

# The Carved Trees of New South Wales

By FREDERICK D. McCARTHY

**A**MONG the wealth of aboriginal relics found in New South Wales, the carved trees constitute a most interesting group. They have formed the subject of innumerable notes and photographs in newspapers and magazines, and a large number of inquiries about them are made at the Australian Museum each year. Etheridge<sup>1</sup> called them dendroglyphs and classified them into two series: those beside graves he termed taphoglyphs, and those on initiation grounds he termed teleteglyphs.

## TAPHOGLYPHS.

The taphoglyphs mark the grave of a notable member of a tribe, such as a medicine-man, warrior, leader in ceremonies, orator or man of wisdom; sometimes the site of a combat in which there had been a death was denoted by a carved tree. Only one tree was engraved beside the majority of graves, but as many as four and five taphoglyphs at one site have been recorded. They are usually to be seen on river banks and flats, where the graves were dug in the soft earth. The orientation of the carved trees in relation to the grave is not consistent; there are records of two trees standing north and north-west of a grave, of three trees forming a triangle, and four a rhomboid. In addition there are several instances of four trees standing at the cardinal points round a grave. The trees were not given any care after the burial ceremonies were finished.

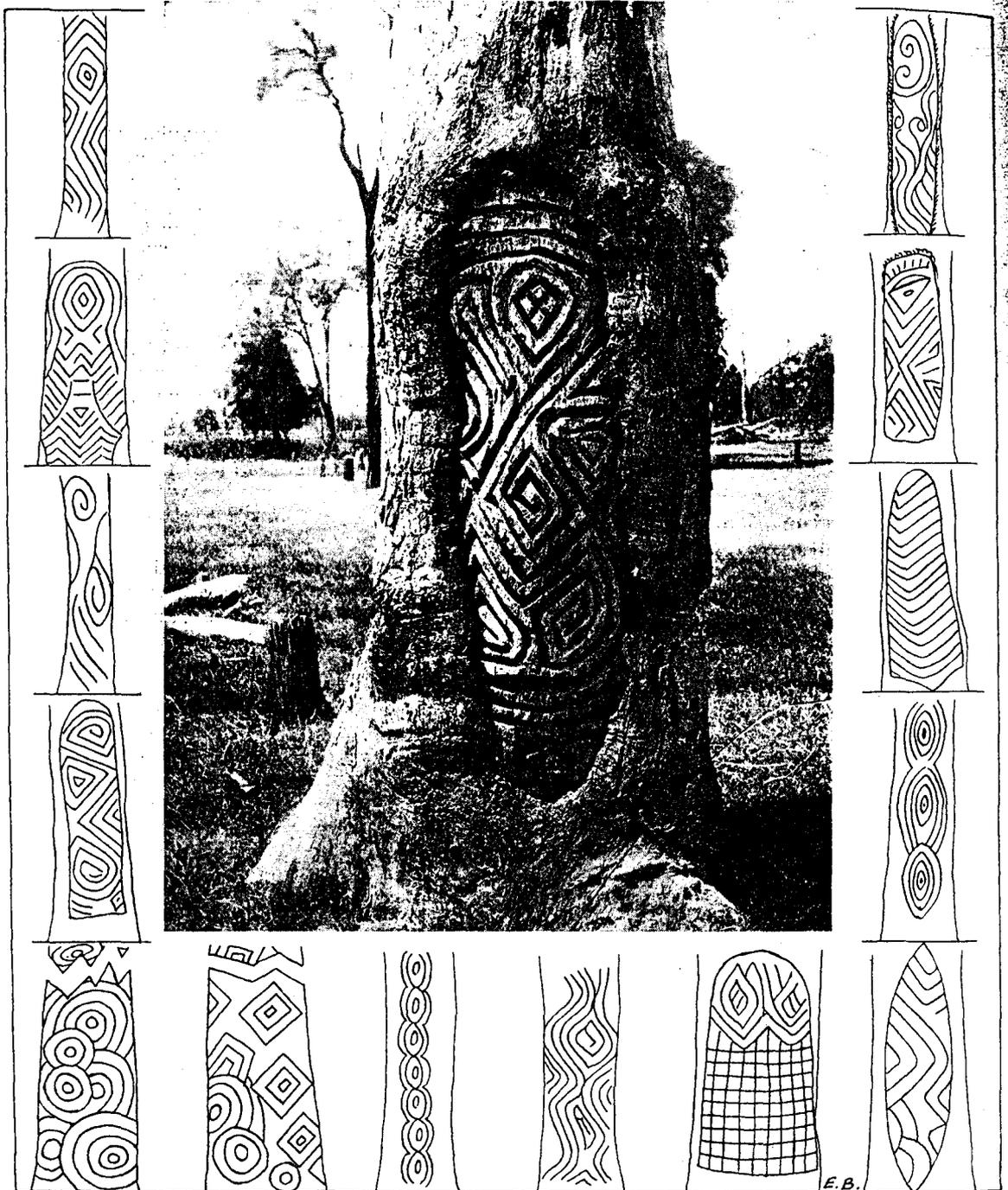
In central New South Wales the graves were of the tumulus type, in which a high mound of earth was raised above the grave, with a strip of bare soil surrounding it, and sometimes several long raised mounds along one side. The taphoglyphs were associated with these graves.

