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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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Abstract

The spectacular and finely executed paintings of human figures that became known as "Bradshaws" intrigue all who see them in the remote rock shelters of Western Australia's Kimberley. In the sequence of Kimberley rock art, these figures, termed Gwion Gwion or just Gwion by some Aboriginal groups, clearly pre-date the Wandjina paintings that form part of the region's ongoing Aboriginal culture, and which dates back almost 4000 years. Although dating these figures remains elusive, a single tantalizing optically stimulated luminescence date of sand grains from a mud wasp nest that overlies "Gwion-style" paintings suggest a minimum age of 17,500 years for the art work.

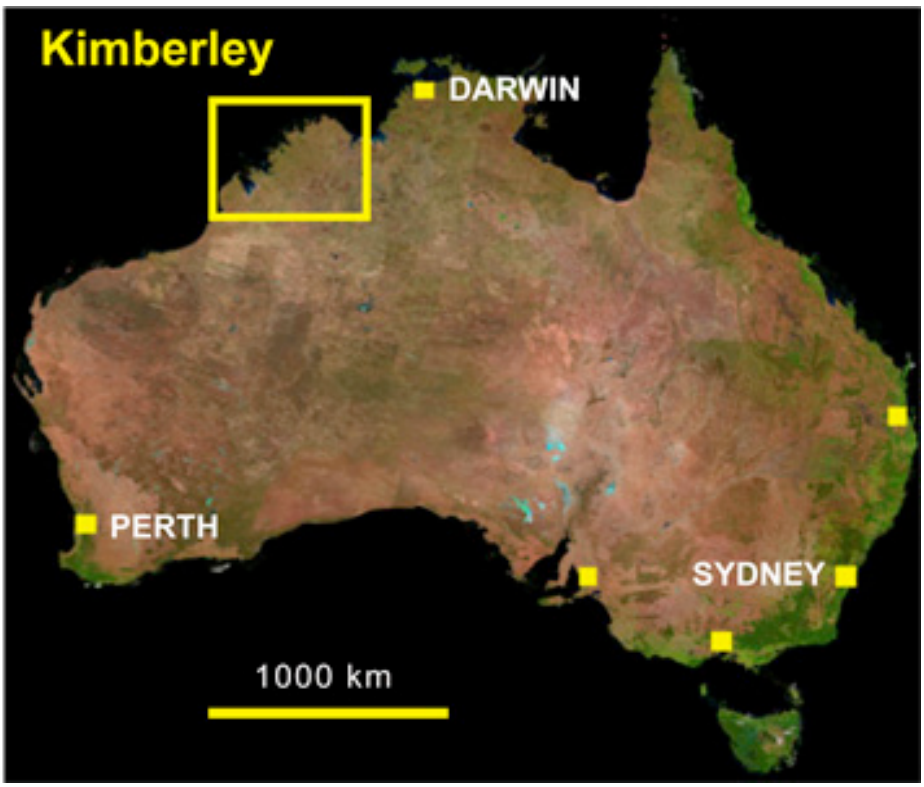

Fig. 1. Satellite image of Australia showing the Kimberley area.

The Kimberley region of north-west Australia is a largely wilderness area almost the size of France (Fig. 1). The richness of the area's rock art has been appreciated for many years, and there is a strong continuing indigenous culture relating particularly to the spectacular Wandjina paintings. However, Wandjinas represent just one of many art styles that occur throughout the Kimberley (e.g. Crawford 1968; Walsh 1988; Flood 1997; Morwood 2002; Donaldson 2007).

Fig. 2. Early Kimberley Irregular Infill Animal painting of a fish, 40cm long.

Fig. 3. Kimberley art panel of typical Sash Gwion figures illustrating complex superposition. The panel is 2m wide.

