



## THE AGRA COLLECTION

The following collection of selected papers presented at the IFRAO Congress in Agra has been edited by Guest Editor Graeme K. Ward.

# Australian papers from the Agra rock art conference

Graeme K. Ward, Guest Editor

Scholarly congresses are major occasions for the dissemination of knowledge and are usually stimulating and enjoyable exchanges. They generate considerable energy – or perhaps they transform the significant effort that goes into developing and staging them. There is a buzz as delegates meet, mingle and discuss one day's highlights and the prospects for the next; the satisfaction of sharing insights derived from each presentation. Rock art conferences especially. There is the instruction and pleasure of dealing in a discipline whose subject material is at once amenable to technical investigation, the subject of scientific enquiry, often involving sociological dimensions, and aesthetically pleasing either on the screen or in the field.

But congresses embody their own problems: while the stimulus may survive some time after the conference, less often, regrettably, does it last long enough to be reproduced for publication to inform those unfortunate not to have attended the event. The problem is always how to decant the precious essences and perhaps to distil them for the benefit of a wider audience through publication. Publication of conference proceedings is problematic and becoming increasingly so as costs increase. Few commercial presses want to have to deal with the averaged results of edited volumes. Are the distillations of what were wisdoms at the conference still to a wider audience after the event? Timeliness is often important, but often the completion of the compilation awaits the slowest contributor. There are ways: contribution to a pre-conference 'pre tirage' may be mandatory for attendance; but these are pre-presentation, pre-discussion offerings lacking the improvement that can result from reconsideration after questions, comments and reviewing. There are good examples of post-congress publication. They involve much concerted effort. A firm hand will be evident in the selection of papers and their timely production and peer-reviewing. Because conference proceedings are

not favoured by publishers, editors are turning to online publication; their minimal publication costs need not imply that these papers were in any way cheaply won; they will meet appropriate editing criteria including external reviewing and formal publication requirements including cataloguing-in-publication and ISBNs.

This small collection of papers derives from presentations made to the first international congress of the Rock Art Society of India (RASI), which was also the Tenth Congress of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), held between 28 November and 2 December 2004 at the Hotel Jaypee Palace, in Agra, India. The theme of the Congress was 'Changing paradigms'. As well as many Indian members, about eighty international delegates attended; they will have benefited from their exposure to new developments in the study of Indian rock art, as, no doubt, their hosts will have appreciated the opportunity to imbibe the different approaches and perspectives provided by the visitors. The visitors will also recall the generosity of their Indian hosts, visits to Agra attractions including the Fort and the Taj Mahal, and the various post-congress fieldtrips to places such as Bhimbetka near Bopal, the Chambal Valley, and Orissa.

Proceedings of the congress were to have been collected into a volume edited by Professor K. K. Chakravarty and Robert G. Bednarik but this did not eventuate. A few years after the conference, I was asked to contribute to the editing. Discussions with Chakravarty and Bednarik resulted in the decision that Professor Chakravarty would undertake the publication of Indian and other Asian papers, and Bednarik and I would pursue other contributions. By this time, many presentations had been published elsewhere, or were otherwise not available. Those included in this issue of *RAR* comprise papers derived from many of the Australianist presentations made to Agra symposia. It has been several years

since the presentation at the Congress; mindful of this delay, we have tried to ensure that the articles published here are still relevant and appropriately contemporary, but not necessarily with slavish attention to an updated scholarly context. They were state-of-the art in 2004 but should be of interest today.

### Australianist contributions to the Agra congress

Australian delegates organised several of the many symposia and made numerous presentations. Of the about one hundred academic presentations made, fourteen were made or co-contributed by Australian researcher. Symposia to which presentations based in Australian fieldwork were made included:

- Symposium A: 'Global perspectives of rock art', convened by Robert G. Bednarik.
- Symposium G: 'Animals and animal-like beings in rock art', convened by Paul Taçon and others.
- Symposium L: 'Can we interpret rock art', convened by Jean Clottes and Kishor K. Basa.
- Symposium M: 'Dating of rock art', convened by Alan Watchman and R. K. Choudhury.
- Symposium Q: 'Rock art management and education programs for site visitors', convened by Jane Kolber and Graeme K. Ward.
- Symposium J: 'Artistic appreciation of rock art', convened by Yashodhar Mathpal and others.
- Symposium P: 'Rock art conservation and management', convened by B. K. Swartz, Jr and R. C. Agrawal.

