

CULTURAL RING TREES IN SOUTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA

Hannah Morris¹, Talei Holm², Norma Freeman³, and Tim Owen⁴

Background

Many First Nations people hold traditions associated with Ring Trees. Ring Trees are trees where a limb and/or the trunk has been bound together to form a 'ring' shape through which one can look. Information on Ring Trees remains largely in oral traditions and confined to archaeological grey literature. As such, Ring Trees as a cultural site type remain on the periphery of the Australian archaeological record.

Ring Trees act as *beacons* within a landscape; they can connect sites and places, provide direction finding, and indicate routes, song lines, and lore lines. Trees with cultural rings have been identified on old and newer trees indicating continuity of a tradition potentially over the last one thousand years. The introduction of fencing separated Country and severely disrupted both the practice of making Ring Trees across the landscape and their intended connections. While Ring Trees can be recorded on the NSW AHIMS and Victorian ACHRIS databases, Aboriginal spatial ordering sees the landscape as the site and not an individual tree.

This poster provides a simple illustrative guide to Ring Tree types, focusing on different binding methods observed in NSW and Victoria.

Methodology

Over the last three years, we have been working with Aboriginal Elders in NSW and Victoria. Together, we have learnt about some associations and possible meaning behind different Ring Tree types, and investigated a variety of formation and binding methods. Working with Elders and reading the local cultural landscape has been key to this research. We have also sought input from arborists to understand the differences between naturally forming and manufactured binds. While distinctions between these binds require further investigation, both Ring Tree types can still be considered cultural.

The trees presented in this study are located within Wiradjuri Country and Dharawal Country in NSW. Each tree was recorded in collaboration with local Aboriginal Elders. Further discussions, in conjunction with geospatial mapping, have sought to use the direction that a ring points to connect the tree with other cultural items, places, or traditions both near and far.

Our developing database of Ring Trees is allowing comparative analyses of trees across the study area. This includes the establishment of simple bind categories, possible patterns in tree species, and associations between bind types and functions.

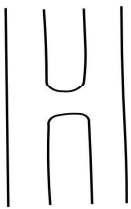
Further Research

Further investigation into Ring Trees presents a significant opportunity to connect tangible to intangible heritage.

The next stages of this research includes statistical analysis of the trees identified to date. This data would inform potential associations between tree species, ring shape, binding methods, and cultural associations.

Working with Aboriginal Elders and arborists will assist with further understanding of Ring Trees and the roll they play within a cultural landscape. We see that wider recognition for Ring Trees, and their relationship to landscape features and cultural sites, as necessary to understanding their true function and value.

We are also in the process of drafting a simple recording form and illustrated glossary of terms. It is our aim to develop resources that can be used easily during field recording by members of the First Nations community, archaeologists, and arborists.

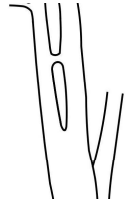
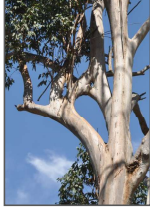


H Bind—Bridge

An H-bridge bind has a clean, continuous fusion forming a strong connection between two branches.

Characteristics:

- Found in both main structural branches and side branches
- No visible sign where the branches join
- Often forming a U-shape at the top and bottom of the bind
- Can be found in trees with one or more rings
- Formed above a junction
- Multiple rings can form a helix (like rungs on a ladder) or double helix (two or more rings pointing in different directions)
- Can form several shapes including oblong, round, teardrop, and slit

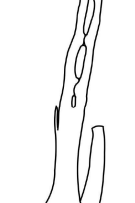
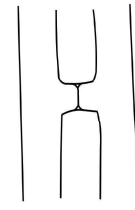
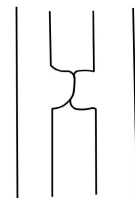


H Bind—Pinch

An H-pinch bind has two nodules pressed together without a continuous fusion.

Characteristics:

- Primarily found in main structural branches
- Visible signs where the nodules join
- Additional fusing around this junction may be evident
- Few nearby branches
- Can be found in trees with one or more rings
- Not always formed above a junction
- Where double binds are present, the top bind of the lower ring acts as the lower bind of the upper ring
- Often forming a straight shape such as oblong or slit



X Bind

An X bind is formed when two branches cross over one another, enveloping the bind to form a clean fusion.

Characteristics:

- Formed by one main structural branch and one side branch, or two side branches
- Often a clean fusion forming a strong connection between two branches
- Often no visible sign where branches join
- Formed above a junction
- May be formed by inosculation, a natural type of fusion where one branch has rubbed or braced against the other

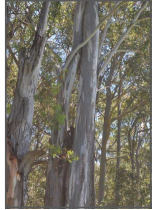
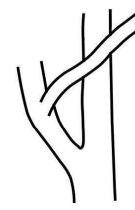


K bind

An K bind is formed where two branches brace against one another.

Characteristics:

- There are several distinct forms, including:
- A smaller branch pressed against a larger branch
- Two adjacent branches forming a regular and reversed C-shape
- Two structural branches growing side by side
- Two or more branches bunched together and bound
- Can be found in trees with one or more rings



Acknowledgements

This poster has included cultural information and input from several First Nation Elders and community members including Glenda Chalker and members of the Young Local Aboriginal Land Council such as Enid Clarke, Keith Freeman, Roy Levett (decd), Amanda Levett, Marnie Freeman, Alona Apps, Jirrah Freeman, and others. Within each community there have been multiple others who have helped identify, record, and connect values. Each Elder has provided permission for this information to be shared in the common interest of education and collaboration.

Authors

¹Hannah Morris, Extent Heritage, hmorris.arch@gmail.com.au

²Talei Holm, taleiholm1@gmail.com

³Norma Freeman, younglalc62@gmail.com

⁴Tim Owen, GML Heritage, towen@gml.com.au