2 Special Places and Images on Rock

50 000 Years of Indigenous Engagement with Australian Landscape

Paul Taçon

Introduction

On Australia's ancient shores, today submerged in sand and sea, the first humans arrived in the distant past. It was at least 45 000 to 60 000 years ago when people began to colonise Australia's far north, but they soon penetrated inland, establishing themselves in new environments filled with plants and animals very different from any encountered before. These First People mapped, marked and mythologised the land wherever they went, transforming truly natural landscapes into cultural places rich with human meaning. Later to be immortalised as powerful Ancestral Beings, the First People made the continent of Australia for human use, their travels, actions and reactions transforming and shaping topographies and environments. For Indigenous Australians these were great acts of creation and destruction, but from a detached scientific viewpoint there is a resonance of truth in that, in essence, first human encounters with landscapes shape them for subsequent human use.

One of the ways in which the First People to arrive in Australia transformed the land was through fire, and the annual burning of landscapes has characterised Indigenous Australian cultures ever since. Besides a great knowledge of fire there were many other forms of knowledge and technology people must have brought with them. For example, at least 60 kilometres of open water had to be crossed, so some form of raft or rudimentary boat must have been constructed. In order to make even a crude raft, skills such as woodworking, weaving and knotting, were required. Archaeological evidence from the earliest sites in various parts of Australia indicates stone tool-making was an essential component of the earliest cultures to arrive in Australia, just as in other parts of the world. But, importantly, there is also evidence of ritual and religious belief, in the form of elaborate cremated or ochred burials from Lake Mungo, New South Wales, one of the oldest dated sites,[1] and art-making, as used pieces of ochre are found in some of the lowest levels of the oldest excavated sites.[2] In other words, one of the key components of culture

that the First People, the First Australians, brought with them was the use of pigment for ritual and art making.

For at least 50 000 years some form of art has been produced in Australia. The used pieces of red ochre that have been found suggest that body art, rock art and the adornment of objects have long taken place. Burials with ochre, fragments of painted ceilings in deposits and rock shelter walls with traces of ancient designs are all testament to a lengthy art tradition that must have begun when people first arrived in Australia. Since then, a multitude of local and regional styles have come and gone, with art a practice virtually everyone in communities engaged in.

Today over 125 000 rock art sites can be found across Australia, with images dating from at least 30 000 years ago to the 1990s. These prominent landscape places yield a range of paintings, drawings, stencils, prints, engravings and, in parts of northern Australia, delicate figures made of beeswax pressed onto rock surfaces.

Many different subjects fascinated rock artists, with some groups focusing on particular animals, while others were obsessed with the human form. Great Ancestral Beings, such as the widespread Rainbow Serpent or the human-like Baiame of south-east Australia were repeatedly reproduced at key locations. Great diversity over time and across space has resulted, so that today Australia has one of the largest and most varied bodies of rock art of any country. But although the rock art is expansive and enduring, it also is delicate, fragile and threatened. In this chapter its significance for Australia and the world is discussed by way of a limited number of exceptional but representative examples. In the process a number of key themes in Australian Indigenous rock art are also highlighted. I conclude that Australia's rock art heritage is not only important to Aboriginal communities but is also a deep time-well of artistic inspiration for all Australians and the world in general.

Finger Fluting

We will never know exactly what technique was used to produce Australia's first art form. Did one of the first humans to arrive decorate a spear or some other object soon after stepping ashore, perhaps to celebrate the long water crossing or to ensure hunting success in the new land? Did the first group decorate their bodies to dance in solidarity, commemoration and joy at surviving the dangerous journey? Did someone dip their hand in ochre and place a print on a nearby rock? Was there a scramble to some rock shelter and a later painting of the place with figures, geometric designs or stencils? Were rocks banged together

to peck or pound marks on boulders or platforms? Or did people caress the smooth sand, running their fingers through the ground to leave lines and other marks of their presence on the new land they had arrived at?