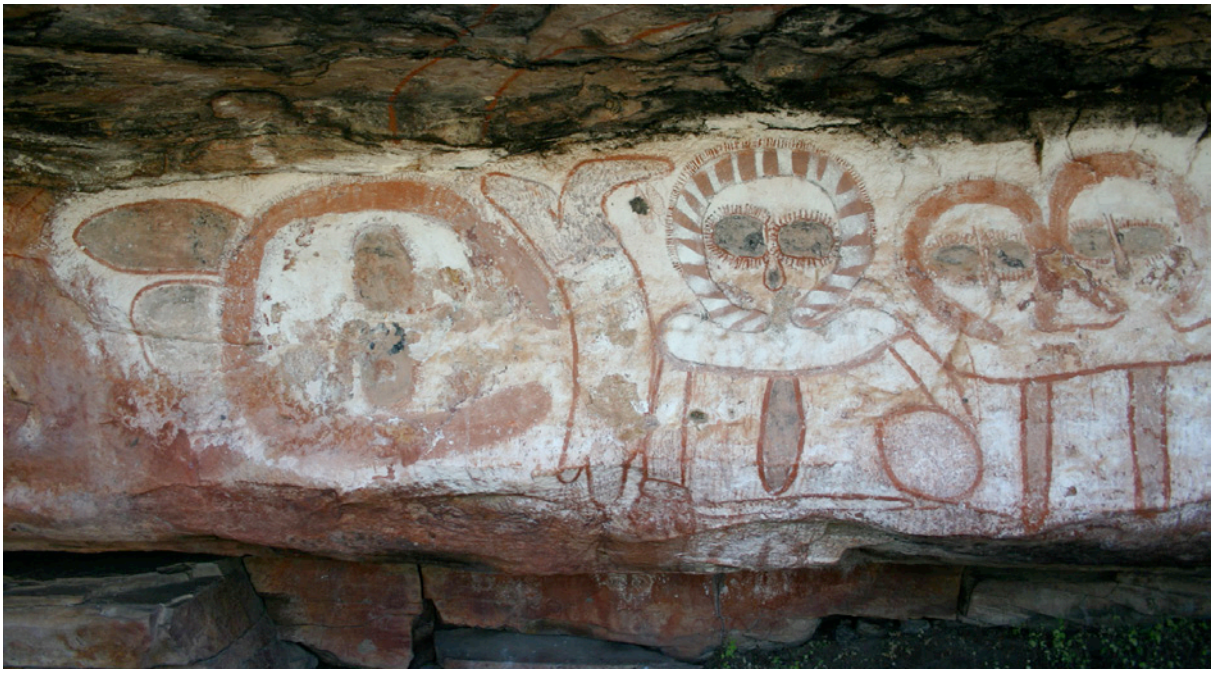

Fig. 4. Kimberley Wandjina figures represent cloud spirits and form part of a continuing cultural tradition dating back almost 4000 years. The central face is 30cm wide.

Fig. 5. Post European contact art depicting 17th century pipe-smoking Dutch sailors in a rowing boat equipped with rowlocks and oars. Bigge Island, Kimberley coast.

The paintings span a period of many thousands of years, and four distinct periods are recognised (e.g. Welch 1999; Walsh 2000):

- early naturalistic animals with irregular painted infill (Fig. 2);
- Gwion or Bradshaw figures (Fig. 3);
- Wandjinas (Fig. 4);
- Post-European contact art (Fig. 5).

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 (Morwood *et al*. 2010). Reliable dates for the earlier art styles remain elusive, but some results suggest the Gwion paintings are at least 17,500 years old (Roberts 2000).

Gwion paintings

Since the first publication of sketches by pastoralist/explorer Joseph Bradshaw (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. Bradshaw likened the paintings to early Egyptian art, and did “not attribute them to the present representations of the Black race” (Bradshaw 1892).

Other early reports only intensified European interest in these paintings: a Palatine missionary, Father Worms, who worked in the Kalumburu area in the 1930s, quoted a Gwini elder as “of the opinion that another people, who occupied this district long before their arrival, produced them” (Worms 1955). Noted Australian anthropologist Charles Mountford, although he never visited the Kimberley, commented on drawings of these figures made by entomologist Gerald Hill in 1909, and stated them to be “the finest examples of aboriginal art, in which action is portrayed, known to the writer” (Mountford 1937).

