

The abode of malevolent spirits and creatures - caves in Victorian Aboriginal social organisation

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Abstract

A study of Aboriginal associations with Victorian caves finds that there is a rich cultural heritage associated with caves. This association has been found to be rich and varied in which caves and sink holes featured prominently in the lives of Aboriginal people – they were often the abodes of malevolent creatures and spirits and some were associated with important ancestral heroes, traditional harming practices, and some were important in the after death movement of souls to their resting places. Aboriginal names for caves, where known, are discussed.

Introduction

This paper documents Aboriginal associations with caves in Victoria through considering their place in stories and mythology and also through examining place names of caves. Rock shelters, commonly called caves, are a rich repository of Aboriginal cultural heritage, however this study will attempt to follow the narrower understanding of ‘cave’ employed by most cavers, that is, they must have a dark zone, however it needs to be acknowledged that not all the caves identified here have dark zones. Some dozen or so caves have been identified as having documented Aboriginal association.

Discussion

The earliest records of Aboriginal associations with caves are found in the 1843 journal of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, and the 1846 publication of William Hull. On 10 November 1843, Robinson visited the Widderin Caves [3H-1]¹ near Mt Widderin²

¹ Where possible, the cave identification codes [e.g. 3H-1] of the Australian Speleological Association (Mathews, 1985) have been given to avoid the problems that result from multiple names being used for the one cave, or the

(Weerteering, in Robinson’s orthography) in the Western District. The day before, he met about a dozen Aboriginal people, including Piccaninny Bob, a brother of King William at AM Allan’s station near Mt Emu (see Billis and Kenyon 1974: 13). From these people he learned the names of the caves, and noted that ‘the natives have a tradition that Kanung made the caves at Anderson’s’. The identity of ‘Kanung’ is not known. Henry Anderson was at ‘Borriyallock’, 50,750 acres on Mt Emu Creek, near Skipton, 1839-50. Robinson (Journal 10/11/1843 in Clark 2000a) entered the following account of his visit to the Widderin Caves south of Skipton:

visited the caves. Mr Anderson’s brother went with me. The entrance is a half mile from Weerteering west. The entrance is in a large hole, 60 by 50. Very large tree mallee, 10 to 12 feet high, the largest indigenous tree mallee I have ever seen. The bats during in last month were seen in thousands; there were only three at this time. There are large mounds of dark kind of excrescence [sic] rising in five [columns] 10 or 12 high which is said to be bats’ dung. It contained shiny particles. These heaps swarmed with moths, probably what the bats feed upon or the particular [...] composed of pieces of moths. I got [...]. We had two candles which dimly lit the cave. The cave contained two large chambers (see plan), vaults.

Robinson’s 1843 sketch of the interior dimensions of the Widderin cave is believed to be the earliest sketch of its kind in Victoria. Duncan, Baker, and Montgomery (1999) have noted that the Mt Widderin Caves were once an immense maternity site for the Southern

same name for several caves. The numbers refer to tags which have been placed on the actual cave entrances.

² Mt Widderin has also been known as Anderson’s Hill, after Henry Anderson who held the pastoral run in the 1840s

Bent-Wing Bat (*Miniopterus schreibersii*), but they disappeared from the site in the late 1860s. Charles Barrett (1944: 32) explains how access to the lava caves is through one of the 'sinks' formed by the collapse of the basalt. 'Caves near to the entrance in past times were inhabited by hosts of bats, and layers of guano were deposited on the rock floors'. A detailed description of the cave and its mineralogy may be found in Vince and Hall (1993).

Andrew Porteous has recorded the Aboriginal name of the Mt Widderin Cave as 'Larnook' (Smyth 1878 Vol. 2: 179). This word is 'larng.uk', uk being the possessive suffix, translated 'his/her', and larng meaning 'home', 'camp', 'nest', 'habitation', 'resort or resting place', 'camping place'. Larng is found in numerous western Victorian place names, such as Langi Gheran, Langi Kal Kal, Langi Logan, Langi Willi, Larnebarramul, Laanecoorie, and Larngibunja (see Clark 2003: 9).

