

Professor Sylvia Joy Hallam

MA, PhD (Cantab.), FAHA

17th August 1927 – 3rd June 2019

As the first archaeologist at the University of Western Australia, Sylvia Hallam, together with Ian Crawford and Charlie Dortch at the Western Australian Museum, pioneered the study of archaeology in Western Australia. From her arrival in Perth in 1961 with her husband Herbert Hallam, medieval historian at The University of Western Australia (UWA), Sylvia was an energetic and tireless advocate for archaeology as a discipline. She lectured regularly in various departments at UWA and was finally appointed to a part-time lectureship in prehistory in 1970 and to a full-time lectureship in 1973. An independent department of archaeology eventually was established in 1983 and Sylvia was promoted to Associate Professor in 1984.

Sylvia and Herbert Hallam had met as students at Cambridge University. As was common at the time, when Herbert Hallam was appointed to a lectureship in medieval history at the University of Western Australia, he was accompanied by his wife and family. Sylvia Hallam, however, was already working on a major archaeological research program on patterns of settlement around the Wash in East Anglia from the first to fourth centuries AD. Her pioneering analysis of rural settlement during Roman times was published as a Royal Geographical Society Memoir in 1970 and in 2004, Sylvia finally obtained her PhD on the basis of this published work.

On arriving in Western Australia, Sylvia switched her interests from the Roman fenland to Aboriginal archaeology. Nevertheless, her research continued to focus on landscape studies and regional field survey—an emphasis unfashionable in Australian archaeology at the time. Her fieldwork focused mainly on the Swan–Avon region and especially the Perth Metropolitan area. This work compiled an invaluable record of the archaeology of the Swan Coastal Plain, now largely lost to urban development, and provided a training ground for a generation of students. Sylvia's approach to archaeology stressed landscape context and understanding the archaeological record in relation to changing environments, as well as the integration of a range of different types of evidence from the natural sciences to the archives. This led her to a detailed exploration of historical sources in order to investigate past Aboriginal land use and the nature of the environment encountered by the first European settlers. Her seminal work 'Fire and Hearth' was published in 1975. In it, she showed how the Noongar people of the South West used fire to radically remake the landscape thereby readily enabling its penetration and settlement. Rhys Jones had already coined the phrase 'firestick farming' in 1969 to characterise the interaction between Aboriginal people and the Australian environment. However, 'Fire and Hearth' remains one of the most detailed and meticulous explorations of the construction of the environment by Aboriginal people. Her later research on yams and



Resting next to petroglyphs at Murujuga (Burrup Peninsula), ~1975 (photo Robin Chapple).

the role of Aboriginal women in the South West is less well-known, but was another ground-breaking analysis of the interaction between Noongar people and their environment.

Sylvia's research interests were wide-ranging and she connected with colleagues working in many other parts of the state, across Australia and internationally. These ranged from Professor Richard Gould then at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, for collaboration on the Warburton region, to Lesley Maynard in the Pilbara, and colleagues in Poona, India. Her published archaeological work includes such diverse topics as the colonisation of new continents, microliths worldwide, Aboriginal demography, the role of women in pre-European economy and society in Western Australia, as well as Aboriginal use of fire as a tool of land management and the archaeology of Western Australia. Following a serious illness in 1983, she switched her research interests from archaeological fieldwork to the archives. This led to a fruitful research collaboration with Lois Tilbrook and to her significant contribution to

the Aboriginal volumes of the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*.

As well as her advocacy for teaching and research in archaeology at UWA, Sylvia promoted the public pursuit of and engagement with archaeological research at state, national and international level. She was an Associate of the WA Museum and a member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies [later AIATSIS]. Sylvia was a fellow of the Royal Society of WA and in 1985–1986 became its first female president. She was also involved in ANZAAS and the university Staff Association. In 1984 she was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Sylvia continued to publish and contribute to the public face of archaeology after her retirement in 1989. She campaigned vigorously and tirelessly for the recognition of the outstanding significance of Murujuga. In 2006, she worked with Caroline Bird to produce a report for the National Trust, which provided strong supportive evidence for protection of this stunning art-rich cultural landscape location. The impact of chemical emissions on the rock art was a particular concern for her and she was an outspoken critic of the inaction of both industry and government.

Professor Sylvia Hallam died peacefully in Perth on 3 June 2019.

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