

‘Suffering is the badge of all our tribe’: Histories and futures for the Oxford *marara* (tree carving) from New South Wales

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Abstract

At the University of Oxford’s museum of anthropology, the Pitt Rivers Museum, on open display within the section devoted to Aboriginal art, sits a New South Wales tree carving made by the Wiradjuri or Gamilaroi people, most likely a grave marker. It has no recorded provenance beyond the fact that it was found, in 1948, to have never been accessioned, and so a number was given to it. Erroneously assuming that it was one of many items left in the museum by its former curator Henry Balfour on his death in 1939, no detailed research has ever been carried out on this remarkable piece of Aboriginal cultural heritage. This article seeks to establish all the evidence that is available for the object’s provenance and makes a case for a particular context in particular – as the ‘tomb tablet’ that was sent by the New South Wales organising committee for the Paris universal exhibition of 1867 – and thus one of the earliest and most historically significant Aboriginal artefacts from New South Wales in any European museum. Having followed the historical trail as far as can be done right now, the article concludes with some reflections on museum ethics and equitable futures and sketches a potential future for the *guulany* within the context of a return to Country.

Introduction

On display in the University of Oxford's museum of anthropology and world archaeology, the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), is a tree carving or dendroglyph from New South Wales, most likely from Wiradjuri Country.¹ It has been on display there since 2012, when a new set of displays was created devoted to 'Australian Aboriginal Art'. Set on a plinth, in a gap between two glass cases, it is clamped in position, to prevent it from toppling forward. Thus restrained, the *marara* (the Wiradjuri word for tree carving) sits, and looks out over the Museum's educational space, where dozens of schoolchildren gather most days to listen to stories about human history and material culture (Figure 1). To one side of the *marara*, a case shows examples of Aboriginal painting in traditional styles such as dot and X-ray painting, and to the other side a case is devoted to contemporary photographic artworks by Christian Thompson, installed in 2017. In this typologically arranged ethnographic museum, the *marara* is not displayed as an artwork as such, but its incised design is the essential reason for its inclusion in a display originally designated as showing 'Aboriginal art'. Its label is careful, however, to point out its wider cultural purpose, vaguely glossed as a 'site marker'.

In this article, I ask, where did this tree carving come from, and how did it get to this Oxford museum? In doing so, I put forward a compelling case for its provenance and biography as one of the objects sent by the state of New South Wales for its court at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867. In doing so, the paper explores its connections with wider colonial events, histories and networks, that led to its removal from Country, exhibition in Europe, and subsequent life as a museum artefact. The paper also seeks to understand the historical role of *marara* as objects of ethnography within colonial academia, and their commodification as an ambiguous object of artistic and scientific fascination. Very few *marara* remain in situ in Wiradjuri or Gamilaroi Country today, with most examples existing in museum collections in Australia and elsewhere. Culturally modified trees, whether carved or scarred through selective and non-damaging bark extraction, that do remain in situ are under the constant threat of natural attrition and development pressure.² This makes provenance research such as this particularly important at the present time as the communities affected by the extractive practices of colonialism search for their cultural heritage in international collections.

1 Wiradjuri Country is the largest Aboriginal nation in New South Wales. For a detailed description of Wiradjuri identity, language and territory, see Macdonald, 'Territorial Boundaries and Society in the NSW Riverine'.

2 Spry et al., 'Wala-gaay Guwingal', 3.

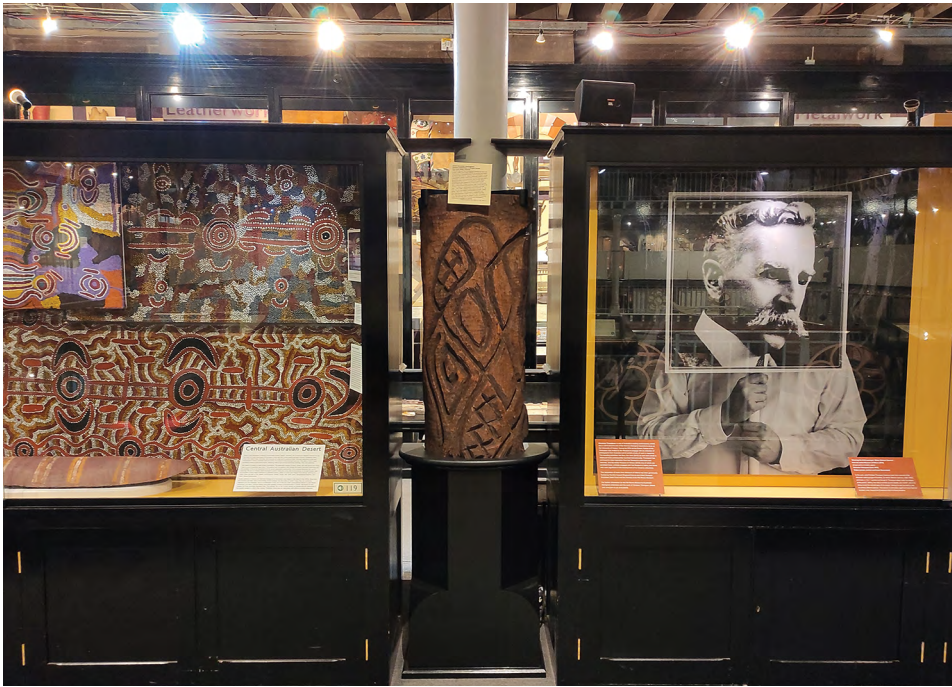


Figure 1: The marara on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2023.

Source: Author's photograph.

The paper ends with a description of recent Indigenous artistic engagement with the Oxford marara, as well as a proposition about its future life back home with the community whose ancestors carved it, and who it in turn commemorates and continues to resonate with strongly today. A new possibility has emerged within the context of a returns policy developed by this particular marara's custodian, the University of Oxford, for cultural objects taken without consent, as well as wider initiatives to collate information about Aboriginal heritage held outside of Australia. These important institutional shifts and international partnerships create a new framework in which to consider a future in which the marara may return to Country and regrow its cultural and social roots.