William Hull (1846: 28) noted that although some remarkable caverns had been discovered in the Port Phillip District, Angel Cave [3GP-8], near Cape Schanck on the Mornington Peninsula, was the only one that he knew of which had any 'native' tradition attached to it. 'This cavern, facing the sea, they say was once the residence of Pungil, the God of the natives, who they believe came out of the sea – formed it, and much delighted in it. There are no paintings or marks, but apparently a wide altar and decayed steps in the recess'. Massola (1969: 158-9) notes that Angel's Cave (his spelling) is a cool stalactite cave on the seashore east of Cape Schanck near the mouth of the Murwurrarong Creek. He explains that it takes its 'name from the fact that from a certain position in the semi-darkness of the cave, a group of stalactites has a vague resemblance to an angel shape' (Massola 1969: 158-9). He adds that Aboriginal people claimed that 'Bunjil was one day taking a walk upon the sea, when a great storm arose. The "Great Man" walked up to the then flat shore, commanded it to rise into a cliff, and ordered a cave to form there. He then sheltered in it until the storm had passed'.

Other sites directly connected with Bundjil include a 'cave' at Bushy Creek, Lal Lal Falls, and the rock-art site known as Bunjil's Shelter in the Black Range near Stawell (Massola 1957). Parker alluded to the existence of an Aboriginal legend in an article published in the

Port Phillip Gazette after the March visit (Parker 1840). Parker wrote, 'The deep and basaltic glen or hollow, forming the fall of Lallal on the Moorabool, near Mr Airey's Station, was the residence of Bonjil or Pundyil while on earth'. Robinson confirmed the connection with Bundjil when he visited the falls on 7 August 1846, and learned from an Aboriginal informant that they were called 'Punjil' (Clark 2000b:108).

James Bonwick (1863:54), also, discussed Bundjil's residence at Lal Lal Falls:

At Cape Schanck, of Western Port, a cave is pointed out from which Pundyil or Bin-Beal used to take his walks beside the sea. He was accustomed when upon earth to frequent other caves, chasms, or dark places. Deep basaltic glens were favourite homes. We are well acquainted with one of these assumed divine residences situated in a romantic volcanic rent some fifteen miles from Ballarat, through which the river passes after rolling down the Lal Lal falls. The planet Jupiter shines by the light of his camp fire in the heavens, whither he has now retired.

The name Bungal, a variant of Bundjil, is found locally in the name of the Bungal pastoral Run adjoining the Lal Lal station on the east, and also in Bungal Dam. This is also the second waterfall in Victoria, thought to have been named after Bundjil. The other is the Wannon Falls, known as Bung Bundjil, and the local clan was named 'Bung Bundjil gundidj' (Clark 1990; Clark and Heydon 2002).

Anthropologist, Aldo Massola (1968b:59), described the Kulin 'myth' of the 'Lal-Lal Falls on the Moorabool River' thus: 'Bunjil made the falls to relieve the monotony of the landscape. He liked them so much that he decided to make them his earthly home'. This story is unsourced, however Massola (1968b:x) explained in his foreword that the accounts he published 'were collected over a period of ten years, from Aborigines in all parts of Victoria', and he supplemented these with 'the scant published material'. Massola speculated that Bundjil chose to live at the falls because of its idiosyncratic features:

Apart from the fascination of watching the wide creek ending its placid run through the level plain by suddenly tumbling, with a mighty roar, down the 200 feet chasm, there were

other reasons, no doubt, why Bunjil was made to live there. One was the fact that the swamp supported a large population of birds and other animals which assured the Aboriginals of plentiful supplies of food. Another was the comfort of the sand dunes on the south-east of the swamp, which make ideal camping places. A third, and no doubt very important reason, was the deposits of white pipe-clay on the east side of the swamp, which are now commercially quarried for paper clay (Massola 1969:70-71).

