

A Central Australian Ochre Mine

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ABSTRACT. An ochre mine still used by Warlpiri men in central Australia is described, and its relationship to trading networks, mythology and control over access is discussed. The paper also examines the methods of mining and processing the ochre, and describes some task-specific stone tools used in mining. Many similarities are apparent between this mine and two famous large ochre deposits, Parachilna and Wilga mia, neither of which is currently in use.

It is of particular interest for three reasons: there are stone tools used specifically for quarrying the deposits; the entire mine is an underground chamber; and it provides ethnographic evidence on the complexities of the control of such valued resources.

PETERSON, NICOLAS & RONALD LAMPERT, 1985. A central Australian ochre mine. *Records of the Australian Museum* 37(1):1-9.

KEYWORDS: Aborigines, anthropology, prehistory, ochre, mining.

Red ochre is one of the most important minerals mined by Aboriginal people. It is used as a pigment for a variety of artistic and decorative purposes: it adorns the human body during ceremonies; it is one of the main pigments used in rock art; and many items of wood and stone, including some shields, boomerangs and clubs, are liberally coated with it. The antiquity of its use throughout Australia is demonstrated at a number of archaeological sites. At Kenniff Cave in Queensland, red ochre was found in all levels dating back to the earliest occupation some 19,000 years ago. It was also found in basal levels of similar age at other sites including Miriwun in the Kimberley district of Western Australia, sites in Arnhem Land, and Cloggs Cave in Victoria (Mulvaney, 1975: 155). But the earliest, and most spectacular, evidence for its use comes from the Lake Mungo site in western New South Wales where the body of a man who died some 30,000 years ago had been coated with red ochre at the time of burial (Bowler & Thorne, 1976: 129).

Usually, red ochre is dug out of the ground from small pits, in nodule form. Although ochre deposits are common throughout the continent, certain kinds of red ochre are more highly valued than others and are important in Aboriginal mythology. In the case of the Parachilna mine in the northern Flinders Range, red ochre, said to be the blood of a sacred emu, was famous over a wide region of central Australia. It was so eagerly sought that Dieri speakers living 500 kilometres to the north sent armed parties of 70-80 men through hostile territories in order to barter for ochre from the mine's

owners (Howitt, 1904: 711). To such people, Parachilna ochre was "considered the 'proper' ochre and is that which is always used, although plenty, hundreds of miles nearer, could easily be obtained" (Horne & Aiston, 1924: 34). It is possible that the Dieri needed the ochre, not only for their own ritual purposes, but also to use in trade with people to the north from whom they obtained pituri (see Watson, 1983: 31-32).

Usually, these highly valued ochres have a silvery sheen caused by an admixture of some other element such as free mercury (cinnabar) in the case of the Parachilna (Bookatoo)¹ ochre deposits, or tiny fragments of mica in the case of the deposits described here. These more valued deposits, the two best known of which are Wilga mia in Western Australia and Parachilna, have been quarried on a grand scale.

The scale of excavations, quite apart from the ethnographic evidence, suggests that the material must have been widely traded, reflecting the significance of red ochre throughout the continent, including Tasmania (Robson & Plomley, 1982). The Wilga mia open cut excavations, for instance, are between 15 and 30 metres in width and up to 20 metres deep, with chambers around the bottom (Davidson, 1952: 82-83), in an area with an estimated population density of only one person per 52 square kilometres. Similarly, the Parachilna mine is an open cut type measuring some 12 metres by 23 metres with six tunnels into the hillside, all but one of which has caved in (Broughton n.d.). While in both these cases regular exploitation of the deposits appears to have ceased by early this century, the mine to be