Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Objects of Power: Australian Aboriginal Breastplates and Scottish Pastoralists

ARTICLE

ALISON CLARK

1495 ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

Aboriginal breastplates also known as brass plates, king plates, queen plates and Aboriginal gorgets were given by European colonisers to Aboriginal people in Australia from c.1815. As a tool of colonisation they were frequently given out by Scottish pastoralists in Queensland and New South Wales in the mid to late 1800s to assist the smooth settlement of land. Through three object case studies this paper will examine the history of these contentious objects, considering how they were used by Scottish pastoralists to colonise Aboriginal land in the 1800s and the afterlives of these objects.

Readers are advised this article contains content relating to violent colonial practices and deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which some may find distressing.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Alison Clark
National Museums of Scotland, UK
A.Clark@nms.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:
First Australians; Aboriginal History; Colonial Histories and Legacies; Scotland and Empire

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Clark, A. 2023. Objects of Power: Australian Aboriginal Breastplates and Scottish Pastoralists. *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 11(1): 2, 1–15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.57132/jiss.212

INTRODUCTION

> 'Semicircular brass badge worn by Sandy, Chief of Coringori, Australia. Crescent gorgets were a mark of British military rank adopted by the indigenous peoples.'[1]

The impetus for this paper was primary research into a breastplate held by the Department of Scottish History and Archaeology, National Museums Scotland currently on display in the Scotland Galleries of the National Museum of Scotland. Semi-circular breastplates like this one were given by European colonisers to Aboriginal people in Australia from c.1815 for a variety of reasons primarily focused around rewarding Aboriginal people for being of assistance to European government officials, squatters, missionaries, and pastoralists. As one tool in the toolbox of colonisation they became particularly popular with Scottish pastoralists in Queensland and New South Wales in the mid to late 1800s. These pastoralists gave breastplates as a way of singling out individuals as leaders of a group. The assumption was that the individual would then act as a go between for the pastoralist and the local Aboriginal population in order to ensure the successful and peaceful establishment of that pastoral station. These 'gifts' demonstrated the inability of colonists to understand existing systems of authority, imposing European ideas of social hierarchy and ownership onto Aboriginal people. The giving of breastplates reflected complex unequal social relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. They are symbols of dispossession from land but also symbols of resistance and strength. These powerful objects, often disassociated from their wearer when held by museums, retain important connections to country and culture for the descendants of those who wore them.

Exhibited alongside objects including a Tahitian taumi collected by Captain James Cook, a piece of gold from Raspberry Mine in Victoria, and a silver five-shilling piece minted during Lachlan Macquarie's governorship of the colony of New South Wales, the breastplate at National Museums Scotland is an emblem of Scots' colonial activity overseas and their role within the British Empire. This is an object that was, until recently, understood and interpreted purely in terms of its Scottishness. The interpretation, which has now been amended to discuss the cultural and historical significance of the object, reveals the complex and contested histories of these objects best described by the interpretation panel from another museum, Melbourne Museum. The First Peoples exhibition within Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum 'celebrates the history, culture, achievements and survival of Victoria's Aboriginal people'.[2] On display is a breastplate, the label text for which states: 'Breastplates are really difficult to talk about and bring forth conflicting emotions. On one level, they are a type of military gorget used by the foreign regime to try and oppress our leaders and warriors. But on another level, they are a memory from our Old People who fought to keep a place for family and community in the new world order'.[3] Through three object case studies this paper will examine the history of these contentious objects and their afterlives. As Jakelin Troy, Kate Darian-Smith and Jack Norris have all discussed, research on the history and use of breastplates in Australia only began in earnest in the 1990s.[4] Breastplates are still an under researched cultural artefact of colonialism and before Gaye Sculthorpe's comprehensive survey of Indigenous Australian collections in museums in the UK and Ireland, those held by UK institutions were rarely discussed.[5] By focusing on how breastplates were used by Scottish pastoralists in the colonies of New South Wales and Queensland to colonise Aboriginal land in the 1800s it is hoped that this paper will contribute to this research, bringing more awareness to these objects outside of Australia.

---

1 Label text for H.NC 93 in the Scotland and the World Gallery, National Museums Scotland. As viewed in February 2020.

2 First Peoples, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre. Available at <First Peoples – Bunjilaka (museumsvictoria.com.au)> Accessed 21 January 2022.

3 This text was viewed in the First Peoples' exhibition at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Museums Victoria in 2014.

4 Jakelin Troy, *King Plates: A History of Aboriginal Gorgets* (Canberra, 1993); Kate Darian-Smith, 'Breastplates, Re-Enacting Possession in North America and Australia' in Kate Darian-Smith et al (eds) *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers: Conflict, Performance, and Commemoration* (London, 2015), 54–74; Jack Norris 'Aboriginal Breastplates: Objects and Images of the Colonial Frontier', *The Artefact*, 42 (2019), 28–42.

5 Gaye Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent and Howard Morphy (eds) *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* (London, 2021).

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

FROM GORGETS TO BREASTPLATES

Aboriginal breastplates originated as military gorgets worn by British Army officers. The word gorget comes from the French word 'gorge' meaning throat. Gorgets were originally a piece of plate armour worn below the helmet to protect the throat. As military clothing changed, the use and meaning of the gorget developed to become a crescent shaped 'ornamental badge of rank for officers' (Figure one) worn on a ribbon around the neck and engraved with the Royal coat of arms.[6] By 1830 the use of gorgets in this way was abolished in Britain but the legacy of these objects in British colonies was already in place. It is thought that the first breastplate given to an Aboriginal person was given in 1815. The breastplate was given to Kuringgai man Bungaree by the Scottish-born Governor Lachlan Macquarie (1762–1824) as a strategy to bring about peaceful relations between Aboriginal people and Europeans (Figure two). This first breastplate also reflected Macquarie's work in shaping the development of the colony of New South Wales from a penal colony into a free settlement over the course of his Governorship.