Some rock art researchers have suggested that running one's fingers through soil, sand and other soft substances might be an early form of mark-making in many parts of the world.[3] Whether art was produced is another matter, and there are endless debates as to the nature of art, rock art's relationship to art and whether the concept of art is purely a recent Western invention. Leaving these debates aside, certainly mark-making is a universal human trait and the marks humans make usually involve the communication of ideas, experience and identity. Often, symbolism underlies mark-making, the transmission of cultural knowledge across space and/or time is involved, and a range of motivations has driven the production of marks. No one universal theory is sufficient to explain past or present mark- or art-making in any culture. However, early marks are likely to have been transitory and temporary, made on bodies, perishable objects, and in or on the ground.

Finger fluting is probably one of these and may have been used in many parts of the world by different groups in various periods. In Australia and Europe finger-fluting marks found in limestone caves are thought to be among some of the oldest surviving forms of human mark-making, although, like most rock markings (rock art), they are notoriously difficult to date. In Australia, finger fluting survives in underground limestone caves of the Nullarbor Plain, as well as near Mount Gambier, South Australia. See, for example, *Finger Fluting in Limestone* (age unknown) (Figure 2.1).

Why finger-fluting marks were made is a mystery. Perhaps there was a sensual component to running one's fingers along the soft cave walls. Perhaps crude maps were being made. Was it a form of doodling? Could it be related to trance and resulting entoptic visions, or time spent in dark caves? Or maybe children played while parents quarried nodules of chert for tool-making in the same locations. Whatever the case, the result is designs that are thousands of years old and resemble some contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous art. In other words, the contemporary world can still relate to these ancient designs, but now it is only through the aesthetics.

Circle and Track Engravings

When the First Australians ventured along the coast, up creeks and rivers and eventually far inland, they would have seen many natural marks across the land they traversed. Knowledge of some of these, such as

animal tracks, was essential for survival for hunter–gatherer peoples. Knowing the location of drinkable water was also essential, especially in arid areas. Rain also marks the land, first with dots or cups as it hits soil, sand and bodies of water, later with scour marks, channels, creeks and rivers as it sweeps across the landscape. When rain first hits the surface of water bodies ripples extend out from the points of impact. Soon the surface appears as a canvas of dots and intermingling, concentric circles. Being keen observers, Indigenous Australians must have regarded this as highly significant for symbol-making, as the earliest surviving engravings – some dated to at least 13000 years ago, and others thought to be much older – consist of circles, concentric circles, dots, cups and lines, often combined with bird, reptile and mammal tracks, for example, *Engraved Circles and Tracks* (age unknown) (Figure 2.2). It is as if the natural marks of the land were replicated and recombined to tell stories and impart meaning about the land and how to survive within it. Later, other shapes were added to this repertoire, again often related to what can be observed on the land. For example, ethnographic research in recent times indicates U forms may have long been used to represent people sitting down at specific locations because this is the impression one's legs and backside leave on the land when sitting.

Circle and track engravings, also known as Panaramittee art, are characteristic of Central Australian rock art sites,[4] but they can also be found within 100 kilometres of the coast in various parts of Australia, for example, *Panaramittee Type Engravings* (less than 4000 years old) (Figure 2.3). They were produced for many thousands of years and the basic design elements feature in much historic and contemporary Aboriginal art from across the country. In other words, they resonate an 'Australianness' that is ancient and intimate. They speak of relationships to land forged over long periods of time, of struggles with both nature and culture. They are both timeless and contemporary symbols of an Indigenous Australian coming to terms with the harshness and beauty of Australia's arid landscapes.

Dynamic Figures

Across northern Australia's Arnhem Land plateau, and among the outliers and boulders that dot the nearby plains, one of the richest and longest lasting bodies of rock art can be found. What are now referred to as Kakadu National Park and adjacent Western Arnhem Land contain at least 20000 rock art sites with anything between a single stencil to sites with over 1700 paintings. Many forms, styles and periods of art activity have been defined, and detailed chronologies of rock art as it changed

over the course of at least 15000 years, perhaps much longer, have been produced by researchers. This area contains not only some of Australia's most outstanding surviving rock art imagery, but also the world's most impressive.

