The Gilparrka site complex, Mithaka Country, southwest Queensland, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes three archaeological sites in Mithaka Country in southwest Queensland, the Gilparrka site complex. Gilparrka Almira is dominated by engraved crescent motifs, and is surrounded by an extensive artefact scatter resulting from the exploitation of silcrete outcrops. The quality of the silcrete and the intensity of exploitation suggest that the material was redistributed through an extensive trade/exchange system. An engraved wavy line at Gilparrka Almira may represent a snake, recording an association with the travels of the Rainbow Serpent and reflecting the importance of the silcrete resource. Two culturally modified trees may be markers, also signifying the importance of the location.

Keywords: Mithaka Country, Gilparrka Almira, rock engravings, culturally scarred tree, artefact scatter, stone resource, trade route, Rainbow Serpent

INTRODUCTION

The Mithaka People are the Traditional Custodians of lands ("Country") located within the Channel Country in southwest Queensland, Australia (Figure 1). The Mithaka People have established a Research Framework- *Ngali Wanthi* – that details their research goals and objectives (see https://mithaka.org.au/research). They view research as a practice of collaboration with Mithaka Traditional Owners to manage Traditional Knowledge so that it benefits their Country, Culture and People. Their "Culture" and knowledge is inherently connected to the landscapes and skyscapes around them, and for generations they have studied and recorded Traditional Knowledge through their own research systems. The research detailed in this paper is part of an ongoing multi-disciplinary archaeological project undertaken in collaboration with the Mithaka People (see Westaway *et al*. 2021).