Figure one Officer's Gorget, copper and gold, late 18th century. MET 17.113. CCO The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York Rogers Fund, 1917.

Macquarie had previously served in the British Army in North America and modelled the idea of these breastplates on those given to Native North Americans by British colonisers in the eighteenth century. Native North American chiefs who fought with the British against the French were given gorgets as a token of gratitude and became known as 'Gorget Captains'. Their distribution within North America followed an earlier practice of European colonial governments giving silver medals to Indigenous peoples. Known as 'peace medals' the objects 'were the material representations of oral or written agreements about military or trade matters and ubiquitous symbols of cross-cultural diplomacy and economic exchange'.[7] As Kate Darian-Smith has noted, beyond the military context, metal gorgets were also given as a trade good by the British to Indigenous peoples to broker 'diplomatic relations with First Nations.'[8] As I have discussed elsewhere the intentions and the implications of cross-cultural

6 Major Alastair Donald, 'The Origin of Gorget Patches' The Origin of Gorget Patches.pdf (rmhistorical.com) accessed 21 January 2022.

7 Darian-Smith, 'Breastplates, Re-Enacting Possession in North America and Australia', 60.

8 Ibid., 58.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

Figure two 'Portrait of Bungaree, a native of New South Wales, with Fort Macquarie, Sydney Harbour, in background' by Augustus Earle, 1826. NLA PIC T305 NK118. Courtesy National Library of Australia.

exchange are complex and rarely hold the same meaning for both parties.[9] For Europeans the acceptance of gifts by Indigenous peoples was often perceived as an acceptance of colonial governance. For some Indigenous Australians the exchange of gifts was understood as the start of a mutually beneficial relationship. Breastplates are material archives of these complex, unequal, cross-cultural relationships that developed on the colonial frontiers of New South Wales and Queensland.

Under Macquarie breastplates were issued predominately by the Government, existing as Cleary and Karskens have argued within a British system of military credit.[10] Chris Healy has stated that 'breastplates were an attempt at domination of a different order from systematic shooting'.[11] Under Macquarie's governance Aboriginal people were given few options, they could accept these breastplates and the protection they offered or they could be subjected to the colonial violence deemed necessary for a successful colony. When Scottish-born Thomas Makdougall Brisbane took over as Governor of New South Wales in 1821 the distribution of breastplates by settlers and the reasons for giving breastplates grew significantly and they continued to be issued until the mid 1940s. Healy has argued that this early proliferation was because the 'acreage under white control expanded relatively unchecked by colonial governance'.[12] More settlers meant an increased desire for control over Aboriginal land and Aboriginal people. Breastplates were one of many colonial tools used in an attempt to achieve this aim.

9 Alison Clark, 'The Union Jack Festival, Kiribati' in idem, *Resonant Histories: Pacific Artefacts and the Voyages of HMS Royalist, 1890–1893* (Leiden, 2019), 151–61.

10 Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Sydney, 2010).

11 Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney, 2008), 151.

12 Ibid., 151.

Breastplates given to Aboriginal people were often up to twice the size of a military gorget and were made of brass, bronze or occasionally copper, although the National Museum of Australia (NMA) also records two unique breastplates, one made of silver and one of turtle shell. Breastplates were known variously in Australia as king plates, queen plates, brass plates and gorgets with each name referencing either the material that the plate was made from, its military origin or the person who it was intended for. Breastplates were given to both men and women by colonial officials, missionaries, pastoralists, land owners and squatters. Jack Norris argues that 'each breastplate exchange would have held differing motivations and meanings in different time periods or situations.'[13] They were given to distinguish an individual and were not just given to establish a chieftainship as Macquarie had originally intended. They were given to Aboriginal people because of their standing within their own language group, perceived or otherwise, as a reward because of their actions or behaviour toward colonists, and sometimes the breastplate marked a friendship. The motivations for giving a particular breastplate can often be read in the inscriptions either through the language used or the imagery depicted. For example, a breastplate in the Queensland Museum, given to Poonipun, an Aboriginal man from Stradbroke Island rewards Poonipun for rescuing people from a wrecked ship in 1848 and the inscription on his breastplate describes this.[14]

Blank breastplates were made by companies in Australia and England and often purchased in bulk with the engraving then arranged by the purchaser. The chain attached to the breastplates appear to be unique to each breastplate, possibly being organised by the person giving the breastplate, and would have been attached once the breastplate had been engraved. There are more than 300 breastplates in public institutions in Australia, with the NMA holding the largest collection. Gaye Sculthorpe's survey of Indigenous Australian collections in UK and Ireland also revealed two breastplates held by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and the Science Museum in the UK. In 2007 the NMA published an online version of Jakelin Troy's 1993 book *King Plates* creating the most comprehensive resource on Aboriginal breastplates to date.[15] Using this resource as guide for style and form we know that almost all Aboriginal breastplates were crescent shaped, with a metal chain, and were inscribed with images of the kangaroo and the emu.

