

New braided knowledge understandings of an Aboriginal earth ring and biik wurrdha (Jacksons Creek, Sunbury) on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, southeastern Australia

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Introduction:

Aboriginal rings are circular, earth (or rock) features that are preserved at increasingly fewer locations across eastern Australia today. While previous studies indicate these rings are sacred locations of ceremony, little is documented from cultural values and landscape perspectives – particularly in southeastern Australia. This study applies a braided knowledge approach to the study of an Aboriginal earth ring, and the broader biik wurrdha (Jacksons Creek, Sunbury) landscape, on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country in southeastern Australia (Spry et al. in press). It braids together knowledges documented during a Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung-led cultural values study of the biik wurrdha landscape to understand the cultural context of the ring, and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung-led archaeological analysis of 166 stone artefacts excavated at the ring in 1979 to investigate past activities by Woi-wurrung speaking people at this location.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Country:

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the Traditional Custodians of a large area in central-south Victoria (Figure 1).

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country extends from the Werribee River in the west, north to the Great Dividing Range and beyond, east to Mount Baw Baw in the Australian Alps, and south to Mordialloc Creek (Figure 1).

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country includes many important cultural places, including the Sunbury Rings, Mount William Greenstone Axe Quarry (Wil-im-mee moor-ring) and Coranderk Aboriginal Reserve.

Study area and background:

Sunbury Ring G (VAHR 7822-0098) is one of five earth rings (and one rock ring) that are included on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country (Figure 1). Sunbury Ring G is situated next to biik wurrdha and 30 km northwest of Melbourne (Figure 1). For Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders Ron Jones, Allan Wandin and Bobby Mullins, biik wurrdha is 'an important landscape marker that represents our family bloodlines, a source of life, a food bowl, and a travelling highway for our people' in the Sunbury region.

David Frankel partly excavated Sunbury Ring G in 1979 (Figure 2) (Frankel 1982). A new dating study indicates that Woi-wurrung speaking people constructed Sunbury Ring G between 590 and 1,400 years ago (Jankowski 2023).

Methods:

This study follows a braided knowledge approach (Figure 3).

Atalay (2012:59) describes braided knowledge approaches in archaeology as (1) following an Indigenous community-based, partnership process, (2) involving active community participation in all stages, (3) building community capacity, (4) providing mutual benefits for the community and researcher, and (5) valuing the contribution of different knowledges (both community and Western).

The current study of biik wurrdha and Sunbury Ring G is self-determined, co-designed, capacity-building, and participatory in all respects (Figure 3).

It includes a Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung-led cultural values study of the biik wurrdha landscape, and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung-led archaeological analysis of the 166 stone artefacts from Sunbury Ring G (cataloguing, knapping group/refit analysis, usewear/residue analysis) (Figure 4).

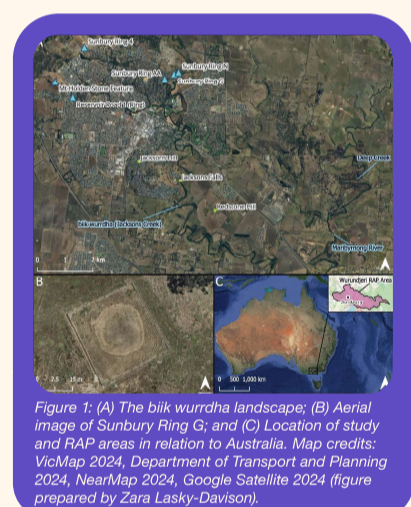


Figure 1: (A) The biik wurrdha landscape; (B) Aerial image of Sunbury Ring G; and (C) Location of study and RAP areas in relation to Australia. Map credits: VicMap 2024, Department of Transport and Planning 2024, NearMap 2024, Google Satellite 2024 (figure prepared by Zara Lasky-Davison).

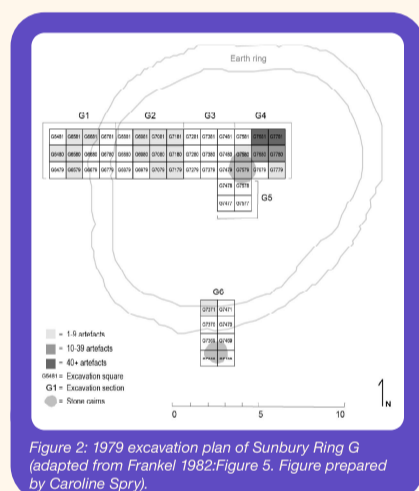


Figure 2: 1979 excavation plan of Sunbury Ring G (adapted from Frankel 1982; Figure 5. Figure prepared by Caroline Spry).

