

When all is said and done, it is clear that ethnographic and ethnohistorical accounts are a far better guide to the nature of Aboriginal past in Victoria than archaeology, which can, at best, only provide a time-depth to what must have been an essentially unchanging hunter-gatherer way of life. Discuss.

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Contrary to the opinion that the Aboriginal past was one of an unchanging way of life, the archaeological evidence reveals a wide variety of past lifestyles within Victoria. This paper will cover various reasons as to why archaeology is a good tool for understanding the past. The cultural aspect of anthropology (ethnography) (Kelly & Thomas 2012, p. 23), and historical records from an ethnographic perspective (ethnohistorical accounts), can assist to understand this variety, but in and of themselves they cannot provide a guide to Victoria's entire indigenous past. There are four key arguments in support of this position. Firstly, anthropology has shown that the indigenous way of life was not homogeneous, as there was a wide diversity between cultural groups which exist even today. Secondly, anthropological evidence summarises cultural groups, without encompassing the full variation of behaviours found within the groups themselves, thus such evidence cannot be presented as a complete observation of a culture; it can only be applied with caution. Next, with a human history going back at least 32,000 years, Victoria has seen a number of climactic events and shifts which changed and affected the lifestyles of the indigenous hunter-gatherers, correcting the notion that the Aboriginal way of life was unchanging and static. Finally, archaeological data can be interpreted by critically analysing ethnological and ethnohistorical sources in an attempt to understand human behaviours in relation to archaeological patterns. Together, they can provide a guide to the past, using spatial location, time-depth and human behaviour. Without archaeology, the rich variations of the different indigenous peoples of south-eastern Australia would never have come to light. It is thus clear that archaeological data is the key to understanding Victoria's varied and changing indigenous past, with anthropological data being carefully used as an interpretive tool.

Ethnography and ethnohistorical accounts can be used to help interpret archaeological evidence, but they cannot replace archaeology as a source of knowledge about the past. Hunter-gatherer groups around the world differ both economically and politically – different groups exhibit different behaviours (Lee 1992, p. 31). There was no one ‘traditional’ way of life which could be applied to the various Victorian aboriginal groups at the time of European contact. As the chairman for the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in the 1860s, Robert Brough Smyth admits that his task of collecting information about the indigenous peoples of Victoria was a much greater task than originally believed, and that his book should be “judged rather as a series of sketches, written in such intervals of time as were available, than as a scientific work pretending to completeness” (1878, p. v). In his discussion regarding burials, he notes that internment is the most common ceremony. However, he also mentions tree, water, cave, platform and cairn burials, as well as cremation (Smyth 1878, p. xxvii). He then goes on to note some of the different death-related customs performed by indigenous groups in different areas throughout Victoria (Smyth 1878, pp. xxvii- xxx). It is quite clear from such ethnohistorical accounts that Victoria was not peopled by a homogeneous population of hunter-gatherers. Even in modern times, “Aboriginal groups in Victoria ... have often divided into factions as a result of regional and tribal affiliations to the Riverina, Gippsland or Western District respectively” (Hayward 1998, p. 68). Although it is tempting to believe that anthropological sources are the best guide to Victoria’s indigenous past, there is such variety and variability that it is impossible to know which observed Aboriginal lifestyles, customs or beliefs could be applied to the peoples of the past. With so many distinct archaeological evidences appearing at different locations over the last 32,000 years, such accounts have to be critically evaluated against archaeological evidence. Only then can it be determined which behaviours could be applied to the peoples of the past.

