NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 6th General Meeting of the Society for 1985 will be held in the

CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

ON

MONDAY 26TH AUGUST 1985

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting held in the Conservation
   Centre, on Monday 22nd July 1985, having been circulated in this
   journal, to be confirmed.

3. New Members:
   The following new member has joined the Society since the last
   meeting:
   
   Ms. JANE JACOBS

4. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received since the last meeting, from other
   societies and organisations, will be tabled at the meeting.

5. Business:

6. Speaker:
   
   Ms. Janet Delaney, of the Classics Department, University
   of Adelaide, will address the Society, on recent research
   in Sicily.

7. Supper will be served
THE IMPORTANCE OF ROOTS AND TUBERS AS A FOOD SOURCE FOR SOUTHERN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.

BY P.A. Clarke,
4 August, 1985

INTRODUCTION

In this article I hope to demonstrate the predominance of roots and tubers in the diet of the Aborigines of Southern South Australia. I also wish to supply a list of all species of roots and tubers that were known to have been utilized and those that may have been, as suggested by use in other areas.

In the past, authors such as Cleland (in Cotton 1966) and Campbell et al (1946) have claimed that the diet of the Aborigines of Southern Australia was dominated by the meat of marsupials and large birds. Cleland (in Cotton 1966 p118-9) for examples states:

"the native of Southern and Central Australia, though omnivorous was essentially a meat-eater (including fish). Animal food was his mainstay. There might be a considerable supplement of plant foods in Central Australia but in the South they were hardly procurable."

Campbell et al (1946 p476) provides a similar view for the South East by declaring that the:

"consideration of the various possible sources of food shows clearly that the staple diet of the natives must have consisted of marsupials ...... and of birds".

Furthermore, Campbell et al (1946 p477) states that "the supply of plant foods was almost negligible" and that, "these vegetable sources of food would give a little variety, but seasonable and mostly in small quantity."

However, more recent work has placed more emphasis on the plant food component of the diet of Southern Aborigines. Tindale (1981 p1872) says that:

"the coastal people of the Coorong may be considered representative of many southern people whose diet included much fish and shellfish, with seasonal additions of animal flesh to augment a fairly substantial vegetable diet."

Gott (1982, 1983) has illustrated the importance of roots and tubers as the staple food source for Victorian Aborigines. It is my intention to demonstrate a similar reliance upon roots and tubers by the southern Aborigines of South Australia and to dispel the view offered by Cleland and Campbell et al that these people were essentially meat eaters.
METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Much of the information contained in this article was gathered through an extensive search of early historical records of the Aborigines of the southern areas of South Australia. Due to the quantity and dispersal of these records it is unlikely that I have yet exhausted all references to root and tuber use from this area. I suggest, however, that the data accumulated so far should indicate at least the major food sources. In addition to the historical accounts some valuable information was collected from contemporary Aboriginal people of Southern South Australia. Some of this recently obtained information has enabled identifications of words for edible plants originally recorded with poor descriptions from as early as the 1840s. There is still much research to be done in this area.

The definition of Southern South Australia used in this article is the areas of this state which receive annually more than 35cm of rainfall. Included in this region is the lower portion of Eyre Peninsula, Yorke Peninsula, the Northern and Southern Mt Lofty Ranges, the southern reaches of the River Murray, the Coorong and the South East. It has been my assumption that with respect to Aboriginal use of the vegetation, the southern regions of South Australia have more food species in common with each other than with the arid areas in the north of this state.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORDS OF ROOT AND TUBER USE

1. Bolboschoenus medianus (V. Cook) Sojak.

This species, commonly called Club Rush, is probably the identity of the Poolilla described by Angas (1847 p101) as the "triangular species of grass or reed" eaten as food by the Moorunde people. Gott (1982 p59-62) considers the identity of Belillah mentioned in Eyre's (1845 p269) list of Murray River Aboriginal foods to be Scirpus medianus V. Cook ((Torr.) A. Gray). However in this article I have referred to this species as Bolboschoenus medianus (V. Cook) Sojak following Jessop (1984). It is possible that Bolboschoenus may be a more accurate name for the Cyperus corms that Tindale (1974 p60) states enabled the Peramangk of the Mt Lofty Ranges to exist all year round without venturing down onto the plains.

