Arriving in Krakow, Poland our luck was about to turn full circle. We had been looking forward to visiting one of the oldest Universities in Europe. The Jagiellonian, University JU in Krakow was founded in 1364 by Casimir the Great. We were soon made aware that we were walking in the footsteps of many renowned scholars who studied here. John Paul II studied at JU before he was elected as Pope, and the famous astronomer Nicholas Copernicus’ name remains synonymous with JU for his revolutionary findings that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa.

It was a warming experience to be officially welcomed into the University by Carlos Panek Soares de Arugao, of the International Relations Office. We were then introduced to the Institute of Archaeology by Professor Radoslaw Palonka and the Director of the Institute Professor Pawel Valde-Nowak. Professor Nowak was very keen to show us something of relevance to Indigenous Australia. After initial greetings and explanations had been exchanged, he got down to business. Excusing himself, with the busy schedule of exam time he hurried out of the room, and quickly returned with an object wrapped in protective cloth. This he handed to me to examine and then sought my opinion on whether or not it was a boomerang?

The object certainly had some of the key characteristics of a boomerang in shape and form. It was long and elevated at both ends and felt quite heavy as it was handed to me to carefully unwrap. ‘Can I handle it?’ ‘Yes go ahead. It is not the original but a faithful copy’. ‘What a surprise to come all this way and to be presented with a boomerang from Poland. What is it made from? where was it found? and how old is it? were the relevant questions that immediately came to mind.

The Professor then unfolded his story. Back in 1985 his team were excavating a cave site, Oblazowa in Southern Poland. The cave was located in a red limestone rock face 6 metres above the recent valley of a small river. Here as they dug down through the timeline of the Upper Palaeolithic period of stone tool technological development, they unearthed a large fragment made out of Mammoth tusk.

It was shaped like a boomerang, and showed signs of having been shaped and polished. It is a copy of this object that I’m holding in my hand trying to get a feel for the similarity of the boomerangs I’ve seen being made, held in my hand, and indeed thrown on many occasions. The Professor explained that the material from the cave where the boomerang was excavated has been dated to about 18,000 years ago. There were also skeletal materials and some decorative objects surrounding the boomerang. Was it a burial? There were still many questions about the nature and context of the the boomerang and the question of whether the cultural practice of boomerang making continued or ended during the upper Palaeolithic period. These are questions that will remain a work in progress as more evidence is found.
Whether there are more to be found lying dormant in the Palaeolithic layers remains to be seen.

The question was put to me again. ‘What do you think, is it a boomerang?’ I was then able to take it in my right hand and demonstrate how boomerangs are thrown. ‘This is how a returning boomerang would be thrown, over the shoulder in a vertical style extending the arm with a flick of the wrist to project the boomerang forward. But a hunting boomerang had different aerodynamics and was thrown underarm and horizontal with the ground to fell the prey being hunted. To me the shape and style of this boomerang and its weight resemble the aerodynamics of a hunting boomerang.’ Photos were then taken as I was able to demonstrate the difference between a returning and hunting boomerang, flanked by Professor Nowak who unearthed it, and Magdalena, a fellow Archaeologist who was born around the time it was unearthed in 1985.

This auspicious visit had come about as a result of a meeting I had set up with a Professor Palonska in the Archaeology Department who, as it turned out, was a collaborator with American Indian people in Colorado. As we had visited the same tribal group and community in the 1980s, we were able to establish friendships and shared experiences of our comparative studies in North America. We chatted away in his busy top floor room until we were joined by the Professor Nowak and Phd graduate and lecturer, Magdalena. The plan was for me to give a lecture on Australian Indigenous Archaeology, and then hear from Magdalena about the boomerang discovery. A great privilege and memorable occasion for me I must say, to be invited to give a talk in a 14th century lecture theatre of admirable tradition and antiquity. The lecture theatre was set in a vault-like room, almost as old as the university itself.

My talk raised a lot of interest in the diversity of languages and territorial groups in Australia and set out the timeline of Archaeological evidence and recent findings dating back to 120,000 years. Magdalena then showed us pictures of the cave and excavation site, and filled in more details about the Palaeolithic peoples in that region. By this time I had almost come round to the idea of a boomerang in Poland made from a mammoth’s tusk, unlikely as the idea had first appeared.

Yes, it can be said that Indigenous Australians are the only living peoples continuing to practice the cultural tradition of boomerang making and usage, and this has become an economic industry of
national and international significance. There is also evidence that other peoples' created boomerangs in similar shape and form that could be used for various hunter gatherer purposes. The continuity of the cultural tradition and practice of boomerang production and use however remains a work in progress.

In making this observation, I was able to elaborate on the dynamics of the boomerang by telling the story of the famous Indigenous Australian inventor David Unaipon. David was fascinated by the aero dynamics of boomerangs, and had worked on inventing a perpetual motion machine. He had also drawn designs for a helicopter pre-WW1, based on the principles of the boomerang, and had invented the mechanism for modern sheep shearing technology. He was known as the Australian Leonardo da Vinci and is celebrated on our $50 note.

As the discussion of boomerangs flowed, I overlooked the opportunity to share the story of my Uncle Bill Onus who was a famous boomerang maker and master thrower. Uncle Bill attracted quite a crowd with his boomerang throwing prowess. He would cut an elbow from a red gum root in the forest, and skilfully carve it into a returning boomerang. Then to demonstrate its magical returning properties, he would decorate it with luminescent paint and throw the boomerang out over the audience seated in one of our grand arts theatres in Melbourne. A spectacular site as one can imagine, with lights out and the boomerang circulating the audience and glowing above, to be returned and skilfully clasped in both hands on stage. A polite bow to the grand applause of the audience was Uncle Bill's reward for his unique cultural performance. These are treasured memories of the rich oral narrative we retain and like to share.

And that is where the boomerang story began and was shared some 13,851 kms away at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Like the tantalising image of the boomerang we now return the story to family in Melbourne and the ancestral lands of Yorta Yorta Country.

Another important link between Krakow and Australia to highlight in closing, is the great revolutionary and humanitarian Kosciusko. His admirer, the Polish Australian geologist and explorer Strzelecki, named our highest mountain after him. The shape reminded him of the Kosciusko mound that commemorates him in Krakow, where he is buried with the kings in the castle cathedral. Now that we have learned more of his life, Strzelecki himself has inspired us with his work for social justice in support of Indigenous Australians and the Irish people's struggle to survive the Great Irish Famine.

Many thanks and appreciation to Jagiellonian University Krakow for warmly hosting our visit and to the following people for their support:

Note: text was created in connection with the implementation of the National Science Center research project no. UMO-2015/17/B/HS3/00181 "Paleolithic ritual place in Obłazowa Cave".

Carlos Panek Soares de Arugao, International Relations Office, Jagiellonian University.

Professor Radoslaw Palonka, Dept. of American Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, JU.

Professor Pawel Vaide-Novak, Director of the Institute of Archaeology, JU.
Dr Magdalena Ciesla, Institute of Archaeology, JU.

Magdalena Lewandowska, PHD candidate, Institute of Archaeology, JU

Catherine Guinness, Collaborative Researcher and co-writer of article.


Dr Wayne Atkinson
Senior Fellow & Yorta Yorta Elder
School of Social and Political Science
University of Melbourne
http://waynera.wordpress.com/
Institute of Archaeology Visit, June, 2019