INSCRIBING THE PLAINS:

CONSTRUCTED, CONCEPTUALISED AND

SOCIALIZED LANDSCAPES OF THE HAY PLAIN,

SOUTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA

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of the University of New England

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Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

Any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in the text.

Sarah Martin
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Photo of a Mound on the Hay Plain Southwest, September 2000.

Figures standing on mound are Ian Woods and Gubba Woods from the Hay Local Aboriginal Land Council, and my partner Badger Bates. This mound is 120 metres long x 107 metres wide and approximately 2.2 metres high.
Abstract

This study utilises several theoretical perspectives and analytical scales to examine the constructed, conceptualised and socialised landscapes of the Hay Plain, characterised by the mounded cultural deposits, regionally known as ‘mounds’, ‘earth mounds’ or ‘oven mounds’. Mounds are found in widely separated areas of Australia, with a major concentration on the Hay Plain and adjacent Murray Riverine Plain. Previous archaeological research into mounds has frequently failed to investigate explanatory relationships or investigate the dynamics of human behaviour. This study examines three major themes, each with different approaches and analytical scales.

Firstly, the search for a fundamental explanatory model for the tightly bounded spatial and temporal patterns of mounds concluded that the distribution of mounds in Australia is directly related to a mid to late Holocene focus on managed, dense, predictable carbohydrate-rich plant crops in varying habitats, which needed prolonged cooking in heat retainer ovens to maximise the energy return.

Secondly, the study aimed to provide evidence of the intertwining of environment, human agency and historical processes, leading to generalised models of socio-cultural change. The large and rapidly constructed mounds of the Hay Plain wetlands provide evidence of resource-use intensification proposed for the mid to late Holocene in other areas of Australia (Lourandos 1997, David & Lourandos 1998). Mounds appeared much later than suitable habitats for the wetland plant crops extensively cooked in mounds, and are not the direct response to evolving wetland habitats. They reflect complex social strategies constrained by habitat potential.

Thirdly, as envisaged by Dobres (1995), concepts of interpretive archaeology such as landscape archaeology, style and gender were used as tools to examine the finer details and complexity of social processes that occurred on the Hay Plain. Mounds are constructed to ‘style’ templates and form an element of composed landscapes, which are appropriated, inscribed and socialised, forming palimpsests of meanings and memories reflecting social structures and histories.

The results of this study demonstrate that range of complementary theoretical perspectives, temporal and spatial scales are necessary to provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the mound-building phenomenon.
Contents

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1
  1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ......................................................................................... 1
  1.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE HAY PLAIN ................................................................................ 3
  1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY ..................................................................................................... 7
  1.4 A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ‘MOUNDS’ IN AUSTRALIA .................................................. 9
    1.4.1 What are Mounds? .................................................................................................. 9
    1.4.2 Comparisons with Incubation Mounds ................................................................. 13
    1.4.3 Comparisons with Shell Middens and Shell Mounds ........................................... 13
  1.5 THESIS OUTLINE ........................................................................................................... 14

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH, THEORIES AND
MODELS ........................................................................................................................................ 16
  2.1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 16
  2.2 PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MOUNDS IN AUSTRALIA .................. 16
  2.3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HAY PLAIN ....................... 21
    2.3.1 Klaver’s Work on the Archaeology of the Hay Plain Mounds .............................. 21
    2.3.2 Previous Research on Burial Distribution and Patterning on the Hay Plain .......... 25
  2.4 REVIEW OF RELEVANT THEORETICAL CONCEPTS .................................................... 28
    2.4.1 Theoretical Concepts and Macro-scalar Models ...................................................... 28
    2.4.2 Interpretive Archaeology and Micro-scalar Processes .......................................... 33
    2.4.3 ‘Style’ in Archaeology ......................................................................................... 36
    2.4.4 Landscape Archaeology ....................................................................................... 37
    2.4.5 Gender-Relations in Archaeology ........................................................................ 41
    2.4.6 Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 43