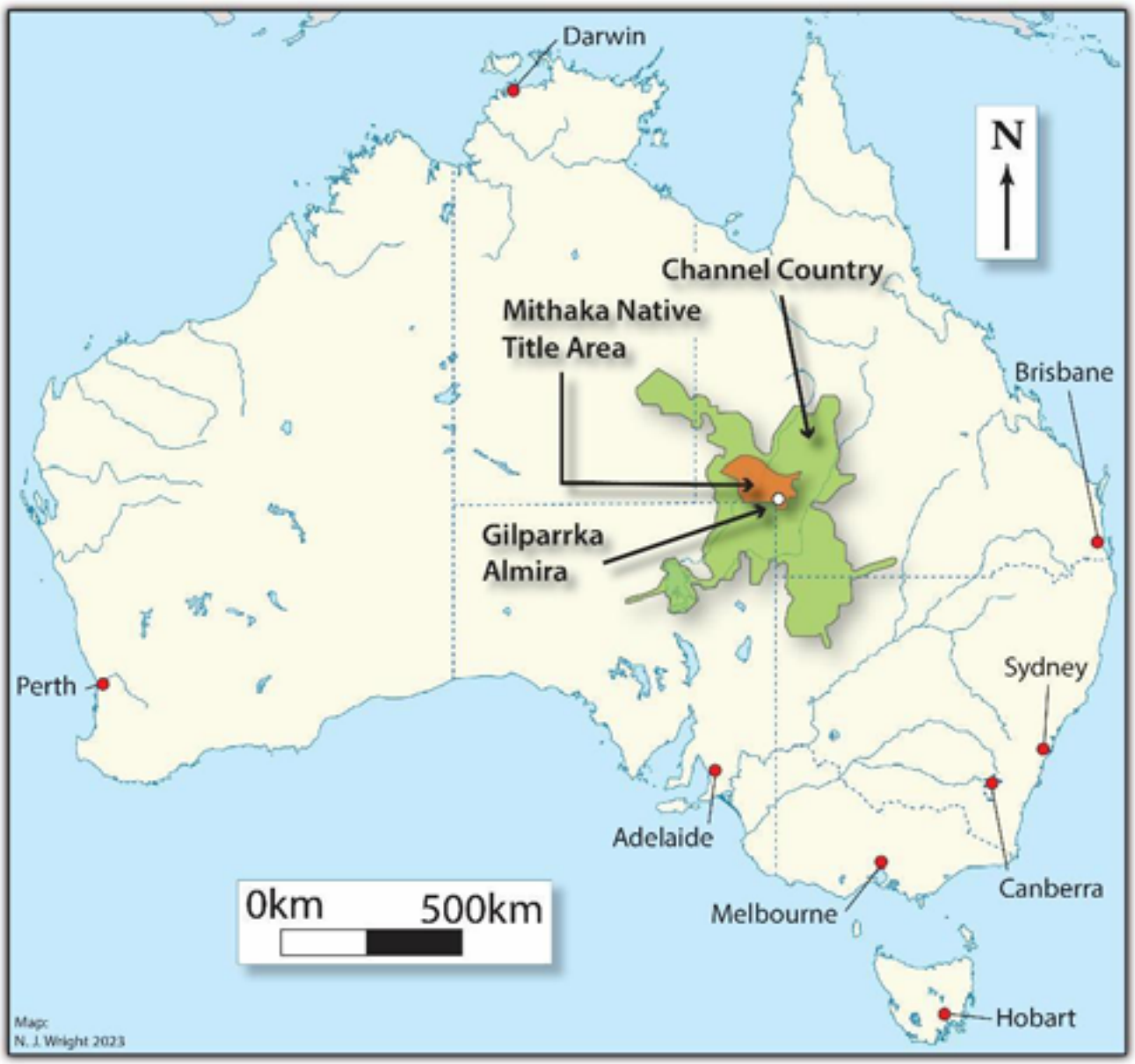

Fig. 1 Location of Gilparrka Almira. Map compiled by Wright.

Mithaka "Country" is situated towards the centre of the Channel Country biogeographic zone, which incorporates an extensive river system formed by the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers, and Cooper and Farrars Creeks. Collectively these channels supply water to Kati Thanda (Lake Eyre), the largest lake in Australia. The environment is a "boom and bust" ecological system, with monsoonal rainfall in the north creating massive semi-annual floods that fill thousands of braided channels across the desert environment. The Channel Country contains a mixture of Mitchell grass downs, open shrublands, woodlands, stony downs-gibber plains (a desert pavement) and sand dunes.

The earliest ethnohistoric accounts from the Channel Country indicate that Aboriginal groups in this region occupied village sites in high densities with an economy based heavily on seed processing and exploitation of riverine resources (Smith 2013; Westaway *et al*. 2021). The unique ethnohistoric record for the region has provided the foundation for a larger multidisciplinary investigation into the nature of this unique arid zone socio-economic system.

Mithaka Country is part of an extensive transcontinental production, exchange/trade and ceremonial network that focused on the narcotic pituri plant (*Duboisia hopwoodi*) as a core commodity. The exchange/trade network, which has been referred to as the "Pituri Road" (Kerwin 2010), has a major north-south trunk traversing South Australia and Queensland with numerous side branches. The river systems were the conduit for travel along the trade route (Kerwin 2010). Along with pituri, the network included other goods such as stone hatchets, tula adzes, sandstone grindstones and ochre (see Franklin et al. 2021; Westaway *et al*. 2021). The trade in these goods was often accompanied by the exchange of "symbolic" behavioural traits, such as songs and dances and ceremonial paraphernalia such as down, fibre and resin (Duncan-Kemp 1933).