The carving of taphoglyphs was a culture trait of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi tribes particularly, and from them it diffused on all sides, spreading as far as the Murring tribes on the south coast of New South Wales. The centre of the practice was the area extending from the upper Macquarie and Bogan Rivers to the upper Lachlan, and especially in the Warren-Wellington district. Taphoglyphs have been recorded as far north as Gunnedah-Coonamble, and as far south as Niemur Creek and Lake Cargellico, but they are unknown along the Darling River. The southern line of their distribution coincides with that of the tumulus grave, but the latter did not spread to the south coast.

It is known that the tribal culture-heroes came down from and went back to the sky world *via* the trees, and Howitt has recorded a belief that the spirit of the dead man went to the sky world by means of the taphoglyph. An interesting example of the powers of the evil spirits to interrupt this spirit journey lies in the digging of a dummy grave with incised trees to delude them—especially Kruben, a powerful evil-doer who wandered about at night. The taphoglyphs were not worshipped nor used as idols, their significance being that the carved design was associated with the clan of the deceased and the religious background of this group.

One of the trees on exhibition at the Australian Museum was discovered by Surveyor-General Oxley on July 29, 1817. In describing the site, he said in his Journal: "To the west and north of the grave were two cypress trees, distant between fifty and sixty feet, the sides towards the tomb were barked, and curious characters were cut upon them. The grave consisted of a mound nine feet long by five feet high, with a semi-circular bank of earth half-way around

<sup>1</sup> Etheridge, Robert, Jr.—The Dendroglyphs, or "Carved Trees" of New South Wales. Memoir, Ethnological Series No. 3, of the Geological Survey of New South Wales, 1913. 104 pp., 38 pls., map.



Geometrical designs carved on trees in New South Wales. The design on the example second from the top on the right probably represents a culture-hero. The specimen in the photograph is at Dubbo.

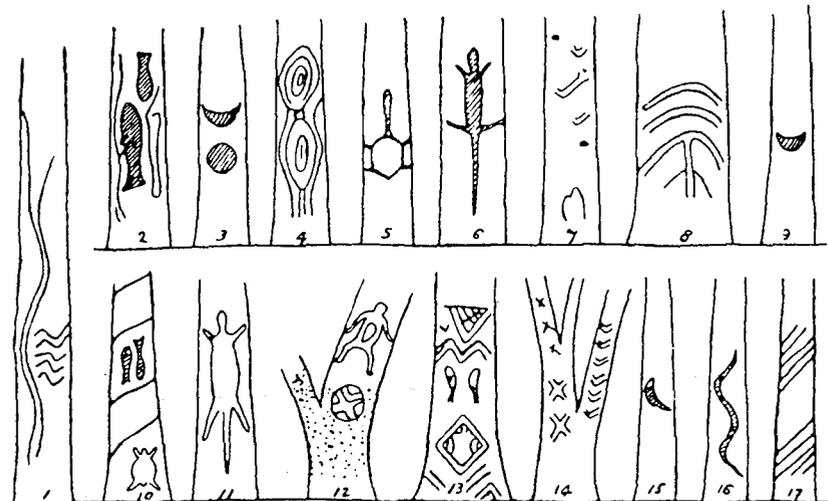
it, and three banks, about one foot high, in a row on its open side." The Australian Museum is indebted to the late Mr. Edmund Milne for the acquisition of this valuable historical relic.