It is difficult for anthropological studies to form a complete picture of any particular cultural group, and applying this incomplete or incorrect picture to peoples of the past is ill advised. In the early 20th Century, professional anthropologists saw hunter-gatherers as unchanging groups, “savages” living in “pristine worlds”, who were dying out after contact with Europeans (Burton 1999). As Burton (1999) noted, the “denial or disregard of change in pre-contact form (save perhaps in longitudinal studies in archaeology) was in an earlier period of anthropology a reflection on the myth that "savage" or "primitive" societies were living fossils examples of evolving social forms - stages on the course to civilization”. Since the 1960s, this view has changed (Laurandos 1997, p. 1). Anthropology is now seen by archaeologists as “a tool for understanding the evolution of human behavior” (Lee 1992, p. 39). Even so, the picture generated by such a tool is often incomplete. For instance, there is an imbalance in the studies of gender-based activities with the assumption that “men’s activities were the most salient” which is yet to be resolved (Merlan 1988, p. 17). Any applications of ethnographic accounts are therefore imperfect. The mound sites in western Victoria are examples where ethnohistorical sources were used to describe locations near Caramut as potentially the sites of bee-hive hut “villages” described in these documents (Williams 1988, p. 4; Figures 1 & 2). This “romantic” view of the past has since become the “official” governmental version of history (Clarke 1994, p. 14). As Anne Clarke points out, archaeologists need to be sure that the archaeological data used “are not just unrecognised, interpretative impositions from our own ethnocentric universe” (Clarke 1994, p. 12), but are reflections of past behaviours. More work is required before the mound sites can be recognised as a settlement pattern (Gerritsen 2000, p. 41). Anthropological data must be used cautiously, especially in relation to early accounts of the indigenous peoples of Victoria. Ethnographic and ethnohistorical data is not a full picture of a community, so therefore cannot be applied indiscriminately to ideas of past cultural groups.

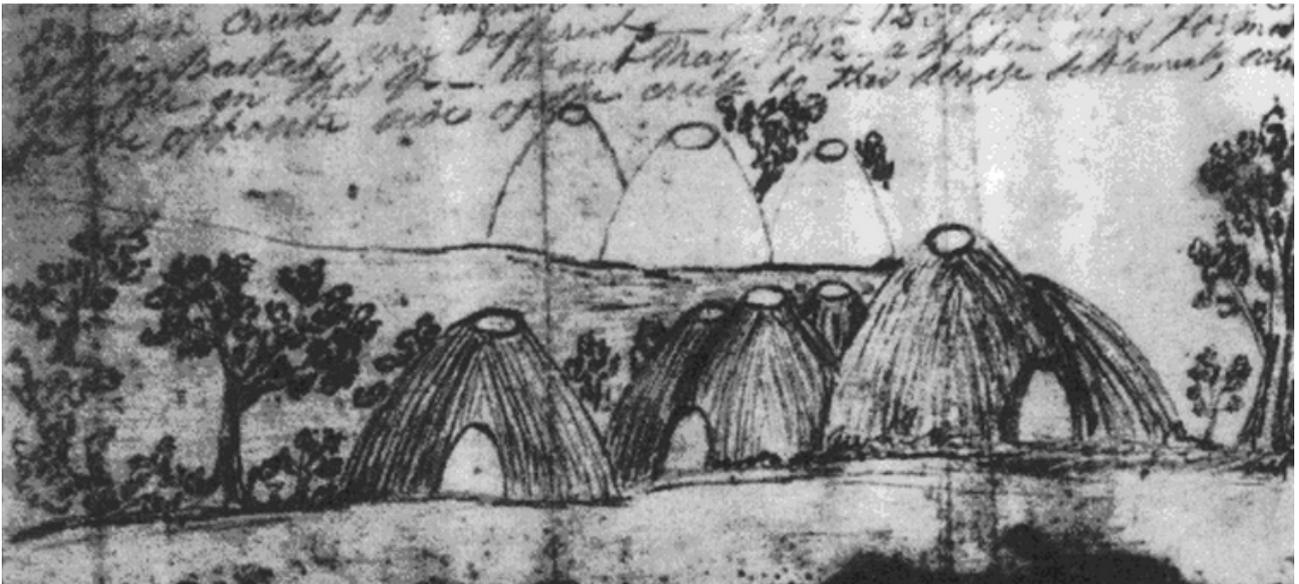


Figure 1: A beehive hut village at Caramut, as drawn by William Thomas in 1858 (Gerritsen 2000, p. 8)

