

The Kulin People

of Central Victoria

Long, long ago in the Creation, the all-powerful *Bundjil* took the form of the eagle and created the Kulin people – their languages, their laws and their lands.

Later, *Barwool*, an ancestral headman, cut the *Birrarung* (Yarra River) to free the country of floodwaters. This inundated the plain where the Kulin had hunted kangaroo and formed *Narm* (Port Phillip Bay). The Kulin are a federation of five distinct but strongly related communities.

They prospered in approximately two million hectares of what is now known as south central Victoria.

The five communities are known as:

- **Woiwurrung (Wurundjeri)**
of the Birrarung (Yarra) catchment
- **Boonerwrung**
of the bays and south coast
- **Taungurung**
of the *Koriella* catchment (Goulburn River)
- **Wathaurung**
of the western plains
- **Dja Dja Wrung**
of the northwest region (Loddon River).

Each of these large groups are divided into a number of smaller, land-owning communities. But all Kulin had as their defining social moiety (totem) either *Bundjil*, the eagle, or *Waa*, the raven (crow). An individual's moiety, inherited from the father, dictated all behaviour, social relationships, even marriage partners. Therefore a network of alliances was created and maintained by regular meetings for trade, initiations, celebrations and resolving differences. Sorcery, magic and *murrup* (spirit) were also fundamentals of society – though little of their deep significance was ever written down. Such knowledge was passed on by the oral tradition of the Elders.

Long before the Kulin had contact with the European world, they had established complex trading networks. In the north of **Woiwurrung** country is *Will-im-ee Mooring* (Mount William) axe quarry. *Murring* (axe heads) made from this treasured green stone passed by many transactions to what is now Adelaide and New South Wales. Few of these special axes were found in Gippsland, probably because the Kulin and Gunai/Kurnai federation were not allies. *Murring* gained prestige the further they travelled. One highly crafted possum-skin cloak was required for exchange of three axes. Fine examples of craft and art can be found in Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum and the Koorie Heritage Trust Cultural Centre in the city.



When *ngamudji* (white men) arrived at Port Phillip in 1835 they pushed aside the Kulin people and mission stations were built to 'look after' this now displaced society. The first reserve was located at an important meeting place beside *Birrarung*, where the Royal Botanic Gardens are now situated. Later, a school for Aboriginal children was established at another important place where the Merri Merri creek enters *Birrarung*. The nearby, modern suburb of Fitzroy continues as a focus for the Aboriginal population of Melbourne. There are still reminders in Melbourne of traditional Kulin life: a scarred tree stands in Fitzroy Gardens; rock wells and shell middens still exist along the *Narm* coast; and earth rings in north west suburbs most likely hosted important ceremonies. All these special places are protected by State & Federal legislation.

Today Kulin people continue to live, practice and strengthen their culture in urban Melbourne and central Victoria.

References

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Further Information

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Victorian Aboriginal Peoples

For Aboriginal people the place now known as 'Victoria' has been home since the beginning of time.

Archeological evidence reveals a connection extending beyond 40,000 years. Ancestors of today's communities witnessed volcanic eruptions of Tapook (Mt. Napier) in the west. They also hunted giant kangaroos and worried over the rising seas, which marked the end of the last Ice Age.

Today, Aboriginal concerns are about self-determination, restoring their lands and living their culture.

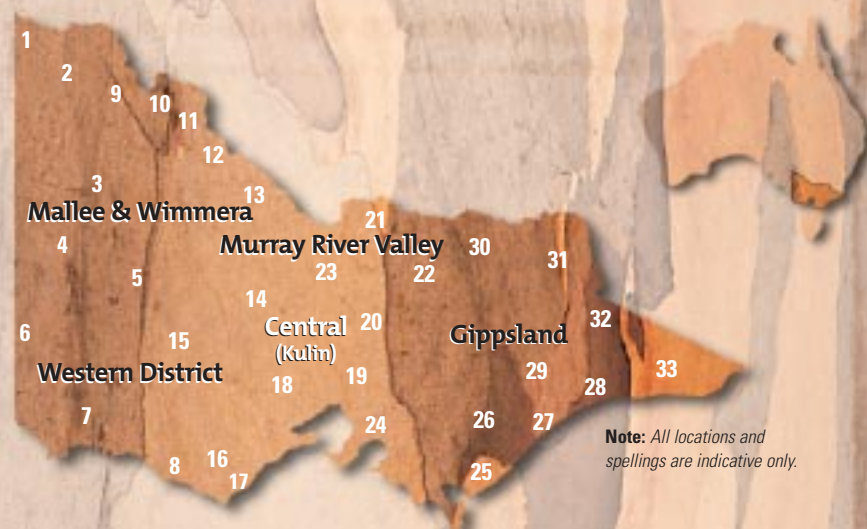
It is estimated that between 20,000 and 60,000 people, speaking over 30 languages, lived throughout 'Victoria' when Europeans arrived in 1835. The rapid colonisation resulted in a devastating loss of languages, traditions and lives. During this violent period of Victorian history, families were forced off their lands and on to missions. These were bitter-sweet places. They were a home and haven from the violence but also a place where there was little choice except conformity with Christianity and Western ways. Ironically, it was from these missions that well-known activists rose to fight for better conditions for their people.