Of the various presentations, four papers are collected here.

Margaret Bullen's presentation was to Symposium L 'Can we interpret rock art?'. Bullen is a medical practitioner as well as a rock art scholar. With her interests and skills in the psychological side of medicine she brings a unique perspective to aspects of the discipline. In this paper she reconsiders 'The role of trance in the creation of rock art images', which has become a paradigm central to some discussions of the origin of rock art imagery. Basing her critique in new approaches to the study of consciousness and brain activity, she successfully challenges its validity including the equation of geometric motifs to entoptic imagery.

Two papers relate to the evergreen theme of the problems of dating petroglyphs and pictograms; Symposium M 'Dating of rock art' saw several presentations. Robert G. Bednarik's survey shows the advances made in this field over the last few decades, to which he has contributed much. Here he concentrates on recent developments, some experimental, and their application to aspects of the topic, including use of the carbon isotope analysis of carbonaceous substances, field XRF spectrometry applied to mineral crusts covering petroglyphs, further use of microerosion analysis, and of digitised

colorimetry for seriation of ferromanganese patinae.

The contribution by Alan Watchman and others references field research conducted in the Wadeye-Fitzmaurice region of northern Australia, a collaborative project involving Traditional Owners, archaeologists and a dating specialist. Here are reported the results of successful attempts to date directly the immediate contexts of images in painted shelters in four locations.

The final article in this series, that by Graeme K. Ward, was presented to a symposium concerning matters related to management of rock art — not its fabric — but its role in educating visitors about its importance as cultural heritage and need for its protection (Symposium Q, 'Rock art management and education programs for site visitors'). Ward discusses the interests of various parties involved in the use of rockshelter sites in tourism, and also emphasises that the education processes involved in such inter-cultural exchanges also have a local inter-generational component, the opportunities for which can be enhanced by tourism.

[The fifth Agra congress paper included in this issue, that by Terje Norsted of the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research, 'Safeguarding of the cave paintings of Lofoten, Norway', was provided to us during preparation of this issue after refereeing, and it seems fitting to include it with others of the Agra papers — RAR Editor.]

There was another Australian contribution to Symposium Q, 'Rock art management and education program for site visitors'. Entitled 'Kimberley (Australia) rock-markings: contemporary significance in the context of tourism', provided a discussion of The Pathway Project, a decade-long collaboration to record cultural heritage places in the north-western Kimberley and their contemporary relevance to the Ngarinyin people. The presentation centrepiece was cinematic: 'Gwion; a film of education through art' made by Jeff Doring with Paddy Neowarra of the Ngarinyin Aboriginal Corporation, Derby. This included accounts of Ngarinyin cultural knowledge-holders discussing meanings of various rock paintings and stone arrangements, and demonstrating that the Gwion motifs, along with the more familiar Wanjina, are an integral part of continuing Ngarinyin cosmology, and that, like the Wanjina, continue to be painted and re-painted. Many Kimberley sites are the subject of tourism, and the filming provided a basis for the discussion of the related matters of Ngarinyin cultural heritage ownership, and protection of places from the impacts of visitation. The intellectual resonance of this artistic tradition has implications for future custodianship, research and management.

Another presentation was made by an Indigenous Australian to the initial symposium, 'Global perspectives of rock art'. Kaye McPherson (Teree-tee Lore) of Tasmania spoke to the matter of 'Globalisation: a working conundrum', pointing out

that standard approaches to the study of rock art 'enforces concepts not based on indigenous fact', and while globalisation might lessen regional isolation, it removes the cultural basis of Aboriginal existence and makes cultural heritage into a non-indigenous debate.