One of the earlier forms has been labelled 'Dynamic Figures' by George Chaloupka, the first rock art researcher to study this type of painting in great detail.[5] In this style, likely to be at least 10000 years old, human figures dominate, unlike an earlier naturalistic style where the focus was on depicting animals. When animals are shown in Dynamic art it is usually in relation to human figures and sometimes human–animal composite beings were depicted interacting with human figures or engaging in human-like activities. The style was named 'Dynamic' because action-packed figures were usually painted on rock shelter ceilings and walls, whether they are anthropomorphic, animal or composite. Human figures, almost overwhelmingly male, appear to race across rock surfaces, legs outstretched and arms bent with the weight of numerous spears and/or boomerangs they hold. Sometimes hunting, domestic, sexual and possibly ceremonial scenes were illustrated. Male figures have enormous elaborate headdresses. Lots of body art is indicated with depictions of scarification, possible body painting and material culture attached to limbs and waists. Dots and dashes were placed near the mouths of some figures or around limbs, perhaps conveying a sense of sound and movement in an abstract way. Although female figures are rare, they are usually elegant when they appear and are often shown with what might be considered both female and male material culture, such as woven bags and spears, for example, *Female Dynamic Figure* (10000–12000 years of age) (Figure 2.4).

Female Creativity

Women and female subjects figure prominently in more recent periods of Arnhem Land rock art, especially the polychrome art of the past 2000 years.[6] Some of the most powerful Ancestral Beings, responsible for the greatest acts of creation, are said to be female. On the other hand, male Ancestral Beings undertook both creative and destructive acts. In Western Arnhem Land an especially important female Ancestral Being, known as Yingarna in the Kunwinjku language, played the most prominent role in the creation of the world for people, including the first Kunwinjku. Yingarna is said to have travelled across the sea, stepping ashore on part of the Cobourg Peninsula. She carried many dilly bags full of children and food. As she travelled inland she deposited spirit children in waterholes, created the first people, told them what languages they

should speak, taught them about the foods they should eat and gave them many other gifts. She was the first mother not only for the Kunwinjku but also for many neighbouring language groups.

In stories and art Yingarna is often portrayed as a powerful woman with human form, but sometimes she is like a female Rainbow Serpent, a composite being with a snake-like body but made of animal parts of various species. She was responsible for creating large areas of landscape, while her Rainbow Serpent son, Ngalyod, is credited with creating numerous localised areas, often described as sacred sites, within Yingarna's larger landscapes.

One of the most outstanding and significant depictions of Yingarna, seen in *Ochre Painting of Yingarna, the Most Powerful Creation Being of Western Arnhem Land* (less than 1500 years of age) (Figure 2.5), can be found on Injalak Hill, at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), not far from the East Alligator River. Injalak has one of the largest concentrations of rock art in the area, with dozens of decorated shelters and several large galleries. Although important, the image of Yingarna is not to be found in one of the most prominent locations. Rather, her image is tucked away in a passage through the dissected sandstone cap of Injalak, surprising visitors as they make their way from areas of art, burial and past residence to a high platform with a commanding view of the landscape to the north and west, which Yingarna created.

X-ray Art

Western Arnhem Land is also famous for its spectacular X-ray rock art, in which internal features of animals, people and some objects are highlighted, alongside their essential outer characteristics.[7] Fish are the most frequent subject, accounting for almost 67 per cent of X-ray depictions,[8] but human females, macropods and birds are also common. Great attention was paid to detail, so that different species of fish, mammals, birds and reptiles can be easily recognised. Paintings of animals often occur as bichromes or polychromes, with backbones, ribs, long bones, internal organs and sometimes optic nerves illustrated. Depictions of people and Ancestral Beings do not usually show internal organs, focusing instead on the skeleton and external cultural features, such as body painting designs and material culture. The internal contents of some objects were occasionally shown, including depictions of cargo and people inside Macassan and European ships, replicas of actual vessels that plied Australia's northern shores during recent centuries. At some sites hundreds of X-ray paintings were made in conjunction with images that have striped, hatched, cross-hatched or, occasionally, spotted infill, as well as a range

of stencils, stick figures and other forms of painted rock art. See *Panel of X-ray Ochre Paintings over Much Earlier Engraved Cupules* (100–1000 years of age) (Figure 2.6).

