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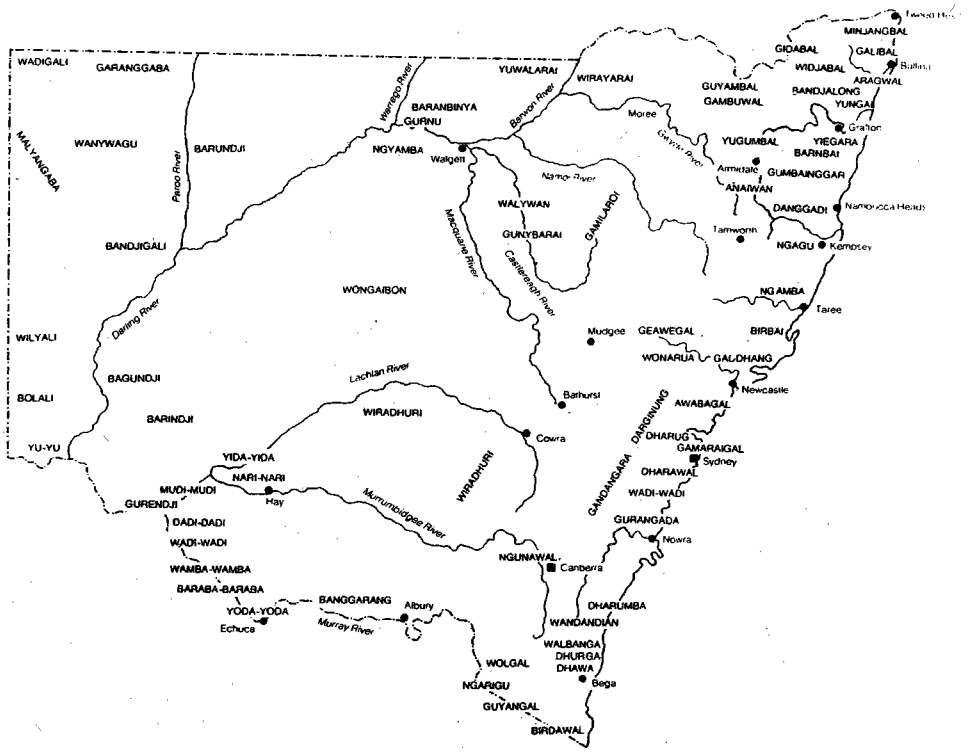
CATALOGUE COPY

THE NSW COASTAL BURIALS PROJECT



Denise Donlon

The Australian Museum
College Street
Sydney NSW 2000
September 1992

02873

Introduction

My name is Denise Donlon and I am a *physical anthropologist* from Sydney. I have spent some years studying and teaching human biology and archaeology and am interested in what can be learnt about people from looking at their skeletons. I have written many reports on skeletal remains from the NSW coast for Aboriginal communities. For example I have examined Aboriginal skeletal remains from:

- Windang for the **Illawarra** Community (Contact person - Dick Henry)
- Swansea Channel for the **Bahtabah** Community (Contact person - Mike Green)

I have mentioned (in brackets) the people who were my contacts for these projects and you may wish to speak to them about me, the work I undertook for them and the attitudes I have to this work.

I have just received a grant from the **Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies** in Canberra to begin a study of Aboriginal burials on the coast of New South Wales. I will be working at the Australian Museum in Sydney during this project.

The **purpose** of the project is to bring together all the information known about Aboriginal burials on the NSW coast -e.g their geographical distribution, age, different burial practices and what they tell us about the lifestyles of people in the past. I hope that this project will have **mutual benefits** for both archaeologists and Aboriginal people. By bringing this information together more knowledge will be gained about an important part of Aboriginal history. Also, knowing more about burials should help in the protection of burials from accidental disturbance in the future.

I have written this booklet to find out what Aboriginal people think about this project.