Dendroglyphs of New South Wales

The Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi communities of New South Wales have been carving trees at burial sites or to mark *bora* (initiation) ceremony areas for many generations. While most observations of the practice are found in the early nineteenth century, members of the Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council have recently shared that tree scarring does continue to be passed down to the younger generation.³ Both scarring

³ Spry et al., 'Wala-gaay Guwingal', 6.

a tree by removing a section of bark for utilitarian purposes and carving into the heartwood for commemoration purposes are practices particularly associated with the communities of western New South Wales. One of the earliest European accounts of the practice comes from the surveyor John Oxley in 1817 on the Lachlan River (Wiradjuri: Kalari, Galiyarr) in central New South Wales. Oxley recorded the site in his journal as the burial of a local ‘King’ who had been drowned while trying to cross the flooded river. Oxley described the grave as a mound surrounded by two cypress pine trees marked with ‘curious characters deeply cut upon them, in a manner which, considering the tools they possess, must have been a work of great labour and time ...’⁴ Another early account was by the surveyor William Govett, who observed a funeral near Goulburn in 1836:

I soon perceived before me three native black women, and rode up to them. They were sitting around a mound of earth, with their heads depressed and nearly touching one another ... I waited some time in astonishment observing their actions, and listening to their horrid lamentable yells. They were each of them striking their heads with a tomahawk ... They weep this way, wailing and cutting their heads, until they become perfectly exhausted, and can shed tears no longer ... The trees all round the tomb were marked in various peculiar ways, some with zigzags and stripes, and pieces of bark otherwise cut.⁵

The carvings were made by removing the bark from an area of the tree and carving designs into the heartwood. The tree is not harmed in the process, and over time many carvings gradually became harder to see as the bark regrew at its edges. The carved designs vary, but there are some common stylistic patterns. Later scholars such as Etheridge attempted to distinguish between dendroglyphs produced as burial markers, which he termed taphoglyphs, and those used to mark bora ceremonial places, which he termed teleteglyphs.⁶ Although Etheridge’s report shows that there were around 80–90 dendroglyphs still in situ across the region at the time of his publication, hundreds had already been cut down by this date, either for sale or export as curios, and even more were cut and removed in the mid-twentieth century.

Comparison of the tree carving in the PRM with published examples suggests that it has both distinct and common elements with other known early carvings published by Etheridge (Figure 2). Its distinctiveness lies in its open series of interwoven lines that enfold and enclose lozenge-shaped spaces. However, some of the design elements are also found elsewhere, such as cross-hatch designs, spiralling lines, and ovoid shapes. In particular, the spiral and cross-hatch lozenge elements are consistent with designs seen in examples published by Etheridge from near the town of Dubbo,⁷ which is in Wiradjuri Country. Such design elements are also more associated with burial sites than bora sites. On stylistic grounds alone, therefore, the tree carving in the PRM would appear to be consistent with it being a burial site marker from Wiradjuri Country.

4 Oxley quoted by Briggs and Jackson, *Carved Trees*, 12.

5 Govett quoted by Briggs and Jackson, *Carved Trees*, 8.

6 Etheridge, *The ‘Dendroglyphs’ or Carved Trees of New South Wales*.

7 Etheridge, *The ‘Dendroglyphs’ or Carved Trees of New South Wales*, Plate XXI.



Figure 2: 'Taphoglyphs', or carved tree grave markers, from near Dubbo, New South Wales, showing some of the same elements as the marara in Oxford, especially diamonds and spirals.

Source: Robert Etheridge, Jr, *The 'Dendroglyphs' or Carved Trees of New South Wales* (Sydney: Dept. of Mines, 1918), Plate XX1.

Reading the marara

When you get up close to the tree carving you no longer see it as a dendroglyph, but as a marara, which has a long story to tell. In the museum's research room, lying on a trolley on its flat back, its carved front looks very different. Instead of seeing the overall design, you instead see axe marks moving in every direction, light dancing off the wavy grain of the wood, and the patina of decades of life in a museum (Figure 3). Having spent its life on open display, no doubt some children's hands have touched its deeply carved surface over the years.

In the hushed museum research space, away from visitors, the marara begins to reveal more detail than is apparent in the dingy museum. The marara was a mature well-established tree. We lift it onto its front to see its sawn back, and its weight is almost more than two people can handle. Bearing the huge weight of the dense wood reminds one of the labour involved in felling the tree and sawing it, years after a man was buried in a spot near to where it was growing. The original carver came to

commemorate a man's burial and to mark its location. His axe chopped at its bark to remove a section, and began to carve deep curving lines, cutting in two directions down into little ravines. The tree was not harmed in doing this. It would continue to grow and flourish, and in time the bark would grow around the carved designs and envelope their edges. But this marara did not live long to tell the story of this man's life and burial at that place. At some time after its carving, it was found by a European who brought a mechanical circular saw, cutting very straight across the top and bottom of this section of the tree, and straight down across its mid-point. And so, the tree was killed, and the life of the marara as a living story of the burial place was removed. A new story began; this section of the marara was taken away and an object of ethnography was created out of it. There is a deep irony in the way the marara was destroyed and sent away to Europe to tell a story about its life as a living representation. The Europeans called it a 'tomb tablet', but they were the ones that made a 'tablet' out of the marara. They called it that to compare it with the practices of other cultures, especially those in the deep European past, with whom they compared Aboriginal people.