Rainbow Serpents

In the rock art of Kakadu–Arnhem Land we also see the first depictions of Rainbow Serpents, all-powerful composite beings responsible for some of the greatest acts of creation and destruction. The earliest date to between 4000 and 6000 years ago.[9] Many are associated with X-ray paintings and Rainbow Serpents continue to be a popular subject in contemporary Arnhem Land paintings on bark or paper.[10] Stories and depictions of Rainbow Serpents have long been widespread, featuring in the art, ceremony, mythology and storytelling of most Indigenous Australian societies. In many parts of Australia particularly impressive depictions of Rainbow Serpents can be found – large and domineering paintings that were often placed so that they would have commanding views of local landscapes.

An excellent example of such an image can be found in north-west Queensland, on traditional land of the Waanyi people, *Red and Yellow Ochre Painting of an Enormous Rainbow Serpent* (age unknown) (Figure 2.7). Located in Boodjamullla National Park, north of Riversleigh and south of Lawn Hill Gorge, a large red and yellow Rainbow Serpent has been depicted, and can be seen from hundreds of metres away. Importantly, the form of this serpent, like other smaller representations nearby, mimics alternating bands of colour found in local geology. Indeed, where it is located is particularly significant in this regard, as both the escarpment top above and boulders below contain colourful bands of mineral that weave their way through the rock in striking patterns. The painting is also located above a spring, another key signifier of Rainbow Serpent presence. There are many stories associated with the painting, but its connection to features of local landscape is particularly impressive.[11]

Gwion Gwion

An association between landscape, water and rain can be found in the art of other areas, especially the Wandjina paintings of the Kimberley region, in the far north of Western Australia. However, it is an earlier art form that has intrigued non-Aboriginal people the most: the Gwion Gwion or 'Bradshaw' paintings found at hundreds of sites across the Kimberley and as far east as the Keep River region of the Northern Territory, as seen in

Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) Figure (age unknown) (Figure 2.8). In recent years these have become contested paintings – in terms of who made them, their age, what they should be called, contemporary Aboriginal significance and who has the right to study them.

Like the Dynamic Figures of Arnhem Land, but in much more static poses, Gwion Gwion consist of mostly human figures arranged to suggest a variety of meanings and activities. Large headdresses and a very rich material culture are illustrated, with most figures having a multitude of tassels, bracelets and other items hanging from their bodies. Most appear to be male, although distinctive genitalia are rare. They are portrayed in a range of distinct but related styles that separate them from Wandjina and other Kimberley rock art in profound ways. This has led to the suggestion by rock art researcher Grahame Walsh that they are non-Aboriginal in origin, having been made at some very ancient time by an as yet unknown race.[12] Various attempts to date the art have produced conflicting results, from about 5000 years to over 17000 years ago.[13] However, research by various people has shown strong links to recent Aboriginal Australian cultures,[14] and the Gwion Gwion may well be West Australian contemporaries of Dynamic Figures.

Pilbara Engravings

Another heavily contested Australian rock art region is the Pilbara, also within Western Australia. Parts of this area are dominated by vast piles of deeply patinated orange-brown boulders, hard granitic rock stained with iron oxide and the ravages of time. Boulder piles stretch for hundreds of metres, sometimes kilometres. Some are relatively low-lying while others are tens of metres high. When first greeted by such a sight one wonders if great giants once mined the land, leaving tailings and spoil heaps across the Pilbara landscape.

Many of the piles contain boulders with rock engravings of long-extinct kangaroos and Tasmanian tigers, fish and other forms of marine life, archaic-looking human-like faces, human figures, birds, reptiles, small mammals and many other subjects. See, for example, *Engraving of a Goanna* (age unknown) (Figure 2.9). The Dampier region is particularly rich in engravings, and is considered by many to be the most abundant engraved area of the world. However, this area is also dominated by great industrial complexes, a port for iron ore and natural gas shipping and forms of heavy industry that require the local landscape to be transformed on a grand scale. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of engraved boulders have been bulldozed, moved, defaced or otherwise destroyed in the process – as much as 20 per cent of the art since the 1960s. Destruction

continues on a monumental scale despite worldwide protest, hurried protection orders and changes to heritage legislation.[15] In the great saga of Australian rock art this is the saddest chapter and one that will seemingly never end.