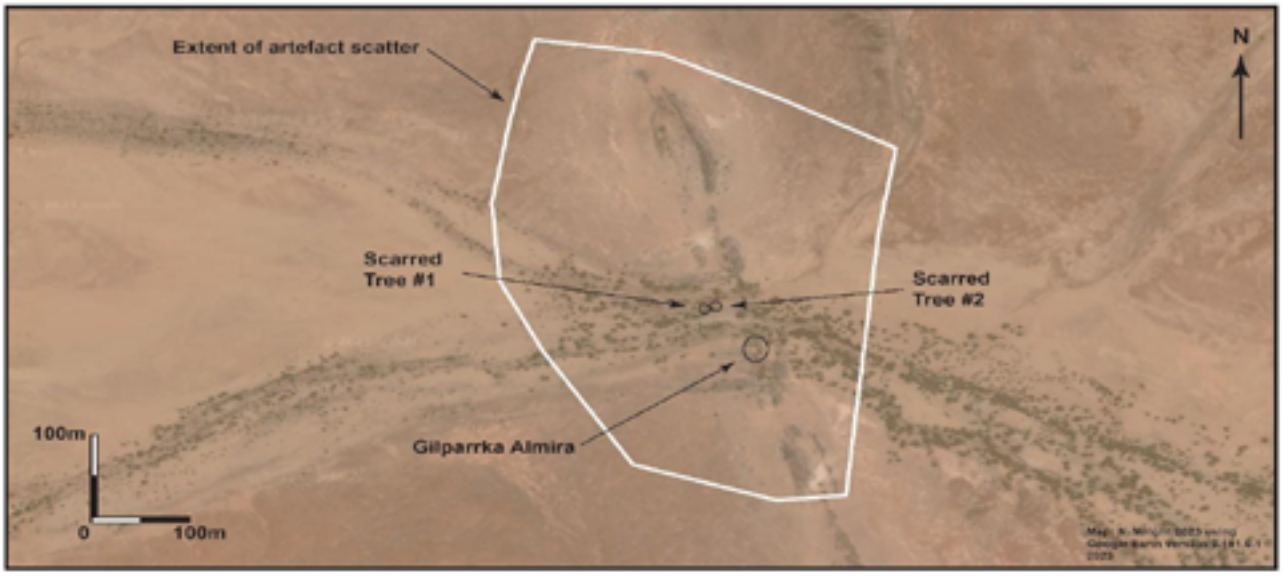

Fig. 2 Gilparrka site complex. Map compiled by Wright.

The Gilparrka site complex is located in the southern part of Mithaka Country (Figure 1) and consists of an engraving site, scarred trees and an extensive stone resource and artefact scatter (Figure 2). Each of these components of the complex will be discussed individually below, followed by a discussion of the broader cultural landscape.

Note that the name Gilparrka Almira is derived from "Gilparrka", the name of the creek at the location, and "Almira", meaning "paintings or etchings" in the Mithaka language.

Gilparrka Almira Rock Art Site

The Gilparrka Almira rock art site consists of engravings on the western face of a steeply sloping sandstone rock outcrop (see Franklin et al. 2021 for a detailed discussion of the site and its potential cultural and symbolic connections along trade routes). There is a single panel of engravings at the site, although the engravings are clustered in different areas, demarcated by natural cracks and fissures in the rock (Figures 3-4). Most of the engravings at the site have been pounded (direct percussion), bruising the rock surface, and the resulting lighter colour stands out against the dark red patina of the rock. There is no apparent re-patination of the engravings. The majority of the engravings are crescents or variations on crescent motifs, in the form of upside-down U-shapes. Other motifs include straight lines, single rows of dots, a trident-bird track with spur and a meandering line (a possible snake, Figure 5). Of the motifs at Gilparrka Almira, 82% are crescent motifs and crescent designs, compared to other recorded rock art sites in Australia, which vary from 1% to 39% at most (Franklin et al. 2021). Ethnographically, crescent motifs can carry a range of possible meanings, including boomerangs, crescent moons, rainbows, caves, huts, people sitting on the ground or tally marks. The engravings at Gilparrka Almira are similar to rock art common to Australia's deserts, which have a limited range of tracks and mostly non-figurative (geometric) images, including crescents/arcs.

Fig. 3 Gilparrka Almira panel Source: Drone photo by Wright - heading [bearing] 71.5 degrees (WNW); elevation of drone 3.81m; ground height (AMSL) immediately below the drone 108.23 metres).

Fig. 4 Gilparrka Almira - Northern end of panel ***Source:*** Photo by Franklin.

