

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ROCK ART: ITS RELEVANCE TO THE EUROPEAN PALAEOLITHIC

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It has been pointed out already by Ucko and Rosenfeld (1967) how important it is for anthropologists working in areas where hunter-gatherers are still extant to attempt to obtain their interpretations of cave paintings and rock engravings, whether these be prehistoric or contemporary. Later, Ucko (1967) made a direct appeal to Australian ethnographers to record Aboriginal ideas about the meaning and motivation behind the rock art which was still being executed or repaired by Aborigines in several parts of the continent.

No one appears to have responded to this appeal (publicly, at least), so this article is an attempt to assemble as many accounts as possible of what Aboriginal informants have said about their own rock art, and then to consider what relevance these accounts may have to the interpretation of European Palaeolithic cave paintings and rock engravings.

It might well be profitable to attempt to assess the European art sites into rough categories, according to the subjects portrayed, as has been done for Aboriginal art, and reinterpret these subjects in the light of the detailed explanations given by Australian Aborigines.

Australian Aboriginal cave paintings may be divided into the following principal classes:

A. Representation of Dream-time Totemic Species.

Sites where such persons or creatures were portrayed were highly sacred, secret and esoteric. They were used for initiation ceremonies, during which the initiands were instructed in the myths and the paintings were repaired or totally repainted. Only a specific man, or group of men, were permitted to do such painting. This accounts for the very varied level of artistic skill found in a single site.

B. Paintings Connected with Mortuary Ceremonies.

These also are portrayals of totemic species and ancestors and occur particularly in the northern half of the continent. Such caves used to contain skulls, bundle burials, possessions of the dead, and memorials of the deceased, in the form of hand stencils, paintings known to have been executed by the dead, and so on. Such sites



C. Increase Sites.

were possibly not quite so sacred and restricted as Class A.

In these one type of food animal predominates, or in some cases, scenes of hunting a particular animal. These may perhaps be classed as «white magic» sites.

D. Sorcery Sites.

These are characterized by crudity of execution, distortion, particularly of the genital organs, scenes of spearing, accident, maiming, and death. They are where the medicine men, or others, carried out revenge magic and may be classed as «black magic» sites.

E. Paintings of Malicious Spirits.

In this class are included the Mimi paintings of North-West Arnhem Land, the Malindji of northern Central Australia, and the Quinkans in southern Cape York Peninsula.

F. Secular Sites.

These might alternatively be called «Art for Art's Sake» Sites. They are areas which usually contain relics of camp activity and are characterized by large numbers of stencils made by men, women and children, paintings of animals, hunting scenes, camp dances, etc. Just as there were varying degrees of sacredness and secrecy in dance and song, so art sites varied greatly, from those which meant death for those who viewed them unlawfully to those where whole groups enjoyed themselves regardless of status.

*Fig. 54
Wandjinas at Wanalirri, Kimberley. The large figure is Wojin, who led the Wandjinas on a punitive expedition against Aboriginal people who had transgressed the law.*

In the absence of ethnographic information it is often difficult to distinguish between these different types of sites, but if some analysis of motifs, grouping, superimposition and so on is undertaken, it is usually possible to



Fig. 55
Another Wandjina
cave. Being on the
roof, these pain-
tings are remar-
kably well pres-
erved.

Similarities and Differences

determine with some certainty what class a site falls into. Of course, there are some sites of such magnitude and complexity that one can only class them as composite sites, where many types of functions must have been carried out.

It would be as well to clarify the main points of similarity and difference between the art to be found on Australia's rock shelters and rock faces and that of the deep caves and open sites of Palaeolithic Europe.

Hand stencils, both positive and negative, and stencils of weapons, etc., are universal in Australia, as they are in prehistoric cave painting throughout the world. Some consider them to be one of the earliest manifestations of Aboriginal art. On the other hand, stencilling has been practised within living memory in the northern half of the continent and in south-eastern Australia there are many sites where it is obvious that stencils of hands, feet and weapons were the final effort made before rock painting ceased.

