

A major discovery of Aboriginal cave paintings in Australia

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In May, scientists and archaeologists from the Australian Museum uncovered a 4,000-year-old Aboriginal rock art site at Eagles Reach, literally on Sydney's doorstep. Despite the abundance of many Aboriginal art sites in the region, the Eagles Reach find, which is located about 160 kilometres northwest of Sydney in the wilderness section of the Wollemi National Park, is regarded as the biggest and most significant discovery in the last 50 years. The more than 200 well-preserved and stunning images at the site have been previously hidden by the region's rugged and inhospitable landscape.

The site was first located in 1995 by a group of bushwalkers who accidentally came across the rock art when they abseiled past a large sandstone shelter. While they reported their discovery to the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, it took another eight years before a team of archaeologists, rock art specialists and Aborigines from the local Darkingung, Darug and Wiradjuri tribes were able to begin a scientific investigation. The delay was largely due to environmental factors such as floods and bushfire and to an initial underestimation of the significance of the site.

A press statement issued by Australian Museum principal anthropologist Dr Paul Taçon declared: "It's like an ancient world that time forgot. We have never seen anything quite like this combination of rare representations in so many layers. For instance, our analysis has revealed an unusually large percentage of bird-related imagery in several layers of the rock art.

"We are incredibly excited about what the cave has revealed to us of the long record of visitors to the area. It is amazing to contemplate why people repeatedly travelled great distances through such a rugged landscape.... to leave their marks on this cave time and time again."

The cave is 12 metres long, 6 metres deep and 1 to 2-metres high, and contains 203 separate drawings, a painting and various stencils executed in charcoal, white pipe clay and yellow and red ochre. At least 12 layers of images have been superimposed, one upon the other, documenting the art and culture of many generations of Aborigines. A wide variety of birds, lizards and marsupials are depicted, including kangaroos, wallabies, goannas, leaf-tail geckoes and many other animals from the region. Also included are life-sized, delicately drawn eagles and an extremely rare design of a wombat.

Dr Taçon told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Eagles Reach discovery was significant for several reasons: "Nowhere in the world is there such a site with so many rare drawings on the edge of a major city. Overseas it is increasingly difficult to find such sites. We tend to think of the period of the 1800s in Australia as an era of discovery but Australia has still special treasures to discover, identify and label. The drawings are in such pristine condition. It is like they were done yesterday."

Although most rock shelters open on three sides, the Eagle Rock site faces north and is open on only one side. The northfacing sandstone overhang has protected the drawings from the extreme conditions of the weather allowing perfect preservation.

Another significant component of the discovery, Taçon said, is the existence of many half-human, half-animal figures called "therianthropes". These rare images include creatures with bird-like heads and others that are part kangaroo. A similar kangaroo form has been found at a site near the Hawkesbury River further east from Eagles Reach.

Taçon explained: "While therianthropes are very special depictions found across Australia, and in several regions overseas, the bird-headed creatures are a very rare find in the Sydney area. In Egypt such animal-headed figures are depicted as gods."

According to Aboriginal religious belief, some of these composite images are of ancestral beings and present on the rock walls since mythical times. Under this system of belief, human beings did not paint these images but were produced by ancient ancestors settling into the cave walls, while their spirits may have travelled on.

Commenting on the cave's significance for Aborigines, Taçon said: "This may have been a special place for Aboriginal people, including different language groups who came together from the north, south and west."

Several years earlier, Taçon and Christopher Chippindale from Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology conducted the first international survey of prehistoric therianthrope images throughout northern Australia, Europe and South Africa. The survey of nearly 5,000 examples of rock art indicated that "therianthropes" represented only about 1 to 4 percent of the works studied.

The Eagles Reach rock art includes stencils of hands, arms, ancient boomerangs and hafted axes, which were probably created by spraying ochre with the mouth over and around the objects. The stencilled hands are regarded as the oldest paintings at Eagles Reach, and anywhere between 2,000 and 4,000-years old. Stone tools and charcoal were also found on the cave floor and will require further scientific investigation.

Like all Aboriginal art, cave and rock paintings are inseparable from the 50,000-year-old Aboriginal society and culture. Aboriginal people did not develop a written language but communicated their religion, laws and history through song, poetry, painting and carving. The various art forms, such as body painting, song, dance and storytelling were not separate practices but were integrated into ceremonial performances. Art was not simply for enjoyment or self-expression but a means of passing on ideas and values that had complex social significance.

The meaning and purpose of cave paintings are complicated and varied. Some images record mythological stories, sorcery, fertility and death rituals, while others depict the hunt. It was also believed that drawing a particular animal would stimulate the species to propagate and that the ritual act of painting or touching these depictions would release sacred energy or power.

As the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov explained at the end of the nineteenth century, the art and belief structure of Australian Aborigines can only be understood as a product of their hunter-gatherer existence. In

a series of letters written in 1899-1900 on primitive art and culture, Plekhanov explained why the Aborigines, primitive European hunters and Eskimos of the Yakamirs developed a powerful urge to paint compared to the agricultural peoples of Africa.

“As long as primitive man remains a hunter, his tendency to imitation makes him, among other things, a painter and sculptor. The reason is evident. What does he need as a painter? Power of observation and deftness of hand. These are precisely the qualities which he also needs as a hunter. His artistic activity is therefore a manifestation of the very qualities which are evolved in him by the struggle for existence. When, with the transition to cattle-herding and agriculture, the conditions of his struggle for existence change, primitive man in large degree loses the tendency and ability for painting which distinguished him in the hunting period” [*Selected Philosophical Works*, Georgi Plekhanov, Volume 5, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, page 358].

