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METHODS AND AIMS IN RECORDING ROCK ART IN AUSTRALIA

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Preface

Emmanuel Anati invited me to write this paper a month ago. I accepted though there was not much time. I then got influenza, so I offer a sketch. I have written about the history of rock art recording in Australia in order to demonstrate that the needs or rights of the rock need to be respected, as well as the needs of the recording. Most essential is that all workers should OWN and take responsibility for the forseeable consequences of their own actions. Humans are a part of an ecosystem which works so that every action has an effect, however small, on every other part of the system.

There is no such thing as a recording method which can be guaranteed free of-deleterious effects (publicity-attention-wear). The rights and needs of the rock art itself, as well as interested people and institutions have to be honoured. Informed cost -benefit analysis is needed.

This sketch of the history of recording rock art in Australia is selective. It pays some attention to the Aims of the recorders, and the uses, sometimes, abuses, of the records. It makes no attempt to be encyclopaedic or fair.

Before the white invasion

A model of Australian Aboriginal rock art says the pictures were made in the dreamtime by dreamtime personages who may be ancestral to present people. Humans have duties to look after them. At the right times, appropriately qualified persons supervise the refreshing of these pictures. A component of the refreshing consists of songs and ritual performances.

This refreshing or *making bright* is a type of recording of the original ancestors' actions in making the picture in the first place. Refreshing is an act which results in a recording on the rock which replaces the earlier version, but it also records or reinforces the picture, its meaning, and its connotations, if only in the minds of the participants in the process.

Insofar as the refreshed picture replaces the earlier version, the process, which is essentially protective and conservative, is also destructive. (Katharine M. Sale, 1992, *Make Em Bright, Aboriginal re-marking of rock art in past and present Australia*, BA Hons thesis, Prehistoric Archaeology, University of Sydney.).

Recording means making visible, saving, preserving, -and applied to the meaning, as well as to the physicalty. Is it the picture that matters, or its meaning, or the songs? Elkin said that the physical manifestation of Aboriginal graphic art is a by product, a surviving residue, of songs. "It is myth, it is ritual, it is chant, even though the song be not audible at the time". (AP Elkin, 1950, *Art in Arnhem Land*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, p. 8).

After the English colonisation in 1788

The first recordings of rock art consisted of verbal descriptions-Governor Phillip was concerned to describe the fact of competent representative graphics: "the figures of animals, or shields, and weapons, and even men, have been carved upon the rocks, roughly indeed, but sufficiently well to ascertain very fully what was the object intended" (Phillip, 1788, quoted in Walker, Popp & Popp, 1997, *Footprints on Rock: Aboriginal Art of the Sydney Region*, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, Redfern, Sydney, p. 14).

Later the same year, Sydney was visited by La Perouse, whose scientists made a few sketches of some engravings. So within the first year of white settlement the two scientific methods then known -drawing and verbal descriptions- were used to record Rock art. Use of the third method of scientific recording then available, sample collection, was presumably prevented by practicality. (Sydney engravings are life-sized representations of people, whales, other animals carved into bedrock). These methods served well the functions of reporting and describing- the observations were relevant to scientific and other curiosity, and to the pursuing of current scientific questions.

From the start, the best current scientific methods were used to record rock art. Recording was always done in a context of mental baggage. Through the nineteenth century, well-equipped exploring expeditions incorporated professional draftspersons to report their discoveries. Most such expeditions aimed to discover resources which could be useful to the newcomers, who were seldom interested in Aboriginal objects. In 1837 George Grey discovered and sketched Wandjinas; his sketches led to interpretations of the figures as "Egyptian" or "from outer space". Such denial of the Aboriginality of Australian prehistoric rock art has been a recurrent feature.

Not until 1847 in the Sydney area, did G.F. Angas make the first published serious attempt to relate the pictures to their culture. He asked an old Aboriginal woman to show him some engravings. (1847, *Savage life and scenes in Australian and New Zealand: being an Artist's impression of countries and people at the Antipodes*), Angas recorded engravings in writing and sketches.