Please note
- **I will not be excavating any burials**
- **I will not make the locations of any burial sites public.**
- **I will not ask you to tell me about burials you do not want me to know about.**

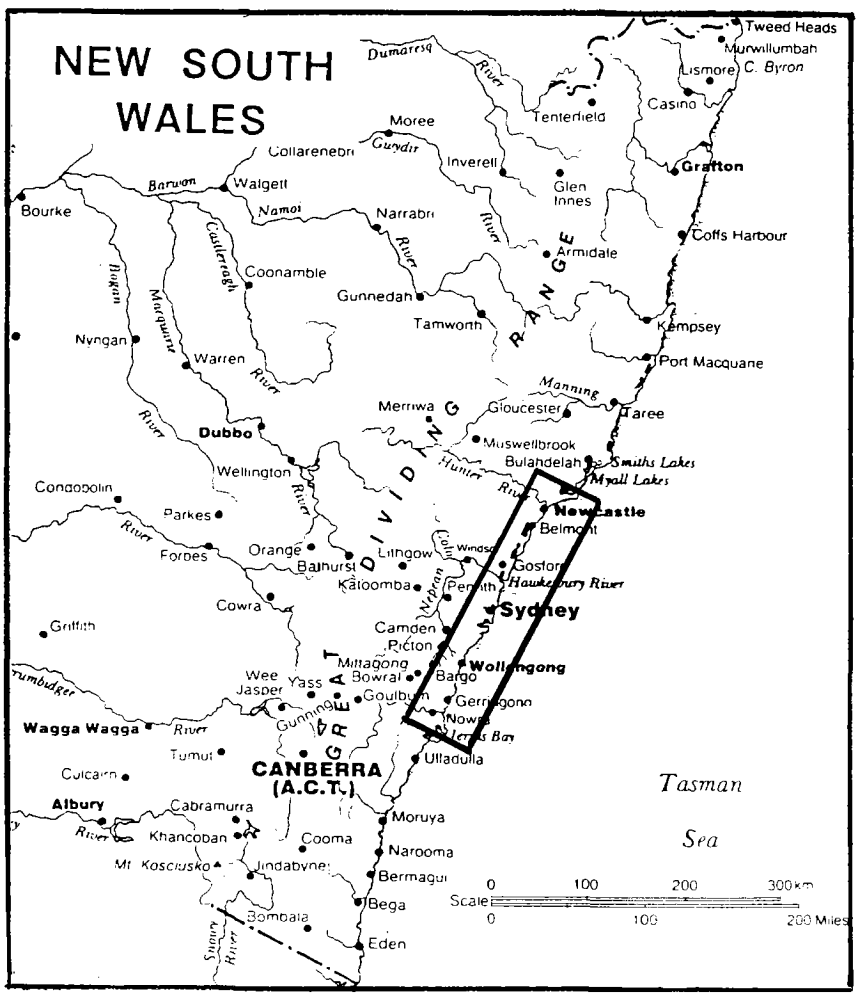
What this project is about

The following available information will be brought together into a single document:

- Where burials are found on the NSW coast
- How old the burials are
- What the burial sites look like now
- Who was buried
- What objects people were buried with
- How people lived
- Different burial practices along the coast

Where are burials found on the NSW coast?

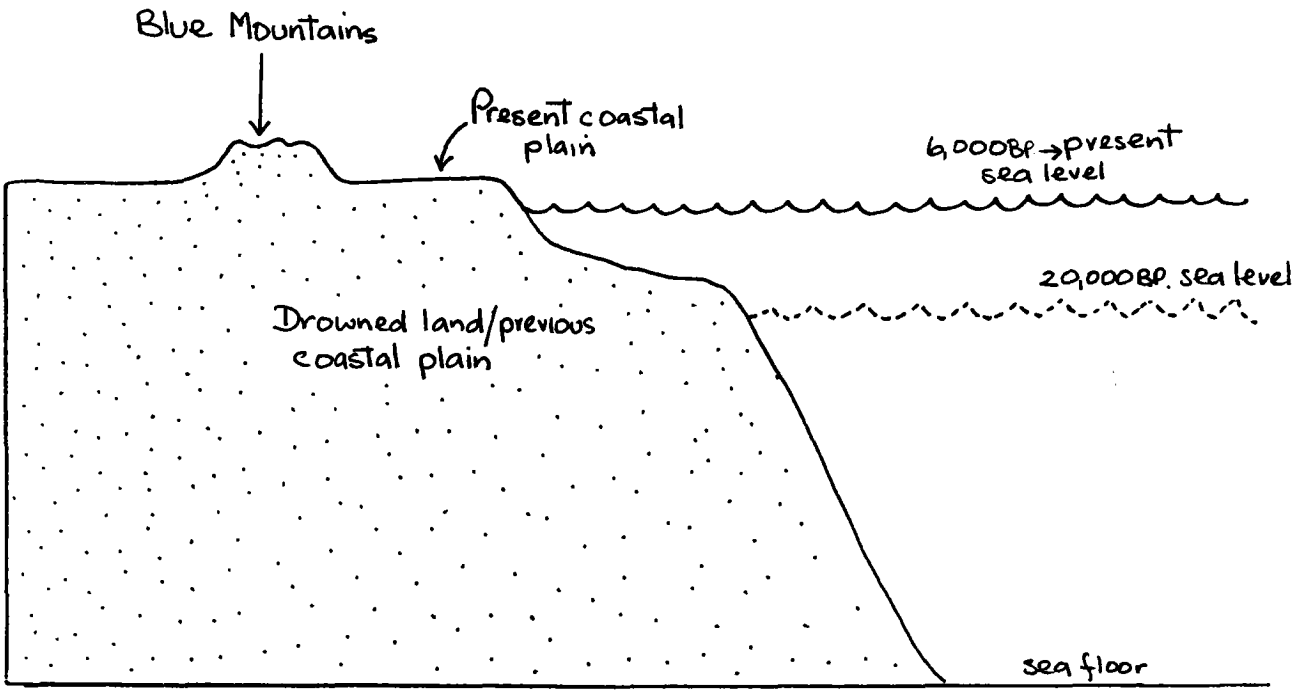
Most of the burials along the coast of NSW have been found around the Sydney, Illawarra and Central Coast areas. This is not surprising as this is where most of Australia's population lives today (and possibly also in the past) and it is also the land which is most likely to be disturbed. The area to be investigated is highlighted below.



