BRIEF REPORTS

The 'Parietal Markings Project' – a Progress Report

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In most of us the expression 'cave art' evokes images of painted or engraved pictures depicting Pleistocene animal species of western Europe. Yet parietal art is not restricted to France and Spain, it has been reported from many regions, including Italy, Bulgaria, Siberia, Mexico and several parts of South America and Asia. The spectacular art of the Chumash Indians of California occurs in caves and recently numerous engravings have been located in a deep cave in Tennessee. But in none of these regions has it been demonstrated that an entire ancient art tradition had a marked preference for subterranean localities.

Until now western Europe has remained the only area where a major Pleistocene art tradition is known to have survived only in caves, especially in deep caves, and which has produced evidence suggestive of a prehistoric predilection for caves of difficult, sometimes quite hazardous access. Evidence from many parts of Australia had always been accepted as proof that Aborigines did not enter deep caves, avoiding even deep rock shelters. There are numerous Australian myths describing such sites as the abodes of a variety of malignant beings. The opposition A. Gallus (1968) experienced when he proposed that the extensive markings deep in Koonalda Cave are prehistoric finger flutings is therefore understandable, and for a number of years this enigmatic site remained an anomaly among Australian rock art. Sceptics cited many alternative explanations for the extensive finger markings and incised grooves found on the soft walls of this cave, well over one hundred metres from the sink hole entrance.

In 1977 the Victoria Archaeological Survey found a small panel of markings similar to those of Koonalda Cave in a cave on the Snowy River, eastern Victoria. Whilst the authenticity of both these sites was soon widely recognised, a controversy began to develop concerning the general subject of cave markings. Reports appeared of a variety of markings, especially scratch-like, subparallel incisions, prompting reactions ranging from the categorical rejection of all parietal marks as humanly-made, to the implicit acceptance as artefacts of any markings resembling the 'Meander Tradition' Marshack (1977) has described from western Europe.

Plate 1.
Vertical wall in Paroong Cave, a newly discovered gallery of cave art in the Mt Gambier region, South Australia. The deeply carved petroglyphs with which the wall is completely covered extend to four metres above the present floor.

One of us (RGB) had already developed a commitment to the study of very archaic rock art prior to 1977, and realised that its scientific investigation would be impaired if debate about authenticity were to prevail. Seeing the need for expertise in distinguishing natural from artificial markings he proceeded to tackle the subject by examining a large number of caves and learning about the natural markings rather than the artificial forms. Thus the Parietal Markings Project (Bednarik and Bednarik 1982) was initially concerned with both these types, in order to attain the ability of recognising genuine humanly-made marks, i.e. petroglyphs.

In 1978 EKB and RGB investigated subparallel, linear markings in a cave north of Perth, Orchestra Shell Cave, which had earlier been described as probably having been made by people using animal claws (Hallam 1971). They were found to be finger grooves that were overgrown by a more recent deposit of reprecipitated carbonate, an alteration phenomenon also present at several other sites.

This find suggested to us that there may be much more to be found in Australian caves than prehistorians had assumed and we began to focus our attention on another major limestone region, the well-watered Tertiary limestone karst of Mt Gambier in the lower southeast of South Australia, to fill that distributional void between the Nullarbor karst and the limestone cliffs of Buchan. Until then the Mt Gambier area had not received any attention as a potential rock art region, although it had long been known to possess one of the continent's largest deposits of Pleistocene stone implements and *débitage*. Late in 1980 we promptly located two caves near Kongorong which contain several different types of rock markings, including some of obviously human origin. We subjected Malangine and Koongine Caves, as we named these two sites, to an intensive investigation that proved especially productive at Malangine Cave. At least three generations of petroglyphs are present at this key site and its sequence of rock art is stratified, i.e. physically separated by laminated deposits of cutaneous carbonate speleothems. We know of no other such site in the world and it is expected that our program of radiometric dating (via radiocarbon and uranium/thorium) will provide approximate absolute dating of the petroglyph sequence once it is completed (Bednarik in press a, b).

The Malangine sequence, commencing with finger flutings such as those in Koonalda Cave, has been found in several other caves in the following years and it was inevitable that the earliest component should attract our special interest. Similar finger scrawls had long been known in caves in western Europe, where they also precede any other rock art they are associated with. We re-investigated most of the French sites of 'macaronis', as the parietal finger markings are termed in Europe, and this comparative study prompted several new ideas on both the European and the Australian finger line traditions. For example we obtained important new evidence in the cave Baume Latrone in southern France.