The paintings were termed “Bradshaw paintings” by the Frobenius Expedition in 1938, in the absence of any Aboriginal word for the distinctive figures (Schulz 1956). The term has been widely used since then (e.g. Crawford 1968; Stubbs 1974; Walsh 1994, 2000; Flood 1997; Morwood 2002) but in recent times there has been a preference to apply an Aboriginal name, *Gwion Gwion* (e.g. Doring 2000), or Gwion (Bednarik 2000) for these figures. *Gwion Gwion* is a Ngarinyin name and other Aboriginal groups use different terms for the figures such as *giro giro* (Worms 1955) and *bramba bramba* (Crawford 1968), which led researcher Grahame Walsh to retain the Bradshaw name in his detailed study (Walsh 2000). Welch (1996, 1999) preferred the simple descriptive terms “Tasselled Figures” and “Bent Knee Figures” to Walsh’s “Tasselled Bradshaws” and “Sash Bradshaws”. In the 1990s, four Ngarinyin lawmen (*munnumburra*) worked with film-maker Jeff Doring to record some of their cultural associations with Gwion Gwion paintings, partly to support Native Title claims to large areas of land in the north Kimberley (Doring 2000). This publication describes the Gwion paintings as sacred evidence of ancestors (*junjun*) and an important part of the *Wunan* tribal law system. Doring’s informants say that this connection was not previously discussed with non-Aboriginal people because it was considered too secret to divulge.

The term “Gwion” is used here in the general sense for this group of paintings, in preference to “Bradshaw” following Doring (2000) and Bednarik (2000).

Description

Gwion paintings depict elegant human figures, typically 40 to 50cm high but rarely up to 2m high. Although the paintings are very finely executed with precise brush strokes, gender is rarely depicted and there is no facial detail, but leg and arm musculature is commonly clearly defined, as is foot and ankle detail, shoulders, and stomach paunch (Fig. 3). 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 often also a bag or fan-like item. Doring (2000) identifies many of these items as adornments still used in ceremonies and dance.

Two researchers in particular, Grahame Walsh (1994, 2000) and David Welch (1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2007), have studied these paintings in detail and established their own, albeit quite similar, terminology for them. Walsh recognised two main types: "Tassel Bradshaws" and "Sash Bradshaws". He also identified many minor variants, but differentiated all the Bradshaws from other commonly associated small red painted figures, which he referred to as "Elegant Action Figures" and "Clothes Peg Figures". Welch (1996, 1999) referred to these paintings as "simple figures" and "Straight Part Figures". Walsh's stylised depiction of these art styles is shown in Figure 6.

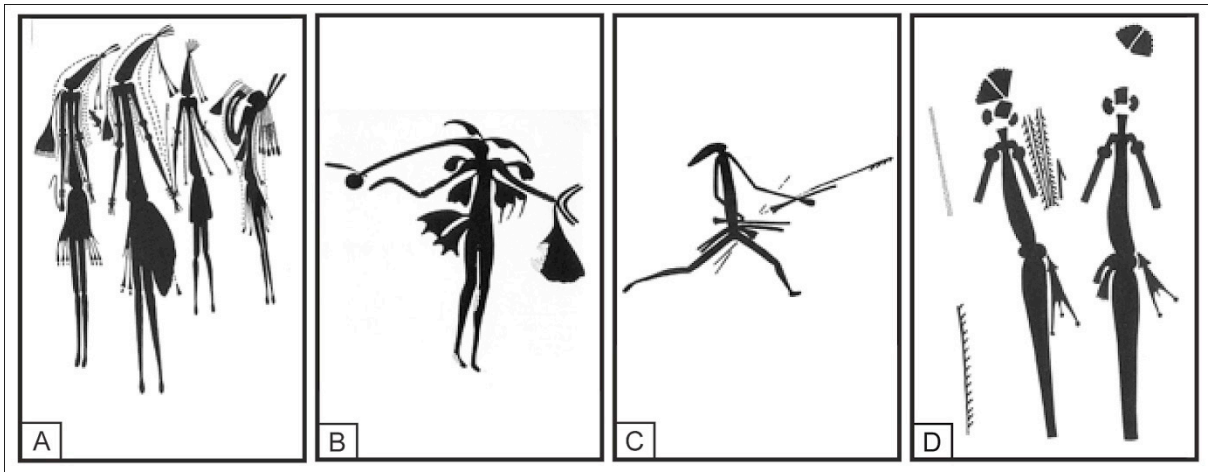

Fig. 6. Walsh's (2000) "Erudite Epoch" sequence (simplified): **A.** Tassel Bradshaws; **B.** Sash Bradshaw; **C.** Elegant Action Figure; **D.** Clothes Peg Figures.