Today well over 25,000 Aboriginal people live throughout Victoria, and this number is growing.

Murray River Valley

Otchout, the mighty Cod carved out the Millewa (Murray River) while fleeing the spears of Totyerguil, the hunter. The rich lands of the Millewa supported hundreds of generations. Even when the river was in flood people fished and moved about in bark canoes, living on high earth mounds while feeding on the abundance of food brought by the flood waters. These mounds can still be seen today. There are also scarred trees from which slabs of bark were removed to make canoes, bowls and shelters.

Today, the people of the Murray continue the struggle for the return of their homelands at the Barmah Forest.



Note: All locations and spellings are indicative only.

1 Njindadj	13 Barapabarapa	24 Boonerwung
2 Ladjiladji	14 Dja Dja Wrung	25* Bratauloong
3 Wergaia	15 Djab Wurrung	26* Braiakuloong
4 Wotjobaluk	16 Djagurd Wurrung	27* Tatungaloong
5 Jardwadjali	17 Gadubanud	28* Krauatungaloong
6 Buandid - Bunganditj	18 Wathaurung	29 Brabralung
7 Gournditch-Mara	19 Woiwurrung (Wurundjeri)	30 Way Wurru
8 Girai Wurrung	20 Taungurung	31 Dhuduroa
9 Jarijari	21 Yorta Yorta	32 Ngarigu
10 Dadidadi	22 Bangerang	33 Maap (Bidawal)
11 Wadiwadi	23 Ngurai-illam Wurrung	

* Members of the Gunai/Kurnai federation

Western District

Aboriginal people have lived in Gariwerd (The Grampians) since before the last Ice Age. The 'old people' left the most extensive rock art in Victoria – over 120 art sites. The red and white painted figures and hand stencils hold the secrets of activities that went on for millennia. South at Carrap (Lake Condah), people lived in semi-permanent, dome-shaped huts and harvested eels in long woven baskets fixed to stone-walled channels. Lake Condah became a mission station in 1867. People still maintain strong ties there, and at Teerak – the Framlingham station near Wheringkernitch (Warrnambool). Thousands of tourists visit the Brambuk Cultural Centre in Gariwerd to see contemporary art, crafts and performances and to explore bush tucker trails.

Mallee and Wimmera

Between rich Millewa Valley and the western plains lies a desert region. A Creation Story tells how Purra, an Ancestral Kangaroo Spirit, marked the route of Barbarton (Wimmera River)

from Stawell north to Ngelbakutya (Lake Albacutya) and Gooro (Lake Hindmarsh). Wirringer (Wirrengren Plain), in the middle of this desert, was an important meeting place for people throughout this region and beyond. Ebenezer Mission became a major regional focus and was deliberately built on an important place of traditional ceremony, as well as being a known massacre site.

Gippsland

Aboriginal people have lived in the mountains of Gippsland and visited the rugged coast of sacred Wammum or Yirruk (Wilson's Promontory) for over 30 millennia. Some made the long annual trek to the high plains for ceremonies – timed to coincide with the harvest of the Bogong moth. The Lake Tyers mission was built in 1861 at Warnang gatty, a favourite fishing place. Together with the later forest settlement of Jackson's Track, these places have been home for many Aboriginal families. Traditional skills in baskets, spears, shields, and canoe making may be found in the Krowathunkulung Keeping Place in Bairnsdale.