Lightning Men

Many stories are illustrated in Australian rock art and one of the more dramatic is that involving Lightning Men. Across the Top End of the Northern Territory there are many locations where human personifications of lightning can be found. In Kakadu and Arnhem Land, Namarrgon the Lightning Man was portrayed at various sites associated with his ancestral presence, and a prominent feature of the Arnhem Land escarpment is said to have been an important resting spot where great bolts of lightning were used to shape that part of the rocky landscape. Forms of Lightning Men are found at notable Keep River sites and lightning is also associated with Wandjinas of the Kimberley. But it is in the Victoria River region, between the Kimberley, Keep River and Kakadu–Arnhem Land that some of the most magnificent depictions of Lightning Men can be found.

These paintings mostly lie within Wardaman Country, south and west of Katherine, and feature two brothers. Various stories are associated with paintings of Lightning Brothers, but in most cases they are said to have had a big fight before painting themselves on the wall.[16] Two remarkable striped anthropomorphs, often identified as Lightning Brothers, can be found at Murduya, near Yingalarri waterhole, a particularly important Wardaman location, one of which can be seen in Figure 2.10, *One of the Lightning Brothers* (less than 1000 years of age).

Eagle Ancestor

In many other parts of Australia Ancestral Beings are also said to have depicted themselves at sites, with Aboriginal people denying human agency in the production. For example, at many locations Rainbow Serpents or other Beings entered into the rock, leaving their images behind, according to traditional Aboriginal elders. But elsewhere in Australia it was important for initiated and skilled individuals to portray Ancestral Beings at key locations – for initiation, storytelling and conveying Aboriginal law and lore. For example, in south-east Australia Baiame, the most powerful creation Being (a male equivalent of Yingarna), was painted, drawn or engraved at many locations, especially in the greater Sydney

region. This area of south-east Australia is as prolific as many parts of northern Australia for rock art, although the art is very different in form, age and style.

Since 2001 a large amount of research by Aboriginal community members and archaeologists has focused on locating, recording and describing the rock art of Wollemi National Park, a rugged landscape on Sydney's north-western fringes. One of the important Ancestral Beings for Darug, Darkinjung, Wiradjeri and other local language groups is the Eagle Ancestor, but until recently depictions of this Being were not known from rock art sites. Elders said the Eagle Ancestor's most important site/landscape was somewhere in Wollemi, but until work began it was thought few rock art sites, let alone those with depictions of Ancestral Beings, would be found because of the inhospitable nature of the terrain. To date, hundreds of rock art sites have been found, many with impressive galleries of drawings and stencils or platforms of engravings. In one area both engraved and drawn eagle-like creatures have been found. The most impressive, seen in Figure 2.11, *Eagle Ancestor with White Stencilled Boomerang and Hafted Stone Axe (Pipe Clay)* (100–16 000 years of age), was first drawn in black, slightly larger than an actual eagle in size. Then a hafted stone axe was stencilled over one wing while a boomerang was stencilled over the other. Later the creature was re-outlined with dry white pigment and glaring white eyes were painted in Mona Lisa fashion so that the Being's gaze follows the viewer about the rock shelter. For local Aboriginal people this and nearby eagle depictions confirm that the home of the Eagle Ancestor has been relocated and that it remains important despite over 200 years of change brought about by outsiders.[17]

Ships and New Arrivals

Throughout Australia the arrival of Asians and Europeans, the animals and objects they introduced and many of the changes they brought about were immortalised in stone. Rock art production did not cease; it merely changed in response to the times. In some parts of the country traditional designs continued to be made in rock shelters, on boulders and on platforms until the middle of the twentieth century, with the most recent art produced sporadically until the early 1990s.[18]

Ships, such as the one shown in Figure 2.12, *Ochre Painting of a European Ship and Hand Stencil Infilled with Ochre Body Art Design* (c. 1800s), and horses were the most popular new subjects painted, drawn or engraved at rock art sites. Hundreds of depictions of ships can be found right around Australia's coastline and sometimes hundreds of

kilometres inland. Horses are more widespread – they are found at sites near the coast and throughout the interior. Modes of transportation seem to have been of particular interest to Indigenous Australians, so at rock art sites across the country there are images of a wide range of watercraft, various motor vehicles, aeroplanes and even the occasional bicycle. Besides horses, introduced animals include water buffalo, cows, pigs, sheep, goats and various other creatures. At one site there is even a painting of a monkey (macaque) in a tree, possibly resulting from an Aboriginal visit to what is now Indonesia with Macassan fishermen. Illustrations of Macassan sailors, European ship captains, buffalo hunters, missionaries, non-Aboriginal stockmen, station owners, women of European descent and Chinese miners were added to rock art sites across the country. The ancient sites featured in this chapter can be located in Figure 2.13.