Tassel Gwions (Fig. 7) are characterised by elaborate tassels, identified as feathers (*yululun*) by Doring (2000), hanging from the arm pits, shoulders or waist. Numerous other accoutrements such as bangles, armlets, headdresses and held items including boomerangs and bags are also typical of this group. They are painted with the finest attention to detail, clearly by skilled artisans using sophisticated brushes and pigments.

Sash Gwions (Fig. 8) are simpler figures characterised by distinctive three-pronged sashes hanging from a waist band or belt, or (rarely) held in the hand. Ngarinyin people call these *walbud* and identify them as possum or kangaroo skin garments (Doring 2000). Body shape is more robust than in Tassel Gwions, and there are distinctive sets of accoutrements including what Walsh (2000) refers to as a "Tuft Armband" and "Chilli Armpit Decoration".

Fig. 7. Tassel Gwion figures with characteristic body accoutrements including tassels, arm bands, and detailed leg musculature and stomach paunch. These paintings have been pounded by later (pre-European) people apparently in an attempt to erase the previous culture.

Fig. 8. Sash Gwions with waist and arm pit sashes, conical headdresses, and boomerangs. The adult hand stencil provides a scale.

Fig. 9. Tassel Gwion figures in red and yellow-brown pigments on the same rock surface suggest original differences in pigments used rather than fading due to weathering.

The paintings vary from deep purple-red to red and reddish-brown, brown, and even yellow-brown. This colour range is in part due to the degree of weathering suffered by paint pigments on the rock surface, in particular the amount of exposure to direct sunlight and rain (Fig. 3). However some panels include both red and brown figures where the degree of weathering and exposure appears to be uniform (Fig. 9). Most Gwion paintings have been subjected to prolonged weathering and most have clearly faded to some degree.

Doring (2000) suggests that the bark of the *mamandu* tree (not identified botanically) was used as fixative and dye for the red colour of Gwion paintings. However, in the limited studies of Watchman (1997), red coloration was found to be due to the iron oxide hematite, and the characteristic purple-red colour of some Gwion figures, described as "mulberry hue", was identified as due to jarosite, an iron sulphate. Yellow and brown paint is mainly the hydrated iron oxide goethite, or a mix of goethite and hematite. These findings do not preclude the use of organic materials as fixatives for these paint materials.

Gwion paintings are mainly on vertical rock surfaces, less commonly on rock shelter ceilings. A notable feature of Gwion art sites is that they are typically small rock overhangs with irregular rocky floors high up on escarpments, sites that would be totally unsuitable for habitation.

Elegant Action Figures (Fig. 10) show great sense of movement and portray kneeling and sitting positions as well as running and hunting scenes. The figures are typically small (less than 40cm high) and carry multi-barbed spears and boomerangs. Several researchers have commented on the similarity of these figures with the Dynamic Figures (*Mimi*) of Arnhem Land (e.g. Flood 1997).

Fig. 10. Elegant Action Figures portray a great sense of movement and the panel illustrates the increased weathering with distance from the protective overhang above.

Clothes Peg Figures (Fig. 11) are so named because of their resemblance to old wooden clothes pegs. (Welch (1990, 1999) refers to these figures as “Straight Part Figures”). They are static figures, typically 30 to 50cm high, painted in red ochre but commonly with blank areas where one or more pigments have weathered away; in particular, hands, feet, waist belt, and headdress detail is often missing. Rare examples with some remaining yellow and white pigments in these areas indicate the figures were multi-coloured. Clothes Peg Figures are generally shown with associated multi-barbed spears and spear-throwers, which is notably different to the items carried by or associated with the Gwion figures.

