FORTIFIED HOMESTEADS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF FEAR IN FRONTIER SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, CA. 1847–1885

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of defensive architectural techniques by civilian settlers in frontier South Australia and the Northern Territory between ca. 1847 and 1885. Four sites were analysed, three of which are located in South Australia and one in the Northern Territory. This study takes a new approach to the archaeological investigation and interpretation of Australian rural buildings, one that identifies defensive strategies as a feature of Australian frontier architecture. These structures represent physical manifestations of settler fear and Aboriginal resistance. Over time, however, the folk stories attached to these structures have also come to play a significant part in Australia’s frontier mythology. They are shown to form one component of a wider body of myths which serve the ideological needs of the settler society, justifying its presence by portraying the settlers as victims of Aboriginal aggression.

Introduction

Scattered across Australia’s landscape, close to her capital cities and sometimes far off the beaten track, lie memorials of long-forgotten conflicts. When first built, these memorials were not intended or expected to become what they did: their construction was simply the physical expression of the fear felt by some of the colonial settlers of Australia. Over time, however, the stories attached to these structures have come to play a significant part in Australia’s frontier mythology. These structures are the fortified homesteads of the Australian colonial frontier: this frontier is defined here as any area where colonial settlers were using the land for agricultural, mining and/or livestock, whilst Aboriginal people were still maintaining their traditional life-ways in the area.

All of the structures investigated within this research are associated with a myth of having been designed for defence against Aboriginal attack. A definition of ‘myth’ which can be applied here is that of myths as, ‘...stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolising that society’s ideology and of dramatising its moral consciousness’ (Slotkin 1993: 5). As well as providing a starting point for archaeological investigation, the myths associated with these sites are worthy of analysis in themselves in order to understand their role in the construction of Australia’s identity, and of her collective and individual ‘memories’ of the frontier.
The aim of this paper is to investigate four issues: whether defensive architecture was used by civilian settlers on the South Australian and Northern Territory frontiers; the nature of frontier conflict in these regions; to what extent historical archaeology can test myths about civilian use of defensive architecture on the South Australian and Northern Territory frontiers; and the significance of these myths to past and present identity construction.

*The Influence of Fear on Architecture*

Frontiers have a different architecture to more settled areas, a topic that has been studied for several decades. As early as the 1950s, Frank Roos Jr described the protective value of the North American log cabin, block houses, and a grand fortified structure called *Campus Martius*, which,

[although it displayed] . . . little of New England’s influence except in the interiors, . . . might readily be called a descendant of the medieval fortified town, appearing here in the wilderness centuries after its prototypes on the continent (Roos 1953: 4).

More recently, Alison Hoagland studied the radical differences between United States military forts on the coast and those on the inland frontiers. The inland forts became more like villages in plan, often even without stockades. Hoagland attributed this to an unconscious expression of the fort’s commanding officers, who revealed their ties to the eastern establishment from which they drew comfort in their unfamiliar and hostile environment (Hoagland 1999: 216, 215). Blair St. George examined the adaptation of ‘bawns’ (fortified houses traditionally built by English settlers in 17th century Ireland) to frontier New England in the United States (1990: 242), as an architectural source upon which the English settlers of New England drew. Margot Winer’s (2001) study of building phases at the late 18th and 19th century English settlement on the East Cape of South Africa was significant in that it showed some striking similarities between the process in South Africa and that identified through the sites investigated in Australia. Even in the 20th century, architecture of fear can still be observed in the example of fortified houses and communities in modern Johannesburg in South Africa (Bremner 1999: ‘B2’).

*Material Culture and Mythology*

Myths are not naturally occurring. They are created by particular groups for particular reasons (Yentsch 1988: 7; Lydon & Ireland 2005: 3). When groups have something to gain from the propagation of a particular myth, they want people to believe that myths *are* naturally occurring, as such belief strengthens the validity of the myths and hence the intrinsic values and ide-