

The ‘Assistant Undertaker’ of Dampier rock art

Recently Professor Iain Davidson announced to the media that he had secured for his university department a three-year postgraduate scholarship to study the rock art of Dampier, to be funded by the rock art vandal Woodside Energy. An announcement in *The Courier Mail* on 4 October 2006 included the coy statement by Davidson that ‘Woodside already had done extensive auditing and study of the art’. The Professor need not have been so modest, *The West Australian Weekend* of 30 September had already reported a few days previously that he, Davidson, had been ‘employed by Woodside to oversee an audit of the rock art on their leases. He can’t comment on the report ... but he will say that Woodside came out well. And he says claims about the number of art pieces destroyed are misleading.’

The scholarship was widely dismissed as a public relations stunt to bolster the chances of Woodside’s Pluto development at Dampier being approved (e.g. on *Message Stick*, 5 October). However, Davidson defended this stunt and his own employment by Woodside with some well-chosen words. When asked by Conor Duffy, ABC, ‘Are you confident then that the heavy industry and rock art can co-exist?’, Davidson replied candidly: ‘No! I have no idea of that and nobody does, but all I can say is that they *will* co-exist. That’s to say, the heavy industry is there. I see no great will in government to remove a billion dollar plant. The rock art can’t go anywhere else, and so what we have to do is to get the best situation, the best outcome from that co-existence.’

Davidson claims to have investigated this issue, and he cannot see how the industry and the monument can co-exist, yet he expects them to co-exist. He offers no solution but the death knell for the rock art on the Pluto site at Holden Point, and the slow death from acidic emissions of the rest of the Dampier rock art. He does not even seem to realise that there are two Woodside plants to consider, and that nobody has demanded the removal of the existing Northwest Shelf plant. The new Pluto plant is easy to locate elsewhere, it has not had final approval yet. He is quite right, the rock art cannot go anywhere else, but he is wrong in suggesting that the Pluto plant needs to be in the same location as the rock art. There are dozens of alternative locations for it.

Davidson also stated in the same interview on 5 October: ‘We know of the damage to several hundred engravings, which were sanctioned by the state government at the time the Woodside plant was set up [in 1980], we cannot say that 20 % of the engravings — 20 % is 200 000 engravings — we cannot say that 20% of the engravings have already been destroyed.’

For someone who claims to have done the relevant research his ignorance is breathtaking. It is generally known that 1760 decorated boulders removed by Woodside in 1980 languish in just one of the compounds of relocated rock art, and they represent only a tiny portion of the destruction. Most of the rock art in the way of industrial development has

been bulldozed, as have *all* of the hundreds of ruined stone arrangements (such as the ones levelled in May 2006, see Figure 4, previous page). Since 1972, records have been kept of the rock art destroyed, by the Department of Indigenous Affairs of Western Australia. They show that between 1972 and 2003, the rock art of 119 sites was relocated, while that of 350 sites was destroyed, but 238 sites in the affected areas were preserved (Hansard 16 August 2005). The Department has also estimated that 3690 rock art sites existed on Burrup initially. In other words, 12.7 % of the Burrup rock art sites were *recorded* to have been destroyed 1972–2003. More were laid to waste since then, right up to the present time, and a very substantial slice of the Burrup rock art was levelled between 1962 and 1972. In addition, it must be remembered that these figures relate only to sites destroyed or relocated, and exclude partially destroyed sites such as Gum Tree and Skew Valleys, where many more thousands of petroglyphs were bulldozed. Thousands of others have been pilfered over the years, because of the complete lack of any protection, and there has been much site vandalism by uncontrolled visitation. Of course the figures also exclude the rock art on Mistaken and East Intercourse Islands, which was eliminated entirely.

According to the most conservative and parsimonious estimate (National Trust of Australia), 900 rock art sites were destroyed on Burrup alone, out of 3690 thought to have existed there in 1962. This is 24.4 % of the total. An alternative way to calculate the quantity of rock art destroyed is to extrapolate from the known figures 1972–2003 to the full land area subjected to development. According to the Premier of Western Australia, Alan Carpenter MLA (his letter to me dated 9 October 2006), the ‘best current estimate is that some 42 % of the Burrup is designated for industry’. We know that 66.3 % of the rock art was destroyed in the area where proper records were kept, and if we make the reasonable assumption that a similar percentage has been or will be lost across the industrial estate, this would extrapolate to 1028 sites, or 27.9 % of the original total Burrup rock art. The difference of 3.5 % probably represents areas yet to be destroyed, most especially Woodside’s Holden Point site for the Pluto plant.

Professor Davidson only knows ‘of damage to several hundred engravings’ (0.1 % of the total?), which illustrates his ignorance. He also thinks that 20 % of the Burrup rock art is 200 000 petroglyphs. Again, his confusion is understandable, he is a newcomer to this topic. Nobody has claimed there are a million petroglyphs on the Burrup, but it has been said many times that there are a million in the entire archipelago, which includes forty-one other islands. Clearly, he either does not know much about this subject, or he acts as an apologist for the rock art vandals. My very conservative estimate of petroglyphs on the Burrup was 300 000, others’ figures are in the order of 500 000. Therefore 24.4 % is between 73 200 and 122 000, depending on

whose estimate one uses. Davidson himself has no idea, he has never until now conducted any research at Dampier, and his knowledge of rock art is in any case not adequate to conduct a credible study in this field.

The second point emerging from his comments refers to his inability of predicting whether the rock art can survive a co-existence with the petrochemical industry. Woodside has already pre-empted this discussion by revealing the reason for its objection to the National Heritage listing of Dampier on 5 October 2006. In an interview with Anna Salleh, *ABC Science*, a Woodside spokesman stated that ‘the listing will create uncertainty for industry in the area, which could be held liable for damage to the rock art through pollution’. This is a clear admission that the acidic emissions of Woodside are damaging the ferromanganese rock accretions on which the rock art depends for its survival. The fear is that once the rock art is heritage listed, monitoring of this damage will be not by parties paid by either Woodside or the State Government, but by independent or Commonwealth scientists. And this, needless to say, will lead to significant impairments for the industrial operations that rely on their massive acidic emissions. This explains why Davidson refuses to rule out the possibility that the rock art will not be able to co-exist with the industry.

Davidson has been the most controversial archaeologist in Australia for some time. A specialist in Spanish stone tools, he made himself a name in 1989 with the theory that figurative art must have preceded human language, because without the ability of making pictures of objects, people would not have been able to convey the meaning of a word.

Since there is no evidence of picture making before about 32 000 years ago, language can only have been invented then. This puerile hypothesis ignores that human brains included the speech centres as early as two million years ago, and humans managed to cross the sea and colonise many islands as much as one million years ago — a feat that even according to Davidson required language. Because he could not bring himself to admit this folly, he claimed eventually that these very early sea crossings were not intentional, but were the result of people drifting accidentally across the sea on vegetation. He has never explained why only humans were able to cross the sea on such drifts, or how this could be accomplished when all sea straits are subjected to strong transverse currents, or how groups large enough to form a founding population managed to cross each time. Davidson’s role in the Bayswater Project is also of interest. More recently he claimed in a newspaper that an archaeologist should essentially own his finds, and when challenged about this, he qualified his pronouncement by adding that this should apply for the duration of the funding period. Perhaps he needs to be reminded that he who pays the piper calls the tune, but bearing in mind his current relationship with Woodside, he has no doubt realised this already.

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A response to this paper has been invited from Professor I. Davidson. Unfortunately it was not available by the time this issue of the *AURA Newsletter* went to press.