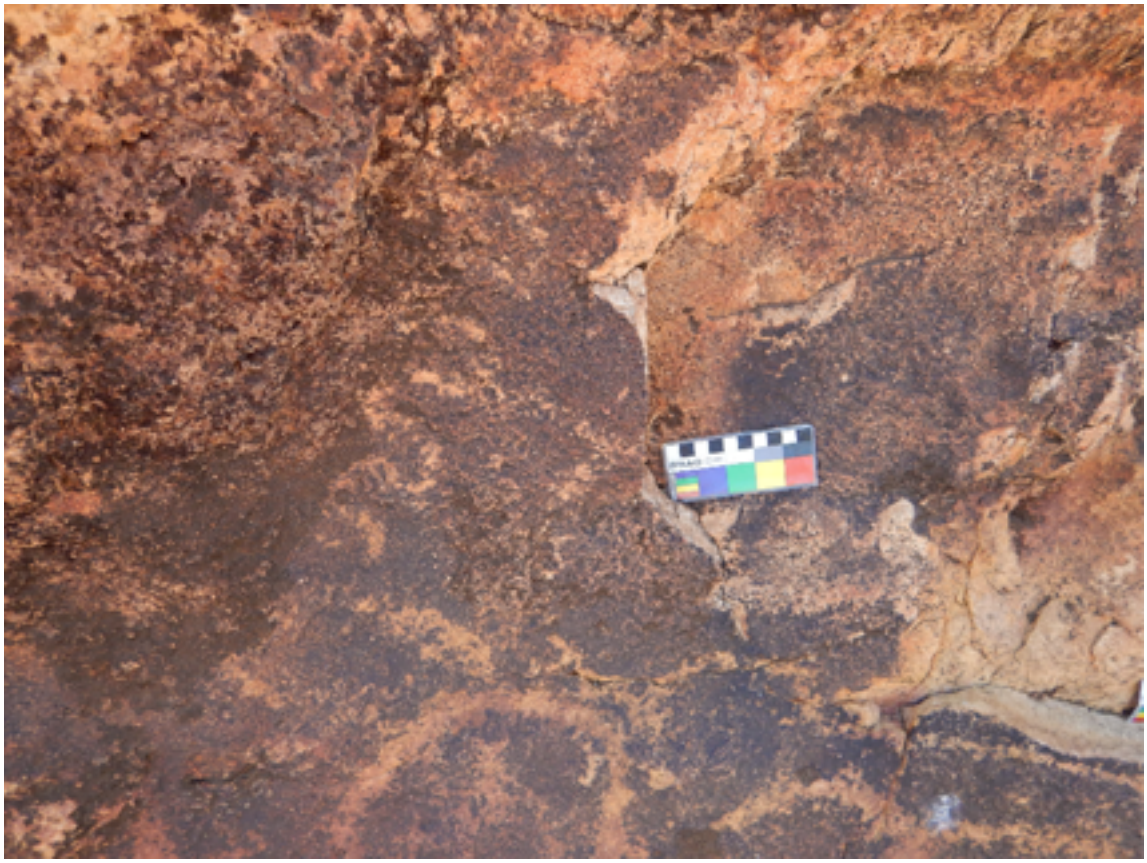

Fig. 5 Gilparrka Almira – a possible snake motif to the left of scale. ***Source:*** Photo by Franklin.

Culturally Scarred Trees

Gilparrka Almira is located adjacent to the confluence of two (2) ephemeral water channels. On one area of the bank between these two channels near the confluence, two Aboriginal culturally modified (scarred) trees are located (Figures 2, 6-7).

Culturally scarred trees result from the deliberate removal of bark to make artefacts. Culturally scarred trees usually have symmetrical scarring with squared off or rounded ends that do not extend down to the ground surface. The scar may eventually be covered by overgrowth from the sides of the scar. Dieback caused by the original scarring, or natural events such as insect activity, may cause secondary damage to the tree above or below a scar. Cultural scarring of trees can also result from traditional hunting and foraging activities such as cut holes for collecting food (for example honey or possums); and toe holds for climbing trees to access fruits, nuts, birds' eggs etc. Trees were also marked/scarred to indicate pathways or culturally significant places such as ceremonial grounds or burial locations. Culturally scarred trees are no longer commonly found across the Australian landscape due to fires and land clearance. The shapes of scars may vary. Small ovate scars (100-120 cm long and 40-60 cm wide) were formed in the manufacture of items such as containers (coolamons) and shields, or they may be markers. Larger scars may be the result of bark removal for canoes or shelters.

Culturally scarred tree #1 in the Gilparrka site complex is a dead tree stump 180cm high with a diameter of 38cm (Figure 6). The form of the scar would have been a regular oval shape, but the bottom has been damaged by insect activity. Due to over bank sedimentation, the scar extends to the current ground surface, but it would have been higher up the tree when originally made (Figure 6). The scar, which is on the SW face of the tree, is 65cm long (but the bottom is indistinct) and 25cm wide (Figure 6).

