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Aboriginal Art in Central Western Queensland:

History of Recording.
Archaeology Branch
Department of Community Services
and Ethnic Affairs
G.P.O. Box 2210, Brisbane QLD. 4001
Telephone: (07) 22 42594

RANGERS:
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ABORIGINAL ART IN CENTRAL WESTERN QUEENSLAND:
HISTORY OF RECORDING.


DISCOVERY

Considering the high density of sites in the area, it is noteworthy that none of the early exploring expeditions mention art. These were mainly concerned with establishing the commercial possibilities of new areas for stocking, and traversed areas quickly along drainage channels.

From the early 1860's however, when holdings were taken up and the country was more closely examined during stock work, Europeans must have encountered sites. Then, as now, very little of this local knowledge would have seen the light in published form. The earliest example of dated vandalism found during my survey was 'J Hunt 1873', in a particularly isolated area.

The initial discoveries took some time to be more widely disseminated as brief descriptions in newspapers or learned journals. The first such account appears to be that of T.S. Parrot, who in 1888 wrote to the Centennial magazine of his discovery of an art site 24 years earlier at the head of Planet Creek, in the Expedition Range. His description immediately established the character of central Queensland art.

"The cave is a very extensive one, and the sandstone is of various colours, red, white and yellow. The paintings with which the walls are entirely covered consist of aboriginal hands and feet, boomerangs, clubs, nulla nullas, fishes, birds, and many other subjects; the whole skilfully worked out with chalks and ochre of different colours, the red on the white, the white on the yellow, and so on." (Parrot 1888:271).
A report appeared in the Melbourne Argus of May 10th 1891, concerning the Buckland Creek site, on the upper Nogoa River, and was later to be used by Worsnop in his book The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Weapons etc of the Aborigines of Australia. He says -

"In Central Queensland, on Buckland's Tableland is Nardoo Creek on the bank of which is a high cliff and, on its face is a magnificently-executed picture, representing a sea of fire, out of which are stretched dusky-brown arms in hundreds in every conceivable position, the muscles knotted and the hands grasping convulsively, some pointing a weird finger upwards, others clenched as in agonies of death as though a host were engulfed in a seething lake of fire ....". (Worsnop 1897:38).

Aboriginal responses to enquiries about the site were interesting but not informative -

"The natives in the neighbourhood have a horror of the place, and when questioned declare that they can give no information about it, saying that their white-headed blacks know nothing about it, nor even their fathers". (Worsnop 1897:39).

Stencils of feet, boomerangs, nulla nullas, and axes were also described as well as carvings of emu tracks, boomerangs, and snakes, and three large painted figures in red. This isolated site has since been sporadically visited and described to varying degrees, e.g. Maitland 1894; Jenson 1926; Buchester 1967; Morwood 1976; Donovan 1976.

In 1900 Archibald Meston, the Protector of Aborigines for southern Queensland, visited the upper Maranoa and Warrego areas. A child's burial cylinder (QE 11/84c) and a number of boomerangs were collected and now grace the Queensland Museum collections. Meston, also wrote of the many caves and rockshelters on 'Warrong' Station, which contained both art and burial cylinders.
"These sandstone caves were the cemeteries of the aboriginals. On the roof or sides of all caves containing the dead were the imprints of hands done in red or white ochres. These hands were the unfailing signs of the rock sepulchre ... all caves bearing those hand impressions were sacred and none dared to disturb or desecrate them under penalty of certain death." (Meston 1901:100).

This report stimulated further correspondence to The Queenslander by A.S. Maclellan (1901), a former manager of 'Warrong'. Maclellan wrote of Aboriginal art and burials at 'the Tombs' site on the upper Maranoa.

"Many a skeleton I saw in the caves there, and hand and foot imprints and other impressions on the walls and roofs of the caves; and fishing nets made out of fibre or bark. These caves served as a vault for this wild race."

Immediately over the Great Divide in the Springsure area, T.W. Biddulph had also noticed marks on the rocks and was sufficiently interested to enquire locally about them. He records that -

"The Aborigines here can give no explanation about them nor do they know by whom or when the rocks were so marked." (Biddulph 1900:225).

To the east in the Taroom area, similar finds were being noted. W.C. Tibbets (1902:225), wrote to the journal Science of Man, describing an art site located between 'Waterton' and 'Isla' Stations thus -

"The subject of the markings consists of many illustrations of the human hand, iguanas, fish, etc., etc."

Here local questioning was a little more fruitful, information from the oldest Aborigine in the area indicated an age for the art of 60 to 70 years.
J.R. Chisholm now submitted a series of reports to the same journal concerning art sites near Hughenden, in northern Central Queensland on 'Praire' and 'Mt Sturgeon' Stations. (Chisholm 1901a; 1901b; 1903; 1907; 1910; 1912). The descriptions included references to drawings of bird and human feet, hands, sketches of boomerangs, and carvings of snakes, emu feet and 'heads with haloes over them'. Chisholm was particularly intrigued by some aspects of the art, in particular -

"Why do the bird's feet in the ancient carvings and drawings always point upwards?" (Chisholm 1910:75).

When asked about the art, local informants replied -

"Blackfellow make em and go down longa ground." (Ibid).
Apart from a brief note by Wilkins (1928:80) in his *Undiscovered Australia*, of stencils and pecked engravings near Torrens Creek, the area was not investigated again until 1980 when a site survey was initiated (D.A.I.A. files CL, DK, DL, GJ, EK).

