

Unveiling the sacred Wiradjuri carved trees

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Top to bottom, and left to right: photographs of TSR carved tree, TSR carved tree detail, TSR fallen scarred tree, Yuranigh's Grave Carved Tree 4, Yuranigh's Grave Carved Tree 1 detail (with inset image showing carved tree from afar). Credit: *Australian Archaeology* (2023). DOI: 10.1080/03122417.2023.2219378

In a landmark collaboration between Wiradjuri people, NSW State government and archaeologists, new research has revealed the deep-time hidden story of Wiradjuri carved trees (marara) and burials (dhabuganha) in Southeast Australia.

Led by a [collaborative effort](#) between Central Tablelands Local Land Services, Gaanha-bula Action Group, Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council, Yarrawula Ngullubul Men's Corporation, La Trobe University, and the University of Denver in the U.S., this project has brought together Wiradjuri traditional cultural knowledge and cutting-edge archaeological techniques of ground-penetrating radar and 3D modeling, to shed light on these sacred locations.

The research, [published](#) in *Australian Archaeology*, uncovered a new understanding of the locations of marara and dhabuganha, ensuring long-term protection and management of these locations, and assisted with the repatriation and reburial of Ancestors who were removed from these locations and others without consent.

Today, only a small number of marara remain, and most dhabuganha are no longer visible due to erosion and modern land-use practices. Using ground-penetrating radar at one location, the teams were able to non-invasively analyze and map changes in soil to refine the understanding of the resting place of a Wiradjuri man of high-standing.

Central Tablelands Local Land Services Aboriginal Communities Officer Greg Ingram welcomed the discovery.

"This has been an exciting opportunity and partnership for an Aboriginal led science project with the Wiradjuri Elders directing [western science](#) to support their existing cultural knowledge of the landscape and funeral practices where the cultural indicators were not obvious due to patterns of land management since colonization," Ingram said.

Wiradjuri Elder, Uncle Neil Ingram said that the Wiradjuri philosophy of Yindyamarra (cultural respect) has been an important part of this project.

"We were able to share our knowledge together on Country, and that was very respectful and important. It was a good demonstration that Western methodology, and traditional methodology and culture, and values, and land, and connection to Country can go together," Uncle Neil said.

Lead La Trobe University researcher, Dr. Caroline Spry said that by incorporating traditional cultural knowledge into the western scientific research, it fostered a deeper understanding of marara and dhabuganha.

"Wiradjuri marara are enigmatic and unique in Australia and worldwide, but many are also nearing the end of their natural life cycle. When you Google these trees, you will only find information written by non-Wiradjuri people that doesn't paint an accurate picture of what they represent," Spry said.

"Our research reveals a hidden history of Australia and encourages people to reconsider their own views of these trees in relation to Wiradjuri perspectives. For Wiradjuri people they are sacred locations that tell a story about Wiradjuri Lore, beliefs, traditional cultural practices and Country, and pathways between the earth and sky world,"

said Spry.

More information: Caroline Spry et al, Investigating Wiradjuri marara (carved trees or dendroglyphs) and dhabuganha (burials) in the Central Tablelands, southeastern Australia, *Australian Archaeology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/03122417.2023.2219378](https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2023.2219378)

Provided by La Trobe University

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