Culturally scarred tree #2 is a desert bloodwood (*Corymbia terminalis*) and is 15m to the southeast of the other culturally scarred tree (Figure 7). The tree is approximately 10m high and has a 60cm diameter. The form of the scar would have been a broadly oval shape, but there appears to have been damage to the top left corner causing dieback (Figure 7). The scar, which is on the SW face of the tree, is 50cm long and 28cm wide and is 45cm above the current ground surface (Figure 7).

Fig. 6 Culturally scarred tree #1. ***Source:*** Photo by Habgood.

Fig. 7: Culturally scarred tree #2. ***Source:*** Photo by Habgood.

Gilparrka Quarry

The Gilparrka Almira engraving site is surrounded by an extensive stone artefact scatter (Figure 2). Extending for kilometres to the north and south of the Gilparrka Almira engraving site are rocky ridgelines incorporating extensive silcrete outcrops (Figure 2). The silcrete boulders of the outcrop have been used as a stone resource/quarry. The full extent of the quarry has not yet been mapped, but the artefacts continue past the ridge to the south of Gilparrka Almira. The focus of the survey undertaken for the project was the ridge directly to the north of the Gilparrka Almira art site. As you move away from the main ridges, the density of artefacts decreases and as you move out onto the adjacent gibber plains the artefacts are no longer evident. The approximate size of the stone resource/quarry and the associated artefact scatter is a minimum of 700m x 500m (Figure 2).

The majority of the stone artefacts observed (over 95%) were made from a very fine-grained high quality grey silcrete, although there were also red, white and yellow silcrete artefacts, some of which were mottled or banded, and a few were made of chert and chalcedony. Artefacts included assayed boulders and cobbles, large cores, flaked pieces, large and small flakes and large amounts of debitage. Very few formal tools were observed during the survey of the area (Figures 8-9).

Fig. 8 High density silcrete artefact scatter. ***Source:*** Photo by Habgood.

Fig. 9 High density silcrete artefact scatter. ***Source:*** Photo by Habgood.

To systematically assess the density of the artefacts within the quarry area surveyed, two (2) intersecting perpendicular transects were laid out on the western side of the ridge to the north of the art site: the east-west transect was 60m long and the north-south transect 40m long. Every 5m along each transect a 50cm x 50cm frame was placed on the ground and all surface artefacts within the frame were counted. Densities ranged from 4 per 50cm2 (16 per 1m2) to 66 per 50cm2 (264 per 1m2) on the east-west transect, and from 17 per 50cm2 (68 per 1m2) to 48 per 50cm2 (192 per 1m2) on the north-south transect. To establish the highest observable artefact density, four (4) specific locations on the western side of the northern ridge were assessed using the 50cm x 50cm frame. Densities ranged from 80 per 50cm2 (320 per 1m2) to 122 per 50cm2 (488 per 1m2).

If these densities were extrapolated across the recorded artefact scatter it would result in artefact counts in the millions. For example:

- 16 per 1m2 (the lowest recorded density) across the entire surveyed area (700m x 500m) would equate to 5.6 million artefacts;
- A mid-range density of 150 per 1m2 across a sample area of 150m x 150m would equate to 3,375,000 artefacts;
- 488 per 1m2 (the highest recorded density) across a restricted area of only 20m x 20m would equate to 195,200 artefacts.

With such large numbers of artefacts, the silcrete resource/quarry must have been used over a very long time period or was intensively utilised over a shorter period. Either scenario is indicative of a process that would have generated a significant excess of raw material. Further analysis of the Gilparrka stone material is planned.

The quality of the fine-grained silcrete and the intensity of exploitation would suggest that the raw material was redistributed through the extensive "Pituri Road" trade/exchange system.

An Interconnected Cultural Landscape

The quality and volume of stone material at the Gilparrka quarry alludes to it being an important place in Traditional times. The Gilparrka Almira art site may be reflecting this importance by marking the culturally significant location. The small ovate scars on the two (2) trees at the confluence of the creeks could potentially have been markers signifying the importance of the area, although it is more likely that they represent regular exploitation of bark for everyday use in more recent times.