The corms of this species were an important food source which was very abundant on the flats of the Murray, (Eyre 1845 p269). The walnut sized tubers were prepared by being roasted and pounded into a thin cake between two stones, (Eyre 1845 p269).
2. *Eucalyptus dumosa* A. Cunn. ex Schauer. Maiden (1889 p27) states that the South Australian Aborigines powdered the bark of the root of this mallee and perhaps other species and eat it alone or with other plants. Maiden (1889 p27) claims it was called 'Congoo' but he doesn't state which group in South Australia used the name. The distribution of this mallee includes much of Southern South Australia and areas to the east of the Flinders Ranges, (Jessop 1984).

3. *Lavatera plebeia* Sims. Bailey (cited Maiden 1889 p37) records that the Aborigines of South Australia in the early days used the roots of a white flowering variety of mallow for food. They were described as having the consistency of parsnips. Maiden (1889 p37) considers this plant to be *L. plebeia*. Wyatt (1879 p170) lists in his Adelaide and Encounter Bay vocabulary the terms Kannoonta for "mallow, plant" and Peecharra for "mallow, shrub". The fact that at least Peecharra refers to an edible species is shown by Wyatt (1879 p176) listing of Teeyappe Peecharra - "chewed fibre of mallow" in his vocabulary. This fibre was probably used by the Adelaide people for making string artefacts such as nets because *L. plebeia* has been recorded as being used for this purpose elsewhere such as the Northern Flinders Ranges, (Cleland and Johnston 1939 p176).

4. *Lepidosperma gladiatum* Labill. Campbell et al (1946 p491) claims that the South East Aborigines chewed the leaf bases of this species, commonly called the Rapier Sedge, perhaps after cooking. Parts of stems or leaves of *L. gladiatum* were excavated from debris at Kongarati Cave near Yankalilla, (Tindale and Mountford 1936 p492-3) and could possibly have been used as food. Clarke and Jones (1984) recorded the use of the root stems of a species of *Lepidosperma* (author's identification) to 'cure' colds, from a Ngarrindjeri man at Meningie. The young root stems were boiled and then eaten.

5. *Microseris scapigera* (Sol. ex A. Cunn.) Schultz-Bip. This species, known as the Yam Daisy, is possibly the identity of many of the names recorded from Southern South Australia simply described as "edible root". Some of the author's speculations of the identity of these names are listed in the Appendix of this paper. The terms Umba, Yungumba of the Adelaide and Encounter Bay people were attributed to *Microseris* by Wyatt (1879 p176). Gott (1983 p15) considers the Lower Murray name Ngamko - "native radish" (Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p30) to most likely be *M. scapigera*. Gott (1983, p4-15) also considers Moorna or Mar-o-ngire - "edible roots" (Smith 1880 p129) from the Boonang people to be possible terms for *M. scapigera*. It is also possible that Ngamba - "edible root" recorded from Pt Lincoln refers to the Yam Daisy, (Gott 1983 p16). The Ngarrindjeri word Koolunthantha recorded with a plant description by Hemming and Jones (1984) has been identified by the author as *M. scapigera*. 
The tuber is recognized as one of the major food sources for Victorian Aborigines, (Gott 1983 p2) and the fact that it occurs widely in Southern South Australia suggests that this was also probably so in this region. Bellchambers (1931 p132) states that of all the tubers, he thought the yam held first place in the estimation of the River Murray Aborigines. Whether Bellchambers defines yam as *M. scapigera* or whether he is using a broad definition of yam such as that used by Smyth (1878 vol2 p173) which includes *Geranium* and *Convolvulus* is not certain. The Ngarrindjeri used the root of *M. scapigera* as a 'cure' for coughs and colds. The long root was boiled and then chewed to get oil out, (Hemming 1981, Hemming and Jones 1984).

6. *Oxalis* sp. Angas (1847 p84) records that edible roots of a species of *Oxalis* were dug up by South East Aboriginal women. Stephens (in Parkhouse 1923 p7) says of the Adelaide people that:

"the root most sought after is a highly nutritious *oxalis* resembling a small carrot and tasting like cocoanut."

This root was very abundant and discovered by leaf, the root being at the depth of about eight inches (20 cm).

7 *Polyporus mylittae* Bertr. This species of fungus is probably the edible fungus mentioned by Eyre (1845 p269) as found below the ground. The common names, such as Native Truffle and Blackfellow's Bread suggest the edible nature of this fungus. In Tasmania, the fungus was peeled and then roasted before being eaten, (Bonwick 1870 p15). Daly (1931 p28) however states that it was generally eaten raw by the Australian Aborigine with the dirt simply being shaken off. Maiden (1889 p46) states that the Tasmanian Aborigines looked for Truffles in the vicinity of a dead tree.