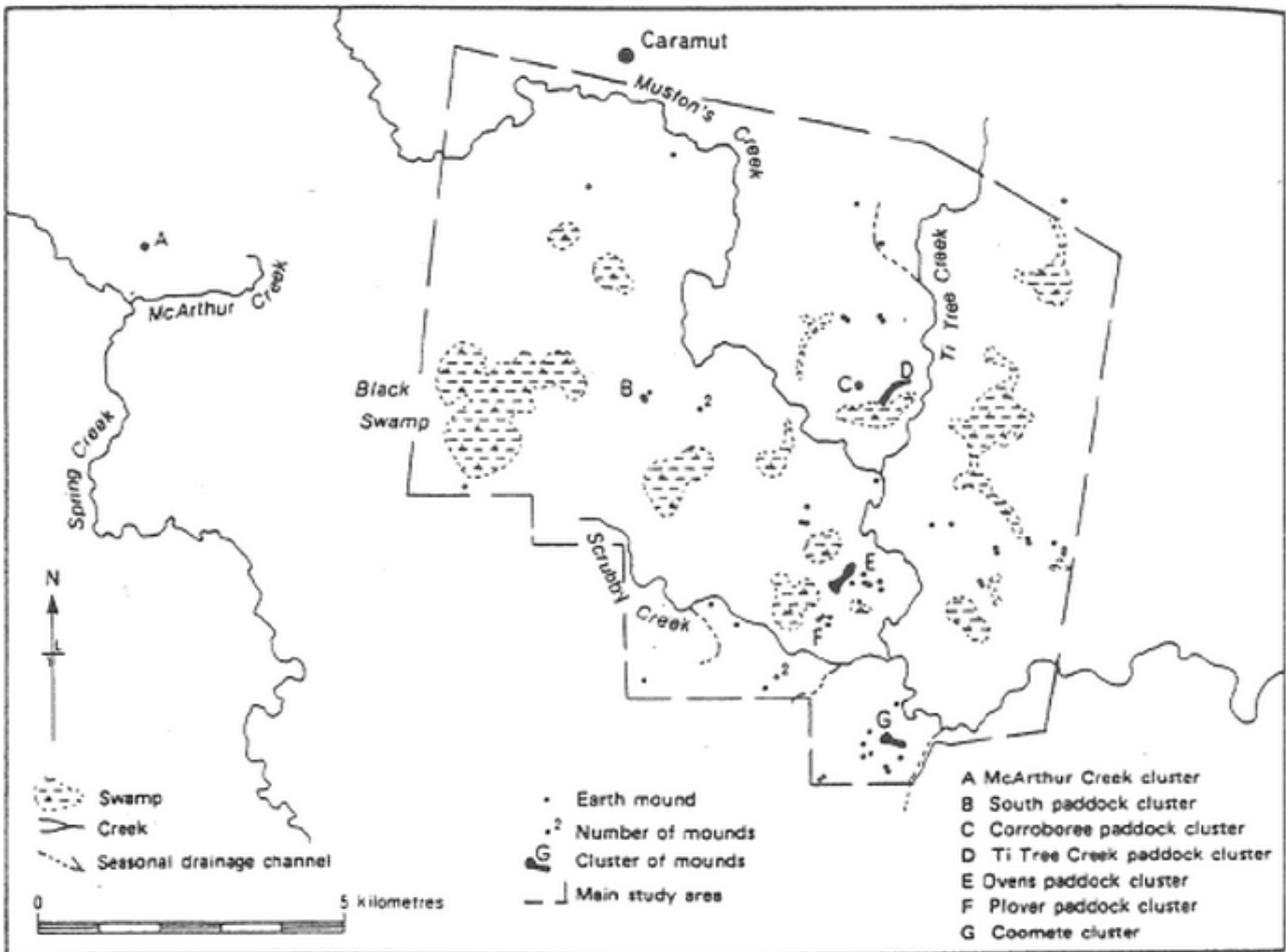


Figure 2: Distribution of mounds near Caramut (Gerritsen 2000, p. 9)