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS ................................................................ 45
  3.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES ............................................................................................... 45
    3.1.1 Research Goals and Questions ............................................................................. 45
    3.1.2 Testing Models .................................................................................................... 47
  3.2 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK .............................................................................................. 50
  3.3 METHODS ....................................................................................................................... 51
    3.3.1 Theory Levels and Data Collection ...................................................................... 51
    3.3.2 A Stable Holocene Landscape ............................................................................. 52
    3.3.3 A Simple Landscape ............................................................................................ 52
    3.3.4 Constraints and Research Ethics .......................................................................... 53

CHAPTER 4 HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY ............................................................................. 54
  4.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................... 54
  4.2 HUMAN EVOLUTION AND COOKING ........................................................................... 55
4.3 EFFECTS OF HEAT RETAINER COOKING ON PLANT AND ANIMAL FOODS ........................................... 57
4.4 HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH IN NORTH AMERICA ................................................... 63
  4.4.1 Archaeological Research in North America .................................................................................. 63
  4.4.2 Chronological Trends in Cooking Styles in North America ...................................................... 64
  4.4.3 Heat Retainer Technology Experiments ...................................................................................... 70
4.5 HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH IN EUROPE ............................................................... 71
4.6 HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY IN THE MURRAY-DARLING RIVERINE BASIN ............................ 73
  4.6.1 Ethnohistorical Evidence of Pit Oven Cooking on the Murray River and Murray Riverine Plain .... 73
  4.6.2 Ethnohistorical Evidence of Cooking in Mounds on the Murray and its Tributaries ...................... 77
  4.6.3 Use of Heat Retainer Ovens for Medicinal Purposes on the Murray Riverine Plain ...................... 79
  4.6.4 Use of Heat Retainer Ovens for Fibre Preparation on the Murray Riverine Plain .......................... 80
  4.6.5 Ethnohistorical Evidence of Pit Oven Cooking on the Darling River and Hinterland .................... 80
  4.6.6 Ethnohistorical Evidence of Pit Oven Medicinal Steaming on the Darling River ......................... 84
  4.6.7 Ethnohistorical Evidence of Pit Oven Plant Fibre Steaming on the Darling River System ................ 84
  4.6.8 Discussion of Ethnographic Accounts ......................................................................................... 84
4.7 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY IN THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN ..................................................................................................................... 86
  4.7.1 Archaeological Evidence of Heat Retainer Technology on the Murray Riverine Plain .................... 86
  4.7.2 Heat Retainer Features on the Darling River and Hinterland ...................................................... 88
  4.7.3 Heat Retainer Experiments ........................................................................................................ 91
  4.7.4 Chronology of Heat Retainer Technology in the Murray-Darling Basin ...................................... 92
4.8 UNDERSTANDING HEAT RETAINER TECHNOLOGY ..................................................................... 96

CHAPTER 5 EXCAVATION OF THE RAVENSWORTH 3 & TCHELERY 1 MOUNDS & GUNDALINE OVENS ................................................................................................................................. 101