In the museum research room in Oxford, when you get up close to it, the marara tells all of these stories of its past in rich detail. On the carved front, the heads of several very old small nails are visible, one at the top, and two near the base. The two near the base may have secured in place a card label describing the object when it was originally displayed. On the top are the remains of another label, only small traces now remaining, including some parts of letters or numbers in printed black ink. On one side, two drill holes are visible, where it was once perhaps secured to a display. One of the diamond-shaped pieces of wood, created by the carver with criss-crossing lines, is now missing, and the remains of some resin or old glue is visible, perhaps where the piece was once put back on in the past but has long since disappeared. Up close, the tiny islands of wood that form the diamond shapes seem to feature more than they do in the dimly lit museum. In Wiradjuri symbology, the diamond is a common feature, representing the sky, stars and trade routes.⁸ On its flat back are the remains of a shipping label, many nail holes, and the heads of two nails still with traces of card attached to them. At the top, four small holes have been drilled, perhaps also done in the past to secure the marara to a support when on open display. In some areas, the odd bit of woodworm is noticeable, but not much. And a dark patina is noticeable on parts of the front, almost like the remains of paint, or perhaps a preservative treatment.

The marara's long institutional life can be read in all of these things, like scars on an aged skin. But what is most noticeable are the axe marks in the wood that look as fresh as the day they were struck by the person who cut them. They are strong, confident chops that took chunks of wood away with each blow, rarely going over the same place twice, moving on steadily around the design in different directions.

8 Spry et al., 'Investigating Wiradjuri marara', 218.

Only once is hesitation discernible – in the lower left lozenge where the carver decided not to continue a cut across the diamond pattern, but to leave it half-cut. Otherwise the marks are free, experienced, and flow around the wood, only ending abruptly at the top where it appears the circular saw has truncated the design. The sharpness of the marks suggest that a steel axe or hatchet was used by the marara's carver, which would suggest it was carved sometime after contact with Europeans in the early nineteenth century.⁹

I invited a plant scientist to examine the tree carving, Prof Stephen Harris, Druce Curator of the Oxford University Herbaria. His observations turn our understanding of the object on its head. Looking at the flat back of the tree section, there is a hollow section where the remains of the early growth of the tree has rotted away over time. This hollow area contains evidence in the form of holes where early branches from the young tree would have been. These holes point in the direction that the young branches grew, upwards towards the light, and show that the marara had been displayed in the museum over many years upside down. The observation is also confirmed by the fact that, in this orientation, the marara begins to flare outwards slightly near the top of the section, suggesting the beginning of branch formation higher up the trunk.

Stephen noted that this was a very mature tree when carved, quite possibly hundreds of years old. The dense, heavy wood is almost certainly from a species of eucalypt, one of the most dominant genera in New South Wales. It is so hard that the carver would have needed considerable force to cut the deep incisions in the sapwood of the tree. The force of these axe blows is still evident in the jagged sides of the carved designs, showing where the axe blade came to rest after each chop, in many different directions.

The surface of the marara in many areas shows a wavy pattern – this is the impression left by the bark in the sapwood below it. In other areas there is cracking, occurring along lines of weakness in the bast fibres of the wood. Near the base of the marara section, at the front, a much larger crack is evident. This crack then becomes one of the carved lines of the design, showing that the carver most likely followed an existing crack in the wood of the tree when creating the design. And finally, looking at the marara in section, it is clear that this tree grew in an eccentric manner, putting on more growth on one side than on the other. There are any number of possible reasons for this, including that it grew on the edge of a wooded area or suffered some stress on one side during its life.

9 This finding is consistent with that observed in Spry et al., 'Investigating Wiradjuri marara', 220.



Figure 3: Close-up of the incised lines carved into the marara showing axe marks.

Source: Author's photograph.

There are nearly 900 species of eucalypts growing in Australia, many of them in New South Wales. To get a precise species identification would involve destructive sampling to provide a thin section of the wood for microscopic analysis, a procedure that would not yield much, if any, research value given the widespread distribution of eucalypts in New South Wales. The close reading of the marara as a material object and as the remains of a once living plant has given us such rich information about its life, before it was carved by an axe, before it was felled by a saw, before it was mounted as a museum artefact, before it was shipped across Europe, before it was exhibited for decades upside down, as if pointing home to Australia. To take this reading further, I needed to get into the documentation that might still exist about the marara's life as an artefact.

Museum documentation

Almost nothing is known about the history of the marara within the documentation at the PRM itself. In December 1948 a curator, Beatrice Blackwood, discovered that it had not been given any entry in the museum's catalogue records, and so gave it a number, 1948.12.77. Not finding any label or other documentation about its provenance, Blackwood realised that it was from New South Wales, and from the Wiradjuri or Kamilaroi peoples, based on publications in the museum's library. Blackwood also makes two further notes in the museum's catalogue, the first suggesting that the object may have been collected by her former colleague Henry Balfour, the first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, and who died in 1939, and the

second to suggest that it was 'probably a grave tree, deeply cut in diamonds etc.', no doubt as a result of comparison with some of the examples published in Lindsay Black's *Burial Trees* (1941), which she references in the museum's catalogue entry.¹⁰



Figure 4: Blackwood's museum card catalogue entry for the marara.

Source: Author's photograph.

¹⁰ The museum's catalogue refers to two publications to identify the carving: *Australian Aboriginal Art* by Kenyon and Barrett (1929) and *Burial Trees* by Lindsay Black (1941).