The first recorded use of the kangaroo and the emu supporting a shield is found on the Bowman Flag made in 1806 by the Bowman family in New South Wales to celebrate victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. The animals became unofficial symbols of the new Australian nation and were later formalised in 1908 in the official Australian coat of arms. Ian Fox has stated that the additional 'inscriptions on breastplates tell a story of attempts at European domination and subjugation, through years of dispossession, indiscriminate slaughter, and martial law imposed on Aboriginal people.'[16] The name of the wearer was inscribed into the centre of the breastplate. The names were usually European names which had been bestowed upon the Aboriginal recipient by the colonist and would often be related to the colonist's own name or family. Further inscriptions varied, linking people to the station or run they worked on, the language group they were from, or a geographic area. Often the spellings of these places were incorrect or anglicised versions of local Aboriginal language. Sometimes the status of King, Queen or Chief was given on the breastplate and other times there is just a name.[17] These inscriptions were a way for the colonist to assert control, even ownership over the Aboriginal person they gave the breastplate to. They also marked 'attempts to make indigenous people familiar by conferring' these European titles or names.[18] Many European colonists failed or refused to understand Aboriginal society, wrongly assuming that communities were governed by chiefs, a misunderstanding Fox argues came from colonists' experience of other Indigenous societies in places such as North America.[19] Additional

13 Norris, 'Aboriginal Breastplates', 31.

14 Registration number QE2629 in Queensland Museum collections.

15 Aboriginal Breastplates. National Museum of Australia https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/aboriginal-breastplates, accessed 23 January 2022.

16 Ian Fox, *Aboriginal Breastplates of the Northern Rivers: Contested Recognition, Uncontested Identity* (Tweed, 2016), 4.

17 The use of the terms King and Queen didn't begin until the mid 1820s, see ibid.

18 Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines* (Sydney, 2008), 138.

19 Fox, *Aboriginal Breastplates*.

decoration was often inscribed and this ranged from scenes depicting Aboriginal people and Europeans, Australian flora and fauna, and symbols of British heraldry. These symbols often reveal further context about the relationship between the giver and the wearer and in some were personal to the wearer. For example Cora Gooseberry, wife of Bungaree, was given two breastplates both inscribed with fish which reference her name, Cora means goatfish, and the importance of Eora women as fisherwomen within Eora society.[20]

SCOTTISH PASTORALISM IN AUSTRALIA

Maps of colonial Australia from the mid to late 1800s are a clear indication of the popularity of the new colonies with Scots, and of the role of Scots in the development of these colonies. Districts are named Maitland and Inverell, whilst runs and stations feature names such as Strathmore, Stirling and Dalkeith. Benjamin Wilkie has noted that early migrants to New South Wales from Scotland were colonial officials and military officers who were granted large tracts of land, but remained small in their migration numbers.[21] Australia was not popular with free Scottish settlers until around the 1820s. From 1821 Scottish migration grew and free Scottish settlers made up one third of those being given small land grants. Wilkie argues that the popularity of Australia grew in part due to economic and social conditions in Scotland with a large number of settlers coming from the Highlands in particular due to both the Clearances and the Highland Potato Famine. As many tenant farmers in the Highlands were forced to become crofters, life in Australia appeared to offer better opportunities, wages and food. Farmers saw opportunity in Australia where the land was advertised by the colonial government as available and plentiful and Governor Macquarie's plan to supply land owners with cheap convict labour made immigration seem attractive and profitable. The promotion of land as readily available for settlers in Australia was based on terra nullius, the myth that the land 'discovered' by the British belonged to no-one. Aboriginal people and their resistance to colonisation were perceived as obstacles to the promotion of this myth, with breastplates utilised by settlers to overcome this.

Lachlan Macquarie was appointed Governor of New South Wales in 1810 and remained in the role until 1821. Sent to the colony to regain control, after the New South Wales Corp had undertaken a military coup, Macquarie's governorship significantly changed land ownership in Australia. Macquarie oversaw a large town planning and public building programme. Whilst agricultural development along the north and south of the colony was established to enable the colony to be more self-sufficient, Macquarie also drove exploration further into inland Australia to find areas suitable for agricultural expansion. Crucially he also looked to capitalise on the convict population, by using them as free labour on pastoral runs and stations, and by making it more attractive for ex-convicts to gain work in the colony. All this was undertaken at the expense of local Aboriginal populations, many of whom were killed in conflict with army officers, squatters or settlers. Macquarie sought to minimise this conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and in 1814 'proposed the idea of a chieftainship system'[22] amongst the Aboriginal population believing this would develop positive working relationships between the two populations. Arguing that each district should have its own chief, these chiefs were to be invested through the ceremonial presentation of breastplates which would distinguish them as representatives of the local Aboriginal population. Colonists would then communicate directly with these chiefs to resolve conflict that arose.

A legacy of Macquarie's governance which opened up more land for settlement by colonists was the establishment of companies such as the Australian Agricultural Company which was founded in 1824 to exploit the land and its natural resources for commercial gain. It was a direct development from an inquiry into the development of the colony of New South Wales in 1823 that recommended that large grants of land should be made to those with significant financial resource with the idea that the stations established could use convict labour to work them. The initial purpose was to farm sheep to sell wool back in the United Kingdom and the company employed many immigrants from Scotland.

