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THE SNAKE WOMAN, JININGBIRNA

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(Plate ix; Text-figures 1-11.)

This site was recorded in 1948, when I visited Groote Eylandt as a member of the Australian and American Arnhem Land Expedition, sponsored by the Commonwealth Government of Australia and the National Geographic Society of America.

THE MYTH.

In the Aropoia or Dreamtime the mythical snake-woman, Jiningbirna with her four children, came up out of a waterhole, Jininga-madja, on McComb's Point, which separates Hemple and Thompson's bays in Port Langdon. Whilst there, a mythical man, Nanatjua, and his companions tried to capture the woman, but she fled northwards along the beach, taking her children with her. When she reached a lake called Narago-madja, which is behind the sand-dunes in the middle of Hemple Bay, she found that two of her four children had been lost during the flight. Jiningbirna, not liking the water in this lake, shifted to a pink-quartzite headland further to the north, named after her. Here she tried to camp, but the rock was too hard wherever she started, and she had to dig out many boulders which she threw in heaps on the ground.

In some of the arrangements are narrow path-like strips flanked with stones which represent the pathway she followed along the headland. When she continued her flight she went down the northern side of the headland, forming heaps Nos. 7 and 8 in the same way, until she reached the water's edge, which she followed to the beach of the next bay. She continued along this beach for half a mile, then over the dunes to a large natural depression in the sand, about 180 feet in diameter and 12 feet deep, and almost circular in form, called Aitira. The latter is situated on the western side of a sandy flat with a large shallow billabong to the west and stringybark forest elsewhere. At Aitira, Jiningbirna met Nanatjua, who had walked from Jininga-madja, and agreed to be his wife.

Nanatjua, Jiningbirna and the two children, lived for some time at Aitira, and when they died their bodies were transformed into two flat stones (Pl. ix, fig. 6) in which their spirits still dwell. The burnt stump of a slender curved tree 4 feet high is standing a few feet in front of these stones. Under it is buried in the sand another slab of stone. At certain periods of the year, two members of the Jiningbirna totem will dig up one of the stone slabs. When they do, many snakes, led by a huge red-headed one, come out of the hole. But the two men stroke the head of the leader and talk to him, and after a while he goes back into the hole, taking all the other snakes with him. As soon as this happens, the two men replace the stone, and cover it with sand.

This large red-headed snake, whose specific name was not collected, is dangerous to strangers and will eat them if he can catch them. They are safe, however, if, when they see him coming, they climb a tree. This mythical snake sometimes goes up into the sky. He has several of the attributes of the Rainbow-serpent. It is not known whether the site is connected with rain or other magic, whether it is an increase-centre for snakes and lizards, or whether it is simply a place mentioned in the above legend.



Figs. 1-8 represent the various stone arrangements on Jiningbirna headland.

THE SONG.

Mr. C. P. Mountford has kindly supplied the following song associated with this site:

<u>Aitira</u> name of depression in ground		<u>jininga-nakwa</u> sacred name of Jiningbirna	
<u>nakulanda</u> come along	<u>nijan-muna</u> women walked	<u>naira-tita</u> lost	<u>nijun-undura</u> two children not lost
<u>nuljaka</u> name of totem rock		<u>umbarinja</u> rocks that represent lost children	

This song refers to the time when Jiningbirna and her children travelled to Aitira. Two children were lost, and their bodies are now stones (Text-fig. 6, Pl. ix, fig. 3). The other two children remained with their mother.

THE BARK PAINTING.

(Pl. ix, fig. 7.)

Jiningbirna is shown in the form of a snake. The rectangles projecting from the edge of her body represent the piles of stones that she made on the headland. The larger stone, on the right-hand edge of the painting, is the metamorphosed body of Jiningbirna set up in the sand at Aitira (Pl. ix, fig. 6). The two white figures within the snake are the children of Jiningbirna who were lost. When Iningarukwa painted the story of this legend on a sheet of bark he drew a gecko lizard beside the sand depression called Aitira. This lizard, *ji-tjara*, together with Jiningbirna the snake and *kongruna*, the trevally fish, form his group of three totems.

THE STONE-ARRANGEMENTS.

Jiningbirna headland runs east and west, is rounded on the slopes to the north and south, and the top is undulating from one end to the other. It points towards the entrance to, and commands an extensive view of, Port Langdon. A few widely scattered pandanus and eucalypts are growing on the headland but it is mostly covered with wiry *Triodia* grass between the rocks. I visited the site in May, 1948, with a local native Iningarukwa, and his brother, Nangiljana, the two last surviving members of the totem, from whom the legend was obtained.

The eight arrangements are shown in Text-figures 1-8, in which upright stones are indicated by parallel diagonal lines. The main elements of the arrangements are heaps with a flat, rounded or peaked top; heaps with a depression in the middle, in some of which the flat rock floor is also visible; circles; ovals; lines; standing stones up to 15 inches high.