It was an understandable assumption on Blackwood's part to ascribe the collection of the tree carving to her late colleague Henry Balfour. He had visited Australia in 1914 to attend the British Association meetings and noted in his diary the collection of a number of Aboriginal artefacts.¹¹ However, his only noted purchase in New South Wales was an inlaid Malaita (Solomon Islands) club, bought at the taxidermist and curio dealer shop of Tost & Rohu in Sydney for £10 (about £1,200 today) which was later reimbursed out of museum funds. It seems very unlikely that Balfour would have purchased a dendroglyph of such size, and no doubt expense, in 1914, without either a mention in his diary or having the cost reimbursed on his return, which would have prompted its entry in the museum's accession book. One of the main reasons for Blackwood ascribing the object to Balfour was the fact that many objects were found in the museum following his death in 1939 with little or no documentation, and assumptions were made, mostly for the sake of expediency, that they were acquired by the long-serving curator. It seems that the dendroglyph received little or no curatorial attention at the PRM until the appointment of the anthropologist Howard Morphy as a curator in 1985, who presumably immediately began to familiarise himself with the museum's Australian objects. Morphy must have immediately recognised its significance, since it was soon afterwards photographed by the museum photographer, in 1987, no doubt in preparation for its inclusion in the museum's exhibition *The First Australians*, part of the wider *Australia in Oxford* series of exhibitions in Oxford during 1988–89. According to John Simmons, a recently retired museum technician who was on the staff at this time, the tree carving was at this time on display in the old stairwell of the museum, near the entrance to the lower gallery, where there was a glazed door. Following the closure of the *Australians in Oxford* exhibition in March 1989, the carving was displayed in the court of the museum, until the museum closed for the construction of a new public entrance in 2008. And this is where it remained until 2012, when it was redisplayed in its current location on the lower gallery of the museum, on open display between two cases showing Aboriginal art.

So, if the marara was not collected by Balfour, what might its provenance be? One major clue is found on its reverse, a label from the French shipping company Flageollet Frères, which shows that it made its way from Paris, through the port of Boulogne, to London (Figure 5). Flageollet Frères et Cie was a prominent French shipping company of the second half of the nineteenth century, mentioned in commercial almanacs as early as 1859, and by the mid-1870s was sending in excess of 15,000 tonnes of goods annually from Boulogne to London.¹² The company seems to have still been operating in the mid-1880s, but references to it fall away after this date. A further point of interest lies in the fact that the shipping label is affixed to the marara itself, perhaps suggesting that the large solid tree section was shipped from France without a container. The shipping label demonstrates that it was sent from Paris to London at

11 See Morton, 'A Diary in the Loose Sense of the Term'.

12 *The Times* (London), 'Law Report: Railway Commission, April 19, Greenop v. The South-Eastern Railway Company', 20 April 1876, 11.

a time when Flageollet Frères were active shipping agents between these cities, that is, between 1860 and the mid-1880s. If this is indeed the case, we are dealing here with one of the oldest known examples of a New South Wales dendroglyph in any museum collection. Although there was a significant later trade in such objects, mostly in the early to mid-twentieth century, very few Australian dendroglyphs are likely to have been circulating internationally in this period. However, there is one candidate which the evidence points to, and it is one that I argue is the most compelling, based on all available documentation, as well as the material analysis of the object itself.



Figure 5: Flageollet Frères company shipping label on the reverse of the tree section.
Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

A 'tomb tablet' sent to Paris

Writing at the beginning of 1867, in the catalogue accompanying the objects sent from New South Wales to both the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne and then onto the major international Exposition Universelle held in Paris that year, the executive commissioner of the organising committee, Terence Aubrey Murray, noted that, in addition to sending a wide variety of natural and industrial products for display:

the Local Commissioners have also thought that it would be interesting to exhibit man in his 'stone age', as exemplified by the aborigines of Australia ... In the rude products of aboriginal ingenuity which they have sent to the Exhibition may be contemplated the rudiments of those qualities and powers which in their higher

development give man the position he now holds in the world ... And as in every age and stage of savagism, barbarism, or civilisation, 'suffering is the badge of all our tribe', so the poor savage too has to grieve, and the evidences of his mourning are not wanting in this collection of aboriginal memorials.¹³

Although no Aboriginal items from New South Wales are listed in the catalogue of the items sent from the state to the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866,¹⁴ Murray's reference to mourning here relates to two items that were then sent with the collection to Paris and listed in the catalogue there, namely 'two caps of clay, worn by the aboriginal widows for twelve months during mourning' and an 'Aboriginal tomb tablet in memory of killing and burying one of the tribe'.¹⁵ Murray's quote from Shakespeare, 'suffering is the badge of all our tribe', is of course intended as a universalist comment upon human nature, hence his allusion to the three commonly perceived stages of cultural development. However, Shylock's words from *The Merchant of Venice* are clearly not intended to be universal but related solely to the troubled experience of being a Jew. And so Murray's use of the phrase is oddly ironic, in that the Aboriginal objects of mourning he and other Europeans had collected only served to emphasise the particular suffering of the Aboriginal community and not any shared human suffering. These two items, the tomb tablet and the clay cap, formed part of a larger section within the New South Wales court at the exhibition devoted to 'Aboriginal weapons and implements', including dillybags,¹⁶ fishing nets, boomerangs, spears and shields. It is beyond doubt that the 'tomb tablet' sent by the New South Wales Exhibition Commission to Paris was a dendroglyph, as will be shown later. But what is also important to note is that it was known to have been created as a commemorative burial marker. This specific information strongly suggests that the local context of the dendroglyph as a grave marker was known to the exhibition commissioners, although it is not known who procured it for them, beyond the fact that it was exhibited by the commissioners as a body, rather than a named lender. One possibility is that it was sourced by Charles Moore (1820–1905), a member of the Exhibition Commission and the director of Sydney's Botanical Garden, who had organised for over 150 specimens of wood from the state to be sent to Paris, and who may have had the tree section cut during his work in collecting specimens in the Richmond and Clarence River districts in 1861.¹⁷

Although I have not been able to locate any photographs of the New South Wales court at the 1867 Exposition Universelle that might show the dendroglyph on display, it is known that some photographs were taken.¹⁸ There was considerable interest in the

13 Murray, 'Introduction', 356.

14 *Official Record of the Intercolonial Exhibition of Australasia, Melbourne 1866–67*, 60–72.

15 *Catalogue of the Natural and Industrial Products of New South Wales*, 37.