How old are burials on the NSW coast?

About 20,000 years ago the sea was lower then today and the coast was about 20 kilometres further to the east. From that time to 6,000 years ago, the sea level gradually rose. This flooded the original coastline and coastal plain. This means that the present coastline has only existed for about 6000 years. It also means that most of the sand dunes along the coast were formed after 6000 years ago (probably about 4000 to 5000 years ago).

Many burials have been found in these dunes and they should not be older than about 4000 to 5000 years. Of course some other burials which are found in other parts of the landscape may be older than this. The people buried here before 6,000 years ago would have belonged to inland communities.



Over the last few years a number of coastal Aboriginal Land Councils have asked me to arrange the dating of some skeletal remains. The dates have ranged between 1000 and 3000 years. This is exactly what we would expect from what we know about sea level changes and the way the present coastal lands have formed.

What do the burial sites look like now?

As you can imagine, it is very difficult to know where burials are now as many indicators - such as carved trees, rocks, etc. have gone. I am interested to know if there was any association between burials and other sites e.g. certain types of middens, etc. as this may give clues about the possible locations of undisturbed burials.

I hope that this study will help to predict whether a burial might be in a area which is about to be disturbed. In this way the burial is more likely to be protected. **For example** - it may be that burials are more likely to occur on the northerly end of a beach and only in certain types of shell middens at a certain depth. If there was to be a disturbance to such type of middens then we could be better prepared to protect that burial.

Who was buried?

It seems that some groups within the society were **more likely to be buried** than other groups. For example some people have suggested that men were more likely to be buried than women. Women may have been placed on the surface of the ground and covered with bark or may have been cremated. Some also think that children were usually buried with women rather than men. However no one really knows if this is the case. I will put together information about which groups were likely to be buried. **This information will com from historic and oral sources as well as evidence gained in the past. I will not be excavating any burials.**

Part of this project will thus be a study of historic accounts by early European settlers who observed Aboriginal burial practices. Here is an example:

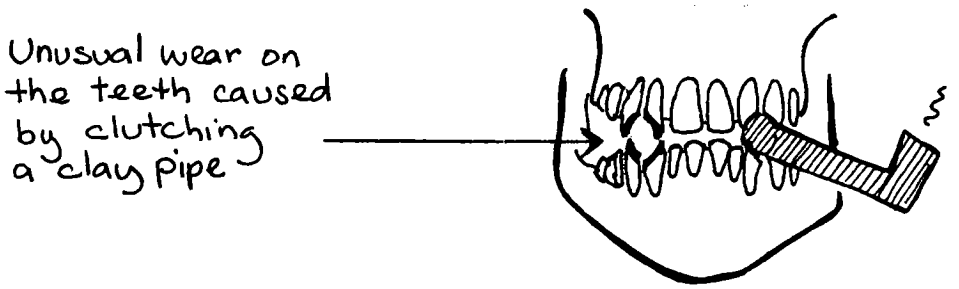
Part of Collin's account of the burial of Bennilong's wife in Sydney in 1798:

"...was...constructed, by excavating the ground with a stick to the depth of three or four inches, and on this part so turned up were first placed small sticks and light brushwood; larger pieces were then laid on each side of these; and so on until the pile might be about three feet in height....A basket with fishing apparatus and other small furniture of the deceased was placed by her side; and Bennilong having laid some logs of wood over the body the pile was lighted."