In early 1983 the Parietal Markings Project was joined by GDA who, as a resident of the Mt Gambier district, was able to commence a systematic search of the several hundred caves in that area, assisted by other members of AURA as well as by members of the Cave Exploration Group of South Australia. By the end of 1984 well over one hundred caves had been thoroughly examined in the area and human markings are now known to exist in twenty-one of them. Most of the new sites were located by GDA, some of them have already been described preliminarily. Finger lines occur at all except two of the cave art sites presently known in the vicinity of Mt Gambier. The Karake Style (Aslin and Bednarik 1984a), represented by deeply carved, always nonfigurative motifs, occurs in nine of them. One of the most striking examples of it is the gallery recently located in Paroong Cave. Here, a large sample of Karake motifs occupies a single cave passage of little more than ten metres length. Vertical walls are completely covered by a continuous maze of very deeply carved patterns reaching to four metres above the present floor (see plates). In order to ensure the continued preservation of the visually spectacular markings we have requested the closure of this important cave (see letter from the South Australian Heritage Conservation Branch, *Letters to the Editor* section, this issue). Malangine Cave has already been closed with the help of the Millicent Field Naturalists Society, and Koongine Cave is expected to follow.

For all other sites, however, the only protection at this stage is that derived from our policy of strict confidentiality. In many cases the locations of galleries are only known to members of this project. Fortunately many of the markings are quite difficult to detect, some are located in extensive cave systems, others are barely discernible as a result of the multitude of modificatory processes they have survived. Galleries vary significantly in size, from about one square metre (Aslin and Bednarik 1984b) to more than one hundred square metres (Aslin and Bednarik 1984c), and some petroglyphs are so interwoven with animal markings that differentiation is an expert task. In most cases the decorated cave walls and ceilings are very fragile and highly vulnerable to damage.

One of the principal findings of the project so far is that wall and ceiling markings occur

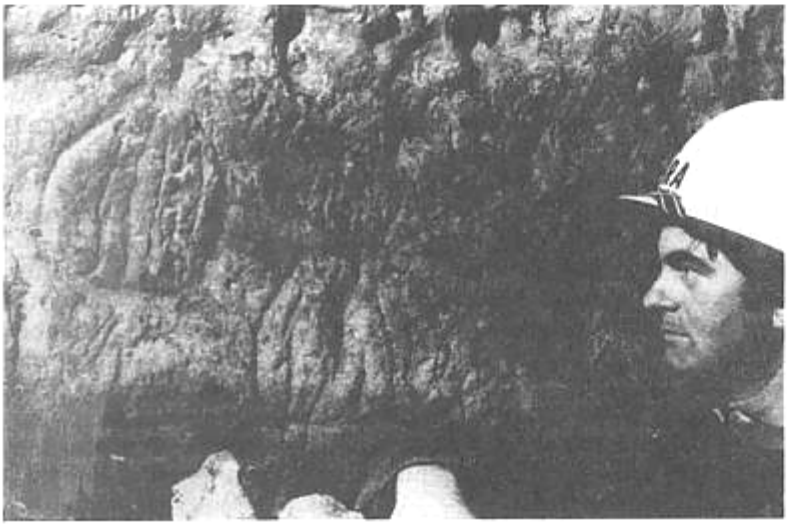

Plate 2.
G. D. Aslin, who discovered the rock art in Paroong Cave, examines small circles with internal vertical barring, a distinctive motif of Paroong Cave.

