

The mystic circle

The abundance of natural resources, combined with the close proximity of the river and pathways, resulted in the low ridges around the Woolloongabba area being extensively used and occupied by Aboriginal peoples long before European arrival. Archaeological artefacts attesting to this presence, such as axeheads, stone scrapers and scarred trees, have been found near Grey and Peel Streets and Musgrave Park.¹⁴ In the 1970s a quartzite axehead was also found embedded in the riverbank outcrop of Ovens Head, next to the South Brisbane Cemetery (see Fig.4).¹⁵



Fig.4 The Aboriginal axehead found embedded in the riverbank outcrop of Ovens Head, ca. 1986 (Artefact #25799, Anthropology Museum, University of Queensland).

century identified the occupants of the wider Brisbane region as being of the Turrubal language group, with the Coorparoo clan occupying the country around the Woolloongabba. Their country was estimated to cover the area along the south bank of the Brisbane River (*Waar-rar*) between Oxley (*Banarrawa*) and Bulimba

Mater Hill, the Vulture Street rise and the Merton Road ridge (see Fig.3) were all used as campsites, and groups from places such as Ipswich and Moreton Bay would migrate to the area, camping on these different sites according to the direction of their home country.¹⁶ Although the Indigenous boundaries of the Brisbane area are still disputed, European inhabitants of the 19th

(*Tugulawa*) creeks, extending out to the Mt Gravatt (*Kaggar-mabul*) area.¹⁷ William Clark, who lived in South Brisbane from 1849, recalled that the clan numbered up to 400 people, and groups would camp on the local ridges on a seasonal basis.¹⁸ The camps were made up of westward-facing triangular huts, constructed from sticks and tea tree bark, and had bark flooring. Fires burned continuously for heat, light and cooking, with extra warmth being provided by animal skins. Food was plentiful, with the open woodland on the eastern slopes of the Merton Road ridge being a favoured hunting and gathering ground. Plant foods such as yams and lily and fern roots were also abundant.¹⁹

The ridge was also culturally significant, being the site of a bora ground that extended from near the present-day Holy Trinity church and across to the South-East Freeway. This ceremonial place consisted of a major bora ring connected to a smaller ring by a dug-out pathway, and young men would move between the rings during initiation ceremonies performing feats of agility to prove their worth.²⁰ The scene was described by Clark:

In old times the blacks had their largest and most used ‘bora’ ground, where they made kippers, or inducted the youths of the tribe into the mysteries and privileges of manhood – in a circular scoop-out on the hill top, while round the base of the hill during the ceremony a number of old blacks act as guards, whirling ‘bull roars’ made of hardened pieces of kangaroo or possum skin, fastened on the end of pieces of native buggeree (i.e. string made of twisted possum hair). No Philistine, white or black, could enter that mystic circle.²¹

Not long after European arrival, settlers began to move into the South Brisbane area and exploit the natural resources, and the ‘mystic circle’ would disappear within a few decades. By the end of the century the traditional Indigenous way of life would also be gone as European development overwhelmed their landscape.