5.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................. 101
5.2. THE RAVENSWORTH 3 MOUND ..................................................................................................... 103
  5.2.1 Survey of the Ravensworth Mound .............................................................................................. 103
  5.2.2 Coring of the Ravensworth 3 Mound .......................................................................................... 106
5.3 EXCAVATION OF THE RAVENSWORTH 3 MOUND ....................................................................... 111
  5.3.1 Excavation Location and Trench Size ......................................................................................... 111
  5.3.2 Excavation Procedure ................................................................................................................. 111
5.4 RESULTS OF THE RAVENSWORTH 3 EXCAVATION .................................................................... 113
  5.4.1 Chronology .................................................................................................................................. 113
  5.4.2 Depth of Deposit and Stratigraphy ............................................................................................... 115
  5.4.3 Oven and Hearth Features .......................................................................................................... 118
  5.4.4 Mound Material .......................................................................................................................... 118
  5.4.5 Faunal Remains .......................................................................................................................... 118
  5.4.6 Bone Colour and Texture .......................................................................................................... 121
  5.4.7 Bone Fragmentation .................................................................................................................. 123
  5.4.8 Plant Remains ............................................................................................................................. 124
  5.4.9 Stone Tool Technology .............................................................................................................. 127
5.5 SURVEY OF THE TCHELERY MOUND COMPLEX ................................................................. 132
5.6 EXCAVATION OF THE TCHELERY 1 MOUND ................................................................. 136
  5.6.1 Excavation Location and Trench Size ................................................................. 136
  5.6.2 Excavation Procedure .......................................................................................... 137
5.7 RESULTS OF THE TCHELERY 1 EXCAVATION .............................................................. 138
  5.7.1 Chronology .............................................................................................................. 138
  5.7.2 Depth of Deposit & Stratigraphy .............................................................................. 140
  5.7.3 Oven and Hearth Features ...................................................................................... 142
  5.7.4 Hut Floor .................................................................................................................. 143
  5.7.5 Activity Areas .......................................................................................................... 144
  5.7.6 Mound Material ...................................................................................................... 144
  5.7.7 Stone Tool Technology ........................................................................................... 144
  5.7.8 Faunal Remains ....................................................................................................... 145
  5.7.9 Plant Remains ......................................................................................................... 146
5.8 SURVEY OF THE GUNDALINE 3 OVENS ..................................................................... 146
5.9 EXCAVATION OF GUNDALINE OVENS 173, 175A AND 175B ........................................ 147
5.10 RESULTS OF THE GUNDALINE EXCAVATIONS ........................................................... 148
5.11 DISCUSSION OF THE EXCAVATION RESULTS ............................................................ 150

CHAPTER 6 THE RAVENSWORTH 3 SEDIMENT AND HEAT RETAINER ANALYSIS ........... 153
  6.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................ 153
  6.2 RAVENSWORTH 3 HEAT RETAINER ANALYSIS ........................................................... 153
    6.2.1 Aims of the Analysis .............................................................................................. 153
    6.2.2 Laboratory Procedures ......................................................................................... 154
    6.2.3 Results of the Heat Retainer Analysis ................................................................. 156
  6.3 RAVENSWORTH 3 SEDIMENT ANALYSIS ................................................................ 162
    6.3.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................ 162
    6.3.2 Laboratory Procedures ......................................................................................... 163
    6.3.3 Results of the Sediment Analysis ....................................................................... 165
  6.4 CONCLUSIONS ............................................................................................................ 169

CHAPTER 7 MACROSCALAR PROCESSES AND DISTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL
  MATERIAL ............................................................................................................................ 172
  7.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................... 172
  7.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................... 172
    7.2.1 Sample Survey of the Hay Plain and Selected Areas ............................................. 172
    7.2.2 Detailed Recording of Archaeological Material .................................................... 176
  7.3 DISTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL ACROSS MAJOR LANDFORMS OF THE
  HAY PLAIN ......................................................................................................................... 177
    7.3.1 Distribution of Sites by Hydrology .................................................................... 177
    7.3.2 Distribution of Sites by Geomorphology and Soils .............................................. 184
    7.3.3 Distribution of Mounds by Geomorphology ......................................................... 184
    7.3.4 Distribution of Other Site Types by Geomorphology .......................................... 184
7.3.5 Density of Mounds by Major Landform.............................................................. 185
7.3.6 Distribution Relationship between Mounds and Ovens..................................... 187
7.3.7 Distribution Relationship between Mounds and Burials..................................... 188
7.3.8 Distribution on Minor Landforms...................................................................... 190
7.3.9 Distribution of Sites on the Hay Plains by Large Scale Topography...................... 195

7.4 THE INFLUENCE OF MODERN RIVERS AND PALAEOCHANNELS ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF MOUNDS .................................................................................................................. 197

7.4.1 The Murrumbidgee River Channel ...................................................................... 197
7.4.2 The Lowbidgee System....................................................................................... 198
7.4.3 The Gum Creek/Abercrombie Creek System....................................................... 199
7.4.4 The Hay Plain North West and Lachlan River................................................... 200
7.4.5 Summary of Modern River and Paleochannel Influences .................................. 200

7.5 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MURRUMBIDGEE AND LACHLAN RIVERS AND WETLANDS .............................................................................................................. 201