Robert G. Bednarik also discussed the action toward 'Saving the Dampier rock art precinct, Western Australia' in his presentation to Symposium P, 'Rock art conservation and management'. He provided a history of the campaign to preserve the massive corpus of petroglyphs in the Dampier Archipelago where the remaining petroglyphs are under threat of gradual destruction from gaseous emissions from a petrochemical industry, outlining the IFRAO protection actions, emphasising the measures that would be useful to future campaigns of this kind, and the need to develop a universal policy to address future threats to major sites. Bednarik's initiatives toward presentation of the Dampier Peninsula sites have been reported in several articles in *RAR*, and in his book *The Australian Apocalypse* (2006).

Two further presentations to Symposium Q were made by Australian-based researchers. John Clegg ('Towards a philosophy of rock art study: what, why, and how?') reported his observations upon the various reasons that visitors appreciate rock art. While the discipline might have become an area of conflict between those from different backgrounds, opposing different predispositions, skills, attitudes, and judgements about other practices, it could be better to accept every contribution as valuable, for things to be investigated. Clegg's modified paper [also edited as part of this collection by the undersigned — *RAR* Editor] has already appeared in *AURA Newsletter* 27(1). Robert G. Bednarik ('The standardisation of rock art research'), noted that, while some have favoured mainly subjective recording of rock art and its etic interpretation, more recently there has been a trend toward specialisation and standardisation due largely to the growing influence of IFRAO's network of rock art organisations. These included the gradual adoption of a standard vocabulary, of a universal ethical code, of standardised procedures of quantification and research methods, including more specialised procedures.

Representations of animals and animal-like beings are found frequently at rock art sites and warranted a symposium of their own. The Australian contribution to the Mythic Animals section of Symposium G, 'Sydney Daramulan Figures' was made by Samantha Higgs (now a doctoral student at The Australian National University) and John Clegg, when she was a student at the University of Sydney and he her supervisor. They deal with the assumptions necessary in 'recognising' and describing (and mistaking) the subjects — a variety of animal representations — carved into the soft and eroding Sydney (New South Wales) sandstone, arguing that the identifications

must be accurate for the research to be extended. Lacking ethnographic accounts, it was necessary to use the methods of formal archaeology, exploring consistencies in their representation, some of which might be described as 'conventions', to identify pre-Historic classifications and concepts of mundane and other creatures, including 'Daramulan figures'. A version of this paper was published at <mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/interpret/shared\_files/Higgs1.pdf>.

John Clegg also contributed to Symposium J, 'Artistic appreciation of rock art' in collaboration with Thomas Heyd ('Re-thinking through aesthetics and rock art'). They argued that, as part of a rediscovery in anthropology and archaeology of the importance of aesthetics and art, there were good *prima facie* reasons for pursuing the *aesthetic* consideration of marks on rock. That it was unnecessary to have to ignore context and focus on some universal or 'transcendental' quality; that it was unnecessary to limit the term 'art' to those phenomena that resemble those of the modern, European art tradition, and that we need not know the intentions of the makers to approach aesthetically such rock art. *Aesthetics and Rock Art*, a collection of seventeen papers edited by Heyd and Clegg was published in 2005.

In a further contribution (to Symposium L, 'Can we interpret rock art?'), Robert G. Bednarik approached the problem of 'The epistemology of rock art interpretation', providing an analysis of its background, and addressing such issues as the basis and purpose of rock art interpretation, the tools applied and their philosophical underpinnings, and what the significance of meaning in rock art is to various stakeholders.

To the same symposium, Hugh Cairns presented an account of 'The Nagard-Ya rock art site (Australia) and astronomy'. This place, as related by Bill Yidumduuma Harney, a senior Wardaman, is the locus of an ancient Creation Story uniting night sky astronomical phenomena with totemic ancestors, the Lightnings and others. He suggested that astronomical phenomena have value in modelling a people's lived-in order where annual calendars are known and the ancient art displays a totemic world. The subject was developed in their book *Dark sparklers* (2003).

We trust that this collection of papers edited from among the Australianist presentations to the various symposia of the RASI congress in Agra will be of interest to readers. Fortunately there are still organisations in our discipline whose aims extend to publication in hard-copy format of conference proceedings, and we have to thank *RAR* in this regard. We also thank the contributors for being willing to revise their presentations for publication, and the anonymous readers.

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