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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE NATURE OF AUSTRALIAN PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART

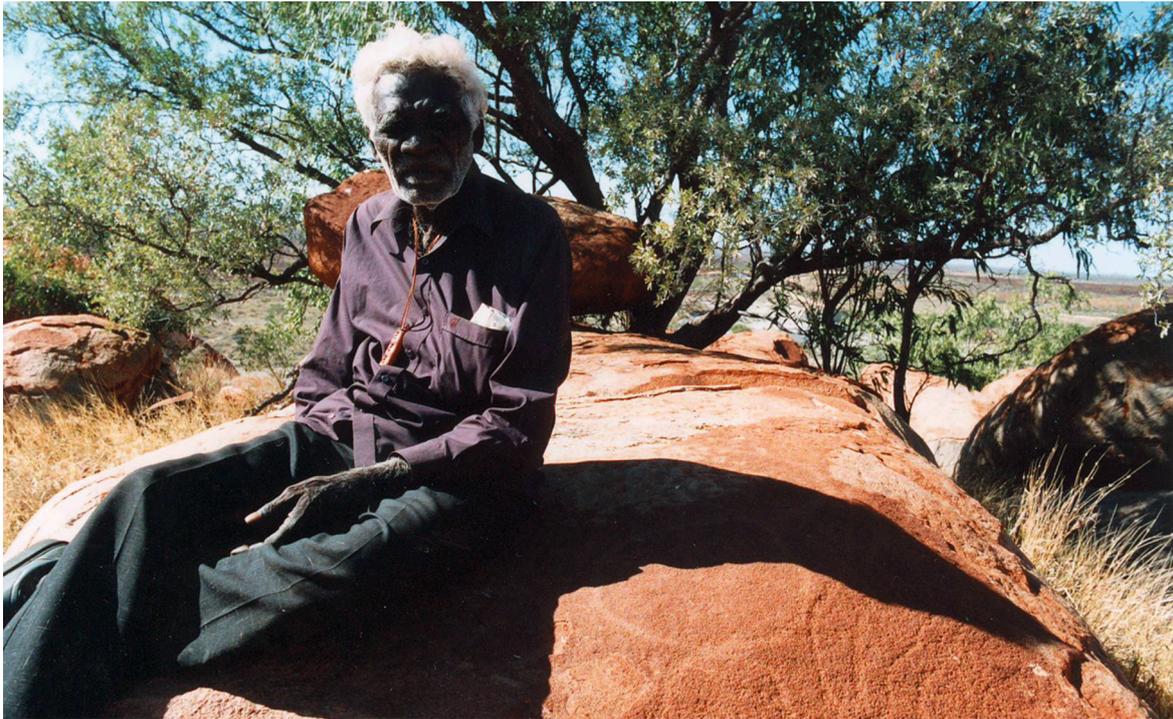
Robert G. BEDNARIK

Some of the most popular assumptions about Pleistocene rock art are falsities: it is not largely a phenomenon found in limestone caves, and thus related to some cultic activities connected with such sites; it is not essentially a phenomenon of the Upper Palaeolithic period; and it is not a phenomenon primarily of south-western Europe. For more than a century we have been indoctrinated by a mythology that is in urgent need of correction before a balanced investigation of global Pleistocene rock art can even be commenced. This is greatly hampered by the incredible disparities in the available published record. Whilst we have many thousands of books and articles, both academic and non-academic, about the Franco-Cantabrian rock art, numbering well in excess of actual art motifs, the rest of the world remains largely unexplored in this respect. The only pan-continental overviews of the Pleistocene rock arts of Asia, Australia and Africa have been provided by this author.

Although the idea of Pleistocene rock art in Australia was first mooted within a few years of the general acceptance of such antiquity in Europe, very little progress has been made in this area during the subsequent century. The first two qualified attributions of Australian rock art to the Pleistocene were provided only in 1981, at Early Man Shelter and Malangine Cave. Better direct dating evidence has been reported from sites in the extensive Abydos and Spear Hill petroglyph complexes of the Pilbara region (figure). Another tentative age estimation by direct means places the earliest petroglyph panels at Sacred Canyon in the Flinders Ranges in the final Pleistocene. Credible Pleistocene dates have also been secured from painting sites.

A retarding factor in the study of Australia's earliest rock art has been an archaeological model of three sequential styles or phases, the "Panaramitee style", followed by the "simple figurative style" and the "complex figurative style". Although it was later widely accepted that the two more recent "styles" could not be upheld as pan-continental, chronologically relevant designations, the Panaramitee concept was maintained and in effect compromised the chronological framework of Australian rock art research for several decades. Although its basis was refuted, it continued to be applied, taught and defended. Since it mistakenly conflated Pleistocene and Holocene traditions into one, separating the chronological entities was rendered difficult.

The earliest period seems to be dominated by cupules and linear grooves, followed by circles and circular motifs, sets of parallel grooves, convergent lines motifs and other specific geometric patterns. This trend is not limited to Australia; it may well be universal. The earliest petroglyphs of Asia, Africa and Europe are also dominated by cupules, and those of the Americas by cupules and linear grooves. Indeed, the pattern is so uniform that these genres of petroglyphs seem to define a Mode 3 or Middle Palaeolithic / Middle Stone Age tradition. Australia was initially settled by Middle Palaeolithic seafarers from Asia, who in view of the much earlier presence of this rock art tradition in India can reasonably be assumed to have imported it with first landfall.



Traditional custodian seated next to curvilinear maze petroglyph on granite that is roughly 20 000 years old, and whose meaning he knows (Pilbara, North-Western Australia).

It is then possible to speculate about the extent of Pleistocene rock art in Australia by resorting to the following reasonable assumptions. Deeply hammered, deeply weathered and deeply patinated non-iconic petroglyphs on particularly erosion-resistant rock are probably of the Pleistocene, as are perhaps most of those found in limestone caves. At open sites these petroglyphs occur usually in arid regions, typically on hard rock types such as various types of granites and other igneous facies that suffer little weathering, and on strongly metamorphosed quartzites. At a rough estimate the proportion of motifs that could be expected to fall into this category is at least 10% of the total Australian petroglyph inventory. Since it is reasonably and conservatively estimated that there are at least ten million petroglyphs in Australia, it follows that over a million could be expected to have survived from the Pleistocene. This may well be higher than the number of surviving Middle Palaeolithic petroglyphs from the rest of the world (few are known currently, a most notable concentration being that of the southern Kalahari, dating from Fauresmith and MSA times), and it is certainly significantly higher than the total number of motifs so far reported from presumed Upper Palaeolithic or Mode 4 traditions in the rest of the world (well below 50 000, of which only in the order of 5 000 are figurative).

Consequently, there is more surviving Middle Palaeolithic (or Mode 3) than Upper Palaeolithic rock art in the world. Secondly, whereas there are great variations among the latter traditions, the earlier ones seem to be defined by considerable uniformities across continents. However, it needs to be appreciated that this could well be a sampling issue, attributable to the taphonomy of rock art. All of the world's surviving Mode 3 rock art can be regarded as being of the greatest taphonomic longevity. It should therefore logically be seen as a taphonomically determined remnant population, from which the less deterioration-resistant forms have all been culled.





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