Rock art production did not cease or degenerate with the arrival of Europeans and Asians; rather, a new chapter of storytelling was born. However, as people were removed from traditional lands, introduced diseases, killings and massacres took their toll and Indigenous people were attracted away to newly emerging settlements, rock art production tapered off. Traditional design elements combined with new innovations to depict, commemorate, communicate and educate were added to new media. For example, since the late 1800s traditional designs and new creations have been made on portable objects, such as wooden shields and boomerangs in south-east Australia,[19] and sheets of bark in northern Australia.[20] These were made for the rapidly emerging outside interest in Indigenous Australian art, leading to both a thriving tourist trade and an exceptional contemporary art market.

Across Australia today rock art sites are still extremely important for Indigenous Australians, from the Torres Strait to Tasmania, from Sydney to Shepparton, from Kakadu to Karratha. They are an important part of the heritage of all Australians as well as having World Heritage value. Five hundred centuries of art production led to untold riches. What remains today is mostly from the past 150 centuries, much of it less than 10000 years of age, but it tells an incredible and unparalleled story of long-term human survival in a constantly changing natural–cultural–spiritual world. Australia's first art was born of and in the land, something that has also affected Australian art ever since.

Figure 2.1 Unknown artist(s), *Finger Fluting in Limestone*, age unknown, Mount Gambier area, South Australia. Engraving in limestone. © P. S. C. Taçon.

Figure 2.2 Unknown artist(s), *Engraved Circles and Tracks*, age unknown, Ewaninga, south of Alice Springs. Engraving in sandstone. © P. S. C. Taçon.

Figure 2.3 Unknown artist(s), *Panaramittee Type Engravings*, age unknown but probably less than 4000 years, near Gatton, Queensland. Engraving in sandstone. © P. S. C. Taçon.

Figure 2.4 Unknown artist(s), *Female Dynamic Figure*, probably 10 000–12 000 years of age, near Mann River, Northern Territory. Ochre painting on sandstone. © P. S. C. Taçon.

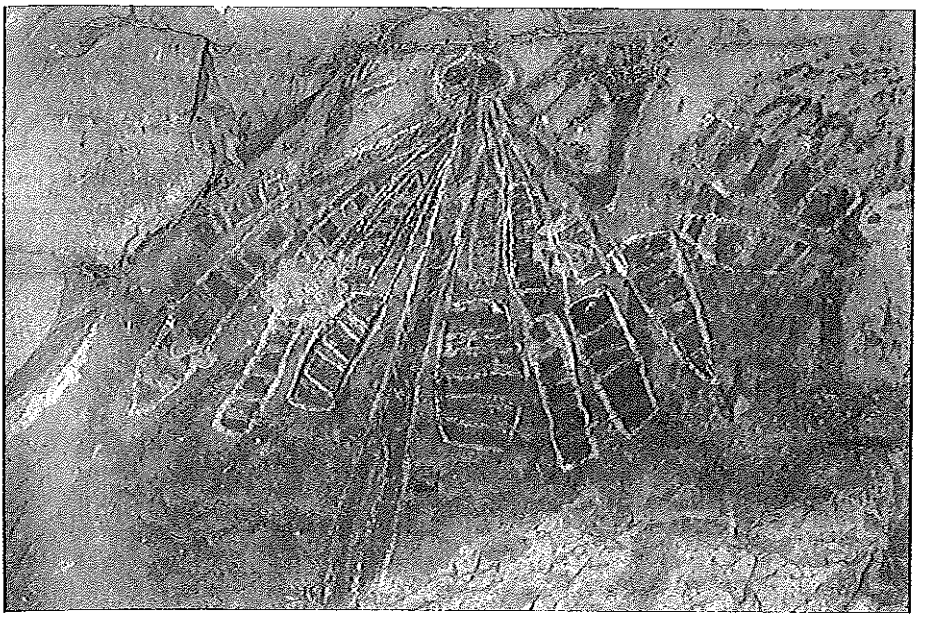

Figure 2.5 Unknown artist(s), *Ochre Painting of Yingarna, the Most Powerful Creation Being of Western Arnhem Land*, less than 1500 years of age, Injalak, Northern Territory. Ochre painting on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

