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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
THE GWION OR BRADSHAW ART STYLE OF AUSTRALIA’S KIMBERLEY REGION IS UNDOUBTEDLY AMONG THE EARLIEST ROCK ART IN THE COUNTRY – BUT IS IT PLEISTOCENE?

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The Kimberley region of north-west Australia has many thousands of rock paintings that span a period of thousands of years. Four distinct periods are recognised, based on superposition of styles:
- Early naturalistic animals with irregular painted infill;
- Gwion or Bradshaw figures;
- Wandjinas;
- Post-European contact art.

The post-European contact art dates from perhaps the mid 17th century, and Wandjina art has recently been confirmed to date from almost 4000 years ago. Reliable dates for the earlier art styles remain elusive, but some results suggest the Gwion paintings could be more than 17 500 years old.

Gwion paintings

Since the first publication of sketches by pastoralist / explorer Joseph Bradshaw in 1892, the finely painted small red human figures from the northern Kimberley region of Western Australia that became known as “Bradshaw figures” have fascinated and intrigued all who see them. Other early reports only intensified European interest in these paintings: a Palatine missionary, Father Worms, who worked in the Kalumburu area in the 1930’s, quoted a Gwini elder as “of the opinion that another people, who occupied this district long before their arrival, produced them”. The paintings were termed “Bradshaw paintings” by the Frobenius Expedition in 1938, in the absence of any Aboriginal word for the distinctive figures. The term has been widely used since then but in recent times there has been a preference to apply an Aboriginal name, Gwion Gwion, or just Gwion for these figures.

Description

Gwion paintings depict elegant human figures, typically 40 to 50 cm but rarely up to 2 m tall. The paintings are very finely executed with precise brush strokes, but gender is rarely depicted and there is no facial detail, although leg and arm musculature is commonly clearly defined, as is foot and ankle detail, shoulders, and stomach paunch (figure). The figures are adorned with a variety of body, head, leg and arm ornamentation including belts with various items hanging from them, long conical headdresses, and leg and arm bands. They typically carry several boomerangs and a bag or fan-like item. Two main types of Gwion figures are recognized, based on detailed studies by rock art researcher Grahame Walsh: tassel Gwions and sash Gwions.
Tassel Gwion figures from northern Kimberley.
Tassel Gwions are characterized by elaborate tassels, identified by Ngarinyin elders as made from feathers, which hang from the armpits, shoulders or waist; numerous other accoutrements such as bangles, armlets, headdresses and held items including boomerangs and bags are also depicted. The figures are painted with the finest attention to detail, clearly by skilled artisans using sophisticated brushes and pigments.

Sash Gwions superpose tassel Gwions and are simpler figures with a more robust body shape than tassel Gwions. They are characterized by distinctive three-pronged sashes hanging from a waistband or belt, or (rarely) held in the hand. These are identified as animal skin garments called walbud by contemporary Ngarinyin people. Sash Gwions also have a distinctive set of accoutrements.

The paintings vary from deep purple-red to red and reddish-brown, brown, and even yellow-brown. Most Gwion paintings have been subjected to prolonged weathering and many have clearly faded to some degree, but it is likely that red ochre (haematite, Fe$_2$O$_3$) was the major component in the original paint medium. Gwion paintings are mainly on vertical rock surfaces, less commonly on rock shelter ceilings. They are typically in small rock overhangs with irregular rocky floors high up on escarpments, sites that would be totally unsuitable for habitation. Other distinctive small red-painted figures occur in the north Kimberley, referred to as “elegant action figures” and “clothes peg figures”. These styles superpose the Gwion paintings and are therefore deemed to be younger.

**Absolute chronology**

Occupation of Australia has been reliably dated to at least 60 000 years ago, and there is evidence for human occupation in the southern Kimberley by at least 40 000 years ago. Direct dating of Kimberley rock art has used AMS radiocarbon techniques to establish that Wandjina paintings and Wandjina-style beeswax images date from the present to almost 4000 years, but dating the older art has proved more difficult: an accreted calcium oxalate layer associated with paint from a Bradshaw figure was determined as having formed $3880 \pm 110$ years, but this may be a minimum age for the painting. A single optically stimulated luminescence date from quartz grains in a mud-wasp nest overlying a Gwion-style painting gave an age of 17 500 years.

**Conclusions**

One age determination clearly does not provide conclusive evidence for a Pleistocene age for the Gwion figures. However, taken together with the relative chronological sequence, the difference in material technologies compared with later art styles, and the highly weathered nature of the paintings, there remains the possibility that the art could be of Pleistocene antiquity. Only further direct dating of the paintings will establish their age.