directed by
Jean CLOTTES

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
INVISIBLE LATE PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART:
Lessons from Northern Australia and the British Isles

John B. CAMPBELL, William J. ELLWOOD, Nicola B. WINN

Late Pleistocene rock art has often remained invisible in northern Australia and southern Britain, partly because it has not been looked for in the right places, partly because its existence has often been seriously doubted and partly because environmental changes have often obscured the surviving evidence. It was assumed there was no Palaeolithic cave art in Britain.

Before we go further, let us make clear where we stand in terms of heritage and knowledge. Campbell’s ancestry is predominantly Scottish, though DNA analysis by Oxford Ancestors has shown that during the Last Glacial Maximum his mother’s ancestors were Solutreans in the Pyrenees and his father’s ancestors were late east Gravettians in central Europe. Campbell worked on the Upper Palaeolithic of Britain for his DPhil at Oxford, but also gained field experience in France and Belgium before migrating to Australia in 1975. He then worked closely with an Aboriginal community on the Tully River. The key elder under whose tutelage he recorded places and stories made it fully clear to him that rock art as perceived by archaeologists was a very limited view. This elder showed him exposed rocks at brun (ceremonial) grounds that had been regularly repainted nearly every year, because the heavy wet season rains would weaken or wash away the brilliant ochre pigments. Campbell has worked closely with elders in tropical rainforest and savannah woodland, and he has excavated and recorded sites in both kinds of environment.

Ellwood’s ancestry is predominantly Aboriginal. He is an elder of the Yidinji of Cairns and the Koko Minni of Chillagoe. He trained in archaeology at the University of Sydney and James Cook University in Cairns, and he is now working on a PhD on Aboriginal landscapes of the Chillagoe district. Between his archaeology degrees he was for a time site registrar for New South Wales. He has heritage experience from much of eastern Australia, as well as from a number of trips overseas to North America and Europe.

Winn’s ancestry is predominantly English and Welsh, and she trained in archaeology and ancient languages at Brown University and further in archaeology at James Cook University in Cairns. She is now working on a PhD project on rock art and exchange systems in the Chillagoe district. She has heritage experience from North America, the Pacific (Micronesia) and northern Australia. She is not averse to seeing rock art as a symbolic language system.

There is a widely held belief in mainstream Australia that Aboriginal people did not produce art in the dark zone of caves, despite the fact that sites like Koonalda Cave in South Australia have been known for decades. Although post-glacial or Holocene rock art has been known both in Australia and the British Isles for some considerable time, till comparatively recently Pleistocene rock art was often either elusive or seriously doubted. This paper presents a comparison of studies
Three of the nine baler-shell stencils still visible on a cave wall panel at the start of the dark zone in Spatial Cavern B in the Walkunders near Chillagoe, Queensland; a hand stencil is also visible in this image; the site is more than 100 km from the sea in any direction (photo: N. Winn).
over a number of years by Australian (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and British research teams focusing particularly on the Chillagoe district of Queensland and the Creswell Crags area of England. The lead author has worked and excavated in both regions.

Rock art studies and archaeology have often had an uncertain relationship. When Campbell began his research on the Upper Palaeolithic of Britain in 1966 no Palaeolithic cave art was known anywhere in the British Isles, unlike France and Spain. He had examined a number of caves to no avail, though he suspected pigments could be hidden by flowstone formations and engravings might be equally difficult to detect. Some British Upper Palaeolithic sites definitely had mobile art, although it was also suspected that the odd object from France might have found its way into British collections.

Cave engravings were found at Gouy just across the English Channel in northern France. The evidence at Gouy is associated with Creswellian-style stone tools (i.e. very ‘British’-looking artefacts) in a formerly sealed cave. In 1997 Campbell and Alan Watchman re-examined a few of the British and Belgian caves (especially Robin Hood’s Cave and Church Hole at Creswell Crags and La grotte du Coléoptère in the Ardennes). In a seminar at Oxford’s Research Laboratory for Archaeology, Campbell and Watchman said that they thought Church Hole would be well worth much closer scrutiny. A year later Paul Bahn and colleagues published their discovery of an engraving of what was initially interpreted as an ibex in Church Hole. It was later described as a stag and a vague engraving of a horse was also found.

Spatial Cavern B near Chillagoe has baler shell and hand stencils at the start of the dark zone. The accompanying image shows a close up of three of the nine baler stencils and an associated hand stencil (figure). The baler stencils are arranged in a slightly curving row on the cave wall. Baler shells were a significant trade item that travelled far into the interior of Australia. They were previously unknown from Chillagoe and we hope to find more direct evidence in new excavations we are planning. We also hope to determine the antiquity of baler shell trade. At the moment hidden layers of paints (red and yellow ochre-based) occur in the rock surface accretion or gypsum oxalate crust near the entrance to Walkunder Arch Cave on the opposite side of the Walkunders. The AMS dates here range from 29,000 to 3,000 years ago. We hypothesise that trade in various materials was already established before the Last Glacial Maximum.