

EARLY DRAWINGS OF AN ABORIGINAL CEREMONIAL GROUND.

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With Three Text Figures.

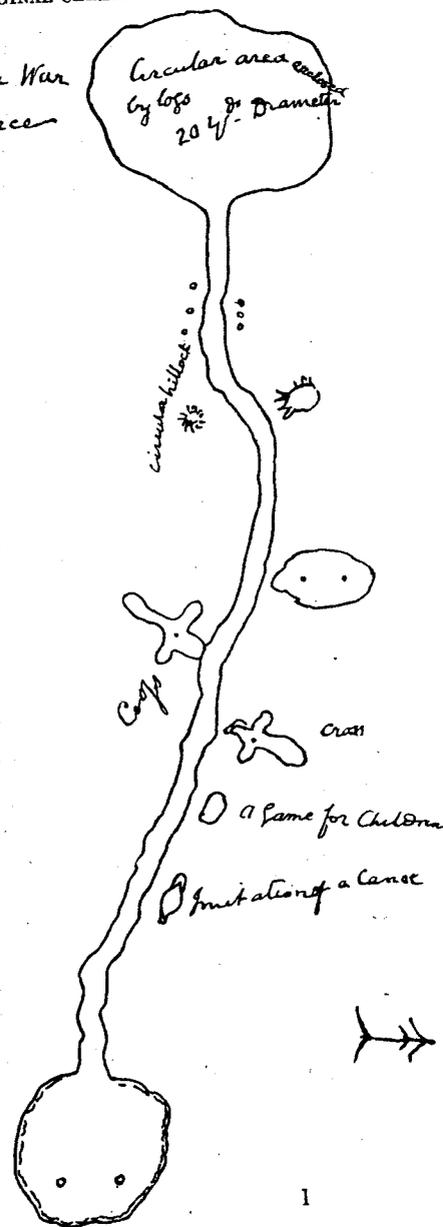
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WHAT has been regarded as the earliest plan of an aboriginal Bora or other Ceremonial Ground appears in J. Henderson's "Observations on the Colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land," published in 1832.¹ The sketches in "An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales" by David Collins (1804), portray various stages of the initiation ceremony without giving a definite layout of the ground. The rough drawings described in the present paper, however, are of earlier date than Henderson's, having been made by Surveyor General John Oxley at Moreton Bay in October 1824, and have remained in obscurity for 96 years. (Field Books 216 and 217, Lands Department).² These drawings were made in pencil and the decipherable portions were recently inked in for the purpose of preserving this interesting ethnological record, but some of the notes are too indistinct to be deciphered.

Oxley made these drawings during an expedition to Moreton Bay in 1824 in the cutter "Mermaid." He made three visits to Moreton Bay, the first on his return journey from Port Curtis at the end of November 1823, when the Brisbane River was explored; the second in September and October, 1824, when an extensive marine survey of the bay was carried out; and the third in November and December of the same year, when he was accompanied by His Excellency Sir Thomas Brisbane.

¹ See reference by R. H. Mathews, these Proceedings, Vol. xxviii, 102, (1894). ² Now in Mitchell Library.

Where the Natives meet after a War
with the adverse tribes to make peace



Inked in by me
H. Selkirk
18.5.1920

Small cut here of 18 or 20 feet
to the height of 18 or 20 feet
having a Gibraltar form
round the center
and probably covered
at the summit

Fig. 1. Aboriginal Ceremonial Ground, Moreton Bay.

The drawings depict two circular areas enclosed by logs, and connected by a somewhat sinuous passage about seventy yards long, one area at least being about twenty yards in diameter (Figure 1). The purpose of these enclosures is made clear by the following note:—"Where the Natives meet after a war with adverse tribes, to make peace."

In Barron Field's Geographical Memoirs of New South Wales (1825), reference is made (p. 70) to a circular pit, about forty feet in diameter, being the scene of combat witnessed by John Finnegan in 1823 between two native women of different tribes, and also between two men at Moreton Bay, while Thomas Pamphlet (*Ibid.*, p. 78), when speaking of an encounter brought about by one native wishing to take satisfaction of another who had wounded him sometime previously, stated that "the spot appointed for the combat was a small ring, about twenty-five feet in diameter, about three feet deep, and surrounded by a palisade of sticks." The combat was witnessed by about 500 men, women and children.¹

The rings depicted by Oxley, however, which were not used for combat, but for making peace, do not appear to have been constructed as pits, as the two dots or small inner circles within the smaller ring appear to represent standing trees which were "fantastically crowned at the summit." The drawings shown, Figure 2, are evidently intended as diagrams giving details.