Figure 2.6 Unknown artist(s), *Panel of X-ray Ochre Paintings over Much Earlier Engraved Cupules*, 100–1000 years of age, Deaf Adder Gorge, Northern Territory. Ochre paintings and engravings on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

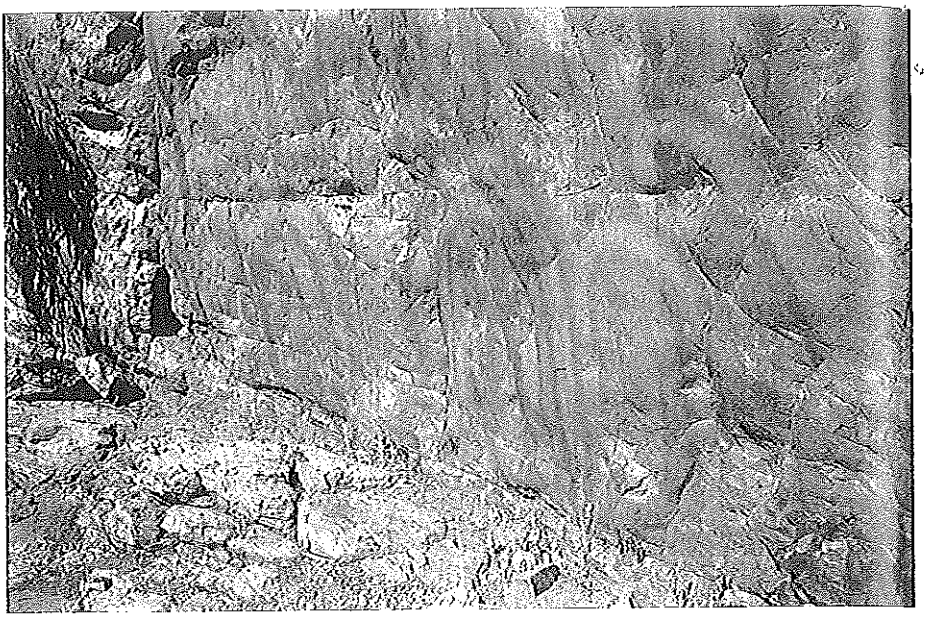

Figure 2.7 Unknown artist(s), *Red and Yellow Ochre Painting of an Enormous Rainbow Serpent*, age unknown, Lilydale Springs, Bodjamulla National Park, Queensland. Ochre painting on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

Figure 2.8 Unknown artist(s), *Gwion Gwion (Bradshaw) Figure*, probably more than 10 000 years of age, East Kimberley/Keep River, Northern Territory. Ochre painting on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

Figure 2.9 Unknown artist(s), *Engraving of a Goanna*, age unknown, Burrup Peninsula, Dampier, Western Australia. Engraving in granophyre. © P. S.C. Taçon.

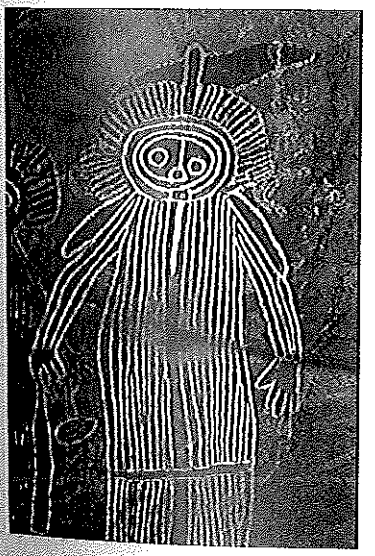

Figure 2.10 Unknown artist(s), *One of the Lightning Brothers*, less than 1000 years of age, Victoria River, Northern Territory. Ochre painting on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