8. *Triglochin procerum* R.Br. *T. procerum*, commonly called Water Ribbons, is most likely the identification of Maracrow recorded by Bellchambers (1931 p132) as a food with "succulent roots". Use of this species as a food has been recorded from Arnhem Land, (Specht 1958 p483).

9. *Typha* species. Recorded names for edible roots growing on river banks and in water could either refer to *Typha* (commonly called Bulrush or Flag) or *Phragmites australis* (Common Reed), both of which have edible roots. From the brief description of many recorded names it is often difficult to distinguish between *Typha* and *P. australis* as both plants occupy a similar ecological niche. Some descriptions however include the use of the root fibre for making twine and this has enabled me to identify them as *Typha* as this is a recorded use in Southern Australia, (Angas 1847 p55). For example, Teichelmann and Schurmann (1840 pt 2 p53) describe the Adelaide word Warnpa as a:
"farinaceous root growing on the river banks, the nutritious part is eaten and the tough parts made into strings, nets etc"

Gell (1904 p94) simply described Warnpa from the Adelaide area as an "aquatic plant". However, based on Teichelmann and Schurmann's description above, I would suggest that Warnpa is the Adelaide Aboriginal term for Typha.

In the Lower Murray area, Typha appears to have had the name Moomoorookee for the whole plant but the name Menungkerre when referring to the bulrush root, (Taplin Journals p47). Other sources recording Aboriginal words for Typha from this region have recorded variations of Menungkerre such as Manungkerri (Hemming and Jones 1984), and ManungKari (Cleland in Cotton 1966 p138) but as names assumed as applying to the whole plant.

The importance of Typha to the diet of the Aborigines of the South East is summed up by Angas (1847 p89) who said that the:

"staff of their existence is the bulrush root which the women gather among the reeds",

The bulrush root was chewed and then the fibres scraped for the purpose of making cord for their mats and baskets, (Angas 1847 p55). Eyre (1845 p269) states that the bulrush was the staple food source throughout the year on the Lower Murray but that it was best after floods had receded and the tops had decayed and had been burnt off. Krefft (1862-5 p361) says that on the New South Wales stretch of the Murray River:

"at a certain period, I believe January and February, the women enter the swamps, take up the roots of these reeds (the bulrushes) and carry them in large bundles to their camp. The roots thus collected are twelve to eighteen inches in length, and they contain, besides a small quantity of saccharine matter, a considerable quantity of fibre"

The roots were roasted in the ground and either consumed hot or taken as a sort of provision upon hunting expeditions, (Krefft 1862-5 p36).

Angas, during his trip through the South East, came across an Aboriginal woman who was carrying an infant on her back who was chewing the "favourite bulrush root" with the infant's brother walking alongside also chewing a bulrush root, (Angas 1847 p59). Also on this trip, Angas (1847 p92) met a person with the name Chembillin meaning "chewing the bulrush root". Angas (1847 p58) says that the roots were steamed between heated stones beneath ovens or cooking fires resembling kilns. Thomas (1906 p116) claims that in South Australia the bulrush root was usually eaten with mussels.
During the excavation of Kongarati Cave, Tindale and Mountford (1936 p407) found large amounts of chewed fibrous material in almost all parts of the occupational layers. Specimens of this fibre held at the South Australian Museum appear to the author to be of Typha. If this is so, it provides further evidence of the importance of this root.

Taplin (Journals p151) states that the Aborigines of the Lower Murray were often paid by the settlers to collect large amounts of bulrush root. Taplin records how a European, Mr Mason, lent a boat to the Aborigines in order for them to collect Moomoorooke (bulrush) for a storekeeper at Wellington. Taplin (Journals p57) on one occasion went with the Aboriginal women to collect Moomoorooke in the Point MacLeay Mission Whale boat and he says he gave them a good price for the roots.

10. Xanthorrhoea sp. The roots of at least some species of Xanthorrhoea, commonly called Blackboy, Grasstree or Yacca, were eaten. Schurmann (1879 p216) describing the plant foods of Port Lincoln Aborigines claims that:

"the only root known to me as eaten in a raw state is that of the Grasstree which grows in great abundance on the barren hills and plains of Port Lincoln, and is consumed by the natives in prodigious quantities at different seasons of the year."

Angas (1847 p84) records that the roots of the smaller species of Xanthorrhoea of the South East was eaten. Of the smaller species of Grasstree, Angas (1847 p203) reports that:

"they eat only the lower portion of the leaves at their junction with the root, drawing them out of the ground and biting off that part which was underneath the soil, the flavour resembles that of a nut."

