddon returned in 1889 as head of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition, which revolutionized anthropological field methodologies and helped establish British Social Anthropology (Herle & Rouse 1998).

Located between Cape York Peninsula and the south coast of New Guinea, the Torres Strait has long been part of a dynamic regional exchange network. Since the 1830s these networks transformed as the Torres Strait became a colonial and missionary center, and the rise of global commercial trade and pearl-fishing (Lavagne 1994). Haddon’s interest in anthropology developed out of his impression that Torres Strait Islanders were rapidly changing under European influence, and that representations of their society must be “savaged” before it was too late (Herle & Rouse 1998). Haddon undertook ethnographic and biological collecting, asked locals to make objects and restage customs, which he documented in still photographs, drawings and notes. To make his collection in 1888-9, Haddon collaborated with islanders, members of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and colonial government officials on the Islands and in Southern Papua. Tracing these relationships through the objects now in the National Museum of Natural History allows for a contextualization of the intersecting histories between Torres Strait communities, Haddon, and early museum anthropology.

The Collections: Consisting of three accretions of “duplicate specimens”, Haddon’s collections were received in 1990 (accession 24726) and 1995 (accession 29310, 30002). Predominantly collected in Torres Strait and New Guinea, at least 6 objects are noted by Haddon as having been made in a different locality than where they were collected. Some objects were also collected in localities that Haddon never personally visited, but obtained from other Europeans.

In his shift to become an anthropologist, Haddon used his 1888-9 collections as a means by which to establish a contextualization of the intersecting histories between Torres Strait communities, Haddon, and early museum anthropology.

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An overview of the 90 ethnographic items donated by Alfred Haddon to the National Museum in Accession No. 24726, 29310, and 30002

An example of the network of relationships found in Haddon’s collections is seen in a series of objects connected to dagon. An integral part of local diet, dugong are found throughout the region and feed on sea-grass. Haddon (1901: 148-53) details the capture of the two dugong by boat at Mabuiag (see Fig. 1). Upon discovering that they were traditional harpooned from platforms, Haddon asked his friend Waria to construct one for him (Fig. 2). For his photograph, Waria stands holding a harpoon and twine that were used to injure and drown dugong. While too small to be seen, Haddon asked Waria to hang a dugong charm from the platform. Though the charm Waria used was a larger one from Moa, the charm in NMNH’s collection is a similarly designed object from Mer (Fig. 3). Dugong charms, harpoons and hunting magic were traded between island communities.

Analysis and Findings: The digging charm, tobacco pipe, and related photos show how objects in the Smithsonian collection can be used to aid in retracing Haddon’s interaction with locals (e.g., Waria and Gabia) and Europeans (e.g., Milman and Bracke) stationed in the area. These objects, and their movements, give us a glimpse into the trade relationships between the neighboring islands, New Guineans, and Cape York Aboriginal communities in addition to the customs Haddon sought to “savage” through his work. The objects themselves speak to the transforming material realities of the region, and the ways in which islanders incorporated external materials in their shifting practices (Fig. 5).

An overview of the collection in light of Haddon’s movements in 1888-9 also points to further relationships. Other than the Dundial material, it is likely that Haddon obtained his New Guinea objects through the Rev. James Chalmers and Robert Bruce of the LMS and perhaps other resident Europeans. These social relationships allowed Haddon to obtain a great variety of objects which fed into his mapping of the material culture of southern New Guinea (Haddon 1894).

Figure 8: Bundles of mumok, legs made of plated coconuts with knots of turkey red and grey yarn tied to them which were collected on Muralug by Haddon on September 1888 following local dances. The inclusion of calico, turkey red cloth, yarn and new pigment shows how foreign materials were made local. Given to the National Museum in 1891 (Acc. 24726).

Further research:
1. Consult Haddon’s notes held in Cambridge to refine the timeline, list of Haddon’s activities and people encountered.
2. Use this and information found in, and about, his other collections from 1888 to contextualize the photographs and objects in the Smithsonian.
3. Make links between objects in the collection and those in Haddon’s photographs in the NAA and elsewhere.
4. Trace how these objects came to be in Haddon’s possession.
5. Use this information combined with research on other collectors, and ethnographic work with communities to reach broader conclusions about Melanesian Networks in Haddon’s time.

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Figure 1: Photograph of Haddon returning to Waiben for some time, visits Muralug and Moa Island, and re-traces his 1888-9 movements in the Torres Straits. Courtesy of the NAA.

Figure 2: Haddon returns to Waiben for some time, visits Muralug and Moa Island, and re-traces his 1888-9 movements in the Torres Straits. Courtesy of the NAA.