The following is a description of the various arrangements:

1.—A large, but low heap of small blocks and boulders, in the middle of one end of a large oval rock surface.

2.—A small imperfect circle of stone, occupying a space of 8 x 6 feet, situated on the northern end of an adjacent flat oval rock.

3.—On the same rock surface as No. 2 is another arrangement consisting of several circles of various sizes, and an oval with one side open. The smallest circle has a stone in the middle. This arrangement occupies an area of 10 x 6 feet. There is a jumble of large rocks nearby.

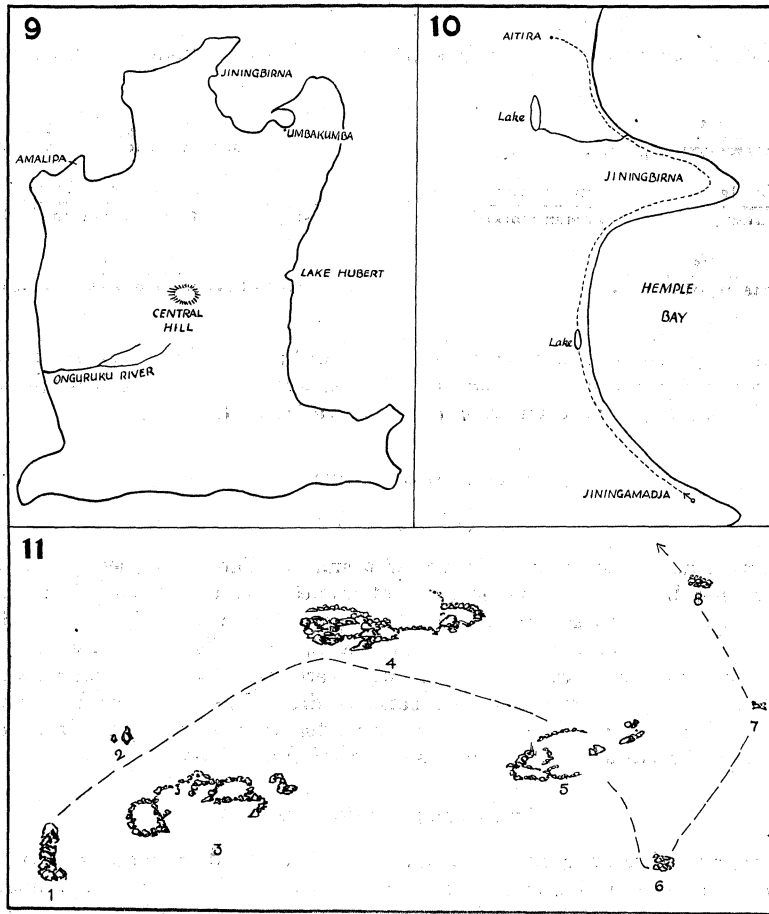


Fig. 9.—Groote Eylandt, showing the location of Jiningbirna headland on the northern shore of Port Langdon.

Fig. 10.—The track of Jiningbirna from Jininga-madja to Aitira.

Fig. 11.—The lay-out of the stone arrangement, and the approximate route followed by Jiningbirna.

4.—A dense assemblage of stones placed on an extensive flat rock. At one end is a large heap containing four clear spaces. It is joined in the middle by a small circle, an oval, and another small circle. At the other end is a heap, clear in the middle, which ends in an angled line of stones. This group is 20 x 10 feet in area.

5.—Situated on the largest flat rock surface on the headland. At one end is a line of stones, with two ovals on one side of it, and what appears to be an imperfect circle on the other side. An ill-arranged line of stones extends along the other side of the group. At the other end are three low heaps of stones. The group occupies an area of 16 x 10 feet.

6.—A single heap of stones, on the edge of the southern side of the headland, carefully packed to a height of 15 inches on a small flat ledge of rock 1 foot thick. A few of the stones have fallen on to the rock surface below. In this heap are the two upright stones, 14 and 18 inches high, which represent the two children lost by

Jiningbirna. They are also shown in Plate ix, fig. 3. Beside this heap is a flat-bottomed depression with an earthen floor in which Jiningbirna once camped (Pl. ix, fig. 4). It is 10 x 8 feet in area, and about 2 feet deep.

7.—A small heap of stones on the northern side of the headland.

8.—A large heap of stones on a small flat rock some distance down the northern side of the headland. It is beside Jiningbirna's track to Aitira.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE IX.

1-2, 5.—Various parts of arrangement No. 5, showing also the type of rock surface on which the arrangements have been placed.

3.—Heap No. 6, showing the two upright stones which represent Jiningbirna's lost children.

4.—A depression with a flat earthen floor which formed one of Jiningbirna's camps.

6.—The two upright stones at Aitira. The front stone, representing the bodies of the woman, Jiningbirna, and her two children, is 20 inches high, 10 inches wide and an inch thick. The back stone, the body of the man, Nanatjua, is 15 inches high, 9 inches high, and 3 inches thick. The nature of the depression is illustrated.

7.—Bark painting.