In the period 1909-18, interest in, and the number of visitors to known sites, seems to have increased, if vandalism at the much-abused 'Black's Palace' area is anything to go on. Reports by surveyors and geological fieldworkers concerning Aboriginal art also increase towards the end of this period. For instance, F.B. Campbell Forde, Deputy Surveyor General, wrote in 1918, of a stencil site in the Staircase Range, near Springsure, which he had first seen in 1883, on route to survey 'Babiloora' Station. Similarly, W.G. Drane, Staff Surveyor, wrote from 'Cheshire' Station concerning the 'Black's Palace' on the Barcoo/Belyando Divide. His description probably reflects the general European attitude towards such sites -

"The place is merely of historic value. It is admitted that no one even in the wildest flights of imagination could discern the slightest traces of art." (Drane 1918).

He closes with an ominous precedent -

"I am forwarding per parcel post a painting of a hand, which may be of interest."

In 1937 the first of a great many touring expeditions to the Carnarvons was made by the Queensland branch of the Geographical Society of Australasia, under D.A. O'Brien. The enterprise was repeated in 1938 and 1940, and the results published by O'Brien (1939/40), Elkin (1940) and Goddard (1940/41). Goddard's account of the third expedition must rate as the first serious published account of Aboriginal art in Central Queensland.
Brief photogenic accounts of the art of this region appeared sporadically throughout the 1940's and 50's, and still do (e.g. Anon 1976; Barrett 1946; Brammel 1940; Frauc a and Frauc a 1967; Geary 1939; Henderson 1963; McKenzie 1977; Redmond 1963; Sutton 1967:). However, it was not until McCarthy (1960) published a brief note in *Mankind* on the Graceville and Cutzies Cave sites, that scholarly interest again surfaced. The report suffered though, from being based on second hand information: Of the photographs provided by a local informant, that of Cutzie's Cave was subsequently published upside down.

Hand and Axe Stencils, Central Highlands  
*(Morwood)*

Mulvaney's classic report on the work at Kenniff Cave and the Tombs in 1960, 1962 and 1964 also contains a section on the art of 'Mt Moffat', 'Emu Bends', and 'Mt Tabor', although 'the expeditions were archaeological in purpose' (Mulvaney and Joyce 1965:202). The excavations, like those to be undertaken later at Cathedral Cave by Tugby (Cleff 1965, 1977) and Beaton (Beaton 1977), also have relevance for the vexing question of the age of the art. At Kenniff's Cave, the evidence of ochre throughout the deposits
indicated that "even the Pleistocene colonists possessed an aesthetic sense, whether they painted themselves, their implements or their walls." (Mulvaney and Joyce 1965:201).

Three years later Dr. Eleanor Crosby, Curator of Anthropology at the Queensland Museum, published the results of her survey of art sites in the upper Dawson River area, near Taroom, 320 km east of the Warrego (Crosby 1968:73-81). As well as demonstrating clear differences between upland and lowland sites, particularly in colour usage, Crosby noted a stylistic relationship between this art body and that of Carnarvon Gorge and the upper Maranoa: It was suggested that this might apply throughout the Central Queensland Highlands (Ibid:8).
Crosby's successor, M.C. Quinnell, continued work on the art of the area by undertaking a thorough recording of 44 art sites in Carnarvon Gorge, beginning in 1969. (Quinnell 1975; 1976; 1977). These sites include some of the largest and most spectacular art sites known from the Central Highlands e.g. The Art Gallery, Cathedral Cave. The recording and subsequent analysis combined local knowledge of site distribution with an intensive fieldwork programme: It yielded the most detailed description of a Central Queensland art body yet published, and defined the general framework for future work in the area.

Subsequent studies have been more limited in scope. Morwood (1976) published an account of three rock art sites on the upper Nogoa and Warrego Rivers, including Goat Rock and the historic Buckland Creek Site. The latter also features as one of the eight sites briefly discussed by Donovan (1976:45-51), as part of an ethnohistorical/archaeological survey of the Nogoa Basin. In a recent article in *Mankind*, Beaton and Walsh (1977:467) show the potential of Aboriginal art as a source of information about many aspects of prehistory, including trade: They argue that shell pendants are represented in the stencil art of some Central Queensland sites, and that these suggest that a trade chain existed between the Carnarvon area and the far north of Australia.

To summarise then, no information regarding the cultural context of rock art in the area is available. Partially, this reflects a general lack of interest by early colonists, which is understandable in the light of the prevailing frontier ethics concerning Aborigines.

However, even when enquiries were made informants appear to have been evasive (e.g. Biddulph 1900:225; Worsnop 1897:39). Donovan (1976:121) reports a similar reluctance for Aborigines to discuss their ways -

"The Aborigines were remembered as being reluctant to explain themselves and their activities, also preferring to address each other in their own language."
Grooved engravings of human feet, kangaroo, bear and goat tracks - Goat Rock (Morwood)

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that this art body is totally lacking in contextual information. Despite evidence that much of this art is relatively recent and some is certainly post-European in age (stencils of European items were recorded), it is as 'dead' as the 20,000 year-old engravings in Koonalda Cave or the 30,000 year-old art of the Upper Palaeolithic art of Europe.

In the 117 years since European settlement of the region, the general characteristics of Central Queensland rock art have been outlined. Apart from Quinnell's work on the art of Carnarvon Gorge, and Crosby's study near Taroom, available data has been minimal and of variable quality. This has not prevented speculation as to the place of Central Queensland in the
development of Australian Aboriginal art and its inclusion, or exclusion, from pan-Australian developments (e.g. McCarthy 1967:29; Maynard 1974:41). Previously, work has also concentrated on the art of the eastern Highlands: The art of the Central West shares many features with its eastern counterpart, but both similarities and differences are informative.

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