This species of Grasstree is probably X. quadrangulata FvM.

11. Other possible roots. There are many other plant species which could possibly have been used as root food sources in Southern South Australia and the most likely of these are listed in the Appendix. Boerhaavia diffusa L. has been suggested by Cleland (in Cotton 1966 p135) as the identity of one of the names for roots mentioned by Schurmann (1879 p216) as eaten by the Aborigines of the Port Lincoln area. Furthermore, Black (1943 p333) states that the root is eaten by the Australian Aborigine.

The Bracken Fern, Pteridium esculentum (Forst.f.) Nakai is another possible root food source as its use in Victoria, as such, has been documented by Robinson (in Plomley 1966, cited Gott 1982 p64). In this example, the rhizomes and young fronds were chewed but Dawson (1881 p20) claims that they were beaten with stones to yield a paste. However, it appears that Bracken contains a number of poisonous compounds (Everist 1981 p775-781) so the preparation of the rhizomes and young fronds may well have been more complex than the above records indicate.
The root-bark of *Santalum murrayanum* (Mitch.) Gard. has been recorded as used as food by the Aborigines, (Maiden 1889 p32) and the range of this species in South Australia suggests its possible use here.

**STAPLE FOODS AND SEASONALITY**

In order to decide whether roots and tubers would have been a valuable food source, we must first define the criteria of a staple food. Flood (1980 p92) states that staple foods should provide fairly abundant food either in size or quantity, and be procurable for at least one quarter of each year. Roots are more likely to be considered as staple goods, using this definition, than other forms of plant food because roots and tubers are generally present throughout the year whereas fruits and seeds generally occur during a limited season.

Although the roots and tubers are available throughout the year, there are seasons when they may not be as easily found. Flood (1982 p92) claims that the tubers of the Yam Daisy, *Microseris scapigera*, would be easier to find in the summer, in the highlands of South Eastern Australia, because this is when the plant flowers. For most of the rest of the year the plant bears little foliage. In South Australia, *M. scapigera* flowers from September to November (Black 1943 p938) so it is possible that this was the main time of the year it was utilized here. The Ngarrindjeri informant of Hemming and Jones (1984) said that the yam tubers were located by their yellow flowers. Stephens (in Parkhouse 1923 p7) states that *Oxalis* roots could be found by the leaf. However Gott (1983 p10) considers that the lack of vegetative markers above the ground would not have presented an obstacle to Aboriginal women with their intimate knowledge of their surroundings.

For most species of root, there are probably times of the year when the tubers are not as palatable as they are for the rest of the year. The Yam Daisy goes through a period in early winter when the new tuber has not yet completely grown and the old tuber is shrivelling up and becoming bitter to taste, (Gott 1983 p9). However there is no suggestion by Gott (1983 p9-10) that it is not eaten during early winter, just that it is less palatable. Because Grasstrees are a conspicuous element of the vegetation at all times of the year it seems likely that the seasonal use of *Xanthorrhoea* roots described by Schumann (1879 p216) would be due to unpalatability. The Bulrush, *Typha*, was recorded as being used throughout the year, (Eyre 1845 p269) but perhaps the times of the year when it was most eagerly sought after was January and February,(Krefft 1862-5 p361).

Unfortunately seasonal information of plant use in Southern South Australia is lacking for most of the species discussed in this paper. However with the information we do have it seems that both *Microseris* and *Typha* could have been utilized throughout the year. There can therefore be no doubt over the classification of these species as staple food sources. Of the other species,
probably all of them could have been used for the greater part of the year. Therefore it is likely that at least some of these roots and tubers would have been important food sources.

CONCLUSION

It is now clear that the view held by Cleland and Campbell et al of the Southern Australian Aborigines as predominately meat eaters is not supported by the ethnographic record. Their under emphasis of the capacity of the natural vegetation was probably in part due to insufficient attention placed on early historical records. Cleland and Campbell in their published articles did not include much material obtained from living Aboriginal people of the area and yet there must have been people about from the 1930s through to the 1960s who had detailed knowledge of plant use. In fact there is still some information available, such as which plants were used and how, to be collected from Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray. During the 1930s and through to the 1960s, Tindale appears to have collected much concerning plant use of the Coorong people but he is yet to publish the bulk of his material. Gott has shown that for Victoria, an area with a similar environment to Southern South Australia, roots and tubers were a major part of the Aboriginal diet. This material, combined with that of this paper, adds to the evidence contradicting Cleland's assertion that meat was more important than vegetable foods.

