Cultural linkages and nodes: concepts useful for Aboriginal cultural landscapes and local government planning schemes?

The focus of this paper is cultural landscapes, local government planning and the management of Aboriginal heritage around Melbourne. It would be incorrect to say that Aboriginal people had no impact on the surrounding landscape. This kind of impact and the way it has shaped the physical landscape is less easy to understand, for many people, than the more recent rural and urban development. The pre-contact landscape should be viewed as a cultural landscape that underlies or coexists with the post-contact historical landscape.

Two studies which aim to assess and provide planning advice to local councils regarding pre-contact or Aboriginal heritage are currently being undertaken around Melbourne by du Cros and Associates.¹ The shires commissioning the work, Macedon Ranges and Nillumbik shires, are both located north of Melbourne just outside the metropolitan area.

It has become increasingly important that the local councils acquire some kind of zoning plan or overlay designating areas of sensitivity for Aboriginal cultural heritage for integration into their planning schemes. They also need to engender some non-Aboriginal community awareness about Aboriginal heritage in order to pursue non-statutory measures to assist in protecting that heritage.

It has also become noticeable that current site prediction models derived from archaeological regional analysis are often not specific enough for integration into planning schemes or public education programs. Such models are also likely to ignore social factors associated with Aboriginal land use and the likely presence of certain non-archaeological sites (for example, Aboriginal historic places and sacred places with no archaeological remains).

Last year, du Cros and Associates conducted a study which included an archaeological zoning plan for the Nillumbik Shire Council. This approach has been approved by Aboriginal Archaeology Victoria (AAV) and the zones are being integrated into the council’s planning scheme. With the Nillumbik approach, the social dimension of Aboriginal heritage has not been really addressed. This approach also offers little scope for interpretation of the Nillumbik Shire area as a cultural landscape or as archaeologists term it, a ‘social landscape’. But is there the potential to offer councils and other interested parties something else as well as a zoning map?

Enter Macedon Ranges Shire Council who had recently completed a cultural heritage study with a strong emphasis on cultural landscapes.² This study dealt with the non-Aboriginal cultural landscape of the Macedon Ranges and its general philosophy was considered by the council to be worth repeating with Aboriginal landscapes.

The first or pilot stage of the Macedon Ranges pre-contact study commenced in April and was completed in August 1996 with NEGP funding. This study aimed to define and describe the range and rarity of pre-contact sites, and

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identify any physical links between such Aboriginal places and the type of significant cultural landscapes that might exist for the designated shire area. Such physical links are termed 'cultural linkages' and are broader in nature than travel routes, as they describe a greater range of human behaviour associated with past travel, resource use, trade and communication. While cultural linkages have been successfully defined for the non-Aboriginal cultural landscape of the Macedon Ranges, this pre-contact study is the first to attempt to apply this concept to Aboriginal cultural landscapes for planning and land management purposes.

Definition of elements within the cultural landscape

In trying to link many types of evidence to a particular area where other distinctly different modifications have altered the landscape will require some points of reference for the non-Aboriginal community. Using pre-contact clan estates as landscape units will be meaningful perhaps to archaeologists and the Aboriginal community, but will not greatly assist the shire's planners and the non-Aboriginal community to comprehend and utilise the Macedon study's data.

The post-contact landscape of much of the area in and around Melbourne differs greatly in character to that which existed prior to contact. Pre-contact landscapes need to be linked to the existing landscapes in the minds of the shire, researchers and the community. This approach is not new in public interpretation and is the basis of Gary Presland's book *Land of the Kulin* which superimposed Aboriginal landscapes on a *Melways* map of Melbourne.

Even so, a cultural landscape at its most complex would be more than a series of artefacts, site types, known sources of raw materials or modified patches of vegetation scattered across a particular area. An investigation of an area should involve some examination of how these features are inter-related. It would also link in people's minds how different cultural landscapes relate in a temporal way as well as spatially.

At least two pre-contact cultural landscapes are possible for the Macedon Ranges. The earliest cultural landscape might be described as that which comprises the more distant archaeological past, which does not share much with the more recent pre-contact phase. The more recent pre-contact phase is the one for which physical remains on and/or near the landscape surface and ethnographic and ethnographic data have most relevance.

A possible cut-off point may be 500-1,000 years before contact, and should be considered as a conservative and arbitrary estimate. Any other suggestions about this cut-off point would be gratefully accepted.