The Aboriginal peoples of Victoria have inhabited Victoria since at least 32-31,000 years BP (Duncan 2001, p. 18; Richards *et. al.* 2007, p. 1), and experienced periods of dramatic climactic change. As human behaviour does not remain constant during times of environmental stress (Johnson 2004, p. 272), occupation of the Victorian Mallee over thousands of years reveals that different locations were used at different times. Box Gully is situated in the Mallee area of north-western Victoria, and was occupied from 32,000 BP during a time of climactic instability leading up to the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) (Richards *et. al.* 2007, p. 9; Figure 3). The climate was much harsher than that of today: “The period from 35,000 BP to 20,000 BP saw the onset of global cooling and associated desiccation. Lakes and rivers gradually dried or became saline, and sand dunes became devegetated and mobile” (Ross 1981, p. 146). Over thousands of years the Pleistocene people who visited the Mallee had to adapt to a changing environment (Ross 1981, p. 145), but seemed to have abandoned the site in 26,600 BP. There is no current evidence that the site was used in the Holocene after the climate ameliorated. However, even during the Holocene, the climate continued to change. According to Ross (1981; Figure 4), other sites in the Mallee were utilised: the Raak Plains during the wet period (dating to 7,650±110 BP), and Wyperfeld Lakes during the subsequent drier period (2,310±80 BP and 1,470±80 BP). The stone tools found at both sites indicate changing strategies for exploiting the Mallee resources during wetter and drier phases. Large tools of the Core Tool and Scraper Tradition were excavated at earlier sites, while flakes of the Small Tools Tradition were uncovered at more modern sites (Ross 1981). Faunal assemblages at Box Gully are represented by small animals, whilst at Raak Plains the favoured prey was primarily the macropod (Richards *et. al.* 2007, p. 8; Ross 1982, p. 100). As such, the archaeological evidence left by the indigenous people who utilised the Mallee reveals that their lifestyle adapted as the environment changed over the millennia.

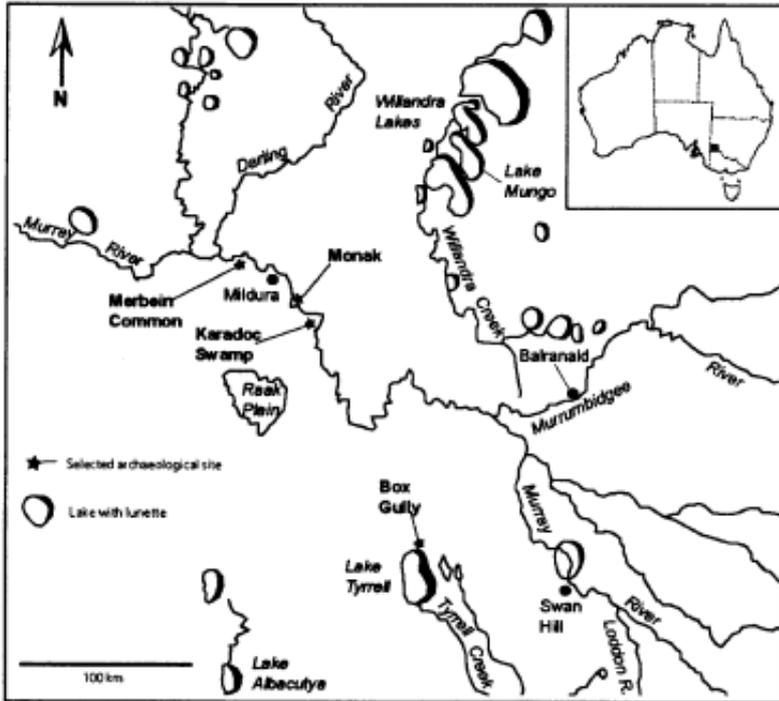


Figure 3: The location of Box Gully in relation to other important Aboriginal sites. Box Gully is at the northern end of Lake Tyrrell (Richards *et. al.* 2007, p.2)

