# *INSCRIBING THE PLAINS :*

# *CONSTRUCTED, CONCEPTUALISED AND SOCIALIZED LANDSCAPES OF THE HAY PLAIN, SOUTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA*

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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.

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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

# Figures and Tables

## *Volume II Appendices*

## *Conventions, Terms and Abbreviations*

[words 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