16 A bag generally woven by women from plant fibres to gather and transport food.

17 See King, 'Moore, Charles (1820–1905)'.

18 Letter from Charles Moore to T. A. Murray from Paris in May 1867, in which he states that he would get J. L. Montefiore to send the photographs that had been taken of the NSW court to Murray by the next mail. See A. G. Gyulay, 'The New South Wales Court in the Paris Exhibition Palace'. *Sydney Mail*, 20 July 1867, 7.

Aboriginal objects displayed during the exposition, with J. L. Montefiore, the New South Wales resident commissioner in Paris, writing that the director of the Louvre Museum had written to him about acquiring 'some native arms'.¹⁹ The question of selling or otherwise disposing of many of the objects at the close of the exposition was the subject of a letter to Murray from Charles Moore, who oversaw much of the arrangement of the displays in Paris:

It is most important that some price should be fixed at which the various articles sent to the Exhibition by the Commission may be sold – if not too high, most of them will sell readily ... A value must also be placed on the weapons, which I have arranged in the form of a trophy in two groups, and are examined with a great deal of interest. I have had several inquiries after these, but think they will either go to the South Kensington Museum or to that of Edinburgh.

An engraving of the New South Wales court at the Paris Exposition by Dieudonné Lancelot shows one of the two groups of Aboriginal weapons mentioned by Moore (Figure 6), with shields at the base, clubs above, and spears at the top. The suggestion that some of the Aboriginal artefacts on display in Paris might have been destined for the South Kensington Museum (SKM) is an intriguing and tantalising possibility for the dendroglyph's later history. The SKM had been established only 10 years earlier, in 1857, following the huge success of the Great Exhibition of London in 1851. At this early date, the SKM was still in flux, and without its later clear focus on art and design, but at its heart was the concept of practical education through objects, the key concept behind Prince Albert's Great Exhibition and the driving force of the new museum under Henry Cole, the first general superintendent of the Department of Practical Art. This focus on education meant that it was not like the other national museums, being more like 'a school that had a collection to which the public was also admitted'.²⁰ Many items were loaned by the SKM to the Paris exhibition, as noted by Cole, who also acted as the executive commissioner of the British section there (within which the British colonies also exhibited). These items were carefully packed in specially made vans onto trains via Boulogne.²¹ In Cole's final report on the exposition, among the shipping companies used by the British section for the transportation of objects, one in particular jumps out – Flageollet Frères.²² One of the reasons why the SKM may have been interested in the dendroglyph was due to its perceived educational value from a graphic design perspective. This context for understanding the object was not something that Murray and the New South Wales Exhibition Commission had chosen to highlight in its own published catalogue, as we have seen, where its value as an object that bore witness to the ancient cultural expression of human mourning was foregrounded, part of an attempt by the

19 Letter from J. L. Montefiore to T. A. Murray, 15 August 1867. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Paris Exhibition: New South Wales Department', 15 August 1867, 5.

20 Robertson, 'The South Kensington Museum in Context', 4.

21 Cole, 'Report by the Executive Commissioner', xv.

22 The money paid to Flageollet Frères is noted as £17, a relatively small sum in comparison with other French shippers such as Gaudet Frères at £2,499 (around £300,000 today).

commission to show the educational value of studying the Aboriginal peoples of its territory. Yet a shift in the object's main educational value seems to have taken place, as evidenced by its inclusion, in the overall catalogue of the British section of the exposition, within the class 'Upholstery and Decoration', which also included a 'carved tablet, designed by Mr Manderson' and the 'top of a loo [game] table'.²³ This seems to have partly been the result of difficulty in categorising some of the Aboriginal objects within a classification scheme designed for European manufactures. The widows' caps for instance were exhibited under 'Clothing for both sexes'.²⁴ With such a shift in value, from ethnographic evidence of 'Stone Age' culture, to example of native graphic art or decoration, the interest of an educational collection such as that of the SKM becomes much more understandable and conceivable.



NOUVELLE-GALLES DU SUD. — Dessin de M. Lancelot.

Figure 6: Engraving by Dieudonné Lancelot showing the New South Wales court at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867.

Source: François Dulcuing, ed., *L'Exposition universelle de 1867 Illustrée*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Administration), 465.

²³ *Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867*, 348.

²⁴ Widows' caps, otherwise known as *kopis*, were worn throughout a period of mourning which could last from one week to many months. They were made by applying multiple layers of plaster to the head once the hair had been cropped, often over a net to make removal easier. After mourning was complete, they were then placed on the deceased's grave. Australian Museum, 'Mourning – Indigenous Australia: Widow's Caps', 22 November 2018, australian.museum/about/history/exhibitions/death-the-last-taboo/mourning-indigenous-australia/.

A final and definitive piece of evidence that the marara in Oxford is indeed the one from the 1867 exhibition is a sketch made of the carving on display in Paris (interestingly, the wrong way up) by A. W. Franks, the British Museum keeper responsible for ethnography, in whose diary it can be found (Figure 7).²⁵ The detailed sketch is without doubt the same object and is even labeled '428' – the number given to the tomb tablet in the exhibition catalogue.



Figure 7: A. W. Franks, private notebook titled 'Paris Exhibition' [1867].

Source: British Museum Archive, Ethnographic Notebooks, Large Series, LS11, 49.