Figure 2.11 Unknown artist(s), *Eagle Ancestor with White Stencilled Boomerang and Hafted Stone Axe (Pipe Clay)*, 100–16 000 years of age, Wollemi National Park, New South Wales. Charcoal and white pipe clay drawing on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

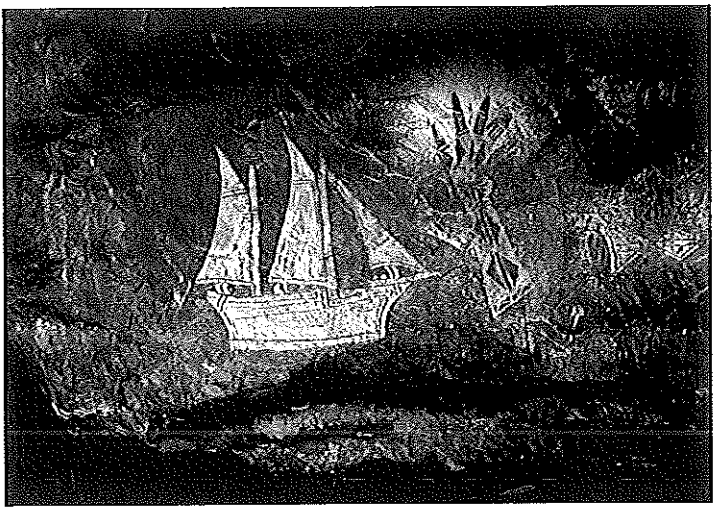

Figure 2.12 Unknown artist(s), *Ochre Painting of a European Ship and Hand Stencil Infilled with Ochre Body Art Design*, c. 1800s, near Gunbalanya, Northern Territory. Ochre on sandstone. © P. S.C. Taçon.

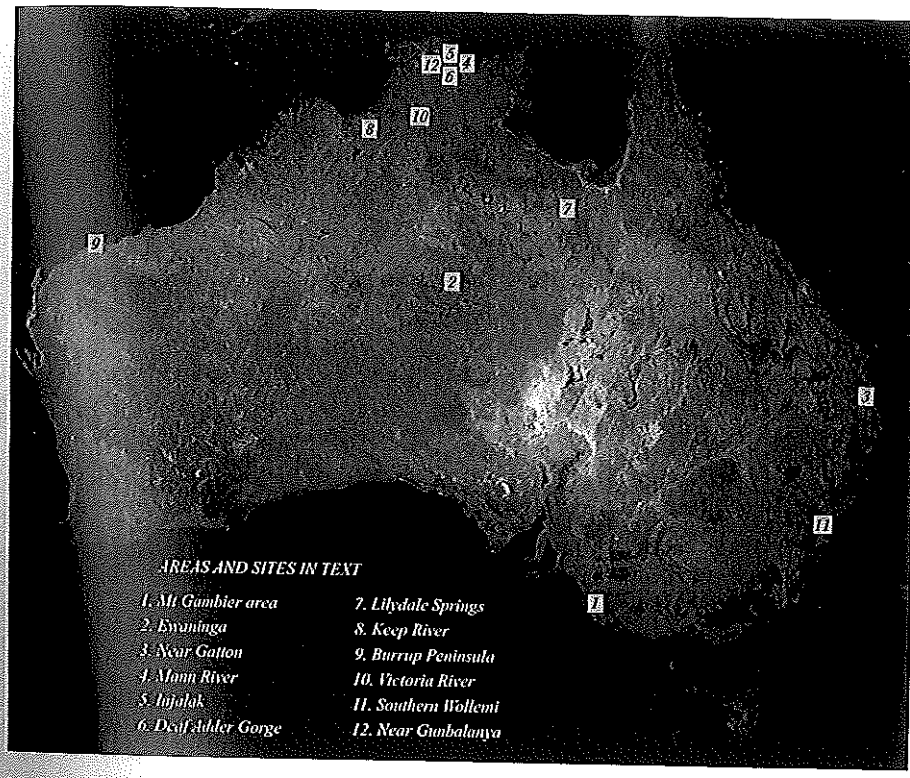

Figure 2.13 Locations of the ancient rock art listed in this chapter. © P. S.C. Taçon.