

Australia's First Roads

The first "roads" in Victoria or Australia were developed by the first people who arrived on this land between 60,000 and 120,000 years ago. These roads or routes are now often referred to as Songlines, a term that I had not known until a few years ago. So I did a little research into Songlines and believe I understand them reasonably well but if anyone can add further information or clarity, I would welcome that.

After reading the book "Songlines, The Power and Promise" by Margo Neale & Lynne Kelly (Thames & Hudson Aust 2020) I realised that Songlines were ever so much more than a detailed map of the country. Songlines were the knowledge system, the library and archive of the people. They contained all the knowledge of the people that was passed on orally to the next generations through song, storytelling, dance and art.

I was once told that Songlines were like GPS today but I now realise Songlines were so much more, more like today's Wikipedia. The wayfinding aspect was just one element of Songlines. They were maps, parables, allegories, scripture and oral history connecting people to land.

Also, many books had been written about the development of roads in Australia but they all basically start with the arrival of Europeans. So I have prepared the following short note about Australia's First Roads for the purpose of completeness. Comments are welcome.

Songlines

The first people to come to Australia are believed to have arrived between 60,000 and 120,000 years ago. Their ancestors had travelled hundreds of thousands of years earlier out of Africa. They moved around their tribal homelands according to seasons, sources of food, and social ceremonial purposes. They navigated through their tribal lands, which had boundaries that were respected and protected, using passed-on knowledge of astronomy, geography, landmarks, and rock-art maps. The media for recording knowledge and culture was the traditional song cycles, stories, dance and art. The people were the libraries. Accurate learning was very important and only bestowed on those capable of accurate recall.

So it seems that Songlines were a rich description of the environment through which people navigated and would have included information about landmarks, vegetation, water sources, astronomical features and everything else known known about that part of country.

By singing the songs in the appropriate sequence, Aboriginal people could navigate vast distances, often travelling through the deserts of Australia's interior. The Songlines not only showed them the way across the land but told them everything that was known about it and their connection to it.

The continent of Australia contains an extensive system of Songlines, some of which are of a few kilometres, whilst others traverse hundreds of kilometres through lands of many different Aboriginal peoples. Some were used as trade routes and others guided them to ceremonial places. By singing while they travelled, they passed-on an understanding of the country they traversed to the younger members of the group.

These routes through the landscape came to be believed to have been travelled during the Dreamtime (or Alcheringa) and featured a series of landmarks thought to relate to events that happened during this time.

In areas of denser occupation like along rivers or routes leading to resources, there would have been visible well-trodden paths which may have been travelled without song. But on less travelled routes Songlines were the means of navigation.



Aboriginal trade routes

In Victoria Geelong Road, Ballarat Road, Calder Highway, Sydney Road, Plenty Road, Heidelberg Road, Maroondah Highway, Burwood Highway, Dandenong Road and Nepean Highway were all originally Aboriginal Songlines.

European Roads

When the Europeans arrived in Australia, they would have used the visible paths made by Aboriginal people. Later as farmers and pastoralists looked for paths through forests or mountains Aboriginal guides and trackers passed on some of their Songlines knowledge and it is believed that is how some of the Stock Routes were developed. There is also evidence that early explorers used knowledge about Songlines.

The Europeans lived in denser communities and travelled on horses, used carts and had other hoofed stock and so they quickly formed much more visible paths and obliterated evidence of the original paths. As traffic increased, the demand for better roads grew and the construction of all-weather roads began. The rest is well-documented history.

References

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Nick Szwed

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