Bundjil, the creator-spirit, is also associated with another cave. R.B. Smyth (1878, Vol. 1: 456) recounts the story of Buk-ker-til-lible, the cave or chasm at Cave Hill near Lilydale. The Aboriginals believed that Buk-ker-til-lible had no bottom, and when they threw stones into it they could never hear the stones land. They believed that Pund-jel made this deep hole when he was angry with the Yarra Aboriginal people. They had committed deeds that displeased him and he caused a star to fall to the earth, striking and killing a great many people and the star fell deep into the earth, and made this chasm.³

Several caverns exist in southwest Victoria, near Port Campbell, where they have been washed out under the cliffs by the force of the Southern Ocean. Phillip Chauncy has provided us with a discussion of one of these caves:

One of these extends under ground nearly a quarter of a mile, and in one place the rain-water has washed a small hole from the surface of the ground down into the cavern. There is a continual draught of air blowing up through this hole, so that if a leaf or any light substance be thrown over it, it is

immediately carried up into the air. For ages past the natives were in the habit, whenever they approached this air-hole, to throw a piece of wood into it to propitiate the demon supposed to reside within its profound and mysterious depths. When the late Mr. Superintendent La Trobe examined this part of the coast, in 1842 [sic], some of his men made a rope ladder, and went down over the cliff and explored this cavern. When they came to the part nearly under the hole communicating with the surface, they found an enormous pile of wood, which must have been the accumulation of ages, as the natives had to carry the pieces of wood from the distant forest. The men set fire to the pile, which lit up and displayed a magnificent vaulted chamber, bedecked with long glistening stalactites, and tenanted by vast numbers of bats, whose whirring, whizzing noise was probably that which the natives attributed to some supernatural being (Chauncy in Smyth 1878, Vol. 2: 268-9).

This cave was visited by C.J. La Trobe in 1845 and 1846, and he recorded a detailed description in 1846 (see Blake 1975). La Trobe noted that the 'natives' referred to it as 'Lubras' Cave'. This is probably what is now called 'Starlight Cave' [3W-5], south-east of Warrnambool. Edmund Gill (1948) names this 'Guano Cave', and other names include 'Bat Cave' and 'Lake Gilleard Cave' (See Gill 1948 and Hall 1993 for more information). La Trobe explained that local indigenous people knew the caverns well and 'had a superstitious dread of them, stating that the caverns below were inhabited by headless lubras' (Blake 1975: 19).

In northwest Victoria, two of the most important Ancestral Heroes, are the buledji Brambimbula, the two Bram brothers. Accounts of their actions survive from three languages: Wergaia, Djadjawurrung, and Wembawemba (Hercus 1986). Accounts have them active in a vast expanse of country stretching from Lake Boga in the northeast to Naracoorte Caves in the southwest. A.W. Howitt (1904: 485) noted that the Bram brothers lived in a cavern far to the west. In August 1907, at the Lake Condah Mission, the Reverend John Mathew spoke with Jackson Stewart, a Wembawemba speaker born near Lake Boga. Stewart told Mathew that the

³ Bundjil was also associated with the Bridgewater caves (shelters). Bonwick (1970: 112) explained that the 'natives have some dim shadowings of traditions connected' with the caves. 'Some spirit, Punyil, once resided in one, and was accustomed to descend therefrom and walk the shore. Rude attempts at drawings were said to be found there. I did not observe any, though want of time prevented a close examination of the various caverns'. Presumably this is a reference to the line of shelters in the cliff overlooking the Bridgewater Lakes at Tarragal [3P-9].

'Brambangu were two brothers, chief men, who lived in a cave near Naracoorte (Mathew Papers).

Many of the place names in and around the Gariwerd Grampians National Park have mythological references, and many to the actions of the Bram brothers in forming the landscape of the Gariwerd/Grampian ranges (see Clark & Harradine 1990; Clark & Heydon 2002). For example, in the story presented by RH Mathews (1904), in which the Bram brothers are pursuing Ngindyal, the emu, features in the mountains, such as Rose's Gap, are explained. Many of the Gariwerd placenames recorded actions and events associated with Ancestors and many contained references to Ancestral body parts; for example, Mudjambula which means 'the two of them pick something up'; 'Mud-dadjug' 'blunt or useless arm'; Wudjub guyun 'stabbing spear in the stomach'; Gunigalg 'excrement stick'; Werdug 'his shoulder'; Wudjugidj 'belonging to the man'; and Wulbuwa 'to burn very fiercely'. The importance of the Bram brothers is also seen in the name of the interpretive and cultural centre 'the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre' in Halls Gap, a clear reference to the Ancestral heroes, the buledji Brambimbula, the two Bram brothers. Brambuk translates to 'belonging to Bram'.

