

SOME ASPECTS OF THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF
THE ABORIGINES OF THE HUNTER VALLEY AT
THE TIME OF FIRST WHITE SETTLEMENT IN
THE AREA.

Thesis submitted as part
of the requirements for
an Honours Degree in History.

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Grateful acknowledgement is made to Mr. W.C. Green and Mr. W. Dalton, both of Scone, for their assistance in finding local material; to Mr. D.R. Moore, Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, Sydney, for permission to use the Museum files and to view the collections housed there; and to Miss Sharon Sullivan for advice and many hours spent reading the text.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an examination of the material culture of the aborigines of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, as it was at the time of first white settlement in the area. The sources consist mainly of explorers' and early settlers' records and reminiscences.

Primarily the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive picture of the mode of life of the aborigines. Therefore the approach will be descriptive rather than analytic. It is important that such a study should be made now, before all trace of their former way of life is lost. Prehistoric research is always hampered by a lack of evidence, and so the historical material concerning the later stages of Australian prehistory is invaluable in that it contains information of a kind which is beyond the scope of the archaeologist's trowel. It is hoped that this description of the protohistoric aboriginal culture will provide a basis for further research into the prehistory of the area. A detailed examination of some aspects has been rendered impracticable by the defective nature of the sources, but it is hoped that the more complete picture they give in others will be of some use.

Secondly it is the purpose of this thesis to examine the manner in which the aborigines adapted to their environment, and the extent to which they utilized the available resources. This involves a study of the material expression of their adaptation, in the form of dwellings, canoes, tools and equipment, weapons, clothing, and so on.

Thirdly it is the aim of this study to determine how closely the material culture of the aborigines, as described, corresponds to other evidence. As far as possible descriptions of the spiritual and artistic life of the aborigines will be substantiated by reference to material remains.

An attempt will be made to assess the significance of the conclusions drawn in relation to the general culture pattern of the Australian aborigines, and more particularly to archaeological finds in surrounding areas.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. The first begins with a brief geographical and historical account of the area. It then goes on to discuss the influence of the environment on population, physical appearance, group size, and the degree of inter-tribal contact. The second chapter includes a brief description of the aborigines' social organization and habits; brief

because this cannot be reflected in material remains, and is not part of material culture.

Chapter three concerns the food quest, its importance to the aborigines, its effect on their life, and the influence of the environment. The latter half of this chapter consists of a detailed description of the methods used to procure food by means of hunting, fishing, and gathering, and of the manner in which the aborigines prepared their food for consumption. In the fourth chapter is a description of the material culture including an account of its manufacture and use. This account includes such items as canoes, clothing, dwellings, weapons, tools and equipment, with reference to trade and, again, environment. There follows in chapter five an attempt to relate the above to findings from archaeological research, to give some indication as to how much can be inferred from the material evidence available.

The last three chapters provide a discussion of the ceremonial, spiritual, and artistic life of the aborigines, and culminate in an attempt to determine whether extant art in the area is part of the 19th Century culture.

There are omissions from this description of aboriginal life. For example, language has been almost completely ignored, and the only references to the myths

and legends of the aborigines, are where they illustrate the material culture. They constitute a separate field of study requiring specialized knowledge, and the sources are very often unreliable.

Where possible, an attempt has been made to draw comparisons with other areas, particularly surrounding districts such as Port Macquarie and Port Jackson, the Liverpool Plains and the region to the west of the Goulburn Valley. Comparisons with these last two areas mentioned is particularly difficult, however, as source material is scarce.

Time as well as sources has been a limiting factor in this research, and as a result only the most well known authorities have been used for comparative purposes. Some attempt has been made to examine the significance of the finds of the area in relation to the general culture pattern of the aborigines (1), but as the emphasis is on a detailed description of a particular area, comparison has been employed only when it appears illuminating.

(1) For which purpose general anthropological texts have been used, in particular
E.M. Curr The Australian Race, Its Origins, Customs, ...etc; 4 vols, Melbourne, 1886-7.
R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt (ed). Aboriginal Man in Australia. Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965.
A.P. Elkin The Australian Aborigines. How to Understand Them Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1964.

Unequal weight is given to certain facets of aboriginal life. This is largely because of the nature of the sources. Early settlers seem to have been fascinated by the superstitions or magico-religious aspects of the aboriginal culture, and there is a corresponding wealth of material about this. Conversely, some aspects of the material culture interested the pioneers not at all, and so there is very little in the collected sources about such things as stone tool types. Information of this kind would have been particularly valuable from the point of view of establishing a sequence of cultural development within the area, in relation to the rest of Australia.

Some settlers who were in a position to make invaluable observations concerning the aborigines failed to record them simply because they thought it was not worth while. Even Breton, who is one of the more informative sources, remarks:

'It must be confessed I entertain very little more respect for the aborigines of New Holland, than for the ourang-outang; in fact I can discover no great difference.' (2)

Generally there was no appreciation of the aborigines' culture as such, and often there was little regret at the effect contact with white civilization was having

(2) W.H. Breton Excursions in New South Wales ...etc
London 1833 : p196.

upon the aborigines. Of course this was not always the case, and there were some who recognized that the aboriginal culture was in danger of disappearing, and sought to record as much of it as they could while the aborigines were still in their natural state. Of these W. Scott (3) is a good example.

