Head wound suggests ancient Aborigine was killed by a boomerang

September 22 2016, by Bob Yirka

Australian Aboriginal boomerangs. Credit: Wikipedia/CC BY-SA 1.0

(Phys.org)—A team led by Michael Westaway, an anthropologist with

Australia's Griffith University, has found evidence that suggests a skeleton found protruding from an Australian riverbank two years ago is the remains of an ancient Aborigine man who died of what might have been a strike by a boomerang. In their paper published in the Cambridge Press's, *Antiquity*, the group describes the skeleton, what they found during their analysis and why they believe it might represent the victim of a boomerang attack.

The skeleton was discovered in 2014 by an Aboriginal man living in the area—the locals subsequently named it Kaakutja, which means "older brother" in the Baakantji language. It was initially believed that the skeleton had belonged to a man that had been killed by someone with the British Native Police, a group that was responsible for killing many Aborigine people not long after Europeans arrived in Australia in the 1800s. But testing by the researchers showed that the man died in the 1200s, well before Europeans arrived with their metal weapons.

Analysis of the skeleton revealed a large cut to the face that had gashed the bone running from the brow to the chin that had not healed, suggesting it was part of the reason for the man's death. They also found that two of the man's ribs had been broken and that part of his arm had been cut off. They also noted the skull had two healed wounds, suggesting that the man had been involved in more than one violent encounter. But it was the head wound the team found most intriguing because it looked so much like a wound typically caused by a metal weapon.

To better understand what may have caused the head wound, the researchers studied paintings that had been done on rocks in the vicinity, which had been dated to around the same time as the skeleton—they noted that the paintings depicted people wielding Lil-lis, a type of knife-like wooden weapon, and boomerangs. The team noted that either type of weapon could have been used to inflict such a long wound, but suggest

that the boomerang seemed more likely because there were no wounds to the forearms, which typically occur in hand-to-hand combat. A tossed boomerang would have taken an arced path toward its victim, allowing for slipping behind a shield if the victim had been holding one.

More information: Michael Westaway et al. The death of Kaakutja: a case of peri-mortem weapon trauma in an Aboriginal man from north-western New South Wales, Australia, *Antiquity* (2016). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2016.173

Abstract

Skeletal remains from a burial in New South Wales exhibit evidence of fatal trauma, of a kind normally indicative of sharp metal weapons, yet the burial dates to the mid thirteenth century—600 years before European settlers reached the area. Could sharp-edged wooden weapons from traditional Aboriginal culture inflict injuries similar to those resulting from later, metal blades? Analysis indicates that the wooden weapons known as 'Lil-lils' and the fighting boomerangs ('Wonna') both have blades that could fit within the dimensions of the major trauma and are capable of having caused the fatal wounds.