The occurrence of a possible engraved snake at Gilparrka Almira (Figure 5) also suggests that the site may have been a stopping point for the Rainbow Serpent on one of its various journeys across the continent. The Rainbow Serpent is one of the most powerful and widespread "Ancestral Beings" of Aboriginal Australia. The movement of its body as it travelled along a "Dreaming track/song line" formed physical features like hills, gorges, creeks and rivers in the once-featureless terrain. The Simpson Desert to the west of Mithaka Country was said to be the home of the Rainbow Serpent (Duncan-Kemp 1961:179). Furthermore, Duncan-Kemp (1968) noted that Maratjoora, the name for the Rainbow Serpent in the Channel Country, exerted a strong influence on the Aboriginal people of the region.

A parallel for Gilparrka Almira can be found at the site of Jukuita Cave in the Tanami Desert, northwest of Mithaka Country in the Northern Territory, where there is an association between an image of the

Rainbow Serpent and crescent motifs. An illustration of the paintings in this cave shows inverted "U" shapes/crescents in each curve of the Rainbow Serpent's body (Cowan 1992: figure 4). The Rainbow Serpent, in this region referred to as Jarapiri, is said to have surfaced on its journey north from central Australia (Cowan 1992). It is possible that the engraved snake and inverted "U" shapes/crescents at Gilparrka Almira indicate the site was also a stopping point for the Rainbow Serpent on one of its journeys. As you head east along Gilparrka Creek towards Gilparrka Almira, some of the hills and ridges take on the form of a snake adding character to this scenario (Figure 10).

Overlaps between Dreaming tracks and trade routes have been documented. Kerwin (2010:Figures 12–13) mapped the various paths of the Two Dog Dreaming across the continent, and demonstrated a correlation with the "Pituri Road". Kerwin (2010) also detailed the associations of the Two Dog Dreaming with other Dreaming stories, including the Rainbow Serpent chasing the Nightjar story and the Two Boys story of the Wangkangurru People of the Simpson Desert, adjacent to Mithaka Country. These dreaming stories highlight the movement of pituri across Australia, starting at the place of harvest in the Channel Country and radiating outwards along the Dreaming tracks. Presumably, the Dreaming stories also map in parallel the movement of the other goods associated with the "Pituri Road", such as the ochre, grindstones and stone hatchets. This would be consistent with our proposal that the Gilparrka Almira engraving site may be associated with the journeys of the Rainbow Serpent, and the high quality silcrete from the Gilparrka stone resource/quarry having been exchanged/traded along the "Pituri Road".

The three (3) individual archaeological sites - engraving location, stone resource/quarry, scarred marker trees - are therefore part of an interconnected Cultural landscape.

Fig. 10 Snake-like hills enroute to the Gilparrka site complex. ***Source:*** Photo by Habgood.

CONCLUSION

This paper has detailed three (3) co-located archaeological sites in Mithaka Country in the Channel Country of southwest Queensland, which we refer to as the Gilparrka site complex. The Gilparrka Almira engraving site is dominated by crescents or variations on crescent motifs, with a much smaller number of other motifs, including a possible snake design potentially representing the Rainbow Serpent. The Gilparrka Almira engraving site is surrounded by an extensive artefact scatter resulting from the exploitation of silcrete outcrops forming an extensive stone resource/quarry. The quality of the fine-grained silcrete and the intensity of exploitation, providing a significant excess of raw material, would suggest that the stone material was redistributed through an extensive trade/exchange system. Mithaka Country is located in the approximate centre of the great north-south "Pituri Road" trade network, which had several side branches. The route of the "Pituri Road" overlaps with stories related to the Rainbow Serpent.

Gilparrka Almira, with its possible engraved snake, may be recording the association of the surrounding landscape with the travels of the Rainbow Serpent along a Dreaming track/song line and reflecting the importance of the silcrete stone resource within the "Pituri Road". The two (2) culturally modified (scarred) trees could also have been markers signifying the importance of the location.

The three (3) individual archaeological sites are an interconnected Cultural landscape that retains important cultural values for the Mithaka People as it deepens their ongoing connection to Country and further highlights their connectivity to neighbouring Aboriginal groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The scientific members of the team are indebted to the Mithaka People for their ongoing support for research on their Country and their hospitality and guidance while we are there. The research was funded through ARC linkage LP170100789 and ARC Future Fellowship FT180100014.

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