7.6 DISTRIBUTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL IN THE BALRANALD MURRAY MALLEE SANDPLAIN ........................................................................................................ 206

7.7 DISTRIBUTION OF ASHY DEPOSITS IN THE MENINDEE LAKES/DARLING RIVER...... 207

7.8 DISTRIBUTION OF STONE ARTEFACT TECHNOLOGY ON THE HAY PLAIN ........... 215

7.8.1 Recording of Stone Artefacts ............................................................................. 215
7.8.2 Hay Plain Southwest Stone Artefact Technology.................................................. 216
7.8.3 Lowbidgee Stone Artefact Industries .................................................................. 218
7.8.4 Hay Plain South East Stone Artefact Industries.................................................... 218
7.8.5 Murrumbidgee East Stone Artefact Technology................................................... 220
7.8.6 Hay Plain North East Stone Artefact Industries.................................................... 220
7.8.7 Broad Trends in Stone Artefact Technology across the Hay Plain ....................... 222

7.9 THE INTERTWINING OF ENVIRONMENT, AGENCY AND HISTORICAL PROCESSES .... 225

7.9.1 Summary of Distribution ................................................................................... 225
7.9.2 Relationships between Environment and Agency ................................................. 226
7.9.4 Behavioural Dynamics and a Macro-scalar Model .............................................. 228

CHAPTER 8 INTERPRETING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES .................................................. 229

8.1 INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................... 229

8.2 ARE MOUNDS SHAPED? ...................................................................................... 230

8.2.1 Roundness and Moundedness .......................................................................... 230
8.2.2 Mound Sizes .................................................................................................... 238
8.2.3 Mound Cluster Sizes ....................................................................................... 242
8.2.4 Stylish Mounds ................................................................................................. 243

8.3. ELEMENTS AND COMPOSITION OF THE CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPE .......... 245

8.3.1 Mounds as Constructed Landscape Features .................................................... 245
8.3.2 Burials as Constructed Landscape Features ...................................................... 249
8.3.3 Paths as Constructed Landscape Features ........................................................ 253
8.3.4 Weirs, Dams, Fish Traps .................................................................................. 253
### Chapter 8: Conceptualised and Ideational Landscapes

#### 8.3.5 ‘Bora rings’ or Ceremonial Earth Rings

- 8.3.6. Wells and Reservoirs
- 8.3.7 Ring Trees and Scarred Trees
- 8.3.8 Relationships between Elements of the Constructed Landscape

#### 8.4 Conceptualised and Ideational Landscapes

- 8.4.1 The Storied Landscape
- 8.4.2 Triggers of Memory

#### 8.5 Mapping Social Landscapes

- 8.5.1 Landscape as Identity
- 8.5.2 Language and Landscape
- 8.5.3 Movement of Languages
- 8.5.4 Relationship between Language Group and Social Organization
- 8.5.5 Relationship between Language Group and Ceremony
- 8.5.6 Mapping Language and Social Organization over Archaeology

#### 8.6 Managed Landscapes and Gender Relations

- 8.6.1 Managing Wetlands
- 8.6.2 Gender Relations

#### 8.7 Inscribing the Plains

### Chapter 9: Mounds and Models

#### 9.1 Introduction

- 9.2 Testing Models Against the Results
  - 9.2.1 Reasons for Using Heat Retainer Technology
  - 9.2.2 Are Hay Plain Mound Mounds Derived from Repetitive use of Heat Retainer Ovens?
  - 9.2.3 Chronology of Heat Retainer Technology and Mounds
  - 9.2.4 Models of Distribution on the Hay Plain
  - 9.2.5 Correlating Mounds with Changing Environments
  - 9.2.6 Mounds with ‘Style’
  - 9.2.7 Mounds as Elements in Composed Cultural Landscapes
  - 9.2.8 Socialised Landscapes and the Inclusion/Exclusion Models
  - 9.2.9 Spatial Patterning of Mounds and Social Organisation
  - 9.2.10 Managed Landscapes and Gender Relations