Representations of game animals and hunting scenes are general in Aboriginal rock art, particularly in the engravings, but a profound and basic difference is that in Aboriginal art the hunter is very frequently shown, in varying degrees of stylization or realism. Certainly in Australia there is none of the peculiar reluctance to portray the human figure which is so marked in the European Palaeolithic. The reasons for this will be apparent when we consider the basic Aboriginal beliefs later in this article. It is sufficient here to note that human figur-



Fig. 56
Kaiara figure, similar to Wandjina, at Chalangdad, Kimberley.

es, engaged in every conceivable activity, predominate in most Australian art sites.

There is much use of symbols in Aboriginal art and often these symbols resemble the frustrating and controversial signs of the Palaeolithic caves. On the other hand, Aboriginal art incorporates a multiplicity of animal tracks, as would be expected in a hunting people. In fact, T.G.H. Strehlow (1964) considers that all Aboriginal art should be looked at as if it were on the ground in a single horizontal dimension. This may well apply to Central Australian art, which is Strehlow's special province, but seems scarcely relevant to the much more elaborate and figurative art of Northern Australia.

A symbolic element in the art of many parts of Australia which is foreign to the European Palaeolithic is the



Fig. 57
Rainbow snakes,
one with eggs, and
spirit children in
the eastern Kim-
berleys.

use of concentric circles, spirals and stylized patterns of parallel lines. These are very similar to Bronze Age decorations found in South-East Asia and may well have been a comparatively late introduction. On the other hand, the oldest dated art in Australia — the finger patterns in Koonalda Cave reported on by Edwards and Maynard (1969) in an earlier edition of the *Bollettino* — is identical with the meanders, popularly known as «macaroni», found in many caves in South-West Europe.

Regarding what in the European Palaeolithic context is termed «mobilier art», i.e. the small incise and carved items of ivory, bone, etc., often found in deposits in painted caves, this form of art is rare in Australia. The nearest equivalent is perhaps to be found in the *tjurunga* of Central and Western Australia. These are slabs of



Fig. 58
Nargorkun and his
wives at Sleisbeck,
south-west Ar-
nhem Land.

stone or wood of varying size, on which are incised series of tracks and symbols. These represent maps or ground plans of events included in the myths recounted to the youths at initiation and are highly sacred and secret. Commonly they were hidden in clefts or caves except when brought out reverently for ceremonial purposes. They were considered by the Aborigines to be much more than just symbols; they were believed to contain spiritual essence of the ancestor concerned and to be of great potency. In fact, they were extremely dangerous unless handled correctly; that is, with the correct chants and mimes.

The Australian rock art sites themselves differ considerably from those in Europe, since in Australia, with very rare exceptions (Koonalda is one), the paintings are in open rock shelters or overhangs, while the engravings are on horizontal or, less commonly, vertical surfaces in the open. It is possible, of course, that such open sites were originally used more frequently in Europe but, being more vulnerable, have largely disappeared, whereas the art of the deep caves has survived disproportionately. In Australia it is doubtful if Aborigines normally used deep caves to any extent; in fact it would seem that the remarkable activities of the late Pleistocene flint-miners and artists of Koonalda were virtually unique and a product of the unusual conditions of the limestone karst region of the Nullarbor Plain.

Although individual art sites in Australia often contain a bewildering variety of art styles, covering the gamut

Fig. 59
Spirit figures and
«X-ray» fishes at
Noarlangie, wes-
tern Arnhem Land



from realism to extreme stylization, it may be taken that these are all manifestations of one particular theme. Each site relates to a particular totemic ancestor or event of the Dreaming and the art is a celebration of one aspect of one particular myth concerning that ancestor. Before considering possible ways of interpreting Aboriginal art, it would be as well to explain briefly the system of beliefs and myths underlying all Aboriginal thought and activity within the tribal system.

**Basic
Aboriginal
Beliefs**

The concept of «The Dreamtime», or perhaps more appropriately «The Dreaming», is fundamental to all aspects of Aboriginal life, art, and ceremony. It is, in fact, a religious and philosophical concept of considerable sophistication and complexity and, within its own premises, constituted a satisfactory and consistent explanation of the universe and man's place in it. Briefly, then, the Dreaming was a time of long ago when totemic man-animals roamed the unformed earth, by their acts and adventures creating all the natural features and living creatures know today. When their creative tasks had been completed, these totemic Dreamtime Heroes and Heroines vanished into the rocks, caves, waterholes, and rivers, or ascended into the sky to become celestial bodies. A most important point to grasp is that these creator figures are referred to at one moment as behaving as animals but then immediately afterwards are obviously human. The dividing line is deliberately blurred in this type of totemism. When such totemic individuals are

portrayed visually, they may be human or animal or a combination of both.