¹ Finnegan and Pamphlet, together with Richard Parsons and John Thompson, left Sydney on the 21st March, 1823, in an open boat to bring cedar from the Five Islands (Illawarra). The boat being driven out to sea by a gale of wind, they suffered inconceivable hardships, being twenty-one days without water, during which time Thompson died. The others, on the 16th April, landed on an island which they believed to be south of Jervis Bay, but was really Moreton Island, from which they gained the mainland, discovered the Brisbane River, and, except Parsons, were found by Oxley when he arrived in Moreton Bay on the 29th November, 1823. Finnegan and Pamphlet were living with the natives near Bribie Island, but Parsons had gone north, as he thought in the direction of Sydney, and was not heard of after. (Field's New South Wales, p. 89.)

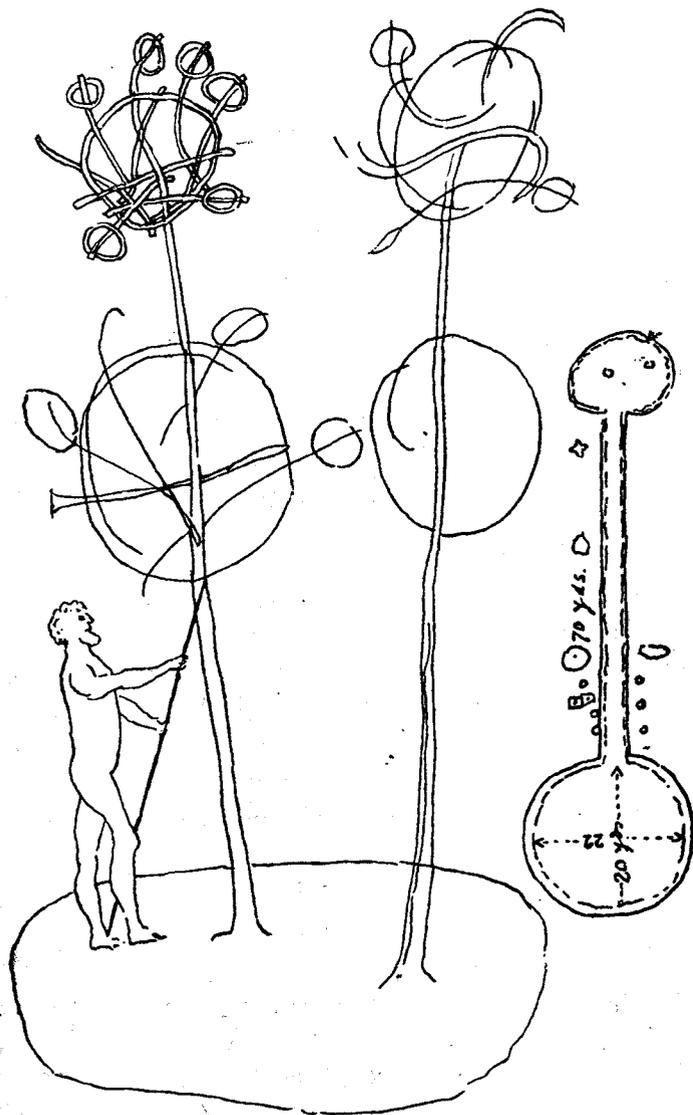


Fig. 2. Diagrams giving details of figures in figure 1.

Representation of a
Woman by a Native of New South
Wales

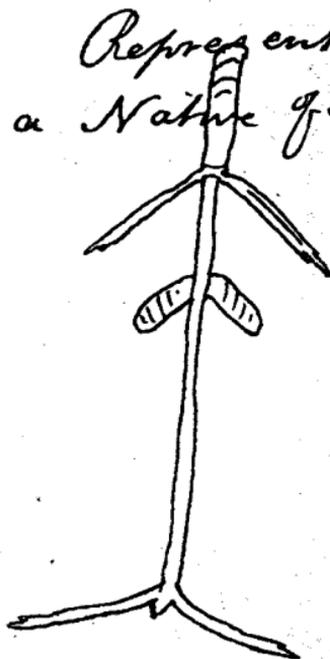


Fig. 3. *Native's Representation of a Woman.*

This Ceremonial Ground is similar in design to a Bora Ground, where the initiation ceremony was carried out, but from Oxley's note it appears to have been used on the occasion of peacemaking. The representations along the sides of the passage are usually formed of earth and turf, or the design may be cut in the ground.

Oxley mentions under date 29th November, 1823, (F.B. 202), that a Sydney native named Bowen, who was with him, understood something of what the Moreton Bay natives said, and on the same date he records seeing a native burial place.

We desire to record our thanks to Mr. A. J. Hare, Under Secretary for Lands, for permission to make use of the information contained in Oxley's fieldnotes.