#### 9.3 A Generalised Model of Mound Distribution in Australia

#### 9.4 Mounds and Generalised Models

- 9.4.1 Mounds of the Hay Plain and the Lourandos ‘Intensification’ Model
- 9.4.2 Food for Thought- Mounds, Ovens and Global Models

#### 9.5 Conclusion

REFERENCES
Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1 Map of South Eastern Australia, showing Murray Darling Basin and Hay Plain.......................... 5
Figure 1.2 Divisions of the Hay Plain ........................................................................................................ 6
Figure 1.3 Areas of Australia with Concentrations of Mounds .................................................................. 10
Figure 4.1 Map of the Murray Darling Basin showing Places discussed in the Text ................................. 74
Figure 4.2: Karloans 1942 drawing of cooking emu in a pit oven with stone heat retainers (Berndt & Berndt
1993:104) ............................................................................................................................................... 75
Figure 4.3: Sketches traced from Bonney's notebooks c. 1865-1881 showing cooking in pit ovens with stone
heat retainers. Layers in the top oven are 1. soil, 2. leaves 3. food 4. leaves 5. hot stones ......................... 83
Figure 4.4 Sample of Menindee Oven Sizes (Length x Width in Metres, N=72) ........................................ 89
Figure 4.5: Locations on the Hay Plain ....................................................................................................... 102
Figure 4.6: Plan of Ravensworth Mounds 1-5 ............................................................................................ 104
Figure 5.1: Plan of Ravensworth Mounds 1-5 ............................................................................................ 104
Figure 5.2: Core Sections plotted against Ground Surface Height .............................................................. 107
Figure 5.3: Profile of Ravensworth 3 and Surrounding Landscape ............................................................... 108
Figure 5.4: Longitudinal Section of Ravensworth 3 .................................................................................. 108
Figure 5.5: Excavation Section showing Stratigraphic Layers in East Wall .............................................. 116
Figure 5.6: Excavation Section showing Stratigraphic Layers in South Wall ............................................ 117
Figure 5.7: Excavation Section showing Stratigraphic Layers in South Wall ............................................ 117
Figure 5.8: Ravensworth 3 Excavation Weights of Bone, Shell and Stone per Spit .................................. 126
Figure 5.9: Ravensworth 3 Excavation Sample: Percentage of Stone Material Type per Spit .................. 126
Figure 5.10: Ravensworth 3 Excavation Sample: Percentage of Platform Types by Spit ......................... 129
Figure 5.11: Ravensworth 3 Excavation Sample: Percentage of Termination Types by Spit .................... 129
Figure 5.12: Tchelery Mound Complex and Dry Lake Mound Complex .................................................... 133
Figure 5.13: Contour Survey of the Tchelery 1.1 mound .......................................................................... 134
Figure 5.14: Longitudinal Section of the Tchelery 1.1 Mound ................................................................. 135
Figure 5.15: Cross Section through the Middle of the Tchelery 1.1. Mound .............................................. 135
Figure 5.16: Cross Section of Tchelery 1.1 from Swamp across Mound & Excavation Trench (over 10 x vertical exaggeration) ................................................................. 135
Figure 5.17: Tchelery 1.1 Excavation Section West Wall Square D .............................................................. 141
Figure 5.18: Tchelery 1.1 Excavation Square D (1 x 2 metres): Weights of Bone, Shell and Stone by Spit ...... 145
Figure 5.19: Gundaline Ovens and Artefact Scatter ................................................................................... 149
Figure 6.1: Ravensworth 3 Mean Magnetic Susceptibility of Heat Retainers by Colour ............................ 158
Figure 6.2: Change in Magnetic Susceptibility in Clay Balls with Baking Time ........................................ 158
Figure 6.3: Variation in Size and Shape of Heat Retainer Sample ............................................................... 161
Figure 6.4: Ravensworth 3 Gross & Sieve Weight Trends by Excavation Spit ........................................... 161
Figure 6.5: Ravensworth 3 Heat Retainer Sieve Fraction Weight Trends by Excavation Spit ..................... 166
Figure 6.6: Sediment and Heat Retainer Magnetic Susceptibility ............................................................... 166
Figure 6.7: Particle Size by Percentage of Sediment Sample ........................................................................ 168
Figure 6.8: Ravensworth 3 Magnetic Susceptibility by Particle Size Fraction .......................................... 168
Map 1: Hay Plain Archaeological Material Type and Hydrology .............................................................. 178
Map 2: Hay Plain Mounds and Geomorphology ....................................................................................... 179
Map 3: Hay Plain Middens and Geomorphology ...................................................................................... 180
Map 4: Hay Plain Burials and Geomorphology