The analysis of Southern South Australian ethnography indicates that at least two types of roots, the Yam Daisy (Microseris scapigera) and the Bulrush (Typha sp) would have been available for most of the year. There was also a considerable variety of roots to be collected and these would have formed the basis of a reasonably substantial vegetable diet.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Common Name</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Locality within SA</th>
<th>Record from Vic Only</th>
<th>Seasonal Use</th>
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<td>Arthropodium sp</td>
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<td>Liliaceae</td>
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<td>CYPERACEAE</td>
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<td>Typha species</td>
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<td>MU, SL, KI, SE</td>
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<td>Yacca, Grasstree</td>
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<td>Mostly Southern Districts</td>
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Locality Key: After Jessop 1984

North-Western NW Northern Lofty NL
Lake Eyre Basin LE Murray MU
Gairdner-Torrens Basin MU Yorke Peninsula YP
Flinders Ranges FR Southern Lofty SL
Eastern EA Kangaroo Island KI
Ceye Peninsula EP South-Eastern SE

* Use of these species recorded from Victoria suggests possible use in Southern South Australia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIES</th>
<th>EYRE PENIN.</th>
<th>YORK PENIN.</th>
<th>ADELAIDE AREA</th>
<th>ADCL.-ENCOUNTER BAY AREA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bolboschoenus medianus</td>
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<td>Kannoonta-<em>Mallow,Plant</em> (11)</td>
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<td>Pechara-<em>Mallow,shrub</em> (11)</td>
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<td>Microseris scapigera</td>
<td>Ngamba (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Waljo (3) ?</td>
<td>Umba,Yunqamba (4)</td>
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<td>Santalum murrayanum</td>
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<td>Triglochin procerum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typha sp</td>
<td>Puntu,Buntu (5)</td>
<td>Warnpa (6,7)</td>
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<td>Paipola-honey from (11)</td>
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<td>Xanthorrhoea sp</td>
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<td>Kurru-Grasstree (8) Yutuke-sap of (9) Pinyatta-honey from (10)</td>
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<tr>
<th>SPECIES</th>
<th>ENCOUNTER BAY TO L. MURRAY</th>
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<th>L. ALEXANDRINA, L. MURRAY</th>
<th>SOUTH EAST</th>
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<td>Microseris scapigera</td>
<td>Ngamko (5) ?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Koolunthantha (16)</td>
<td>Moorna, Mar-o-noire (17) ?</td>
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<td>Pteridium esculentum</td>
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<td>Me-e (18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Santalum murrayanum</td>
<td>Netting (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Triglochin procerum</td>
<td>Naracro (20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typha sp</td>
<td>Pungurto (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moomoorookee (23)</td>
<td>Mir-nat (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makuru-root (22) ?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Menungkerre-root of (23, 24)</td>
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<td>Manungkerre (16)</td>
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<td>Manungkari (25)</td>
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<td>Prungi (26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Xanthorrhoea sp</td>
<td>Yirtuge (29)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kurrung (44)</td>
<td>Yirtugi (30)</td>
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<td>Irrintyi-sap (27)</td>
<td>Nglaie-flower stem (30)</td>
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<td>Korto-gwa (28)</td>
<td>Ngulaia (26)</td>
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**Key to References of Above Table.**

1. Wyatt 1879 p170
2. Schurmann 1879 p216 (id. by Gott 1982 p16)
3. Teichelmann and Schurmann 1840 pt2 p52 (author's id.)
4. Wyatt 1879 p176
5. Tindale 1936 p66
6. Teichelmann and Schurmann 1840 pt2 p53 (author's id.)
7. Gell 1904 p94 (author's id.)
8. Teichelmann and Schurmann 1840 pt2 p15
9. Teichelmann and Schurmann 1840 pt2 p63
10. Teichelmann and Schurmann 1840 pt2 p39
11. Wyatt 1879 p174
12. Angus 1847 a p101 (author's id.)
13. Eyre 1845 p269 (id. by Gott 1982 p59)
14. Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p22
15. Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p30
16. Hemeing and Jones 1984
17. Smith 1886 p129
18. Mathews 1894 p73
19. Eyre 1845 p270-1
20. Bellchambers 1931 p132 (author's id.)
22. Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p24 (author's id.)
23. Napier's Journals p47
24. Taplin 1874 p30
25. Cleland in Cotton 1966 p138
26. Berndt 1941 p27
27. Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p40
28. Moorhouse in Parkhouse 1935 p21
29. Meyer 1843 p66
30. Taplin 1879 p141
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