Two other concepts are being used here for the first time in relation to understanding past indigenous cultural landscapes. These are the concepts of
cultural linkages and cultural nodes that have been adopted for testing in this study as elements for interpreting and reconstructing the most recent pre-contact landscape.

Cultural linkages

The theory surrounding the term 'cultural linkages' is minimal. It is a concept that was generated by consultants along with the Woodend/Mt Macedon community during the Calder Highway – Woodend Bypass community consultation process. In the final report Chris Johnston of Context Pty Ltd identified four main types of cultural linkages relating to the historic cultural landscape around Woodend:

1. Transport and travel: travel between places provides a physical expression of the linkages listed below which are more intangible. They also provide evidence of the desire to move from one locality to another, and their significance to the community can change over time.

2. Administrative: administrative links provide the local government framework within which locales operate.

3. Economics and trade: a consideration of economic and trade links within a district provides evidence of the changing nature of transport routes over time. It may explain the historical significance of a discarded route, or the reasons for the creation of a new one.

4. Social: the social links between and within communities (religious, educational, recreation, sporting, psychological) are influential in determining movement within a locale, between different locales and beyond district boundaries. They may explain why a community regards some destinations as of particular significance and others of lesser significance.

Historical archaeologist, Neville Ritchie, has noted there are problems with the assessment of values associated with New Zealand's mining sites. The linkages he identified to overcome these problems were functional, historical and cultural. He stated that they should be taken into account in any future site recording and assessment on New Zealand's goldfields. It is not surprising that this concept has been used in trying to come to terms with goldfields where relics cannot be easily understood in isolation from one another. The features of such landscapes, though, do have less of a problem with contemporaneity than those in Aboriginal landscapes as most of the material remains were deposited and modification of the landscape occurred during a short time frame of not more than several decades.

For the purposes of the Macedon study, the consultant has interpreted 'cultural linkages' as a network of physical links between places of repeated visitation within the study area. Linkages could be travel routes for Aboriginal groups...
endnotes


4 Context Pty Ltd, A Study of Traditional, Historic and Cultural Linkages: A component of the Woodend transport study, report to Vicroads, Melbourne 1993, pp. 3-4.

5 Ibid.

6 N. Ritchie. 'Is there an Optimum System?: The recording and assessment of historic mining sites', Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology. 9, 1991 pp. 37-44.

7 Context Pty Ltd, op cit.

between two points frequently visited, or even part of a general trade route between clans (within and through the study area). Such linkages could also include routes of easiest convenience across the more rugged areas of the Macedon Ranges.

At this stage, the position of such routes could only be derived manually from a general appraisal of the topography of the area and from extrapolations from the area's ethnography and ethnography (for example, information such as 'Aborigines travelled along creeks and rivers, a group was met by Europeans in 1840 on its way to down Deep Creek Valley from Mt William' etc.).

It is hoped that the overlay of information possible with GIS and further research in stage two could make these routes more defined and obvious. Like the Woodend report's cultural linkages, it is proposed here that the physical expression of Aboriginal social, economic and inter-group relations can be found along such routes.

Places of repeated visitation or nodes

Places of repeated visitation as final destinations within the region, locales, or as destinations on the way along travel routes (linkages) have been defined here as 'nodes'. Suggestions for a better name again are welcome. These 'nodes' could be either frequently visited camp sites (eg. Wooling/Bolobek Swamp), resource areas (eg. Mt William axe quarry) or aggregation points (eg. camp sites for meeting other groups for 'business' or ceremonies).

Cultural linkages and nodes have the greatest relevance as elements within the more recent pre-contact cultural landscape, but also have some general relevance to the more distant cultural landscape only accessible through the archaeological record. Stage two of the study will aim to 'reconstruct' the most recent of the pre-contact landscapes using these elements foremost.

Conclusion

Few sites have been excavated and dated in or near the study area, so not a great deal can be gleaned about the cultural landscape of the more distant past from the archaeological record. In my experience, the recent pre-contact landscape is also that which is more commonly dealt with by the shire and the community in everyday decisions associated with land-use planning. Such remains or modifications to the landscape are on or closer to the surface and are more likely to have some measure of contemporaneity.

Finally, a multi-disciplinary approach combining the work of cultural geographers, GIS analysts, anthropologists, planners and archaeologists is perhaps what is needed to apply cultural landscape models most successfully in heritage management context. This landscape modelling is still in its experimental stage, but if successful it could add a greater depth to public interpretation of Aboriginal heritage in the Macedon Ranges for the whole community.