



BRIEF REPORTS

Earliest known Historical rock art in Australia

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In its capitalised form, the term 'Historical' refers to what some members of one human species refer to as the time period beginning with the introduction of written records. In the case of Australia, this is broadly taken to be the settlement by Europeans, although it was preceded by a period of visits by people from literate or semi-literate societies over some centuries. In the most simplistic and Anglocentric form, the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1788 is taken to mark the commencement of History in Australia. In particular there has been no evidence presented so far of any Historical rock art or inscription in Australia that predates Cook's landing. There are numerous later dated inscriptions, such as that by Giles at Mootwingee or the three *Beagle* inscriptions on Depuch Island, but it is generally accepted that Australian coasts have been visited by European and Asian seafarers for some centuries before Cook. Until now, however, there has been no indication that they penetrated any great distance into the continent's interior.

My discovery of some apparently European petroglyphs in the eastern Pilbara, about 150 km from the nearest seashore, is relevant here. They consist of the letter 'H', an image assumed to depict a ship's steering wheel (perhaps held by two arms), an anthropomorph of ambiguous derivation and the date '1771'. These motifs were partially made with a metal tool, whose elongate impact marks resemble those of a knife blade. They occur together on the horizontal upper surface of a prominent boulder which forms the locally highest point of a dolerite dyke extending for many kilometres almost due north-south over the semi-arid landscape. The greyish-green basaltic dolerite is patinated to a dark reddish-brown colour (Munsell 2.5YR 3/5). There are a few scattered further petroglyphs at the locality, apparently of Australid provenience, and within a few hundred metres of it occur two major petroglyph sites, each comprising a few thousand motifs, all morphologically resembling the local Australid petroglyph traditions of the general Woodstock - Abydos region.

There are numerous dated rock inscriptions in this general region, of which I have examined almost twenty microscopically for the purpose of obtaining a microerosion calibration curve. These inscribed dates span the past 120 years, i.e. the time of established European pastoral and mining operations (ranging from 1881 to

1997). They are inevitably repatinated to a degree relatively commensurate with their purported ages, in fact this colour gradation seems to be so precise that I am experimenting with electronically assisted quantification of the measured bulk colour changes. According to the experience gained from these studies of repatination, the '1771' date and associated motifs cannot possibly be recent, based purely on their weathering and repatination states.

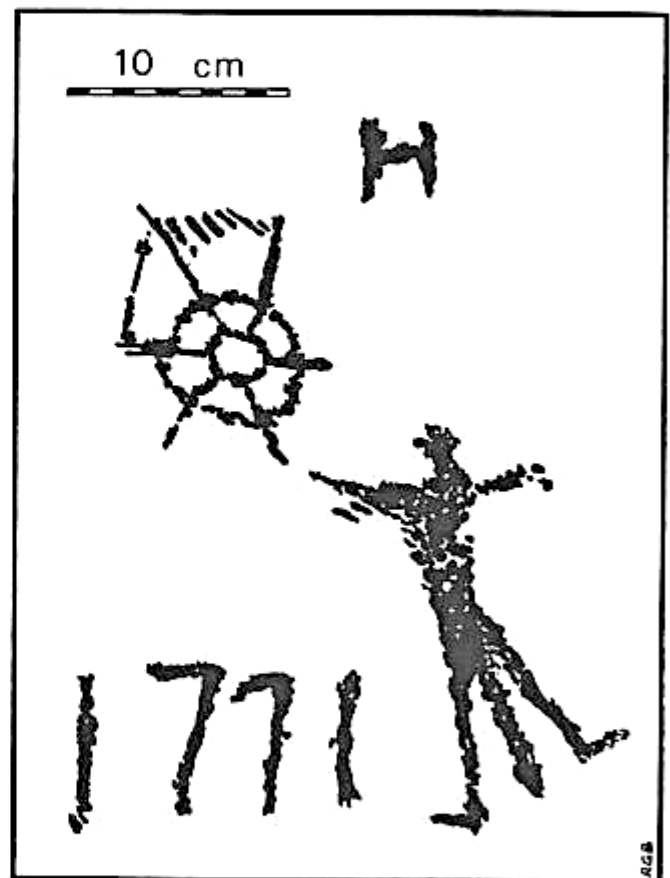


Figure 1. Recording of Historical petroglyphs at an autochthon rock art site in the eastern Pilbara.

Detailed examination with a binocular microscope has permitted several relevant observations. Two of the motifs (the 'wheel' and the 'H') were roughly sketched by indirect percussion with a long and nearly straight metal edge. The first motif was largely completed with a hammerstone, but many of the metal marks survive intact (with at least one 'bounce mark'), whereas only part of one single metal mark survives in the 'H'. The four numerals and the anthropomorph were made entirely with one or more stone hammers.



Figure 2. Historical petroglyphs, eastern Pilbara, Australia.