Smyth (1878) published an account of the Bram brothers which he had received from the Reverend Hartmann. Presumably, Hartmann obtained them from Wergaia residents at the Ebenezer station.

The Rev. Mr. Hartmann says in a letter to me, in reference to this story, that, according to information given by the blacks, it is known all over the country. It is only part of a long story. The two Brambambulls were rather remarkable men. The blacks' further account of them may be briefly stated thus: --The Brambambulls were invulnerable, and the elder could make himself invisible whenever he pleased. The last thing known about the elder is that he went away in a whirlwind. The younger Brambambull is said to have vanished too for a while, but to have made his appearance again in another part of the country. He was followed and found by his mother. It is said that he died from the effects of a snakebite; that he was buried; and that he became alive again. After that

he could not be found any more. The portion of the story that is sent, Mr. Hartmann says, is written in the way a black would tell it--of course considerably abridged (Smyth 1878: 53-4).

Associations with malevolent creatures and spirits

Caves were often thought to be the abode of malevolent creatures and spirits. For example, JM Allan, at Tooram station near the mouth of the Hopkins River, reported to the 1858 Select Committee that the Aboriginal people in his district believed spirits called 'Tambora' inhabited caves (Victoria 1859: 71). 'Tambora' is the Giraiwurrung word *tampoorr*, their general word for devil, 'male devil', 'bad male spirit' (Krishna-Pillay 1996: 59). Luise Hercus (1986: 211) learned of the existence of a mythical malevolent creature known as 'Ngaud-ngaud'. Stories of the Ngaud-ngaud are widespread, and range from the upper Murray people of eastern South Australia (Swan Reach) to the Woiwurrung of central Victoria. According to the upper Murray people, the Ngaud-ngaud was a malformed giant, who was ultimately imprisoned by the people in a cave where he starved to death.⁴

In Gippsland, caves are associated with two mythical beings; the Nargun and the Nyol. In 1875, Alfred William Howitt explored the Mitchell River by canoe accompanied by two Ganai men - Turnmile and Bunjil Bottle (Seddon 1989). Up one creek, known as Deadcock Creek, they came to a cavern now known as "Den of Nargun" [3GP-5]. Howitt noted that his companions expressed delight upon finding this cavern, and planned to return and camp there and collect the tails of the *woorayl* (lyrebird) among the scrubs of the river, and feast on koalas and wallabies. A little further on, they came to a second cave, fringed by stalactites. The two Ganai men removed some stalactites to show their friends. Bunjil Bottle was convinced that this was the haunt of the mysterious creature, the Nargun, the

⁴ These legends have been the basis for stories written by Patricia Wrightson (1973). In one story she describes a boy's encounter with Nyols who drag him into their cave and want to wrestle with him (among other things).

'Ngrung a Narguna' (Seddon 1989: 18). The Nargun, is a mysterious creature, a cave dweller that haunts various parts of the bush. Howitt learned that they especially haunt the Mitchell Valley. Howitt's companions could not describe a Nargun, beyond that it is like a rock (wallung), and is said to be all stone except the breast and arms and hands. It inhabits caverns, into which it drags unsuspecting passers-by. Howitt knew of another cave in the Miocene limestones of Lake Tyers that was said to be inhabited by a Nargun (Seddon 1989: 18). Massola (1962) searched for this cave and found that its description matched not the presently named "Nargun's Cave" [3NN-1] but another cave, "Cameroon's No.2" [3NN-3].

Smyth (1878, Vol. 1: 456-7) presented the following account of the 'Nrung-a-Narguna'.