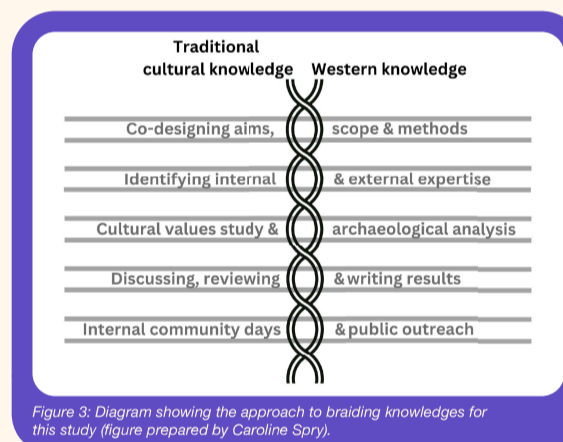


Figure 3: Diagram showing the approach to braiding knowledges for this study (figure prepared by Caroline Spry).



Figure 4: Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders Ron Jones and Allan Wandin with David Frankel, Delta Lucille Freedman, and Caroline Spry looking at the Sunbury Ring G artefacts at the Museums Victoria Merri-bek Annex.

Results:

By working together and braiding knowledges from beginning to end of this project, it is possible to understand the biik wurrdha landscape and Sunbury Ring G in deeper ways:

1. biik wurrdha is a **significant cultural landscape** to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. It is where Woi-wurrung speaking people lived and travelled, raising successive generations of people and actively managing the landscape over millennia in accordance with traditional beliefs and customs relating to their moiety Creation Ancestors Bunjil and Waa. It is the present-day Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people who hold the custodial responsibilities to restore and preserve the health of biik wurrdha (Caring for Country).
2. biik wurrdha is a **place of deep history, colonisation, resistance, adaptation, self-determination and resilience** for Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people today.
3. Sunbury Ring G is a **highly significant location** between the traditional estates of the Marin balluk and Wurundjeri wilam clans of Woi-wurrung speaking people, separated by biik wurrdha.
4. Sunbury Ring G represents a **location of Ancestors travelling and coming together, and of probable ceremony**. Here, archaeological evidence shows that Woi-wurrung speaking people cleared plants, scraped back soil and rock to create the ring mound, layered rocks to create stone cairns, lit campfires, walked around the ring's interior, trampled activity traces, knapped and used stone tools on various plants and animals – and possibly used some of these stone tools to scar human skin and create feather items for ceremony (Figures 5-8).



Figure 5: Knapping groups and refitting artefacts in the Sunbury Ring G assemblage. Scale bar = 1 cm (figure prepared by Zara Lasky-Davison).

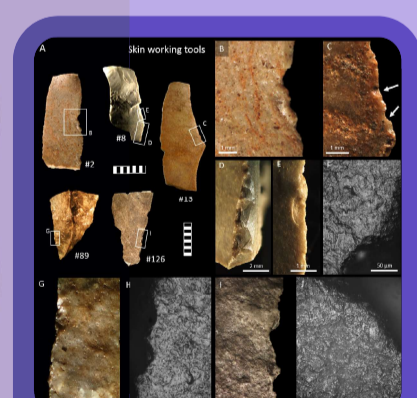


Figure 7: Skin working tools and use-wear (figure prepared by Elspeth Hayes).

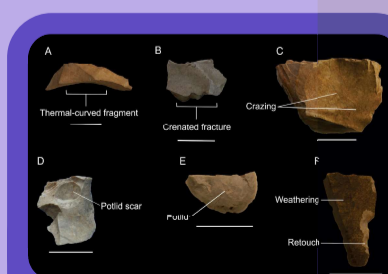


Figure 6: Heat-damaged artefacts in the Sunbury Ring G assemblage. Scale bar = 1 cm (figure prepared by Zara Lasky-Davison).



Figure 8: Protein (collagen) (A-C) and feather barbule (D-E) residue.

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in press. New braided knowledge understandings of an Aboriginal earth ring and biik wurrdha (Jacksons Creek, Sunbury) on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, southeastern Australia. *Australian Archaeology*.
Acknowledgments:
 Ngooon goojin thank you to all Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders, community and staff involved in this study, including Karen Jones, Aunty Julieanne Axford, the late Margaret Gardner, Aunty Gail Smith,

Sean Hunter, Aunty Alice Kolas, Allan Wandin, Uncle David Wandin, Jacqui Wandin, Michelle Mills, Robbie Jones, Jordan Smith, Madison Zukanovic, Nathan Xiberras, Naomi Zukanovic, Shane Nicholson, Brendan Wandin, Jordan Spencer and Ricky Lee Ross. Thank you also to David Frankel, Museums Victoria, Department of Land, Water, Environment and Planning (DELWP), Hume City Council, Greater Western Water, Parks Victoria, DELWP provided the funding for this project.