Now the Dreaming was long long ago but it is also the here and now and the future-to-be, for, to ensure the continuation of life and the cosmos and to produce the annual renewal of species, the events of the Dreaming must be re-enacted, in dance and mime and chant, at the actual places where the creative events of the Dreaming took place. In some cases the cave paintings and rock engravings were considered to be the actual shapes of the Dreamtime people, in others a humanly-created record of their deeds. In any case, these relics and reminders of the creative ancestors must be repaired annually at the time of the great regenerative ceremonies.

The process of initiation, which continued throughout a man's life, was actually a gradual revealing of the great creative myths of the journeyings of the Dreamtime Ancestors through the tribal territories. This revelation came through the dramatic re-enactments and the explanations of the paintings and engravings. But these re-enactments were far more significant than mere dramatic or even religious performances, for those taking part believed that in the ecstasy of the ceremony the Dreaming was indeed recreated and they themselves took on the spiritual essence of the Creative Ancestors and *became* them for the duration of the sacred time. In this way the continuance of life of the Aboriginal People, of the totemic species, of the total cosmos was assured.

Once this concept of the Dreaming is understood, it immediately becomes apparent why the sacred painted sites often contain a bewildering mixture of animals, human figures, tracks, symbols, and so on and also why paintings of varying standards are superimposed one on another. For these sites have been reverently repainted by generation after generation and individual artistic skill has ranged from genius to childlike crudity. Nevertheless, it is the act of repainting the sacred site that is vital, not the quality of the painting, though it must not be assumed that the Aborigines do not distinguish between the varying standards of their artists. It is just that there was one particular man, or group of men, who through their totemic relationship were entitled to repair or re-engage each particular sacred site.

It should be added that not all art sites are sacred nor secret. Many rock shelters which were obviously used as living sites are also painted with animals, symbols, hunting scenes, etc., and it is clear that such paintings were done for fun, or to commemorate some secular event. This situation is paralleled in the sphere of songs and dances, for, quite apart from the ceremonial aspects, it is normal for a local group of Aborigines to do what are known as «camp dances» or «playabouts» around the



Fig. 60
A complex of animal tracks and symbols portraying a myth at Ruguri, near Yuen-dumu, Central Australia.

camp fire in the evening. These events are open to all and are, in fact, the means by which the children learn to dance in traditional style.

Hand stencils, too, appear at all sorts of sites. There are some places where there are literally hundreds of stencils, of men's, women's and children's hands. These are the signatures of a pre-literate people and they merely signify «X was here». In sacred sites they are a symbol that a particular man has partaken in a particular ceremony there, or they are the signatures of the artists who painted the adjacent figures. They are also a form of memorial. Professor A.P. Elkin (1930b) mentions that in the Kimberleys in North-West Australia he was told that the men of a tribe could recognise every hand stencil and print; when the man who had made a particular print was dead, they would see it and remember him «and maybe cry a little».

It has often been stated that all Aboriginal ceremonial is really a form of «increase magic», and certainly this was true of some ceremonies, such as the *inticheuma* of Central Australia, which was unequivocally aimed at producing fertility of one species or another. But it is certainly not correct to class all the ceremonial and initiation cycles of rituals as «increase magic», except insofar as they were considered essential in order to maintain the equilibrium of the seasons and species.

This brings us to another Aboriginal belief that was basic and universal, that of the Rainbow Snake. Huge

snakes appear, particularly in cave paintings, in all parts of the continent and the myth of the Rainbow Snake has been recorded in very similar form in most corners of Australia where trained anthropologists have been able to do fieldwork. The Rainbow Serpent, though originating from the Dreaming, is still active and needs to be appeased so that it will allow the supply of spirit children to continue. Often the Rainbow Snake is believed to dwell in the clan waterhole or well and this is also where the spirits of children to be born wait their time to enter the womb of the appropriate mother. In many tribes the place where the mother first felt the quickening in her womb determined the totemic class and clan country of the child-to-be. At times the Rainbow Snake also appeared in the sky, where it brought about the life-giving rain. The whole symbolism of the Rainbow Serpent is, therefore, that of regeneration and rebirth.