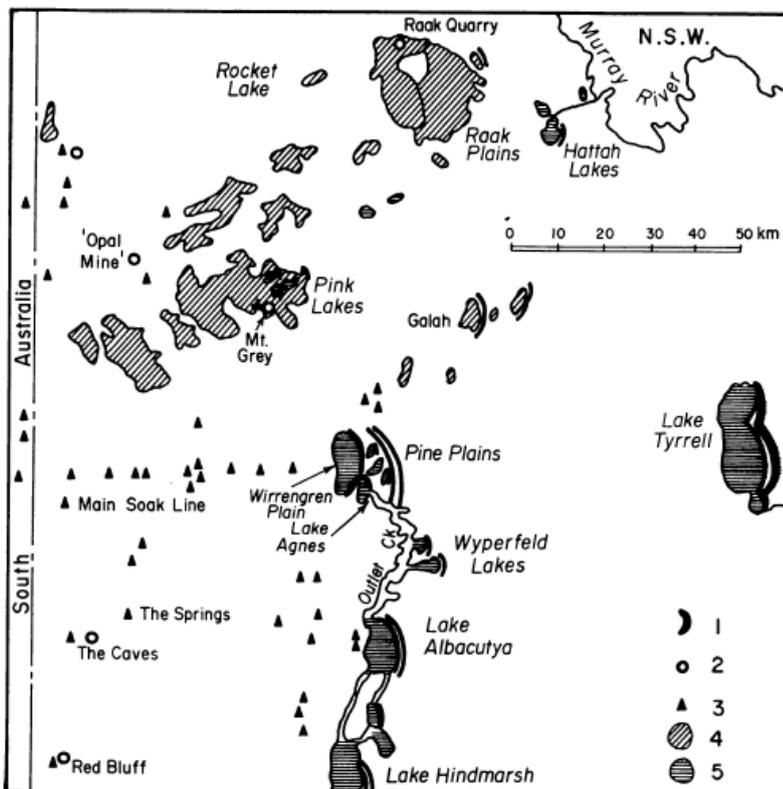


Figure 4: The location of major areas investigated in the Mallee by Ross (1981, p. 146)

Ethnoarchaeology, the “study of living peoples to see links between behaviour and material remains” (Kelly & Thomas 2012, p. 43), brings together the disciplines of ethnography and archaeology in a way that can – when carefully applied – be used to help gain an understanding of the past. Without the archaeological evidence, there would be no knowledge of people living in Victoria 32,000 years ago. “Currently ... archaeologists are working directly with contemporary gatherer-hunters under the rubric of ethnoarchaeology” (Lee 1992, p. 33). However, even in this, ethnoarchaeological data can only serve as a general model for interpreting the past (Laurandos 1997, p. 5). One example of ethnoarchaeology in Victoria is that of the distribution of Mount William greenstone axes throughout the tribal/linguistic regions of two rival groups, the Kulin and Kurnai. (McBryde 1984, pp. 274-275; Figure 5). Ethnographic evidence suggests that the Kulin operated the Mount William quarry in the early 19th Century (McBryde 1984, p. 267). Archaeological discoveries of the axe heads were within Kulin territories, and McBryde concludes that this reflects “the isolation of the Kurnai from contact or trading relations with the Kulin tribes” (McBryde 1978, p. 363; Figure 6). It is important to note that the dates of many of these greenstone axes are unknown, so it cannot be assumed that 19th Century hostilities applied to tribal relations of the past. For example, the archaeological evidence could suggest a behaviour relating to group identity, and be unrelated to the enmity of later times (Gould 1980, pp. 210-211). However, while the exact reasons for axe distribution patterns remain unknown, the ethnoarchaeological evidence does suggest that there was a link between post-contact linguistic/cultural boundaries and greenstone artefact distribution. Anthropological data thus can be used to determine whether certain human behaviours could provide an explanation for archaeological evidence. When used together appropriately, archaeology and ethnography can provide a better guide to understanding Victoria’s long indigenous history rather than ethnography alone.