Map 5: Hay Plain Artefacts/Open Sites and Geomorphology

Map 6: Hay Plain Ovens and Geomorphology

Figure 7.1 Mounds and Associated Sites in Illawara Sample Area

Figure 7.2 Plan of Pevensy West Sample Area

Figure 7.3 Location of Archaeological Material in Lowbidgee Sample Area

Figure 7.4 The Menindee Lakes and Darling River (from Martin 2001 and courtesy of the Menindee Lakes ESD Project)

Figure 7.5 Bjijjie Lake and Darling River showing Ashy Deposits Located on a Large Billabong, and Lake Inlet and Outlet Creeks (adapted from Pardoe & Martin 2002)

Figure 7.6 Percentages of Raw Materials in Samples across the Hay Plain

Figure 8.1 Length x Width for total Hay Plain Mound Sample (N=188)

Figure 8.2 Length x Width for Hay Plain mounds by Major Landform (N=188)

Figure 8.3 Menindee Ashy Deposits & Hay Plain South West Mounds Length x Width

Figure 8.4 Hay Plain Mounds Length x Height (N=188)

Figure 8.5 Hay Plain Southwest & Menindee Ashy Deposits Length x Height above Ground

Figure 8.6 Mound Length x Width for Hay Plain Southwest and Comparative Sample Areas

Figure 8.7 Average Moundedness Index & Average Length for Mound Clusters and Menindee Lakes Ashy Deposits (Table 8.2)

Figure 8.8a Ratio of Mound Length Intervals Compiled by Location (Table 8.1)

Figure 8.8b Ratio of Mound Height Intervals Compiled by Location (Table 8.1)

Figure 8.8c Average Length x Width x Moundedness Index by Location (Table 8.1)

Figure 8.9 Mean Length x Moundedness Index for Mound Clusters (Table 8.2)

Figure 8.10 Locations and Language Groups of the Hay Plain

Figure 8.11: Mitchell’s 1836 Sketch of a Burial on the Hay Plain (Mitchell Library Picture File DG -A6)

Figure 8.12: Robinson’s 1846 sketch of a Grave at Tala Lake (Clark 2000:53)

Figure 8.14. Krejft’s 1856-7 Watercolour of a ‘native grave’ on the Lower Murrumbidgee (Mitchell Library Picture File PXD 9:22)

Figure 8.15 Mean Length x Mean Moundedness (Table 8.2), Showing Distinct Populations of Mounds on Flat Plains and Mounds near Rivers

Figure 8.15 : Krefft 1856-7: watercolour of ‘three girls’ on the Murray River (Mitchell Library PDX9)

Figure 8.16 Women in Mourning, Balranald, Murrumbidgee River, 1860 (Becker in Tipping 1979)

Table 3.1 : Research Framework

Table 4.1 Dates and Mound Construction Period for Combined Hay Plain and Murray Riverine Plain Mounds

Table 5.1 Dates from Ravensworth 3 Excavation Square A and Core 2, and Age by Depth Box Plot

Table 5.2 Ravensworth 3 Stratigraphic Layers drawn from Excavation

Table 5.3 : Ravensworth 3 Numbers and Percentages of Natural, Carbonised and Calcined Bone in 3 Spits