20 These are now in the collections of the Australian Museum (B008454) and the Mitchell Library (R 251B).

21 Benjamin Wilkie, *The Scots in Australia 1788–1938* (Suffolk, 2017).

22 =Fox, *Aboriginal Breastplates* , 2.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

As Scottish migration to Australia became increasingly attractive and settlement in Australia expanded, the Scottish Australian Investment Company Limited was established in Aberdeen in 1840 and began operating in Australia from 1841. They invested in pastoral stations and, later, in mining, copper and coal. The establishment of the company coincided with the establishment of pastoralism in what is today Queensland which helped to develop economies in the area. Pastoralism developed after 1840 when the commissioner for lands had declared the land around and to the north of the penal colony, established in what is today Brisbane, was available for private settlement and in 1842 Brisbane was declared a free settlement. Previously controlled from New South Wales, north-eastern Australia became its own colony named Queensland in 1859. Pastoralists quickly followed the early expeditions into the region. Between 1861 and 1900 economic development in Queensland was almost solely dependent on 'the expansion of primary industry.'[23] Explorer William Landsborough's survey of the land had highlighted suitable areas for pastoral runs to be established and many pastoralists followed these recommendations. In 1868 the first of the gold rushes began on the Gilbert River, causing more Europeans to come into the area in the hope of making their fortune. Michael Morwood notes that this increased European population started to put pressure on what were already tense relations between the Aboriginal population and white settlers.[24] The establishment of the Queensland Native Mounted Police did nothing to ease tensions. They often made settlers feel safer but the fear that they produced in the Aboriginal population led to many revenge attacks on settlers.[25]

Breastplates were one tool used in the colonisation of Australia and played a role in early agricultural and pastoral development in New South Wales and pastoral expansion into Queensland. Colonists wanting to set up sheep and cattle stations and avoid or minimise conflict with the local Aboriginal population would often identify an Aboriginal person, usually a man, to coerce into cooperating with them and give him a breastplate in return. The man was then expected to negotiate with local Aboriginal people on the pastoralist's behalf. These so-called gifts imposed European ideas of social hierarchy onto Aboriginal people. Not all pastoralists used breastplates, many resorting to more violent means to manage the local Aboriginal population, and some pastoralists used both breastplates and violence depending on the situation. It is also important to remember that these transactions were incredibly complex. They reflected unequal power relations, yet it was unlikely that the giving of breastplates controlled Aboriginal people in the way that pastoralists believed they did. In her discussion of European clothing given to Aboriginal people in early New South Wales, Karskens asks us to move away from the notion that the adoption of European clothing by Aboriginal people signified degradation or loss of culture and instead to consider their agency.[26] We do not know how Aboriginal people used and understood breastplates but we can extend Karskens' argument to consider that they would have been worn for a variety of reasons and perceived in a variety of ways. Breastplates were a visible marker of reward and a form of protection within colonial society. They afforded the wearer some limited power within that society and the Aboriginal people who wore these breastplates may have drawn upon this. These objects are tangible material links with Aboriginal people who were involved in the colonial history of Australia, bearing witness to the 'complex zone of encounter, the European-Aboriginal frontier'.[27]

A BREASTPLATE IN SCOTLAND

The breastplate exhibited in the National Museum of Scotland (Figure 3) was sand-cast from brass and has a deep semi-circle shape. Instead of the usual metal cord, the plate hangs from a twisted plant fibre cord, the end of which is bound around a kangaroo bone awl, probably a tibia. A knotted fibre bag is also twisted and bound around the cord. The plate is engraved with the words 'Sandy Chief of Coringori' and surrounded by an engraved emu and kangaroo.

23 Dawn May, *From Bush to Station: Aboriginal Labour in the North Queensland Pastoral Industry, 1861–1897* (Townsville, 1983), 1.

24 Michael Morwood, 'The Prehistory of Aboriginal Landuse on the Upper Flinders River, North Queensland Highlands', *Queensland Archaeological Research*, 7 (1990) 3–56.

25 Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier; Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (Sydney, 1982), 104.

26 Grace Karskens, 'Red Coat, Blue Jacket, Black Skin: Aboriginal Men and Clothing in Early New South Wales', *Aboriginal History*, 35 (2011), 1–36.

27 Philip Jones, *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers* (Adelaide, 2007), 9.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

The breastplate came into the collections of National Museums Scotland in 1985 when the Royal Scottish Museum and National Museum of Antiquities Scotland (NMAS) were formally merged. The NMAS had purchased the breastplate as part of a group of ninety-seven objects from the Duns Collection, which came up for sale in 1903. All of the objects purchased from that sale were of Scottish origin with the exception of this breastplate.

Figure three Brass breastplate worn by Sandy Chief of Coringori. H.NC 93. Copyright National Museums Scotland.

North Berwick born Professor Reverend John Duns (1820–1909) was a Professor of Natural Science at New College, Edinburgh, a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and a member of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, who was serving as Curator when the National Museum of Antiquities Scotland moved to Queen Street in 1891. Duns had an eclectic collection including English, Irish and Scottish archaeological material, Egyptian antiquities, and material culture from Asia, North and South America and Oceania. The breastplate is the only Australian object listed within the 1900 valuation report of his collection and much of the ethnographic material within that collection reflects other areas of the world colonised by Scots during the 1800s: New Zealand, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Arctic.[28] Given the breadth of the collection and the fact that Duns is not recorded as having travelled outside of Europe it is thought that his collections were purchased from auction houses or through his networks in the literary, philosophical, antiquarian and natural history societies in Edinburgh and Scotland more broadly.