Fig. 11. Clothes Peg Figure, 50cm high, with pigment missing from hands, feet, waist and head area, and a large item, presumably a woven bag, hanging from the neck. A multi barbed spear (at upper right) is a characteristic accessory of these figures.

Relative chronology

Most observers have recognised that the Gwion paintings are of some antiquity, based on their faded appearance, over-painting by other art styles (Fig. 12), and the fact that Aboriginal people did not relate them to their existing Wandjina culture at the time of early European contacts.

Fig. 12. Sash Gwions overpainted by now very faded Wandjina-period paintings of large human figures (red and white legs only visible).

Welch (1996, 1999) and Walsh (1994, 2000) documented many examples of superposition and established a relative chronology for the Kimberley rock art. Walsh (2000), on the basis of extensive field observations over several decades, placed the Kimberley art styles into Epochs and Periods, further subdivided into distinct groups:

Archaic Epoch
- Pecked Cupule Period
- Irregular Infill Animal Period
  - Hand stencils
  - Boomerang stencils
  - Positive hand prints
  - String, feather & grass prints
  - Paintings (animals, plants, humans)

Erudite Epoch
- Bradshaw Period
  - Tassel Bradshaws
  - Sash Bradshaws
  - Various other minor Bradshaw forms
  - Elegant Action Figures
- Clothes Peg Figure Period

Aborigine Epoch
- Clawed Hand Period
- Wandjina Period

Walsh's relative chronological sequence has been broadly confirmed by more recent observations (e.g. Donaldson 2007, 2011), and it is clear that Gwion figures represent one of the oldest art styles in the Kimberley. Walsh highlighted the inferred large time interval between the Gwion art and the vastly different Wandjina paintings which remains part of continuing Aboriginal culture. However, Welch (2007) argues for continuity of tradition from people depicted in early Gwion art to historic and current Aboriginal ceremonial dress, and Doring (2000) documents continuity of at least some aspects of ceremonial attire from Gwion paintings to the present time.

Absolute chronology

Occupation of Australia has been reliably dated to at least 60,000 years ago (at Lake Mungo in the southeast of the country; Bowler and Price 1998), and dates of 55,000 to 60,000 years have also been recorded from Arnhem Land in northern Australia (Roberts *et al*. 1994, 1998; O'Connor 2007). In the southern Kimberley, O'Connor (1995, 1999, 2007), McConnell & O'Connor (1999), and Balme (2000) have documented occupation dates of at least 40,000 years in the limestone ranges. Importantly, an ochre-covered rock from O'Connor's Carpenter Gap excavation in the Napier Range dates to 39,000 years and is the oldest indication of rock art yet discovered in the area (O'Connor & Fankhauser 2001). Rainsbury (2009) summarised archaeological research results for the Kimberley from 37 documented excavations and dates obtained from various materials associated with some of the major art styles.

Direct dating of Kimberley rock art has used AMS radiocarbon techniques to establish that Wandjina paintings (containing carbon as the black pigment) and Wandjina-style beeswax images date from the present to almost 4000 years (Morwood 2010; Watchman 1997). Dating the older art has proved more difficult: Watchman (1997) dated some carbon-bearing silica accretions over some Tassel Bradshaw paintings as about 1400 years, and an accreted calcium oxalate layer associated with paint from a "Cane Bradshaw" as 3880 ± 110 years. These may be minimum ages relating more to the time of mineral accretion over the paintings than the date of painting.

Roberts *et al*. (1997) used optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) to date quartz grains from a mud-wasp nest overlying a Bradshaw painting. This gave an age of 17,500 years which would therefore be a minimum age for the painting. The OSL technique is yet to be firmly established as a reliable and accurate dating method and until further dates corroborate this single result and calibrate it against more established techniques such as AMS radiocarbon, the age of the Gwion paintings remains unknown.

Conclusions

One OSL date clearly does not provide conclusive evidence of a Pleistocene age for the Gwion figures. However, together with the relative chronological sequence, degree of weathering, and the difference in material technologies compared with later art styles, there is still the possibility that the art is of Pleistocene antiquity. Current research on north Kimberley art sites by University of New England and Wollongong University staff and students will hopefully answer some of these questions over the next few years.

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