Ancient
Australia
Unearthed
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Lake Mungo lies within the Willandra Lakes Region, a system of fossil lakes with World Heritage listing for both its natural and cultural heritage value. Very few archaeological sites have been excavated at Lake Mungo. However, it contains some of the oldest archaeological evidence in Australia, with finds that have not only national but also global significance.
Stone artefacts: 45,000 BP

Stone artefacts litter the surface of the Lake Mungo lunette. They cannot be directly dated themselves but archaeologists can estimate their age by dating the sediments around them. Some stone artefacts have been found in sediments that could be older than the burials.

Mungo Man: 38,000 to 43,000 BP

The Mungo Man remains were found in pink-coloured sand, indicating that he had been covered in ochre when he was buried. He provides the earliest evidence for the ritual use of ochre in a burial in the world. Mungo Man was about 50 when he died, and suffered from osteoarthritis in his spine and right elbow. These are the oldest-known human remains in Australia.

Mungo Lady: 38,000 to 42,000 BP

The Mungo Lady remains belong to a young woman who was about 19 years old when she died. Her body was cremated, and then her bones were smashed and buried in a sandy grave. This is the oldest-known example of ritual human cremation in the world.

Footprints: 19,000 to 22,000 BP

These Pleistocene footprints, left in soft muddy clay, number in the hundreds. Recent Aboriginal interpretations revealed that adults, teenagers and a few small children walked east along the claypan. Then, a day or two later, a hunting party ran across the same area, probably chasing their prey. One set of footprints only has a right foot, indicating a one-legged man. Another set was made by a tall man who ran as fast as an Olympic sprinter.

Hearth: 17,000 BP

Many hearths have been found at Lake Mungo, some as old as the burials. In 2013, Dr Nicola Stern and her team excavated a hearth dating to 17,000 BP that contained burnt bettong bones (a small mammal) and a few stone tools. LGM, when people were using this lake would have been full.

Investigate

Research Lake Mungo and answer these questions:

1. What was the environment like when Mungo Man and Mungo Lady were alive?
2. How has the environment changed over time at Lake Mungo?
3. What sort of food might have been available at Lake Mungo 40,000 years ago?