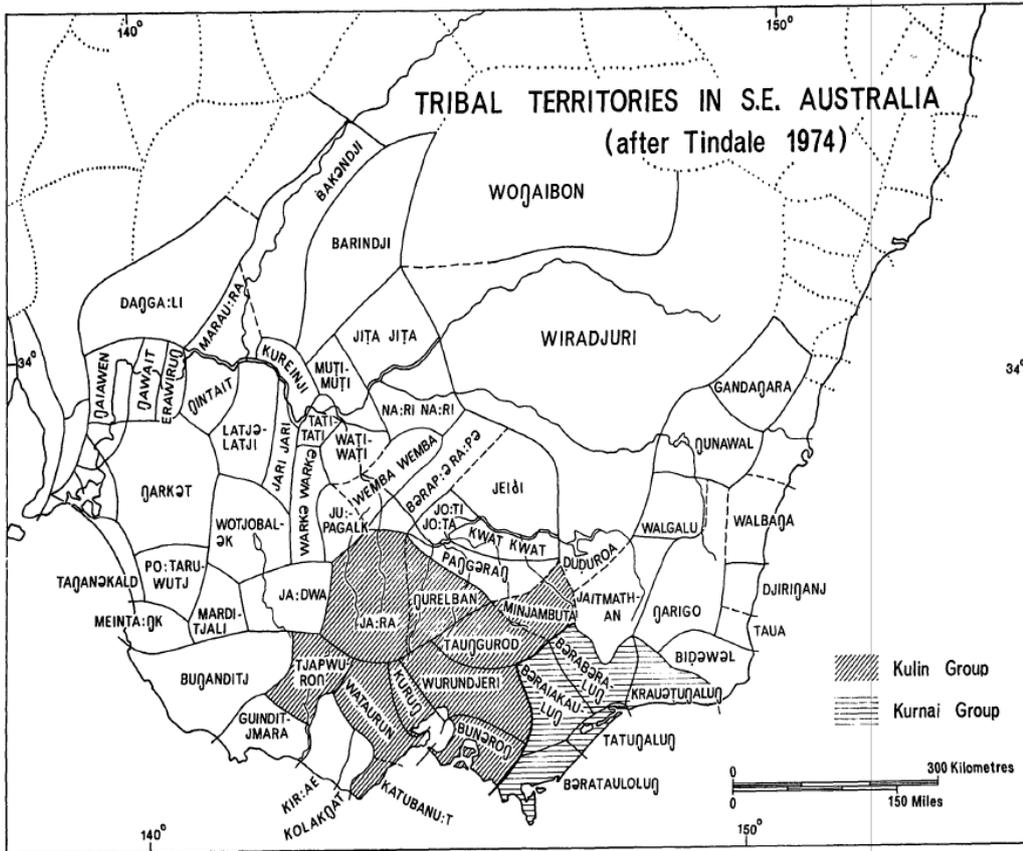


Figure 5: The Kulin and Kurnai territories (McBryde 1978, p. 380)