Collins, David (1804) *Account of the English Colony of New South Wales,* 1788-1801, 2nd ed., London.

What objects were people buried with?

People were often buried with some of their personal possessions - such as jewellery, spears, magic stones, small animals, crystals, ochre, pipes etc. These grave goods can tell us a lot about that person's life. For example from a skeleton which had teeth worn in a particular manner (see picture below) I could tell that he or she had smoked a clay pipe.



How did people live?

Here is a list of some of the things I may be able to tell about a person's lifestyle by examining the skeletal remains which are still in museums.

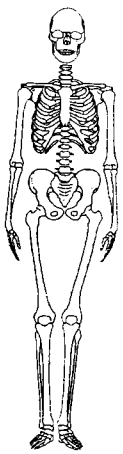
WHAT I CAN TELL	HOW
CAUSE OF DEATH	Certain types of injuries and infections leave "marks" on the bones e.g. yaws and syphilis often leave pitting on the shin bones and skull.
PERSONAL DETAILS	The size and shape of the bones can tell you the sex, age, height and muscle development of the person e.g. women's bones are usually smaller than men's and their hip bones are a different shape.
DAILY ACTIVITIES	Certain daily activities leave "marks" on the bones e.g.. squatting leaves smooth pits on the shin and ankle bones; carrying heavy loads can cause arthritis of the spine; and diving in cold water can produce nodules in the ear canals.
CHILDBIRTH	A woman who has had children will have small "pits" on the hip bones where the ligament have torn at the bone.
DIET	The state of the teeth can say a lot about a person's diet e.g. very severe wear on the teeth can suggest a diet of hard food with lots of grit in it.
HEALTH	Diseases can be seen on some bones.e.g. arthritis is common on the elbows; anaemia shows up as tiny furrows in the eye sockets.
INJURIES	Spear and nulla nulla wounds are fairly commonly seen - and of course - healed broken bones!
CUSTOMS:	Customs such as pipe smoking and tooth removal are fairly commonly seen.

Are burial practices along the coast similar? Are they differnt to inland burials customs?

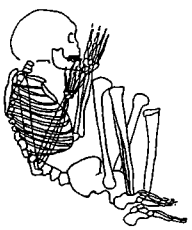
If burials along the coast are very similar and different to those of people inland, it might suggest that the coastal people had a lot of contact with each other but not with inland groups. By burial practices I mean:

- the way that the body is prepared for burial
- cremation
- position of body
- different burial types for people of different sex or age or status
- the burial of grave goods

Here are 2 examples of burial practices, one where the body is laid out flat (extended) and the other where the body is bent up (flexed).
I will get my information about burial practices from books and reports people have written.



EXTENDED BURIAL



FLEXED BURIAL

Why should this project be done?

Many people are concerned that the development of the coast is going to uncover and possibly destroy many Aboriginal burials. This study should help in predicting where burials are on the coast and so help protect them. There have been many burials found along the coast over the last 30 years but no one has really brought all the information together before.

Benefits to the Aboriginal Community

As I said above this study should help protect burials. I will produce a number of reports from this study. There will be one report especially for your region and also a larger report which will bring together all the information I will have collected from the coast. **Progress reports** will be available throughout the next year. I would also be happy to come out and chat to you or any other groups in your area about the methods I will use in my research.

I will wherever possible communicate with other groups in the community about Aboriginal burials, e.g Local Government Councils, the police and Coroners Courts. These groups sometimes have information on burials. They are also often the first people to be contacted about the finding of skeletal remains so it is important they understand about Aboriginal burials.

I would like to know **if you would like to be involved** in this project and if so, **how**. Perhaps you might like:

- me to visit your community or council, to tell you more about my work, or to explain certain things about skeletal remains. For example show you how to distinguish Aboriginal from European bones.

- to visit the Australian Museum and speak to me;

If you have any ideas, questions or need any more information please write to me at:

Division of Anthropology
The Australian Museum
6-8 College Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

or **phone** me on:
(02) 339 8332 or (02) 389 7397
or send me a **fax** on:
(02) 360 4350

Denise Donlon