The dividing line between the Dreamtime and ordinary life is often tenuous. For example, fully initiated men, and especially medicine men (or clan shamans) claimed that often while dreaming they were transported to the Creation Time of the Ancestral Totemic Heroes and Heroines, from whom they obtained new songs, new ceremonies, which they had to teach the men of the clan or local group to perform. There were claims also of spiritual journeys into the future and many stories are told of Aborigines foretelling future events with uncanny accuracy.

Some
Aboriginal
Interpretations

In this section it is proposed to outline briefly some of the more convincing explanations of cave paintings, obtained in most cases by trained anthropologists from Aborigines in their own tribal territories. This last point is important, because many accounts have been elicited from detribalized Aborigines when viewing paintings and engravings far from their own «country» and it is well known that Aboriginal people, in order to please or get rid of persistent whites, are apt to make up any story they think likely to be acceptable.

Firstly, let us consider what is probably the best documented art area in Australia — the Kimberleys, where there are two main cults; that of the Wandjina and that of the Rainbow Snake. There is a close similarity in rock painting style and convention throughout the region. The cults and their meanings have been investigated in depth by a number of fieldworkers and most recently by Crawford (1968), whose findings fully corroborate earlier work by Elkin (1930, 1949), Capell (1939), and others. On page 31 of *The Art of the Wandjina* Crawford says:

«The Aborigines state that they did not create the Wandjina paintings, but inherited them from the spirits who first made them. These spirits were the Wandjinas themselves, legendary beings whose activities are recounted in myths and songs. A feature of these myths is that

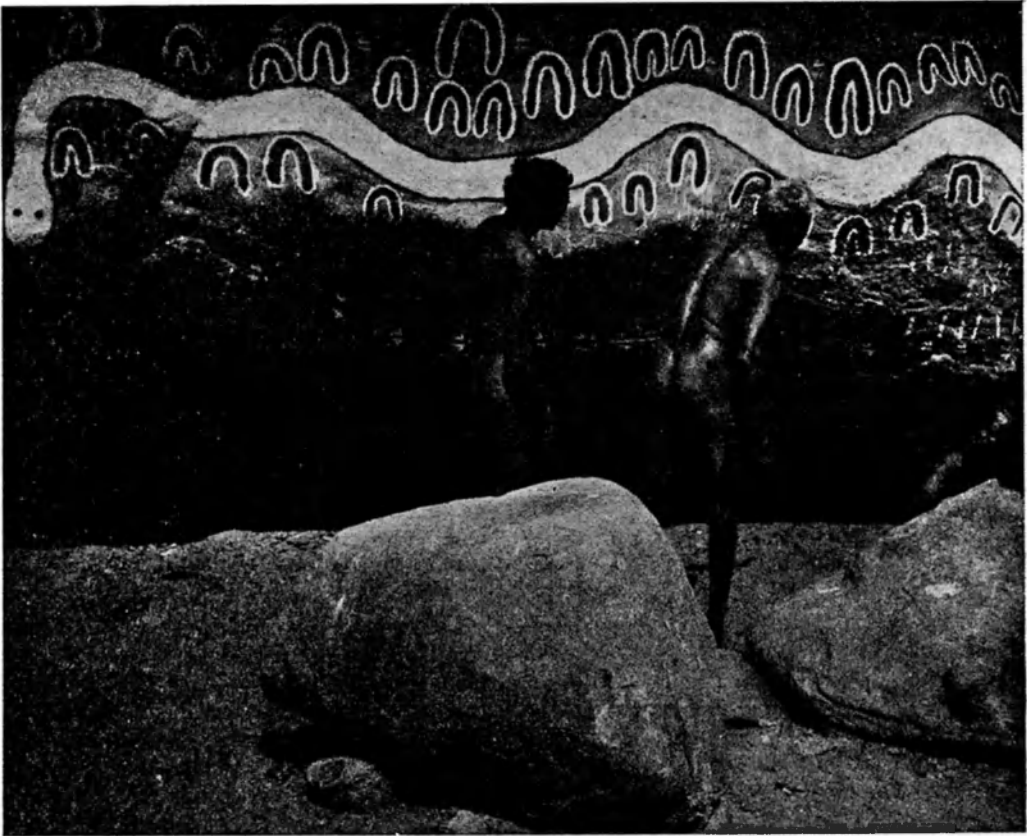


Fig. 61
A great rainbow snake at Ngama. An old man explains the legend to an initiand.

each of the Wandjinas eventually died, leaving his image on the rock where it was painted either by his associates or by himself. The Aborigines used to believe that it was their duty to conserve these paintings by repairing any damage, but the original paintings were the creations of the Wandjinas themselves».