25 My deep gratitude to Gaye Sculthorpe for alerting me to the existence of the sketch in this notebook.

Possible routes

At the close of the exhibition, in November 1867, the agent-general for New South Wales in London, William Colburn Mayne, wrote to Murray on his return to London to say that he and Montefiore had decided that ‘articles destined for, or sold to, private persons, or for institutions, should be those first packed and dispatched’.²⁶ While we know that the dendroglyph was sent in this period from Paris to London, evidenced by its shipping label, what is most tantalising about the documented possibility that it was acquired for the SKM is the connection between that museum and the donor of the founding collection of the Oxford museum where it exists today, Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers (1827–1900).²⁷ In 1874 Pitt-Rivers lent a major portion of his large and growing collection of ethnographic artefacts to the South Kensington Museum’s new Bethnal Green branch museum, two years after it had opened in what was a relatively poor London district, where they occupied a portion of the basement displays. Many other loan collections as well as objects from the SKM’s own collections, as well as objects left over from the 1851 Great Exhibition, were also displayed there. Although Pitt-Rivers was to gradually deposit more and more loaned objects at the SKM over the next decade, none of the receipts given to him suggest that the dendroglyph was among them. One possibility therefore is that the dendroglyph was acquired by and displayed at the SKM in the 1870s in association with Pitt-Rivers’s collection, but that its origins and ownership became confused over time, with the assumption eventually being that this ethnographic object most likely formed part of the Pitt-Rivers loan collection. This may have happened at any time, but could possibly have happened after his collection moved to the SKM’s main site in 1878, where it formed part of the Educational Series exhibited in two galleries alongside the Horticultural Gardens. Pitt-Rivers continued to deposit significant amounts of material on loan here until the collection’s transfer to Oxford in 1885. This possibility could explain a number of anomalies around the object’s provenance, especially its lack of any clear documentation or mention within Pitt-Rivers’s own collection, which you would expect if he had bought it at auction in London or deposited it himself at the museum. Although in May 1867 Charles Moore seemed to think that the Aboriginal weapons displayed by New South Wales in Paris would likely be sold to the SKM, no mention of any Australian objects is made in the list of objects obtained from the exhibition, published the following year, in 1868.²⁸ It is not impossible that objects did nonetheless make their way into the SKM’s collection, but the lack of any mention does make it less likely. And yet there is one possible mention of the dendroglyph in the list of objects loaned by Pitt-Rivers that were transferred

26 Letter from W. C. Mayne to T. A. Murray, 18 November 1867. See *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘Paris Exhibition: New South Wales Department’, 15 August 1867, 5.

27 Augustus Henry Lane Fox did not add Pitt-Rivers to his name until he inherited the estate of his cousin Horace Pitt-Rivers, 6th Baron Rivers, in 1880. However, I refer to him as Pitt-Rivers throughout this article for the sake of clarity.

28 *List of the Objects Obtained During the Paris Exhibition of 1867, by Gift, Loan, or Purchase*.

from the SKM to Oxford in the summer of 1885, and that is the 'large piece of carved wood' that is listed as having arrived, but that has never been positively matched with any object.²⁹ A further hint as to its nature comes in the further note that this piece of carved wood was not numbered, nor displayed in a case. Although not definitive, this object description does at least match the dendroglyph closely, being without any visible number written on it (which is usual for Pitt-Rivers items), and would almost certainly never have been displayed in any of the cases commonly used for the Pitt-Rivers collection, due to its size and weight.

There is another, perhaps even more persuasive, route that the tree section may have taken to end up in Pitt-Rivers's own collection, and this is via the collection of the Anthropological Society of London (ASL). In a letter to the ASL dated 20 April 1867, T. A. Murray wrote to suggest that the carved rock designs reproduced in a review of George Tate's book *The Ancient Sculptured Rocks of Northumberland and the Eastern Borders* (1865) published in its *Anthropological Review* might bear interesting comparison to those found on 'an "aboriginal tomb tablet" which has been sent from this colony to the Paris Exhibition'.³⁰ The sculptures in that review article, he noted, are supposed:

to be of pre-historic antiquity, and of sepulchral character; and if the similarity exists, it will be interesting to contemplate in it another instance of man's disposition, all over the world, to act under like circumstances in a like manner. It is possible that the social condition of the sculptors of those remote ages may not have been much in advance of that of the Australian aborigines of the present day. It has been the practice among the latter to place inscriptions, or rather rude marks, on trees in memory of the dead who were buried near: I have known it in many cases.³¹

Murray's remarks here about the ancestry of humanity as exhibited in Aboriginal culture echo those he made in the description of the items sent to the Paris exhibition, but it is worth also noting here the concrete confirmation that the 'tomb tablet' sent to Paris in 1867 was indeed a dendroglyph such as that found in Oxford (Figure 8). Towards the end of his letter, Murray then makes an offer to the ASL, writing that:

The tomb tablet to which I have referred, and two caps of clay – No. 422 of the catalogue – worn by aboriginal widows in mourning – shall be quite at your service after the exhibition for your society's museum if you should desire at all to have them. I will write on the subject in due time, to Capt. Mayne (118 Cannon Street) agent for the government of this colony in London, and a commissioner representing it at the exhibition.³²

29 This record is ID#521615 in the PRM's database.

30 Murray, 'Communication from Sydney', liii.

31 Murray, 'Communication from Sydney', liii.

32 Murray, 'Communication from Sydney', lvi.



Figure 8: Front view of the marara in Oxford (1948.12.77).

Source: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

The person Murray refers to here is William Colburn Mayne (1808–1902), an Irish-born politician, who migrated to New South Wales in 1839 and held various political offices until becoming agent-general for the colony in London from 1864 until 1871. The ASL had in fact also appointed its own representative at the Paris exhibition, Robert H. Collyer, as noted in the *Anthropological Review* of April 1867.³³