Many of the sources used are explorers' journals and reports, such as those provided by Barrallier, Cleveland, Cunningham, Grant, Mitchell, and Paterson. Often these men were content to remark on the friendliness or otherwise of the natives, and leave it at that, but any observations they do make are valuable for they were usually the first white men to come into contact with the aborigines.

Often the paucity of detailed material from the explorers can in part be explained by reference to the apparent shyness of the aborigines. Typical of the explorers' experience is an incident recorded by Grant, who was with Colonel Paterson's expedition of 1801, at Nobby's Head, Newcastle.

'We have not as yet had any communication with the natives. We have seen them at a distance, but remarkably shy. Yesterday, the 22nd (June), Mr. Barrallier and Bowen fell in with one by accident and brought him on board, but... we could make nothing of him. He was more removed from the human race than any I have yet seen.' (4)

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- (3) W. Scott The Port Stephens Blacks, Chronicle Office, Dungog, N.S.W., 1929 : p5.
- (4) H. Grant "Natives of the Hunter River (1801)" Historical Records of New South Wales 1896 : p406.

The following year Barrallier remarked that he suspected there were large numbers of aborigines in the area, but he could not be sure,

'For they never allow us to approach them'. (5)

Settlers' records and reminiscences suffer somewhat from inaccuracy and lack of detail. To take an example, one learns of a bora ground in the Upper Hunter district:

'Near the junction of the rivers Page and Isis, tributaries of the Hunter, not far from the town of Aberdeen, Mr MacDonalld, a squatter of the place, showed me the spot where they held their boras. It was in a pleasant glen at the foot of one of the highest hills in the neighbourhood'. (6)

Not only were the aborigines shy, at times they were positively unfriendly, and this in turn prevented the explorers from making detailed observations about them. Robert Brown, a botanist, visited the Hunter Valley in 1804, and wrote

'I have visited Hunter's River and examined all the branches as far as a very small boat could proceed. The unfriendly disposition of the natives, who even attacked my boat, rendered it unsafe for me to go far from the banks, or to trace any of the branches above where they are navigable.' (7)

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- (5) F. Barrallier Letter to C.F. Greville, in Banks Papers, Brabourne Collection, vol. 4 : p81.
- (6) A. MacDonalld "The Aborigines of the Page and the Isis", Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, vol VII, 1878 : p255.
- (7) Quoted by J. Jervis "The Hunter Valley: A Century of its History". Royal Australian Historical Society, vol 39, pt 3, 1953 : p100.

Henry Dangar also came into contact with unfriendly natives. When about to cross the Liverpool Range near Murrurundi in December, 1824, his party

...met with a large body of natives, in number, they suppose, about one hundred and fifty, by whom they were attacked unawares; one of their party... having been struck by a spear in the head, before they knew that the natives were near them. They, however, rallied and made front for about three hours when they were obliged to decamp, leaving their pack horse with all their provisions, clothes and cooking utensils in the hands of the enemy, who being content with their booty, allowed the party to proceed without further molestation. (8)

Most of the evidence concerning the aborigines is from the Newcastle - Port Stephens area, particularly in the very early period, as the first settlers of the Upper Hunter region were few and

seem not to have been of a type to give careful study to the social life and traditions of the local aborigines. (9)

Moreover, one of the best authorities on the aborigines of the Hunter Valley is R. Dawson, and most of his material concerns the Port Stephens area. However, the nature of the terrain in this district is such as to allow constant contact between the aborigines of Port Stephens and those of the Lower Hunter. The evidence suggests that culturally they were essentially the same.

(8) The Australian 23 December, 1824. Quoted by J. Jervis "The Route to the North", Royal Australian Historical Society vol XXVII, pt 6, 1941 : p442.

(9) Mr. W.C. Green. His information was provided by personal communication and by letter. His parents came to the Upper Hunter in the 1840s. Henceforth he shall be quoted as 'Mr. W.C. Green'.

Dawson is, as has been mentioned, one of the best authorities for the area. He worked with and studied the aborigines for many years. His detailed knowledge of the subject is reflected in his writings, and his account contains descriptions of several customs which are not to be found elsewhere - for example the custom of grooving axes.

Another important source is Lieutenant Breton's Excursions in New South Wales... This work is also informative, particularly with regard to such things as weapons, but its value is diminished by the fact that he is not always careful to indicate whether he is speaking specifically of the Hunter Valley natives, or of aborigines in general.

Much invaluable work was done early this century by W.J. Enright, especially with the aborigines of the coastal regions. Enright specialized in Anthropology while at Sydney University, and unlike most of the explorers and early settlers, he was interested in the material culture of the aborigines. Additional information concerning the material culture has been gained from archaeological research done in the area by Mr. F.D. McCarthy, onetime Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum and now Director of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies at Canberra.

In many areas the picture provided by early settlers' records is incomplete, and this is in part due to the prevailing nineteenth century attitude towards primitive people, (10) who were regarded as being of inferior mentality, almost subhuman. Illustrative of this is Breton's remark

'It must be confessed I entertain very little more respect for the aborigines of New Holland, than for the ourang-outang'. (11)

Notwithstanding their limitations, the settlers' records, together with those of explorers and surveyors, provide the only comprehensive picture of aboriginal life as it was prior to its disintegration as a result of contact with white civilization.