A mysterious creature, Nargun – a cave-dweller – inhabits various places in the bush. He haunts especially the valley of the Mitchell in Gippsland. He has many caves; and if any blackfellow incautiously approaches one of these, that blackfellow is dragged into the cave by Nargun, and he is seen no more. If a blackfellow throws a spear at Nargun, the spear returns to the thrower and wounds him. Nargun cannot be killed by any blackfellow. There is a cave at Lake Tyers where Nargun dwells, and it is not safe for any black to go near it. Nargun would surely destroy him. A native woman once fought with Nargun at this cave, but nobody knows how the battle ended. Nargun is like a rock (Wallung), and is all of stone except the breast and the arms and the hands. No one knows exactly what he is like. Nargun is always on the lookout for blackfellows, and many have been dragged into his caves. He is a terror to the natives of Gippsland.

Massola (1968: 74-5) has recounted the story of the Nyol at Murrindal.

Once, when the tribe was camped at Murrindal, one of the men went possum hunting. Possums were plentiful on the trees growing amongst the rocks there. While he was hunting, he noticed an opening between two rocks. He put his foot in it and was drawn in. He found himself in one of the many caves in the vicinity. The cave was lit by a strange light,

and was inhabited by many very small people who came to him showing signs of friendship. They called him Jambi, which is a general term for friendship, although it means brother-in-law. He tried to get back above the surface, but found that he had to wrestle with the little people. They were very strong, although small, and although he fought many of them, they all overcame him.

Feeling exhausted he lay down to rest. The little people, the Nyols, gave him rugs to sleep on and grubs to eat. The latter were a great delicacy, and he enjoyed them very much. At last, many of the Nyols went away and he was left in the charge of one of them. Everything had been quiet, but now he heard a rustling sound. One of the Nyols came to him saying he would show him the way to the surface of the ground. Before very long he was amongst his own people, but for several days could not tell them what had happened to him. His mind had temporarily gone blank.

Other cultural associations

This study has discovered the Aboriginal names of numerous Victorian caves, in terms of generic words for 'caves' in southwest Victoria, James Dawson (1881: vii) learned that the Djabwurrung word for cave was 'Yeitchmir' meaning 'close the eyes'; the Gurngubanud dialect of Dhauwurdwurrung knew caves as 'Yatmiruk', which also meant 'close the eye', and the Bigwurrung dialect used the word 'Yuluurn'.

A cave featured in the story of the movement of the spirits of deceased people to Deen Maar (Lady Julia Percy Island), an island off the southwest coast of Victoria. On the Victorian coast, opposite this island, a cave named 'Tarn wirring' or 'road of the spirits' formed a passage between the mainland and the island. Grass found at the mouth of the cave was considered proof that a good spirit called 'Puit puit chepetch' had removed the body, of a recently buried person, through the cave to the island and conveyed the spirit to the clouds (Dawson 1881: 51). Aldo Massola (1968a, 1969) claimed to have identified this coastal cave at The Craigs, east of Yambuk, but no ASF number has been assigned.

John Mathew learned in 1890, of an ingenious use of sinkholes in south-west Victoria. A local surveyor informed him of a custom practiced near Macarthur involving two large sinkholes which Aboriginal people would use in their harming practices: they would drop a morsel of the excrement of an enemy down the sinkhole 'who was supposed thereafter to pine and die' (Mathew Papers). These would probably be two of the large collapsed entrances of the lava tubes at the Byaduk Caves, north of Macarthur [3H-11, 12, 13 etc]. In western Victoria, Aboriginal people were very careful in disposing of their excreta, usually burying it with a spatula they called a gunigalk (excrement stick) to ensure that it could not be found by their enemies (Rose in Bride 1898: 150).

Conclusion

This brief review of the ethnohistorical literature has examined Aboriginal associations with caves in Victoria. These associations have been found to be rich and varied. Caves and sinkholes featured prominently in the lives of Aboriginal people – they were often believed to be the abode of malevolent creatures and spirits and some were associated with important ancestral heroes, and traditional harming practices. Some were important in the after death movement of souls to their resting places.

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