Certainly, Scottish colonial officials in Australia such as Brisbane amassed private collections of Indigenous cultural artefacts and many settlers followed suit. Brisbane donated his collection to the University of Edinburgh Museum of Natural History and the Tweedside Physical and Antiquarian Society in Kelso. Brisbane was also a President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and through these societies Duns would have been aware of Brisbane's and other Scottish émigré's collecting. These societies assembled collections and provided spaces for men like Duns to share knowledge. In turn 'donors provided artefacts not only to add to research resources but also to bolster their own credentials as educated men participating in civic life and progress'.[29] Chantal Knowles has argued that ad hoc collections were common during this

28 Professor Duns Collection Valuation 1900. Department of Scottish History and Archaeology, National Museums Scotland.

29 Chantal Knowles, 'Unmasking the Torres Strait: Objects and Relationships' in Gaye Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent and Howard Morphy (eds), *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* (London, 2021), 203.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

period and that adding a few 'foreign objects to seemingly unrelated assemblages provided an index against which local specimens could be considered within a global context'.[30] The addition of a breastplate to Duns' collection may have also reflected a European belief at the time that Aboriginal people were dying out. In acquiring this object Duns may have valued it as a relic of what he believed to be a dying race. Including it in his collection would have been a legacy of Scottish colonialism in Australia.

Early examples like this one (Figure four) are identifiable as such as the engravings are very sketch like and do not bear much resemblance to the actual animal depicted, reflecting a European inability to describe or understand the new flora and fauna they encountered outside of their own frame of reference. The emus look more like flamingos and the kangaroos appear to have been copied from the famous 1772 George Stubbs painting the kangaroo of New Holland (Figure five). The kangaroo and emu are depicted looking back over their shoulders in a pose known as regardant, copying the poses of English heraldic animals. Comparing this breastplate to those listed on the National Museum of Australia's online resource suggests that it may have been produced in the colony of New South Wales. A breastplate bearing the inscription 'Jemmy King of Big River' features the same sketch like kangaroo and emu as Sandy's breastplate.[31] Big River may refer to the original name for Cooringoora Station, a run located at Bingara near Inverell in New South Wales. Whilst breastplates inscribed 'Mr Briney of Pialliway' and 'Joey Chief of Petraman' are almost identical in shape to Sandy's breastplate, feature the same sketch like emu and kangaroo and font used for the script is the same, a mixture of cursive and serif script.[32] It is thought that the Mr Briney breastplate comes Northern New South Wales, whilst Joey's plate is unknown however the online catalogue for the NMA notes that 'its age is indicated by the amount of wear on its surfaces and more particularly the early to mid-19th century style of lettering and design'.[33] The breastplate held by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is inscribed 'McIntyre King of Manilla' and features the sketch like kangaroo and emu and a mixture of cursive and serif script.[34] It is also from Northern New South Wales. The similarities between these breastplates suggests that they may have been made within the same geographic area and possibly by the same engraver.

Figure four Close up of a brass breastplate worn by Sandy Chief of Coringori. H.NC 93. Copyright National Museums Scotland. Copyright National Museums Scotland.

30 Ibid., 203.

31 'Jemmy King of Big River', National Museum of Australia, NMA 1985.0119.0001.

32 'Mr Briney of Pialliway', National Museum of Australia, NMA 1985.00590.385; 'Joey Chief of Petraman', National Museum of Australia, NMA 1985.0059.0384.

33 Unknown location. National Museum of Australia. https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/aboriginal-breastplates/list/unknown-location accessed 19 January 2022.

34 'McIntyre King of Manilla', Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1930.A24.367.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

Figure five 'The Kongouro from New Holland' by George Stubbs, 1772. NMM ZBA5754 © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

Researching the history of this breastplate has proved difficult, reflecting their complexity as objects of encounter. European names were often given to Indigenous Australians by employers or missionaries. These were names such as Mary, William, Charles or Nellie, or nicknames such as 'Old Billy' or 'Topsy'. People were sometimes named after the station or run they worked for or the given the surname of the person devising that name. Sandy, a shortened version of Alexander, was a particularly common name and as such it has been difficult to trace exactly who 'Sandy Chief of Coringori' was, who gave him the breastplate and within what circumstances. But there are several possibilities.

The word 'coringori' inscribed onto the breastplate provides several clues as to who Sandy was and who might have given him this breastplate. The name 'coringoori' is recorded in the papers of William Anderson Cawthorne (1825–97) a British artist and teacher who emigrated to Australia in 1841 and held a strong interest in Aboriginal culture, particularly focused on those groups whose traditional country is located within the colony of South Australia.[35] Cawthorne had been sent a list of Aboriginal families from the 'Coringoori Tribe' living in the Patrick Plains area of the Singleton District, recorded in the 1870s by Scottish-born pastoralist D. M. Waddell.[36] The list also contains a note stating that 'all the names I have enclosed are natives of Patricks Plains and of the tribe Corringorri. I hope to see a few more soon and will do my best to get full particular'.[37] Whilst the list does not contain Sandy's name it is the only known archival mention of a language group with the spelling Coringori. Coringori is possibly an Anglicized version of Gringai, also spelt as Guringai or Guringay, Goringai or Ku-ring-gai.[38] This identifies a group of Aboriginal people whose traditional country is defined today as being located between the 'Hunter and Manning Rivers from the ocean to and including the Great Dividing Range … from modern day Newcastle to Singleton, on the northern side of the Hunter, through the Barrington's and back down the Manning to the ocean'.[39]

35 William A Cawthorne published two books on Aboriginal culture, *The Islanders* (1854) and *The Legend of Kuperree* (1858).