Plekhanov’s materialist analysis, which explains the intimate and inseparable relationship between the artist and the hunter, indicates why many art experts and anthropologists have been astonished by the skillful precision, refinement of technique, realism and aesthetic beauty of some of the oldest cave paintings in the world. In Aboriginal society, while some were regarded as having special skills, everyone was involved in hunting or gathering and all participated in communicating and expressing the stories and religion of that society.

In Australia, more than 100,000 rock art sites have been discovered—possibly more than any other country in the world—with most of the richest and colourful in the Pilbara, Kimberleys, Arnhem Land and Cape York regions of northern Australia.

While the study of Aboriginal art and culture is now regarded as important, this was not always the case. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, after the British established Australia as a military outpost in the Asia-Pacific region against its colonial rival France, anthropological investigations of Aboriginal life and culture were of little or no interest. It was not until 1930s and establishment of an anthropology department at the University of Sydney that systematic scientific study really began.

The first European sightings of rock art in Australia date back to early explorers Willem Jansz in 1605, William Dampier in 1688, and James Cook in 1770, but their observations are brief and rather limited. In 1804, Matthew Flinders reported paintings of porpoises, turtles, kangaroos and the human hand in a cave on the western side of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

While many explorers described the rock art as “rude”, meaning crudely executed, others such as Captain Wickham, in *Notes on Depuch Island* (1842) wrote that he was surprised at the “accuracy of the animals and birds presented... the patient perseverance... talent and observation of the Aborigines.”

From the mid- to late-nineteenth century, missionaries, whose aim was to “civilise” and convert the Aborigines to Christianity, were among the few studying Aboriginal society. Working in tribal areas where Aboriginal culture was already disappearing, they often provide the only written record of the ancient customs. In 1841, George Grey discovered and recorded in detail the Wandjina caves in the Kimberley region. Grey refused to believe that Aborigines did paintings of such quality.

By the end of the nineteenth century, some serious attempts were made to record and collate data about the many rapidly disappearing tribes and their culture. The investigators were interested in anthropology but they were not scientifically trained. Their efforts were stimulated by several government-sponsored publications on Aborigines in Victoria and South Australia.

In 1894, land surveyor R. G. Matthews presented a paper entitled *The Rock Pictures of the Australian Aborigines* to the Queensland Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia. The article, which is cited in Plekhanov’s letters on primitive art, provides a detailed record of the

then known rock art sites in New South Wales and descriptions of the paintings and carvings were produced. Matthews also voices concern over what he believed was a lack of public interest and called for systematic anthropological research.

“ [V]ery little work has yet been done in this branch of anthropology,” he wrote. “There is still a very large ground to be broken, and this work should be undertaken at once, while there is yet opportunity, or it will prove either incomplete, or too late altogether.”

Suggesting that all sites needed to be recorded in detail and placed on public maps, he predicted that more sites would be found near the coast. “As a general rule, the coastal districts are the most fertile and best watered parts of the colony, abounding in edible plants, fish, and game of all sorts. It has been observed that the development of any people has a connection with improved physical surroundings. With a plentiful food supply and permanent water, the natives would have more leisure for the exercise of their faculties or imitation and invention.”

The work of Matthews and others soon attracted international interest and eventually laid the foundations for professional anthropological research that took root in the 1930s. From the 1930s through to the 1960s, new scientific-based work was conducted by notable anthropologists such as A. P. Elkin, Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt.

While this work broadened and expanded in the 1970s, Matthews’ earlier warning about the urgent need for serious investigation has been borne out. Anthropological investigation into the deeper meaning of the rock art paintings and the significance of particular sites requires the active assistance of local Aborigines with an understanding of traditionally-derived knowledge of visual symbols and customs.

Local Darkingung and Dharug peoples, whose traditional lands encompass parts of the Wollemi National Park, have been closely involved in the investigation of the Eagles Reach site. But their forebears were, generations ago, driven from this area by European settlers.

Beginning in the early 1800s, the British transformed these lands into farming areas forcing the Aboriginal people to the fringes. In 1816, Governor Macquarie issued a proclamation deeming it an offence for six or more Aborigines to congregate around any farmland. A military unit was dispatched to the area, which could be used to drive Aborigines from the area if the new settlers believed they were being “pestered”. Late that year an expedition of soldiers executed 14 Aboriginal men, women and children in retaliation for an alleged attack by Aborigines in the Bringelly area. Two Aboriginal corpses were hung in the trees as a warning. In the 1890s, the Darkingung and Dharug people were placed under the control of the so-called Aboriginal Protection Board and placed in reserves just outside Sydney at Sackville Reach.

In the weeks since the Eagles Reach rock art discovery was announced, the Australian Museum has been inundated with requests for interviews from the Archaeology Institute of America, CNN, the BBC, *Science* magazine, the *New York Times* and media outlets in Brazil, India and elsewhere. Numerous emails have been received from students and ordinary people around the world excited about the find and requesting more detailed information.

At this stage the precise location of the Eagles Reach rock art in Wollemi National Park will remain secret to avoid possible damage by interested sightseers. While full documentation of the drawings and paintings is expected to take many years, Dr Taçon will give an initial public lecture on the find at the Australian Museum in Sydney on August 28.



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