Of particular importance to this potential route for the dendroglyph – that it was sent direct from Paris to the ASL's museum in London – is that Pitt-Rivers was to later buy most of the ASL's museum collection when it decided to dispose of its accumulated artefacts in 1881, in favour of expanding its library. Since its council had decided 'to give up the attempt, which they are convinced would be a hopeless one, to establish any sufficiently large and comprehensive ethnographical museum', a valuer was brought in and two offers accepted for the material: £14 for a Burmese gong from the curator of the Christy Collection, and '£40 from Major-General Pitt Rivers for the other objects, with the view of their being ultimately deposited at South Kensington'.³⁴ Pitt-Rivers had inherited the large Rushmore estate and surname Pitt-Rivers the previous year from a second cousin, and so his ability to pay large sums for interesting collections greatly increased from late 1880. In addition, Pitt-Rivers had been elected as president of the Anthropological Institute in January 1881 and so was in an unrivalled position to acquire this no doubt interesting collection. Throughout 1881 Pitt-Rivers deposited many hundreds of items at the SKM on loan, even though the long-term status of his collection there remained undecided, but no mention of anything resembling the dendroglyph is recorded in the receipts. When it comes to Pitt-Rivers's collection however, an absence of evidence is very definitely not evidence of absence, since many objects in the founding collection of the PRM have not been matched with entries in the documentation at the SKM. It may have been the case that many of the objects Pitt-Rivers is known to have bought from the museum of the ASL/Anthropological Institute were never deposited at SKM, but at his home, and then ultimately sent to Oxford. This may explain how the 'large piece of carved wood' that I argue fits the description of the dendroglyph, was received in Oxford in 1885 but not recorded as having been previously received by the SKM.

The dispersal of the 1867 exhibition artefacts

Although space precludes here a detailed examination of the wider dispersal of the Aboriginal objects exhibited in the New South Wales court at the Paris exhibition, it is worth noting the variety of institutions that obtained some of the Aboriginal material.

33 Anon, 'Anthropological News', 241. Collyer's appointment as representative of the ASL in Paris is noted in the council minutes of 19 March 1867. Collyer, born in Jersey but who emigrated to the USA, was an enigmatic and colourful character, whose interests span the whole range of pseudo sciences on the fringes of anthropology during the period: mesmerist, phrenologist, showman, lecturer, amateur inventor and self-described professor of 'psychography', he seems to have only been elected a Fellow of the ASL a few months before being tasked with representing the society at the Paris exhibition.

34 Anon, 'Report of the Council of the Anthropological Institute for 1880', 439.

A number of artefacts, including clubs, spears and spear throwers, photographs, a spade, and some other stone tools were purchased by the British Museum at the exhibition. The items exhibited by W. Bawden, including a fishing net and line, a dillybag and a bundle of Kurrajong fibre, were donated by him to the Royal Institution of Cornwall for its museum in 1868.³⁵ A stone axe and a sample of grass tree resin later found their way into the collections of the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum.

There are also intriguing possibilities of other items from the Paris Exhibition within Pitt-Rivers's collection, although none of them are documented as having been purchased from that source. The documentation associated with these items, as well as the fact that they are from the same period, very strongly suggests that the Paris exhibition may have been the source. So, for instance, we find a 'Dilly bag, Kurrajong fibre, bark of *Hibiscus heterophyllus*, New South Wales' and another 'Dilly bag, Kurrajong fibre, New South Wales' in the documentation for Pitt-Rivers's collection, which corresponds very closely with items 407 and 411 in the New South Wales exhibition catalogue, that are listed as 'Dilly bags made from the kurrajong fibre'. There is also a 'Dilly bag made of rushes, Clarence River district, NS Wales', which corresponds very closely with the 'Aboriginal dilly-bag, made of rushes' exhibited by Walter Black, of Woolli in the Clarence River District. Another tantalising object is the 'Dilly bag, made of nettle tree fibre bark of the *Urtica gigas*, Clarence River district', since this species is mentioned in several entries in the exhibition catalogue, in the context of fishing lines made from *Urtica gigas*. Although no dillybag made from *Urtica gigas* is mentioned in the Paris exhibition catalogue, the specific naming of the species in the documentation, along with the fact that many dillybags were exhibited in Paris and the fact that the artefact was obtained most likely sometime in the 1860s or 1870s by Pitt-Rivers, does suggest to me that the Exposition Universelle was a very likely source. Also of particular interest is an 'Aboriginal Pegee or water vessel, Australia'³⁶ noted as having been acquired by Pitt-Rivers from Peter Lund Simmonds (1814–1897) on 8 October 1875 and almost immediately sent to join his collection at the SKM. A number of water vessels were exhibited in Paris, and Simmonds is known to have been involved with the organisation of the British section there. Simmonds was a noted journalist and editor of the *Colonial Magazine and Foreign Miscellany* (1844–49) and *The Technologist* (1861–67), who had previous involvement in international exhibitions, having acted as agent for the Japanese Commission to the International Exhibition in 1851, and sold Japanese objects to the British Museum in 1862. The fact that Pitt-Rivers bought an Aboriginal artefact from Simmonds in 1875, and one that could have been exhibited in Paris, gives us then one more potential route for the dendroglyph, and that is that it was originally purchased by Simmonds, who then sold it to Pitt-Rivers in the mid-1870s. Although this is a possibility, I feel that it is a less likely one than the others outlined

35 Royal Institution of Cornwall, *Fifty-first Annual Report*, xii.

36 The term *pegee* here is obscure but was used occasionally in the nineteenth century to describe a vessel made by folding a large leaf to form a vessel for liquid, honey etc., which is then tied to a stick.

in this article, partly due to any concrete suggestion that this pegee was acquired by Simmonds from the Paris exhibition, and partly since he is associated with very little Aboriginal material from the 1867 exhibition found in other collections.