Crawford further states that when the Aborigines approach the Wandjina paintings, they talk to them as people and bring gifts to appease them. The Wandjinas are «the spirit in the cloud» — they are both human in form and cloudlike. Their headdresses represent both feathers worn in ceremonies and lightning, while the vertical stripes on their bodies (thought by early observers to be clothing) are actually body markings used in ceremonies and represent the rain. The clouds which the Wandjina are considered to represent are the cumulo-nimbus clouds which herald the arrival of the monsoon in Northern Australia. The Wandjinas also control the distribution of the spirits of young children, which live in waterpools and belong to them. The young of all species are similarly under the control of the Wandjinas. In the eastern Kimberleys, all of these functions are attributed to the Rainbow Snake, named Ungud or Galeru. These snakes are painted in a

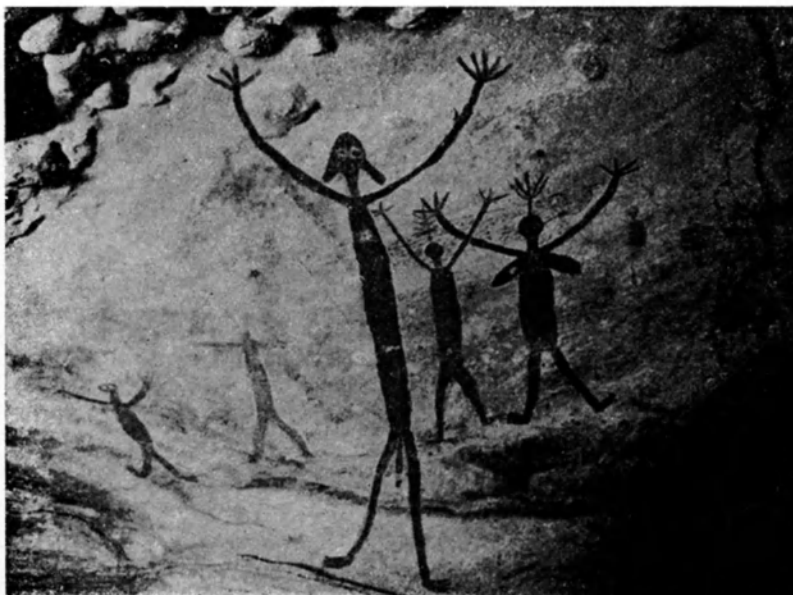


Fig. 62
Quinkans, mischievous spirits,
near Laura.

similar style to the Wandjinas and the two appear together in some caves.

The important fact that becomes apparent concerning these interpretations obtained from entirely trustworthy Aboriginal informants is that not one of these details could possibly have been deduced from the paintings themselves in the absence of any ethnographical information. In fact it was believed until quite recently that the Wandjinas were not painted by the Aborigines, but must have been created by Hindu voyagers or Indonesians, wrecked Arab traders, Ancient Egyptians, or some such. Even today there are some who, in defiance of the ethnography, believe the Wandjinas are spacemen, recorded as a result of landings by spaceships in some earlier age!

The famous Lightning Brothers at Delamere, Northern Territory, appear to be a more recent creation than the Wandjina cult paintings but have a number of affinities with them and are probably a derivation. A number of versions of the myth represented have been collected from Aboriginal informants over the years. Arndt (1962a), who has obtained the most recent interpretation, recounts it as follows:

«Tjabuinji was an average-sized plain-looking married man who was annoyed by the attentions paid to his wife by a 'big young pretty fella', viz. Yagdjadbulla, who, as the painting shows, was the taller and more handsome person. Yagdjadbulla was a tribal brother entitled to court the same woman as Tjabuinji. He was not a blood brother. The wife 'was only a woman' and is not regarded as an important character at all. The main point of the plot was the moral injustice, which was exaggerated by the inequality of size of the two men involved».