#### TELETEGLYPHS.

The teleteglyphs were associated with the initiation ceremonies known as the *bora*. This type of initiation was practised throughout south-east Australia, and extended north to the Condamine River in Queensland. The ceremonial ground consisted of two circular spaces, cleared of all vegetation, and each had a low raised bank of earth around it; the spaces were some distance apart and were connected by a sacred track. Sometimes one circle was in thick bush on a river or lake shore, and the other on a ridge top. Varying numbers of trees, from seven to one hundred and twenty, growing along this track and around one of the circles, were engraved. Apparently, a site was not selected on which the trees were growing in such a position that they formed a traditional pattern, but merely to permit of the preparation of a relatively straight and secluded path between the circles.

The arrangement of the ceremonial ground is of interest, because it illustrates the connection between the carved trees and other elements of tribal religion. Figures of the culture-heroes, kangaroos, emus, and other totemic animals, and those upon which there were food restrictions during initiation, in addition to geometric patterns, were made in the earth of one circle and along the path. Near Wellington, and at Bulgeraga Creek, the trees were engraved along both sides of a straight track to the smaller circle. They extended for about one mile at Wellington, and on a *bora* ground on Tallwood Holding, Redbank Creek, southern Queensland, there are one hundred and twenty teleteglyphs around the smaller circle and extending for one hundred and seventy-five yards along the path. They are carved around the smaller circle on the Richmond and Clarence Rivers, around the larger circle on the Manning River, and near either circle on the Bellingen River.

The distribution of the teleteglyphs is almost the same as that of the taphoglyphs. The cult was centred mainly in the Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri tribes; it is found just over the Queensland border



Naturalistic designs carved on trees on the bora initiation grounds at Bulgeraga Creek, Quambone district (Nos. 1-6, 17), and Gnoura Gnoura, Boomi River, New South Wales. Nos. 1 and 16, snakes: 2, 10, 13, fish: 5, tortoise: 6, 11, goannas: 9 and 15, crescent moon: 10, flying phalanger: 12, human figure.

in the north, on the Narran River in the north-west, at Darlington Point on the Murrumbidgee River in the south-west, and at Ulladulla in the south-east. In the west their limit coincides with that of the four matriarchal sections, which extended to the Cobar district.

#### HOW THEY WERE CARVED.

The methods of engraving the trees varied. On the north coast of New South Wales the designs were incised in the bark, and sometimes only a series of nicks and cuts were made. To the west of the Great Dividing Range the bark was removed and the pattern cut into the sapwood; on many trees a panel of bark and sapwood has been removed and the design engraved in the heartwood. An effective method was to cut a piece of bark off a tree in the shape of a human being, animal, moon or sun, thus leaving a silhouette, the positive being hung on a tree.

Prior to English colonization the dendroglyphs were carved with stone tools, and it is probable that relatively few trees were engraved in comparison to the large numbers that were cut, and the elaboration of the designs that took place, since white occupation, when metal tools simplified the carver's task. A similar elaboration took place in Maori art during the early post-European period.

#### THE DESIGNS.

The dendroglyphs illustrated in the plates of Etheridge's monograph demonstrate the wide range of designs associated with the cult. The designs comprise four groups, examples of which are widely distributed and not localized.

The anthropomorphs are practically all representations of the culture-heroes. On the south coast of New South Wales the Murring tribe engraved on a tree a large figure of *Daramulan* in a ceremonial dance attitude, for use during the initiation rites. At a Kamilaroi *bora* on the Moonie River, near Gundablui, two male figures, representing the sons of *Baiame*, were cut out of bark and set

against trees, one on each side of the sacred pathway; emu feathers were placed on the head of one, and the other held a shield. On this *bora* ground one tree bears two human figures carved one above the other. There is a representation of *Baiame* at the Mulga clan initiation ground on the Bogan River near Nyngan.

Representations of animals, or zoomorphs, are not as numerous as one would expect in view of their predominance among the rock paintings and engravings. The reason for this is that the geometrical designs which form the basis of the cult and their associated myths diffused from New Guinea into eastern Australia, and, when they were incorporated into the ritual life of the New South Wales aborigines, they supplanted the naturalistic subjects to an extensive degree. The zoomorphs are usually "cut-out" figures, which were hung on trees during the rituals. Goannas up to six feet long are commonly seen, depicted from above, and one has its head turned to the side. Tortoises occur at Bulgeraga and Gnoura Gnoura. One teleteglyph at Redbank Creek shows a snake just over nine feet long, with its head pointing to the ground, and at Bulgeraga another snake, four feet six inches long, is cut in a spiral as though it were ascending the tree. Fish are rare, although they occur in several localities in reversed pairs, and up to almost three feet in length. An echidna (Spiny Ant-eater) is recorded at Redbank Creek, but, although other species are mentioned in various reports, there is no known example of them.

