

ABORIGINAL BONE FISH-HOOKS WITH SKELETONS AT WALLPOLLA CREEK, WEST OF MILDURA, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Two bone fish-hooks were found associated with an Aboriginal skeleton in a grave on Keera Station on the S. side of the Murray River, NW. Victoria. They are the only fish-hooks known from this region.

Introduction and Acknowledgement

Aboriginal bone fish-hooks have been found in many places in Australia, but in spite of the very large number of Aboriginal sites along the Murray River, and the alkaline conditions for the good preservation of bone in this semi-arid climate, no other fish-hooks have been found in this region.

A trial excavation was carried out at the site in August 1964 on the initiative of Mr J. Pollitt.

Thanks are due to those braving the heat and giving their time to this archaeological work, viz. Messrs. Pollitt, Lawrence, Naughton, Stubbs, Ritchie, Featherstone Sr., Featherstone Jr., Douglas, Williamson, Smith and Fulchare.

The site is shown in Fig. 1. It is near Wallpolla Creek and the River Road, in the SW. corner of Lybra Paddock on Keera Station in the Parish of Tulillah, Victoria. The military map grid reference is Mildura Sheet 483,778, while the latitude is $34^{\circ} 11' S.$ and the longitude $141^{\circ} 45' E.$ The site is shown on air photo 5018, Run 3, Wentworth 1364, N.S.W. It is on the W. side of an entry track from the River Road.

Stratification

The site is in the red sediments of a Pleistocene alluvial terrace (named the Rufus Formation by Gill, this *Memoir*) that stands above the greenish gray sediments (Coonambidgal Formation) of the present floodplain of Wallpolla Creek and the Murray River. At the surface of the Rufus Formation is a pedocalcic soil, but at the site this has been stripped to the B horizon. When the site was first visited, fragments of human bones, pieces of freshwater

mussel shell (*Velesunio*) and the Aboriginal artefacts were seen protruding from this surface and resting on it. Three layers were distinguished:

- Layer 1.* Uncompacted windblown red sand, with implements and bones.
- Layer 2.* Compacted slightly darker red sand, which becomes lighter with depth due to the presence of pedogenic carbonate. This layer contained charcoal, shell and humus.
- Layer 3.* Compact mottled red sand with carbonate concretions.

Burials

The human burials (part of a multiple grave site) are intrusive into the Rufus Formation. The bones, shells and artefacts collected have been placed in the National Museum of Victoria. Four graves forming a closely spaced group are described.

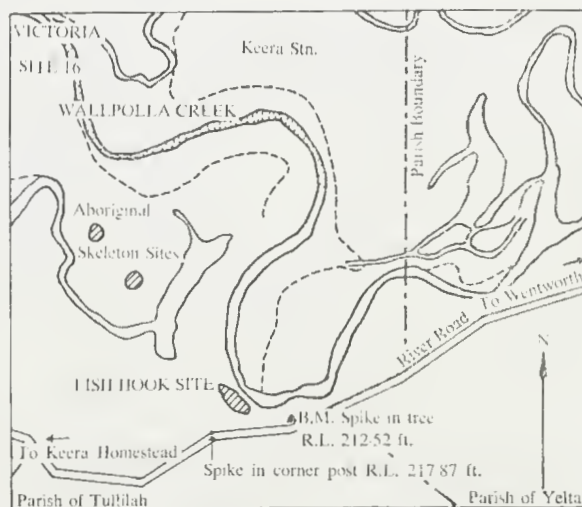


FIG. 1—Locality map.

- Grave 1.* This contained a flexed burial, with knees drawn up to neck level, but 7.5 cm away. It was disturbed by grave 2. A small pocket of shell occurred outside one elbow, and a large quantity immediately below the skeleton. The shells were more or less complete, but not articulated. Masses of shell under the skeleton were observed at this site associated with flexed burials. The grave was in Layer 3.
- Grave 2.* This was a pit grave, partly dug into grave 1, and therefore is younger. The skeleton was in a tight bundle placed in a sitting position with knees under the chin. Some of the bones were considerably disintegrated, and no trace of the pelvis could be found. Some shells from grave 1 fell down the vertical walls of this pit.
- Grave 3.* A partly extended burial with the skeleton on its back, and the head on a shallow ledge. The trunk lay horizontally in the upper part of the pit, but the pelvis and limbs appear to have been pressed into it, the pelvis being turned sidewise. Close to the skull, and underneath it, probably originally on the neck, were the two bone fish-hooks. The hands were on the pelvis. In the lowest part of the grave, near the feet, was a large amount of ash, and some charcoal. This grave also is in Layer 3.
- Grave 4.* An extended skeleton lying on its back with ankles pressed closely together; skeleton length 1.45 m, width of skeleton across arms 25 cm, and width across pelvis 23 cm. This grave was in Layer 2, and almost at the surface. It is thought that the grave was dug from the surface of Layer 2.

Fish-hooks

Description

The hooks are cut from bone and smoothed in the form of U with uneven sides. The ends

of both sides are pointed. The bend of the bone is thicker than the sides. See Plate 30.

Measurements

	No. 1	No. 2
Overall length	43 mm	37 mm
Centre-line of U	12 mm	27 mm
Longer side	31 mm	10 mm
Shorter side	5 mm*	10 mm
Width of hook through concave surface of U	15 mm	14 mm

*(tip missing)

Morphologically, the fish-hooks are of the samolov type, and the nearest prehistoric parallels belong to the Mesolithic (Kjökkenmøddingen, Maglemose Period, Norway, and Natufian, Palestine. Rohan-Csermak pp. 68-91 and Pl. XVII, Nos. 1-3, 1963, and Clark 1967, p. 113, Illus. 788).

Massola (1956) describes recent Aboriginal fish-hooks from the coastal regions of Australia, but they are different from those found in grave 3. On the other hand, the recent use of the samolov type is known from New Guinea (Rohan-Csermak 1963, Pl. XVII, No. 4).

One of the hooks from the Wallpolla Creek shows roughened sulcate area lengthwise across the surface of the bend (Plate 30), which is probably caused by weathering, but may be compared with a structure in this part of the Eurasian sturgeon hooks, which were floated in the water without bait (Rohan-Csermak 1963, Figs. 54, 60 and 78), an attachment (to a weight or the bottom) being responsible for the wear at this point.

References

- CLARK, G., 1967. *The Stone Age Hunters*. London. Thames and Hudson.
- DE ROHAN-CSERMAK, G., 1963. *Sturgeon Hooks of Eurasia*. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 35. New York. Wenner Gren Foundation.
- MASSOLA, A., 1956. Australian fish-hooks and their distribution. *Mem. nat. Mus. Vict.* 22 (1).

Explanation of Plate 30

- Fig. 1—General view of the excavation at the fish-hook site on Wallpolla Creek, N. Victoria.
- Fig. 2—Close-up of skeleton on right side of Fig. 1. The fish-hooks were associated with these remains.
- Fig. 3—The bone fish-hooks.