Fig. 63
Sorcery figures in
a rock shelter
near Laura, sou-
thern Cape York.

Tjabuinji and Yagdjadbullu were said to have fought a duel by throwing a stone axe at each other. Ultimately Tjabuinji hurled this with magical strength so as to cut off the younger man's head. This axe is represented under Tjabuinji's left arm in the painting and is said to have been so strong that Tjabuinji could split whole trees with it. Arndt notes «The splitting of trees by lightning is explained in this way».

Earlier accounts of the meaning of the Lightning Brothers painting have differed from this one in almost every detail. The forked object beneath the smaller figure's arm was said to be his wife, the names were different, the fight was with a magic boomerang, and so on. However the basic idea of a superhuman fight over a woman is common to all interpretations.

Arndt (1962b) also persuaded the Aboriginal «owner» of the elaborately painted caves at Sleisbeck, Northern Territory, to explain them to him. These paintings were stated to have been made by Nargorkun, who created the present landscape and the living creatures on it. Those who misbehaved he punished by death or by distortion of their sex organs. He had two wives who were sisters, called the Narlinji-linji. Nargorkun was bitten by the mud-dauber hornet and became very sick. Two young boys hunted for food for him, but eventually he died. All this is portrayed in the Sleisbeck paintings «to remind succeeding generations of girls, and men, of his law». An annual sickness ceremony was held at this place, because Nargorkun was believe to be resting underground there. Also it was included in the initiation training all young men had to go through.

Macintosh (1952) obtained important information and interpretation of a complex painted cave at Beswick Creek, Northern Territory, from a ritual headman. This is summarized:

«A man may go into the cave and paint something. When he goes back to camp he tells the other people about it. Such a painting is not sacred nor necessarily esoteric; anyone can look at it, including women. If the painting does represent anything of that type, the man has to obtain permission to paint it from the owner of that country, and furthermore has to pay not only the owner of the territory but also the senior member of his opposite moiety. If he makes the painting without obtaining permission and without paying, he is, when ultimately detected, obliged to pay a higher figure».

«After he is dead the people, remembering that he made a painting in the cave, go to look at it and cry for him. Subsequently the painting is covered over with red ochre and so obliterated, this action constituting an addition to the funeral rites for the man. Later again they may paint another picture over the red ochre, perhaps as part of the rites associated with the final resting of his spirit».

This cave, as is common in Northern Australia, had in it bundles and dilly bags containing bones of dead persons. It turned out that this site was a women's ritual site and so was not held in high esteem by the men. Nevertheless it contained a complex and varied art, in which human figures and sexual themes predominated.

Gould (1969) has some interesting observations to make on Aboriginal attitudes to their own art and myths in the Western Desert. At Pukara waterhole he watched his Aboriginal helpers cleaning mud out of the water and adding it to the bank edging the site. During this process some 47 objects of wood and stone were also removed from the waterhole. These were the transformed property of Wamampi Kutjara — the two watersnakes. Red ochre was spread around the rock rim of the waterhole and the whole of the soft mud area was decorated with finger meanders. Natural ripples in the limestone near the waterhole were described as the chest scars of the watersnake men. At the Gorge of Wintara, in the Rawlinson Ranges, Gould and his party found two men painting a representation of a sacred board called *kuntala*. The symbols used were concentric circles, joined to each other by double or single lines. These were interpreted as representing the tracks taken by the carpet snake (*tjikari*) in moving from waterhole to waterhole (represented by the concentric circles). Gould comments that paintings are man-made representatives of sacred subjects and are therefore open to a degree of manipulation and variation and this is accepted. On the other hand, landmarks and alignments are looked upon as the actual bodies of the totemic ancestors;