36 This could either be David Munro Waddell (1834–81) or his younger brother Daniel Munro Waddell (1843–1918) both of whom were pastoralists in the Singleton District in the 1870s.

37 Papers relating to William Anderson Cawthorne, ca.1865–187-?, State Library of New South Wales, ML DOC 871 item 3.

38 Robert Syron and Luke Russell, 'The Kabook and Watoo People of the Gringai Barrington River Gloucester, NSW', *Hunter Living Histories*. The Kabook and Watoo People of the Gringai Barrington River Gloucester, NSW – Hunter Living Histories, accessed 13 January 2022.

39 Ibid.

From around 1853 until the mid-1900s there was also a pastoral run named Cooringoora located at Bingara, south-west of Inverell in Northern New South Wales.[40] The land for the run was squatted on by Charles Bull from around 1838 with Bull naming the run Big River Station, the same station that may have issued King Jemmy's breastplate which bears a similar style of inscription to that identified with Sandy. In 1853 Bull went into partnership with Edinburgh-born William Murray Borthwick and together they renamed the station Cooringoora.

Community researcher Leigh Budden has also suggested that Coringori may be an English corruption of two Indigenous words.[41] Budden writes that the missionary Lancelot Threlkeld recorded the local languages of coastal Aboriginal people in the Upper Hunter Valley in the 1830s and 1840s. Threlkeld recorded the word 'kurang' meaning bush or inland and 'gori' meaning Aboriginal people. Threlkeld wrote that the Aboriginal people from Patrick Plains spoke a different language to people on the coast. Budden concludes that that the name Kuranggori or Coringori may not refer an actual station or language group but that it may have been given to Sandy to denote that he was from inland New South Wales and not the coast.

The name Sandy also provides an archival clue. Lyndall Ryan's discussion of the massacre of twenty-eight Aboriginal people that took place at Myall Creek station in 1838 and the subsequent criminal trial also presents a further historical lead.[42] The article, drawing on reports from the trial, describes how Daniel Eaton, the overseer for another nearby station Byron Plains owned by Perthshire born Peter MacIntyre, had given Sandy, a Kwiambal man, a breastplate 'declaring him friendly and trustworthy and had previously brought the Kwiambal to Myall Creek, "for the purpose of making them friends with Mr Dangar's men".'[43]

Budden has also identified a 'King Sandy' who appears on two blanket lists found from 1842 and 1843 from the Scone district in the Upper Hunter region with his name recorded as Worey in 1842 and Woollilie in 1843. The 1842 list records his language group as Yauccudi or Yancuddi, Scone whilst the 1843 list records Pages River, Murrurundi in the Upper Hunter region.

Whilst it seems likely based on these archival clues that 'Sandy Chief of Coringori' was from the northern New South Wales area, I do not think the breastplate given by MacIntyre to Sandy mentioned in the Myall Creek archives is the same one on display in the National Museum of Scotland. If it was the inscription would probably reference MacIntyre or Byron Plains station. Sandy was a common name given to Aboriginal men by Scottish colonists and as we have seen from the archival traces above, anglicized Aboriginal languages can also make it difficult to trace exactly who Sandy was in the archive. Further research into blanket lists may provide more evidence.

The materiality of the breastplate also provides tangible clues as to how it might have been valued by Sandy. As I have already described how the breastplate hangs from a twisted plant fibre cord, instead of a metal one. The end of the cord is bound around a kangaroo bone awl, probably a tibia and a knotted fibre bag with red pigment on it is also twisted and bound around the cord. This is the only example I have seen of a breastplate in a public collection where Aboriginal objects have been added to the breastplate. The awl may have been worn as a nose ornament or used for sewing or weaving, whilst the bag would have been used for carrying food or other materials. Sandy personalised his breastplate and in doing so created what Philip Jones has referred to as an object 'where one strand of history has touched another'.[44] Sandy's breastplate represents two systems of cultural understanding and agency, that of Sandy and the European colonist who gave him the breastplate. These additional objects offer other potential lines of enquiry, future scientific testing of the fibres and pigment could reveal the age of the bag or where it was from, providing further evidence for when and where the breastplate was given. These additional objects further highlight the complexity of breastplates which held different meanings for different people and continue to do so today. Entangled in complex colonial relations they are both European and Aboriginal. As a result they are, as the text in the First

40 The run is listed in Canon J. Carlos W. Stretch's 'Toponomy: Place Names of New South Wales, their Origin, Meaning and Locality', 134. University of Newcastle Archives A9082. Stretch describes the meaning of the run name as 'a grass tree'.

41 Leigh Budden, Email to Alison Clark, 21 February (2022).

42 Lyndall Ryan, '"A very bad business": Henry Dangar and the Myall Creek Massacre, 1838' in Jane Lydon (ed.) *Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre* (Sydney, 2018), 1–19.

43 Ibid., 5.

44 Philip Jones, *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers* (Adelaide, 2007), 9.

People's gallery describes, difficult to research and exhibit. Despite this complexity breastplates also offer museums the opportunity to tell more nuanced stories about colonialism in Australia considering not just their European history but also their Indigenous history, and what these objects have to say about the encounters that were taking place around them.