By the turn of the century recording by description and sketching (and collecting) had been supplemented by photography. Gradually photography came to supplement scaled drawing, in time to substitute for it. The effects of the ready availability of photography have been deleterious, as figures are recorded, not for their cultural, aesthetic, or scientific importance, but for their ease of photography. Whereas scaled drawings were made perpendicular to the rock art, photographs are taken from all sorts of angles. If a photograph does not turn out well, the relevant figure or site is simply left unrecorded. With an eye to economy, some editors insisted that photographs were too expensive, so authors made line drawings by tracing or inking in their photos. Good ones are good, poor ones add further inaccuracies or distortions to the photographs.

Two distinct strands of recording practises became clear during the final decade of the century. Two professional surveyors, Matthews and Campbell, were then publishing excellent scale drawings of Sydney engravings. Matthews was extremely interested in Aborigines and their culture; he published over a hundred papers on the subject in a decade. His papers on rock art feature collections of figures from different sites, with texts which identify their subjects. W.D. Campbell recorded engravings in danger from urban development. He published all the figures he could find at each site in their relative positions on a map at a scale of 1-8.

Matthews was interested in pictures mainly for their meaning and cultural

connections; he paid attention only to those for which he had ethnographic information. Campbell was careful to publish the whole site, and made the records for reasons of conservation. The same contrast in linked aims and methods occurred in the middle of the century, when Mountford recorded individual figures and their meanings; McCarthy tried to record whole sites.

So far then I'm mentioned recording of rock art by "verbal description", and graphic means I've called "sketching" which range from professional maps and scientific water-colours to less competent pictures. Some records include "location" information. Some include an account of the rock art's "meaning" or "place" in "culture". The reasons for making the recordings are seldom stated, presumably because they are self-evident to the recorder. Four reasons are becoming apparent:

- reportage-description for its own sake;
- conservation/preservation-recording in anticipation of destruction;
- cultural-recording as a part of a culture;
- archaeological-recording as collecting data for archaeological study.

The best and most used method of recording was scaled drawing, with the aid of measurements, grids, or tracing. In the second decade of the century, Basedow made some recordings he published in the best possible way: vertical photographs were overlain by translucent paper which had the figures outlined. By the 1990s, with the aid of a computer it is possible to draw an outline of a perceived figure onto a photograph, and publish both the original photo and the outlined version. An elegant combination involves imposing an interpretation on one of a stereo pair of photographs, so it is possible to view both a three-dimensional image of the rock art and an outline of its interpretation.

Some recorders did not have (or trust) the ability to make satisfactory scaled drawings, and sought accuracy through various mechanical innovations. Thorpe used holes in brown paper, photographed from the roof of his museum, McCarthy used a grid. With the ready availability of polythene sheeting 2 metres wide, tracing has become a preferred means. All too seldom did authors state either the methods they used to make their recordings, or their aims in making them. Sometimes locations are given, or are withheld to protect the site from visitation. The recorders are not always the people who use the recordings. How were these recordings used? By theoreticians of art. For tea towels. School text books. Decorations on books. Management/protection. Visitation, Tourist's tours. Most uses of recordings effectively denigrated the Aboriginal owners or makers of the rock art, for the simple reason that too great a part of the interest in rock art centered on the notion that it was *primitive.*

This was even true of the intellectual or scientific end of the market. Scientific anthropology/ethnography developed in Australia from about 1880, archaeology got going a bit later, and took little interest in rock art. The first big name in the archaeological study of rock art was Davidson, who published two monographs just before the second world war. Even now, in the late 1990s, very little "professional" (academic or museum) study of rock art involves recording, the studies rely on other people's often "amateur" recordings.

A great exception to this generality is Lesley Maynard (McMah, 1964; Maynard, 1976). A strong component of her work was methodological: she had to devise reasons to study rock art as well as means to record it and analyse the recordings. The new recording method she invented was *description by attribute.* The art was described in terms of an hierarchical classification, or the presence or absence of a large number of

attributes. This data could then be analysed using multivariate techniques by punched card or computer.

The sixties and after

In the late 1960s the management of heritage in Australia became a profession. Governments began to take responsibility to look after heritage, a task which previously had been left to museums and individuals.

Environmental impact legislation arose. Its general aim was to anticipate destruction by first ascertaining what might be destroyed. As a result of these changes, the population of professional archaeologists in Australia increased enormously. So did the recording or rock art. But the emphasis is strongly on recording the location of rock art, with a minimum verbal or photographic description. There is an increasing involvement with the Aboriginal owners of the rock art. Where possible and appropriate, the cultural part of rock art is being recorded. To a manager, location is of preeminent importance. For many people, the song or story is all that really matters. But records of location or myth cannot be used to do a stylistic analysis of a picture.