The physiomorphs (representations of natural phenomena) are limited to the sun, moon and lightning. At Gundablui, on a Kamilaroi *bora* ground, a sun two feet in diameter and a moon eighteen inches across were cut out of bark; the sun figure was placed at the eastern end of the ground and the moon at the western end. These two subjects have also been recorded at the Bulgeraga Creek and Redbank Creek *bora* grounds. The lightning was represented by longitudinal, zig-zag, and spiral lines.

By far the greater majority of the designs are geometric in nature. The patterns in this group include a number of motifs of great importance in the decorative art on south-east Australian weapons. There are two important series of geometric designs. One has the concentric diamond, which varies from a triangle to an hexagonal figure, and from a rhomboid to a pointed ellipse, set in a field of chevrons. The other series has curvilinear lines, scrolls, and concentric circles, sometimes associated with other art elements. Equally interesting are the motifs suggesting boomerangs, chains, flying-foxes, and the sets of criss-cross grooves which form a lozenge- or checker-work pattern. The zigzag and St. Andrew's cross also appear.

The designs engraved on the dendroglyphs reveal great strength and control in the line work. The repetition of the design elements in admirably balanced patterns is an outstanding feature, which, together with the graceful curves of the bark frame enclosing the glyph on trees growing in the open forest, make the dendroglyphs an impressive record of the ritual life of the aborigines.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DENDROGLYPHS.

The function of the carved trees is fundamentally the same whether they be taphoglyphs or teleteglyphs. There is reason to believe that the clans of each tribe had their own designs; thus the emu pattern belonged to the clan which had the emu as a totem, and in each tribe the emu clan would have the same basic pattern, though probably varying in detail, and with the same myths and ritual associated with it. Similarly, all of the other totemic clans had their own designs. Thus, within a tribe, there would be as many as, and probably more designs than, there were totemic clans. As the cult spread more widely, the designs with their myths became incorporated into the ritual life of other tribes. These designs were connected with the culture-heroes of the clan and tribe, especially *Baiame*, the great beneficent All-Father of the area, who introduced the various customs,

kinship rules, and ritual practices. *Daramulan* figures in the Wiradjuri myths, and his importance lies in his ability to swallow the noviates at initiation, and later reproduce them as men.

*Baiame* forms the central figure of the beliefs and ritual in the carved tree cult. On the Macquarie River the glyphs represented his offspring, during whose transigrations all but two were destroyed by an evil spirit named *Madjegong*. The emu was *Baiame's* food, and is associated with him at Wellington and on the coast between Sydney and Newcastle; this association is to be seen in the rock engravings of the Sydney district. Thunder and lightning were expressions of *Baiame's* wrath, and in some places the thunder was the voice of *Daramulan*. The relationships of these legendary beings are tangled; among the Wiradjuri *Daramulan* is the son of *Baiame*, but among the Murring he was the son of the emu or *Ngalalbal*. Actually, the legendary all-father had a variety of names in the different tribes of south-east Australia, where *Baiame*, *Daramulan*, *Koin*, *Bunjil*, and others were all used to denote "our father" by the aborigines in different localities. They all lived in the sky.

There is another important belief associated with the dendroglyphs. It was believed that the spirit of each individual came from the sky-world, *via* the trees, and at his death returned in the same way. Thus, the Wiradjuri believed that, prior to the extraction of a tooth which formed the final ordeal in their initiation, *Daramulan* came from the sky to the earth down a pathway made by stripping the bark spirally from a large tree. Similarly, the designs on the trees beside the graves formed the path of the dead man's spirit to the sky-world.

During the initiation ceremonies the meaning of the designs, the myths associated with them, and their significance in tribal history, were explained to the initiates. Thus, the designs on the taphoglyphs represented the ritual and kinship affiliations of the deceased. It is apparent that the dendroglyphs formed a most

intimate link between the aboriginal and his world of legend and myth, and the designs were symbols of the very core of his religious beliefs.

Over six hundred dendroglyphs have been recorded, over fifty of which are in the Australian Museum collection. Although a large number of them are still standing in the country, it is regrettable that many specimens have been wantonly destroyed by firewood and fence-post cutters, and they have not been spared in

the clearing of land on farms and grazing paddocks. Bush fires are, perhaps, the most destructive factor. It is incumbent upon every citizen of the State to do his utmost to preserve the dendroglyphs in his district, and it is especially important that pastoralists and farmers make every effort to protect carved trees on their property. If a dendroglyph cannot be left standing, then it should be cut out of the tree and sent to the Australian Museum.