BARNEY AND KYRA'S BREASTPLATES

As the designs of breastplates developed, the engravings on them also became telling of the social contexts within which they were given. 'Few settlers wrote about the relationship with their Australian Aboriginal employees. The amateur ethnographers of the nineteenth century frequently wrote lengthy accounts of many aspects of Australian Aboriginal society in general. The settler, by contrast, preoccupied with running a profitable enterprise, seldom felt the need'.[45] Scottish pastoralist Robert Christison (1837–1915) was a settler who showed an interest in Aboriginal society and culture, however this interest appears to have been driven by a desire to run a successful cattle station and because he believed he was documenting a disappearing population. Christison collected objects made by the Yirendali men and women that worked on his station and took photographs of them, sending these to the British Museum and the Royal Scottish Museum.[46] He also documented Yirendali society and culture turning some of this information into reports for the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Emigrating to Australia in 1852 Christison took up a lease of 259 square kilometres of land in North Central Queensland in 1866 naming the area Lammermoor Hills after his Scottish home. On receiving an occupation license the station he established was also named Lammermoor. In the course of developing his cattle station Christison wanted to prove that he could work harmoniously with the Aboriginal people on whose land he was living at a time when relations between Aboriginal people and Europeans in Queensland were extremely fraught. Christison practiced what was called 'letting in' a practice whereby local Aboriginal people were allowed back onto their traditional country and allowed to live and hunt there subject to certain conditions set by the pastoralist. In many cases this meant working for the pastoral station that had been established on their land. This practice aimed to minimise the conflict that occurred on many of the pastoral stations and also provided station owners with cheap labour as Queensland's frontier violence discouraged many white workers. The process of doing this is described by Christison's daughter Mary Montgomery Bennett in a memoir written about her father. She wrote that

> in order to convince the Dallebura of his friendly intentions Christison chose a fine-looking young fellow and rode after him … he secured the black fellow and brought him home and chained him to a veranda post. He fed him, gave him a blanket, taught him to smoke and succeeded in convincing him of his friendly intentions … [Christison's] principle with the blacks was, in his own words, not to condemn any of their customs at first, but to show them by example a better way than their own.[47]

Christison named the Aboriginal man he had captured Barney, using him as an intermediary between himself and other Yirendali people in the area many of whom eventually lived and worked for Christison and his family.

Christison gave breastplates to at least four of the Yirendali men and women who worked at Lammermoor, one of whom was Barney (Figure six). The breastplate that was given to Barney features the familiar emu and kangaroo, with the waratah flower next to the kangaroo and a laurel branch next to the emu – a familiar motif taken from military gorgets. The laurel symbolises triumph, whilst the waratah symbolises the Australian bush. As previously noted, breastplates often borrowed designs from English heraldry and this example features the sunburst of escarbuncle. The escarbuncle with a face in the centre indicates faithfulness. Whilst Barney's name is prominent, Christison also included the subdivisions of Barney's language group, Dallebura and Cobbiberry; his European name Barney; and his real name, spelt as it was understood by Christison, Cobarro; as well as the place Barney was understood to be from, Narkool.

45 May, *From Bush to Station*, 2.

46 Now known as National Museums Scotland.

47 Mary Montgomery Bennett, *Christison of Lammermoor* (London, 1927), 402.

DOI: 10.57132/jiss.212

Figure six Breastplate worn by Barney and given to him by Robert Christison. Christison family. (1857). TR 1867/364 Christison Family Papers and Lammermoor Station Records 1857–1989. Photo by the author. Copyright John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.

In the context of the quote from Bennett describing how Christison treated Barney and from the symbols engraved on the breastplate we can understand this breastplate to have been given to Barney in return for what Christison perceived as Barney's faithfulness to Christison, behaviour that was created through an act of violence and unequal power relations. The breastplate signified that Christison believed he had converted Barney to live in what he believed was 'a better way', one that incorporated European customs.[48] It also marked a triumph for Christison in securing land and Aboriginal employee to help him run it. Whilst Christison had leased the land from the Crown, his actions in seeking to work with local Aboriginal people suggest that he understood that the land was not his, or the Crown's. By chaining Barney to the veranda, forcing him to cooperate and assist in negotiations with other Aboriginal people, he could perhaps convince himself that Barney and other Yirendali people had therefore given Christison permission to use their land as his own. Yet in giving Barney and other Yirendali people European names and placing breastplates around their necks Christison exercised possession and ownership. Barney's agency in the situation should not be overlooked. Barney may have used the limited power that having a breastplate would give him within colonial society. By working for Christison Barney helped to protect himself and many other Yirendali people from removal from their country by colonial officials.

Barney's breastplate is now held by the State Library of Queensland as part of the Christison collection of objects, photographs and archival documents. The afterlives of breastplates differ. Some breastplates were buried with the wearer or placed on their grave. Others, as was the case with Barney's breastplate, were returned to their employer after their death. Research by the National Museum of Australia has shown that Aboriginal people reacted in different ways to the breastplates and to those who wore them. Some people considered them to be an honour while others believed they were another insult from a non-Aboriginal population. When Barney died in 1907, Christison commissioned a breastplate for his son Kiara. The breastplate is as much a statement of Kiara's new position at Lammermoor as it is a memorialisation of Barney, as the inscription reads 'Kiara King Barney's son Bunberry Narkool Dalleburra Lammermoor 1907'.

48 Ibid., 402.

Kiara's breastplate features standard recognisable designs – the kangaroo, emu, waratah and a tree – and whilst the inscription on Kiara's includes the subdivisions of his language group as well as his place of birth it lacks the additional motifs that gave us clues about the relationship between Christison and Barney.

