

## **NHIL3006 Assessment 1 – Indigenous Site**

### *Project 15: Original use of engraved platform*

The rock platform at Finchley Lookout plays host to a range of engravings carved by Indigenous people many years ago. It is believed the engraved site is one of many in the region used by the traditional inhabitants for certain ceremonial purposes. The Wollombi region where the carvings are found holds deep cultural significance, with Mt Yengo regarded as an important landmark in local Aboriginal mythology. While some mystery remains about what these engravings denote exactly, it is clear that they were of great importance to local Aboriginal culture.

Carved into a flat sandstone ridge, the rock engravings at Finchley Lookout give some insight into Aboriginal culture. Whilst the connotations behind the carvings are unclear, it is believed that they had strong ceremonial relevance. These large engravings were works of considerable labour, making it improbable that such an effort would have been made purely for amusement (Slater 1937). This particular group of carvings is one of 24 known engraved sites in the Wollombi area, with all but one of them located on exposed ridges (Needham 1981). These rock engravings situated on ridges were believed to be connected to the initiation rites of boys into manhood (Needham 1981). An early settler's account described a group of Aboriginal males leaving the women and children to go to Devil's Rock for the boys "to be made men" (Goddard 1937). Whilst Devil's Rock is a completely different site to Finchley, they are both included in a series of 21 carved sites along a 30-kilometre expanse of ridge that boys were believed to have travelled along during their initiation (Needham 1981). It is thought that the young males were guided from one carved site to another, with the lessons learned at each site bringing them a step closer to full initiation. This trip was supposed to imitate a journey taken by their spirit-hero in the Dreamtime, with each site providing new mysteries and revelations (Needham 1981). Taking the boys to different places of ceremonial significance would have taught them important lessons about their history and what was expected of them as they grew into men. On this journey, it would have been the elder's imparting their wisdom to the young men, teaching them kinship laws along with the rights and responsibilities of their totem as they visited various sacred sites (Budde 2000).

The Wollombi area where these engravings are found is of great importance in local Aboriginal mythology and is thought to be associated with the Dreamtime. Considered an important cultural landmark, Mt Yengo sits in the middle of Yengo National Park, with its unique flat-top peak dominating the landscape. This mountain is the centrepiece of Indigenous mythology in the region and it is likely that every local tribe had a mutual core belief system which revolved around the mountain (Needham 1981). Mt Yengo is believed to be the place where the All-Father spirit, Baiame, stepped to go back into the sky world after his time on earth when he created the first man (Di Gravio 2009). Yengo is considered as sacred and important to the Indigenous people of the region as Uluru is to the traditional inhabitants of Central Australia (Budde 2000). Bearing in mind the cultural significance that this region holds, it makes sense that the younger generation were brought here to learn about their ancestors and where they came from. These engraved sites were used as initiation ceremonial grounds not just by local tribes in the immediate vicinity, but also by groups from further away. While conflict was recorded between the local Darkinjung and Kamilaroi tribes, it appears these disputes were put aside and the Kamilaroi men were permitted to cross tribal borders to complete their initiation rites (Needham 1981). The fact that long journeys were made and tribal borders were crossed for these initiation ceremonies highlights just how important they were.

Aboriginal people are thought to have resided in the Wollombi Valley for at least 3000 years before European settlement in early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Needham 1981). The arrival of white settlers saw a drastic decline in the Indigenous population, so much so that today there is only one living descendant of the Wollombi tribe. (Needham 1981) Because of this, there is little known about the culture and customs of Aboriginal people of the area, and even less is known about what the engravings are meant to symbolise, however some people have tried to interpret what they believe the carvings signify. One interpretation comes from an Indigenous medicine man of the Port Stephens tribe, who believes the carvings were under care of the flying fox clan from the McDonald River west of the site (Needham 1981). Similarities are drawn between a membrane-like line on some of the forms and the flying fox which has a similar membrane. He imagined that the circle of figures represented a ceremony of the flying fox clan, with both male and female figures portrayed (Needham 1981). He also recognised carvings of circles signifying where the women's camp and men's secret

camp was located, along with arrows specifying that the women were not allowed to go past a certain point (Needham 1981).

In contrast to the medicine man's analysis of what the carvings mean, researcher Frederic Slater presents a completely different interpretation. Slater deciphers the engravings in a different manner altogether, relating the carvings to Aboriginal mythology of the area. The dominant figure at the site, with beams of light extending from the head, a band around the waist and throwing a boomerang with another at his foot, is believed to be a spirit called Muri (Slater 1937). He speculates that the group of figures depicts Muri explaining the mysteries of life and death to the four sons of Daramulum, who was the first man created by Baiame (Slater 1937). According to Slater, these carvings represent the higher teachings of Indigenous culture, "by means of the Boomerang, Muri illustrates how the spirit goes out but returns. That is to say that the soul that is within the man does not die but lives on" (Slater 1937).

Unfortunately, the true meaning behind these rock engravings has been lost due to the disruption of Aboriginal culture after European settlement. We may never know what the engravings truly meant, however since the site was most likely used for initiation ceremonies by various tribes from around the region, I believe it makes sense that the carvings would have been used to teach young men about ancestral and totemic stories, as well as unravelling ambiguities about life and death. For this reason, Slater's interpretation resonates more deeply through his belief that the carvings had a spiritual function. The idea that the figures represent a spirit imparting its wisdom onto the four sons reflects the original use of the rock engravings as a means to teach young men stories of the Dreamtime as they become initiated into manhood.

**Works Cited**

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