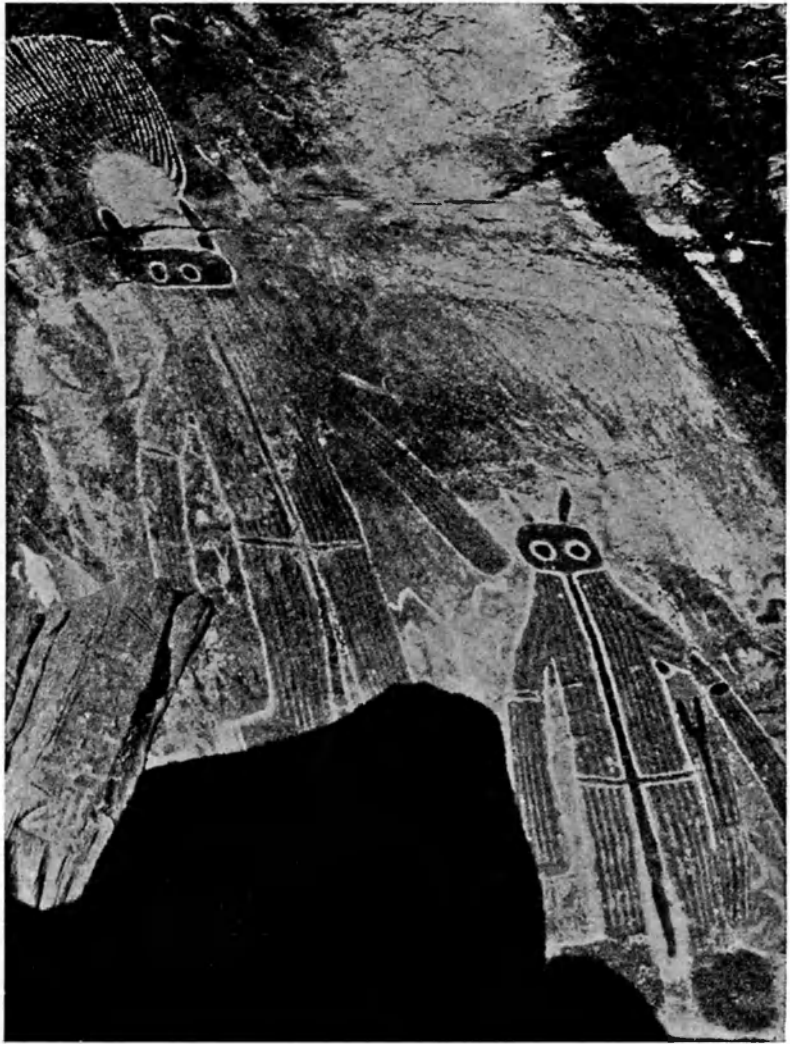


Fig. 64
*The two Lightning
Brothers at Dela-
mere, Northern
Territory.*

therefore any tampering with them is sacrilege and would lead to severe reprisals.

The remarkably intimate knowledge of Central Australian Aborigines possessed by T.G.H. Strehlow has already been mentioned. He was brought up among the Aranda at Hermannsburg Mission and has spent his life in interpreting every aspect of the old tribal life of the Aranda people. In his section of *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1964) he says:

«The Central Australian curved and circular figures were stylized representations of marks or tracks on the ground. They were accordingly — as in nature — painted or incised as elaborated, but always individual figures, on a single base, with empty spaces left between them. The Western Australian angular and straight-line figures, on the other

Fig. 65
A remarkable engraved face from Cleland Hills, on the border between South Australia and Western Australia.



hand, were combined into patterns that covered practically every inch of the surface on which they had been incised. They do not seem to represent any marks or tracks on the ground, but appear to be heavily stylized drawings of the actual objects themselves».

Although Strehlow in this passage is referring to the designs on *tjurunga*, and the relief designs constructed actually on the ground for ceremonies, his remarks apply equally to the rock art of the region, which is practically identical in both form and convention.

Finally in this brief round-up of explanations of rock art obtained from Aboriginal informants, mention must be made of the important work being done by Captain Percy Trezise (1969) in Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland. Trezise, who is an airline pilot by profession, has given his spare time for the past 10 years to locating and recording hitherto unknown art sites in that rugged region and has succeeded in discovering a number of distinctive new art styles. Latterly he has been endeavouring to obtain information on these sites from Aboriginal informants. He has been told with regard to hand stencilling. That it was «putting your name on the wall» and that many of the Cape York paintings were sorcery figures — most of these being human figures, but catfish, crocotohis purpose. Other stylized figures represented mischievous and dangerous spirit people, called Quinkans. His informants were still genuinely afraid of these creatures, particularly at night. These are similar to the



Fig. 66

*The pecked style
of north-eastern
South Australia
and western N.*

Mimi gures in Arnhem Land and to other stylized and elongated figures found elsewhere in the continent. In the stories the close similarity to the fairies, the «little people», of Europe is most marked.