In 1911 Christison sold Lammermoor and Kiara remained a stockman there until 1950 when he moved with the new owners to work in their stock agency in the nearby town of Charters Towers. Kiara became very well known within the town. He is buried in the cemetery there and has a street named after him. He wore the breastplate for the rest of his life and was so well known for wearing it that it was included on a plaque on his gravestone (Figure seven). Tracey Banivanua Mar has discussed how Indigenous peoples 'utilised available colonial structures and political avenues' as a way of making social, economic or political within colonial society.[49] As visible markers of reward from white colonists breastplates sometimes gave the wearer some power within the limitations of colonial society. Some Aboriginal people recognised this value, understanding breastplates 'as a way of access to the white man's world and to the benefits that may have come about because of this access'.[50] Pastoralists often took better care of those Aboriginal people whom they had given breastplates, provided regular supplies of food, tobacco or clothing and gave them special privileges. This may account for why Kiara wore his breastplate his entire life.[51] Breastplates like Kyra's can reveal 'codes and moments' in the colonial history of Australia and perhaps even 'interdependence between black and white'.[52]

Figure seven Kiara's gravestone with a plaque depicting his breastplate, Charters Towers cemetery, 2011. Photo by the author.

CONCLUSION

Tania Cleary's 1993 book *Poignant Regalia* features a small section on the 'Aboriginal view' of these objects.[53] Written by Phil Gordon the section describes the varying views of breastplates amongst Aboriginal communities when these objects were in use, stating that many saw breastplates and their owners as 'assisting the white man's never-ending quest for land and control over the land and the Aboriginal people'.[54] Other Aboriginal people are described as showing 'total disinterest in what the white man was doing because it was irrelevant to' them whilst others saw the breastplates as useful objects for negotiating colonial society.[55] Gordon's description is a useful summary of the complexity of these objects when they were in use

49 Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Imperial Literacy and Indigenous Rights: Tracing Transoceanic Circuits of a Modern Discourse', *Aboriginal History*, 37 (2013), 15.

50 Phil Gordon, 'Breastplates: An Aboriginal View' in Tania Cleary (ed.) *Poignant Regalia: Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal Breastplates and Images* (Sydney, 1993), 17.

51 Oral histories surrounding the location of Kiara's breastplate exist, but it has yet to be located.

52 Philip Jones, *Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers* (Adelaide, 2007), 6.

53 Cleary (ed.) *Poignant Regalia*.

54 Gordon 'Breastplates an Aboriginal View', 17.

55 Ibid.

and echoes their continual role as contested and complex objects in the present day. Fox has also noted the range of opinions that Aboriginal people have about breastplates today citing anger at the violence and dispossession they symbolise, to pleasure at finding a tangible link to a named ancestor.[56] Healy also argues that breastplates can be 'regarded with, or inspire, pride because they are signs of colonialism's failure' to remove Aboriginal people from country.[57] They can be useful objects, a piece of evidence for native title claims. Breastplates are material archives of traditional country in Australia. Today they are often sought out by family history researchers for the clues they provide about people and places. After Robert Christison left Australia most of the Yirendali people living at Lammermoor were sent to live on reserves, hundreds of miles away from their traditional country. For the descendants of Barney and Kiara these breastplates are important documents as each breastplate documents the name of an ancestor who can be linked to a particular place. When one of his descendants visited Barney's breastplate at the State Library of Queensland she stated that 'I looked at it and I sort of felt it when I put my hand on it, I felt it you know'.[58]

In 2020 Waanyi artist Judy Watson created the artists' book 'skullduggery' which addresses Indigenous Australian human remains, their collection and their presence in museum collections today. It considers how Indigenous peoples were viewed as resources and commodities particularly within the sciences and focuses on the story of Tiger, an Aboriginal man, who died on Waanyi country. Tiger's skull and breastplate were stolen from his grave and sent to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum in 1935 by a nurse interested in human anatomy. Watson's work brings attention to ancestral remains held in institutions outside of Australia and the ongoing trauma of this act of violence. It also highlights the colonial violence associated with breastplates and their role as tools used by colonists to exploit Aboriginal people for their own economic gain. Breastplates are also a historical marker of the failure of colonialism to eradicate Aboriginal culture and function today as important connections to country and culture for the descendants of those who wore them.

This article has focused on one way in which breastplates were used by Scottish pastoralists in order to understand their historical value to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal breastplates are contentious objects, objects of power for both the Europeans who commissioned and gave them, and the Aboriginal people who received and wore them. They symbolise violence and dispossession but also agency and resilience. For the museums that care for them breastplates remain important objects for further understanding and explaining cross-cultural relations in colonial Australia and in particular being accurate about the contentious role of Scots in Empire.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Alison Clark orcid.org/0000-0003-3380-100X
National Museums of Scotland, UK

56 Fox *Aboriginal Breastplates.*

57 Healy *Forgetting Aborigines*, 149.

58 Alison Clark, *Conversations in Country: Tiwi and Yirandali Indigenous Australian Collections in the British Museum*, Ph.D. dissertation (King's College London, 2013), 215.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Clark, A. 2023. Objects of Power: Australian Aboriginal Breastplates and Scottish Pastoralists. *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 11(1): 2, 1–15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.57132/jiss.212

Submitted: 24 January 2022
Accepted: 17 May 2023
Published: 27 July 2023