Table 5.4 : Tchelery 1 Depth and Type of Dates and Age by Depth Box Plot

Table 5.5 : Tchelery Excavation Description of Features with Dates

Table 5.6 Description and Depths of Tchelery 1.1 Features

Table 5.7 : Description of the Gundaline Ovens and Dates
Table 7.1 Databases Used for the GIS Distribution Mapping on the Hay Plain ..................................................... 174
Table 7.2: Sample Area Size & Mound Density by Major Landform ................................................................. 186
Table 7.3: Percentage of Mounds with Burials within Major Landforms ............................................................ 189
Table 7.4: Variation in Heat Retainer Material at Menindee (each sample >100) .................................................. 212
Table 8.1 Summary of Mound and Ashy Deposit Size & Shape by Area .......................................................... 239
Table 8.2 Summary of Hay Plain Mound Cluster Average Length and Moundedness Index (W/L x W/T), Plus
Comparative Areas Barmah, Macquarie Marshes and Menindee ................................................................. 239
Table 8.3 Mound Cluster Sizes .......................................................................................................................... 242

**Volume II Appendices**

Appendix 1 Colour Photos .................................................................................................................................... 1-18
Appendix 2 Witter Reduction Charts ................................................................................................................ 19
Appendix 3 Examples of SEM Pictures and Notes from B.Gott ......................................................................... 31
Appendix 4 Tables of Dates for Hearths and Mounds ...................................................................................... 35
Appendix 5.1 Ravensworth 3 Survey Data ........................................................................................................ 39
Appendix 5.2 Ravensworth 3 Charcoal ID .......................................................................................................... 43
Appendix 5.3 Ravensworth 3 Faunal Remains .................................................................................................... 46
Appendix 5.4 Ravensworth Stone Artefact Data ................................................................................................. 48
Appendix 5.5 Tchelery 1.1 Survey Data .............................................................................................................. 76
Appendix 5.5 Tchelery Faunal Remains ............................................................................................................... 82
Appendix 5.5 Tchelery Stone Artefact Raw Data ................................................................................................. 83
Appendix 5.6 Gundaline Artefact Data ............................................................................................................... 90
Appendix 6 Table 6.1 Ravensworth 3 Sediment Particle Size Analysis, colour, pH ....................................... 107
Appendix 6 Table 6.2 Ravensworth 3 Sediment Analysis Magnetic Susceptibility ........................................ 109
Appendix 6 Table 6.3 Ravensworth 3 Heat Retainer Analysis .............................................................................. 111
Appendix 6 Table 6.4 Ravensworth 3 Clay Ball Baking Experiment ................................................................. 113
Appendix 6 Table 6.5 Ravensworth 3 Magnetic Susceptibility by Particle Size Fraction .................................. 114
Appendix 6 Table 6.6 Ravensworth 3 Gross Weights and Sieve Weights ............................................................ 116
Appendix 7.1 Hay Plain Site Database (GridRefs Removed) ............................................................................... 118
Appendix 7.2 Hay Plain Site Survey Data ........................................................................................................... 137
Appendix 7.3 Field Survey Forms ..................................................................................................................... 140
Appendix 8.1 Data for Mound Size and Shape ................................................................................................. 143
Appendix 8.2 Language Group Boundaries ..................................................................................................... 151
Appendix 8.3 Landscape Stories ....................................................................................................................... 156
Conventions, Terms and Abbreviations

[w]ords I have inserted in a quote are placed in a square bracket]

All radiocarbon dates are uncalibrated and the convention ‘BP’ is used to denote uncalibrated dates, unless specifically noted. This is because I have discussed radiocarbon dates from many uncalibrated sources, and chose to use uncalibrated dates for easy comparison. I focus on the time period between 5,000 years BP and the recent historic phase, which does not have a large error. When quoting American papers that use calibrated AD/BC format, I follow this convention. Australian dates discussed in the text are tabulated in Appendix 4.

AHIMS - Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (DEC)
BP - Before the Present, referring to uncalibrated radiocarbon dates
DEC - Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW)
LALC - Local Aboriginal Land Council
NSW - State of New South Wales
NSW NPWS - New South Wales National Parks & Wildlife Service (now part of DEC)
RC - Radiocarbon (dating)
TL - Thermoluminescence (dating)
USO - Underground Storage Organ, refers to plant rhizomes, corms, bulbs, tubers that store energy in the form of carbohydrates, and/or water
VAS - Victorian Archaeological Survey, referring to the state of Victoria