Methods

In 1983 I published a paper on methods of recording rock art. (John Clegg, 1983, *Recording prehistoric art*, in Graham Connah (ed.) Australian Field Archaeology, *A Guide to Techniques*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, pp. 87-108). Nearly 20 years after it was written, the chapter needs revision.

My attitudes were clear: there are many different reasons to record rock art, and many different levels of skill and dedication in the recorders, many different standards required. There are also many different and appropriate methods. Each method has its own costs and benefits and appropriate uses and standards. Among those costs are always some potential harm to the rock art.

I stated those attitudes, but made no attempt to decree which method should be used under which circumstances. I still feel ambivalent about this; the responsibility for actually using the method must lie with the recorder, who must work within norms of courtesy and as decided by responsible authorities. But my chapter should have some information about the grossest dangers to the rock art, as it should stress the rights of the Aboriginal owners and the honour due to the makers. It didn't. My chapter merely gave instruction about how to record rock art by each of 25 different methods. (Some have since been superceded or improved). I distinguished two stages of recording (or otherwise becoming aware of the object to be recorded)

Making the record

I still believe that this division is fundamental. Only once rock art is seen adequately can it be recorded; once it is seen, a suitable method to record it will be obvious to the recorder, who is the only person with any knowledge of WHY they are making the recording.

What damage will be caused by the recording process (and ALL recording causes some damage, even if it's only through where a photographer stands or what they do with their film-pack), and what costs are appropriate to the expected benefits, must be the responsibility of the recorder. Those responsibilities can be discharged only by someone well equipped with knowledge about.

Conservation and erosion processes, biology and chemistry. (What damage is the

rock art suffering now? What will the recording add? Is the damage significant?). And about management and visitation (if my recording is published, will more people visit the site? Will they respect it? Will that respect lead to further damage as they enhance it for snap-shots?). And about significance and ownership and rights. (If the rock art is valuable to a local community, is my mere visitation harming it? What effects will the recording process, or the presence of the recording team have on local endangered species?).

All such considerations are peculiar to the individual site, often individual parts of a picture. An engraving which is regularly flooded by high tides or monsoonal rain will probably not suffer significantly from getting wet, whereas art in desert areas maybe destroyed by a bit of damp. The responsibility is considerable, and there are no quick guaranteed fixes. There are plenty of unfortunate examples, perhaps more in the field of management, or ways in which recordings are used, abused, or ignored.

A pristine drawing site was protected with a weld-mesh grid. Vandals forcibly removed the protection and covered the site in racist spray-painted graffiti. Another weld-mesh grid intended as protection provided an ideal riflestand for local adolescent's air rifles which shot the visible target pictures. All over the world are fences installed to protect rock art. Many such fences are supported by pickets which transfix rock art. The examples I find most frustrating occur where managers, or people planning or constructing well-meant enterprises abuse recordings. Last month I came across two examples:

1. An old recording was taken to represent all the rock art around a walkway proposed to display the rock art. The committee refused even to look at clear unrecorded rock art.
2. All members of a committee thought someone else knew where the engravings are. The walkway now goes above some rock art (obscuring it but perhaps protecting it), and leads visitors to step directly on other figures.

Riassunto

La maggior parte dei rilevamenti di arte rupestre sono eseguiti da persone capaci e ben intenzionate, ma che spesso hanno poca conoscenza e poco controllo delle ripercussioni di questa loro attività. Attualmente, per i rilevamenti, sono disponibili tecniche appropriate ad ogni situazione, che risultano però molto costose. Non vi sono modelli standard universali.

Summary

Most recording of rock art is done by well-meaning and variously skilled people, who have little knowledge or control of the repercussions of their activities. Techniques are available to produce recordings which are appropriate to most circumstances, yet each has its costs. There are no universal standard patterns.

Résumé

La plupart des relevés d'art rupestre sont exécutés par des personnes capables et bien intentionnées, mais qui souvent ont peu de connaissance et peu de contrôle sur les répercussions de leur activité. À présent, pour les relevés, on a à disposition des techniques appropriées à toute situation, qui toutefois se révèlent très chères. Il n'y a pas de modèles standards universels.