Weathering (of the magnetite and augite, less of the plagioclase) and patination followed, but two types of the latter need to be distinguished. Oxidisation of the magnetite component presents local discolouration to full rust-brown, but most of the 'patina' is the result of an extraneously derived accretionary deposit. It consists of aeolian detritus of great diversity, caked together by iron oxides, hydroxides and silica, and locally arranged in distinctive 'laced' patterns. The thickness of the accretion reaches 100-150 microns in the petroglyphs. Morphologically this deposit is entirely consistent with the thick accretion on the adjacent, unmodified rock surface. It is important to note that although groove depths in the various motifs differ greatly (the numerals and part of the 'wheel' are deeper than the 'H' and the anthropomorph), patination colour is quite uniform, hence groove depth has had no influence on the process.

It is also relevant that other dated inscriptions I have examined in the area begin to develop similarly composed accretions after 30-40 years, the thickness of

which is directly related to their relative ages. At ages of 80-120 years, these deposits reach in the order of 30-50 microns thickness. On that basis the four motifs described here should be well over 200 years old.

The availability of a microerosion calibration curve from a nearby site complex would permit very precise (at this age range) age determination if there were any quartz or feldspar present, but unfortunately this is not the case, and no relevant expertise or calibration data for the minerals present exist currently.

During the Pilbara Field Trip following the Third AURA Congress I took several experienced rock art specialists to the site to discuss the interpretation of these petroglyphs. All agreed that the figures were neither recent nor by Indigenous Australians, and it was mooted that the artist may not have been an experienced writer. This speculation finds some support in the apparent nautical motif, which may be intended to iconographically convey his maritime background. The following possibilities were considered:

- a. The petroglyphs are the result of a hoax of, say, the late 19th century;
- b. They were made in 1871 by someone who made a significant mistake in the date;
- c. They were made on the First July 1871 by someone who omitted the punctuation and left no separation spaces between the first digits, i.e. intended to write '1-7-71';
- d. They were made, as purported, 229 years ago.

We agreed that (a) is extremely unlikely: given the historical circumstances in which this would have occurred and the apparent attempt to convey a message with the nautical motif it seems far-fetched to suspect a practical joke. Moreover, the motifs are significantly more patinated than dates of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The mistake implied by (b) also seems like a desperate explanation, particularly as the date's second and third digit are identical (the mistake of writing 1781 instead of 1871 might occur, while 1771 instead of 1871 seems less likely). Possibility (c) looks more plausible, particularly if the artist had little experience in writing and had been isolated for a long time, but it is still contradicted by the state of patination, especially accretion. By far the most likely interpretation is that a European person with a maritime background somehow managed to journey so far inland in the 18th century. It is the only explanation supported by the analytical information and therefore (d) is to be favoured.

Indeed, the only factor against this interpretation is that we possess no records that Europeans of the time

travelled so far into the interior of the country, but considering that our knowledge about the period is inadequate by any standard this proposition is worth examining closer.



Figure 3. View of the site of the Historical petroglyphs.

The former presence of certainly Dutch, British and possibly French and Portuguese ships in the coastal waters is well known, but records of their movements at that time range from the sketchy to the non-existent. It only needs to be considered that there are cases of Portuguese words used by Australid speakers in three different parts of the continent (including the Pilbara), yet there are no historical data of Portuguese landings, or of how these words might have been adopted. Dutch navigators explored Australian coastlines from 1606 onwards, several Dutch ships were wrecked on the west coast during the 17th (*Tryal* in 1622, *Batavia* in 1629, *Vergulde Draek* in 1659) and 18th centuries (*Zuytdorp* in 1712, *Zeewijk* in 1726), and early reports of European physical traits among some Australids of the west coast exist. William Dampier was apparently the first British captain to land in Australia (in 1688), and the Pilbara archipelago named after him is today regarded as possessing the largest concentration of petroglyphs in the world. Certainly it would be naive to assume that there were no journeys undertaken of which we lack any

records, or that there were no troublesome crew members left behind on occasion.

What might question the full authenticity of the engraved 1771 date is not the lack of evidence that Europeans were in the general region at the time, but the great distance this individual must have travelled from the coast (well over 200 km up-river). One would expect a shipwrecked sailor to make every endeavour to remain on the coast, in the hope that he would be found by a passing ship. The site is located directly on a seasonal creek bed discharging into a major river, at the very point where it broke through the dyke, so it is likely that it was reached by following river courses. We may never know why this man chose to stray so far from the coast, but if the message he left for us is authentic, he would most certainly have been in the care of Australid groups. Indeed, there are Australid petroglyphs of identical repatination and age in its immediate vicinity. That his apparent message occurs alongside autochthon rock art may well imply that he was living with a tribe. This might be implied by the anthropomorphous figure, which was probably executed at the same time, and which could be interpreted as combining indigenous graphic features (e.g. large 'penis') with European ('flat feet', which are uncommon in the region's anthropomorphs).

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