Conclusions

It will have become clear from the evidence presented here that the differences between Australian Aboriginal and European Palaeolithic rock art are far greater than the similarities. This is only to be expected, considering the wide geographical gap between the two areas and also the huge temporal span dividing the Aborigines of the ethnographic record from late Pleistocene man in Europe. Although we now know that the Aborigines were already in occupation of the Australian continent during the late Pleistocene, nevertheless it is most unlikely that any of the Aboriginal paintings in open rock shelters would have survived for such vast periods of time as the Palaeolithic art of the deep caves. However, some of the rock engravings may well be of considerable antiquity and it is true that there are many common features between what appear to be the oldest rock engravings and the remainder of Aboriginal art.

The meander patterns of Koonalda Cave might perhaps be thought to be nearer to European than Australian styles, but in fact they may well be the forerunners of the Western Desert style of parallel grooved decoration. A local style discovered by Michael Terry in the Cleland Hills area of the central Western Desert and recently recorded by Robert Edwards does seem to stand outside the normal conventions of Aboriginal art and may well be of considerable antiquity. It is obvious that both European Palaeolithic art and that of the Australian Aborigines represent the end of many many thousands of years of development during which both parallels and divergencies have been followed.

However, it must not be forgotten that the Australian Aborigines, in their traditional life, were obtaining their sustenance in a manner very similar to Palaeolithic man in Europe, even though the flora and fauna exploited were very different. So it is reasonable to assume that the two types of art may have been carried out for similar purposes. An analysis of the various purposes for which rock paintings appear to have been executed in Australia may, therefore, be of some significance in attempting to reinterpret the art of the Palaeolithic caves.

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RESUME

Dans ce tableau de l'art des Aborigènes australiens, l'auteur considère en particulier la signification rituelle, historique et philosophique soit des figures soit des cérémonies qui en accompagnent l'exécution. Les sujets représentés, les styles, la situation des peintures sont comparés à d'autres manifestations artistiques, notamment à celles du Paléolithique européen. Même avec la prudence nécessaire à cause de la distance géographique et chronologique, des comparaisons ressortent beaucoup de points de contact. Le mode de vie des Européens du Paléolithique ne devait pas être très différent de celui des Aborigènes, qui connaissent la signification de peintures très semblables, en certains cas, à celles du Paléolithique. Le monde des Aborigènes est un monde de chasseurs plein de superstitions et de mythologies. Selon une des légendes les plus connues, par exemple, les animaux totémiques auraient créé le monde et se seraient cachés en suite; chaque année les héros totémiques (les «personnages du rêve») sont repeints, dans des lieux sacrés, au cours de complexes cérémonies avec chants et danses traditionnels. Des examens ethnographiques de ce type, s'ils ne peuvent pas résoudre les problèmes de l'art paléolithique, peuvent cependant suggérer des hypothèses dignes de considération.

RIASSUNTO

L'autore presenta un quadro degli Aborigeni australiani tenendo conto in particolare del significato rituale, storico e filosofico tanto delle figure quanto delle cerimonie che ne accompagnano l'esecuzione. I soggetti rappresentati, gli stili, l'ubicazione delle pitture vengono confrontati con altre manifestazioni artistiche, in particolare con quelle paleolitiche europee. Pur con la necessaria prudenza data la distanza geografica e cronologica, risaltano interessanti punti di contatto. Il modo di vita degli abitanti della Europa paleolitica non doveva essere molto diverso da quello degli Aborigeni, che sono in grado ancora oggi di spiegare il significato di decorazioni in certi casi simili in maniera sorprendente a quelle paleolitiche. Il mondo degli Aborigeni è un mondo di cacciatori ricco di superstizioni e di mitologie. Secondo una delle leggende più diffuse, ad esempio, gli animali totemici avrebbero creato il mondo e si sarebbero nascosti; ogni anno gli eroi totemici (i «personaggi del sogno») vengono ridipinti, in località sacre, durante complesse cerimonie con canti e danze tradizionali. Esami etnografici di questo tipo possono fornire, se non una spiegazione dell'arte paleolitica europea, almeno una serie di ipotesi degne di essere prese in considerazione.