The sale of the Aboriginal objects from the New South Wales court at the Exposition Universelle of 1867 was thereby widely spread across both a variety of institutions and individuals, both in England and France, and cross-referencing the collections today is no easy task. Nonetheless, engagements with some of the material, in particular by Wiradjuri and Ngannawal artist Brook Andrew, has sought to 'imagine the life force of these objects, if only they could talk'.³⁷

Artistic engagements

In 2017, I began to collaborate with Brook during his research degree at the University of Oxford as we explored the marara in the Pitt Rivers Museum together. As my provenance work developed along the tracks discussed in this paper, Brook's own engagement fed into his doctoral research and work as artistic director of NIRIN, the 22nd Biennale of Sydney in 2020. Brook had found footage from 1949 of the Adelaide businessman and collector Harry Balfour using a large circular saw in the bush to cut tree carvings down in Kamilaroi Country. More than 50 had been removed in this way during that time. 'People were crying, others were shocked', recalls Andrew from when he showed the community the film. 'Only a few people knew about the existence of these trees.'³⁸ The importance of the marara for educational and cultural revival purposes is demonstrated powerfully in a 2021 film made by a research team from Monash University, including Brook, as well as community members of Collarenebri, titled 'Gaaguwiya dhawungu – Bring Back Home'.³⁹ The voices from the community in the film call for institutions to return carved trees to Country as a key part of their efforts to revive and continue cultural practices into the future. In one of the galleries of NIRIN curated by Brook in Sydney, a full-size 3D printed version of the Oxford marara was presented by him, strapped to a trolley as if to emphasise its treatment as a commodity (Figure 9). In more recent work, Brook has created the series *guulany (solar) 1–6*, which honour the ancestral memories of culturally modified trees. This work formed part of a recent exhibition in Melbourne, *More than a tarrang (tree): memory, material and cultural agency*, that featured a number of artists engaging with tree carving and scarring practices.⁴⁰ These artistic engagements, involving extensive collaboration with Elders

37 Martin et al., *More than a Tarrang (Tree)*, 6.

38 Kelly Burke, "'The Carved Trees Have a Spirit': Kamilaroi Fight to Repatriate Sacred 800-Year-Old Trunks', *The Guardian*, 12 December 2021, www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/dec/12/the-carved-trees-have-a-spirit-kamilaroi-fight-to-repatriate-sacred-800-year-old-trunks.

39 Ribbon Gang, 'Gaaguwiya dhawungu – Bring Back Home', YouTube, 18 November 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2AlA8zqpe8&t=897s.

40 *More than a Tarrang* featured work by artists Brian Martin, Brook Andrew, Moorina Bonini, Maya Hodge, Bradley Webb, Greg Griffiths, Alfred Priestley, N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs and Simon Rose. See Martin et al., *More than a Tarrang (Tree)*.

Conclusion: A case for homecoming

The provenance research presented in this paper strongly suggests that the marara in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, is the 'tomb tablet' sent by the New South Wales Exhibition Commission to the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867. It is known that the exhibits were sold to many different institutions and individuals at the end of the exhibition, especially in England and France, and the marara bears a shipping label showing that it entered England via Boulogne through a shipping company who were particularly active in this period, Flageollet Frères. It is also known that T. A. Murray, one of the New South Wales committee members, had written to the Anthropological Society of London offering the 'tomb tablet' at the end of the exhibition. One of the most active collectors of ethnographic material in London in this period, Augustus Pitt-Rivers, was also heavily involved in the ASL and bought the contents of its museum in 1881. I have also suggested reasons why the marara in Oxford is likely to be the 'large piece of carved wood' received in Oxford when Pitt-Rivers's founding collection was transferred there in 1885. None of the evidence presented is conclusive proof in and of itself; instead, it forms an assemblage of supportive evidence that I would suggest is compelling.

But what of the marara's present and future life? Following my research on it, the marara is now exhibited in the museum the right way up, for perhaps the first time. But this is only the start of a process of correcting the ignorance of the past about the object, or indeed when it was not an object, but a series of meaningful marks carved by someone upon a living tree to commemorate the burial of a person of significance. The marara was only made into an object by the violent act of taking a circular saw to a living tree to make a 'tomb tablet' in the 1860s. Part of the process of unlearning colonial ethnographic practices is to pay more attention to our language and concepts.⁴¹ I have presented the case in this paper for the tree carving as most likely to have been the marker for a burial (*dhabuganha* in Wiradjuri) and have used other terms in context such as dendroglyph or marara. But even this attention to language is insufficient to understand the practice in its proper cultural or cosmological context, which requires specific types of community involvement. Martin et al. propose instead that Western museums talk of cultural or ancestral belongings and foreground Indigenous systems of connection in provenance research.⁴² I see the need at the present time for both forms of research as we continue to scope the extent, range and nature of collections internationally, as well as more appropriate forms of curation. Other museums have

41 Azoulay, *Potential History*.

42 Martin et al., *More than a Tarrang (Tree)*, 3.

also begun in recent years to act on promptings for return, including the Museum de Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland,⁴³ the Australian Museum (to Dubbo),⁴⁴ and Museum Victoria (to Barradine).⁴⁵

Artefacts such as this were (re)made as objects of ethnography out of living trees at a burial location. Carved memorial trees were never meant to be alienable personal property and cutting them down would never have been sanctioned by the community. And so there would appear to be a strong case for a return claim by the community to the University of Oxford under its Procedures for Claims for the Return of Cultural Objects, published in 2020.⁴⁶ As a burial marker, the marara would be eligible for claim under section 2.2(a) of this policy, given that '[t]he object was taken under duress (including military violence, looting or theft), or other apparently legal transactions that involved use of force or coercion'. The evidence discussed in this paper suggests that this marara was taken by or on behalf of someone on the New South Wales organising committee for the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1867, and that even if cut from a tree that stood on land owned at the time by someone legally empowered to remove it, there would have been no Aboriginal consent sought or given. In my opinion, the identity of the marara as a burial marker is a particularly aggravating factor, a violent act of robbing a community of a memorial to their deceased. Indeed, trees in Aboriginal culture exist in a reciprocal relationship with humans that brings them closer in some senses to an identification as kin.⁴⁷ A return to Country would be a very fitting new chapter in the life of this marara, returning the memorial to its country, and giving back to the new generation a piece of its lost heritage as a hopeful sign for a more respectful and equitable future.

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