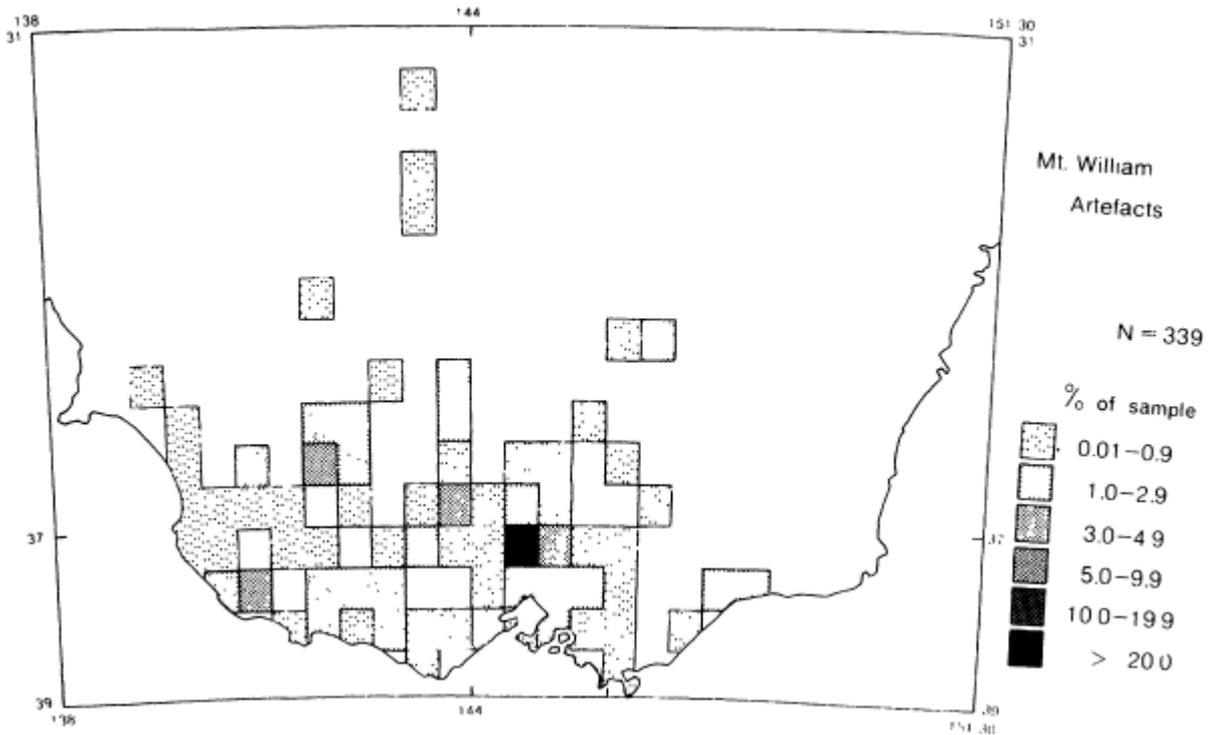


Figure 6: Distribution of artefacts quarried from Mount William (McBryde 1984, p. 269)

Ethnographic and ethnohistorical accounts cannot be presumed to apply to all of Victoria's cultural groups throughout their 32,000 years of history. The anthropological studies of Victoria's indigenous post-contact past prove that there were many groups within Victoria, covering a multitude of different customs and beliefs. This information can only provide 'sketches' of a culture at the time they were observed by ethnographers. Unfortunately, such studies can only offer an incomplete or incorrect picture of any one group. All such information must be critically analysed before it can be applied to the archaeological remains in an attempt to understand past human behaviours. The environment in which these people lived must also be investigated, as climate can shape human behaviour. In the relatively stable climate of the early Holocene, neither 19th Century ethnohistorical accounts nor modern ethnographical studies are able to account for the range of variation and changes in hunter-gatherer lifestyles, which must have occurred due to climate changes over the past 32,000 years. Such lifestyles could never have remained 'unchanging' through time, as people had to adapt to new situations as the world changed around them. What ethnoarchaeology can do is provide a guide to understanding Victoria's Aboriginal past. Ethnography, when critically assessed, can be applied to the archaeological evidence found at dig sites across Victoria to interpret the artefacts and other remains of prehistoric peoples. Archaeological evidence has proved that Victoria's indigenous past was constantly changing over thousands of years, with myriad variations occurring and altering across both time and space. Today, archaeology continues to provide a wealth of information relating to the variations and changes in human behaviour throughout the ages, but this would have remained unknown were ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources the only guides to the past.

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