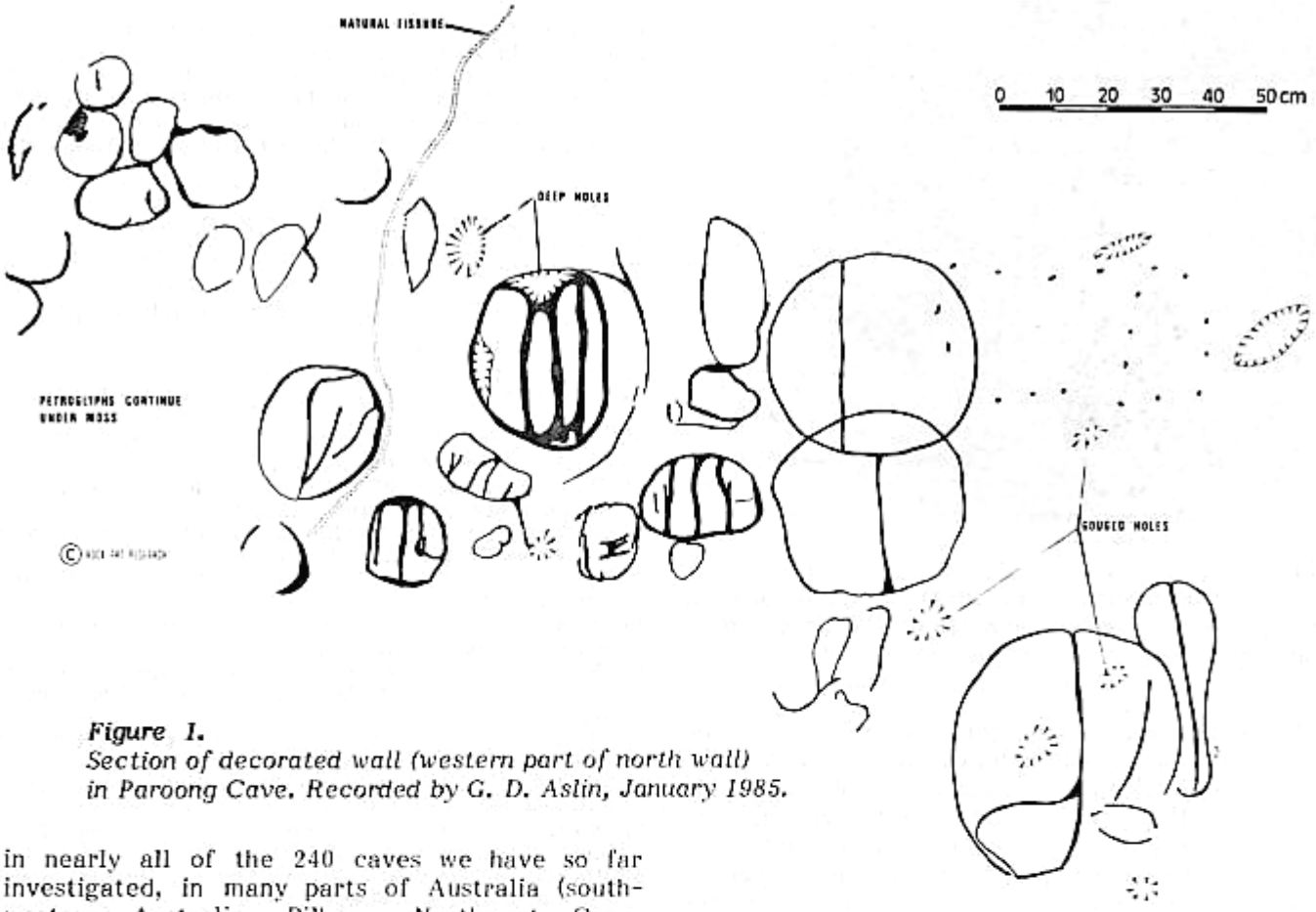

Figure 1.
Section of decorated wall (western part of north wall) in Paroong Cave. Recorded by G. D. Aslin, January 1985.

in nearly all of the 240 caves we have so far investigated, in many parts of Australia (southwestern Australia, Pilbara, Northwest Cape, Nullarbor Plain, Blue Mountains, Buchan area and Tasmania, besides the Mt Gambier area) and in several overseas countries. But it must be emphasised that the vast majority of them, certainly more than 99.9 percent, are natural marks, mostly those occasioned by animals. Markings caused by plant action or by processes that can be summarised as 'geomorphological' also occur in caves but they are far less frequent (Bednarik, in press c). As in many other areas of their discipline, archaeologists must restrain their eagerness to accept nonarchaeological phenomena as archaeological evidence.

During 1984, when the number and density of cave art sites near Mt Gambier began to rival that at Les Eyzies (France), it became clear to us that one of the world's largest known bodies of cave art was being discovered at Mt Gambier. Australian cave art is emerging as one of the most fascinating phenomena of prehistoric culture. Although often very complex, it is always completely noniconic and largely unstructured, offering little scope for conventional stylistic analysis. While the conceptual proximity of European cave art to our own world view has often been cited as its most surprising attribute, the paramount characteristic of the Pleistocene cave art of southern Australia is probably its cultural remoteness. While the European caves remind us of the uniformity of the human experience, in the Australian caves we face the externalisations of human concepts

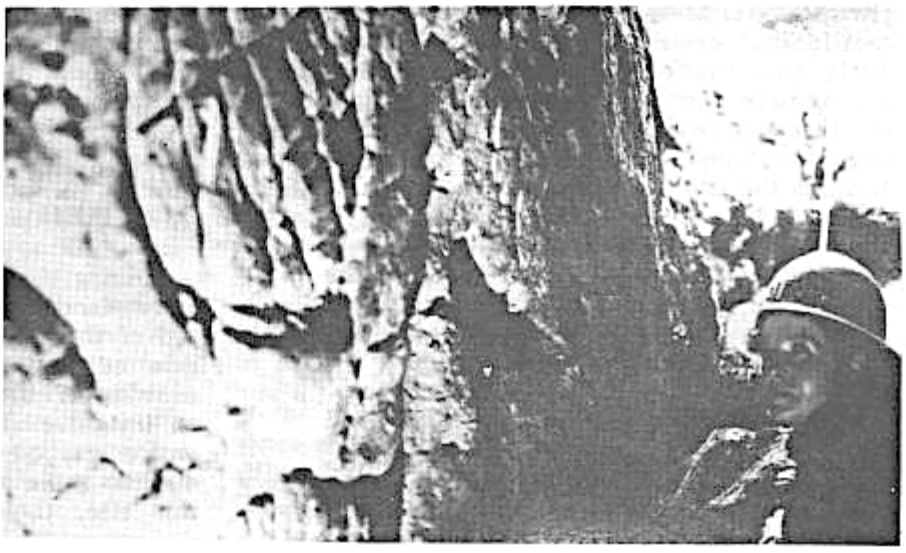

Plate 3.
Large, deeply carved circle with internal lozenge lattice, western end of south wall, Paroong Cave.

Plate 4.
Members of a very successful AURA team; Paroong Cave. An engraved circle maze can be discerned on upper left.

of reality that differ significantly from the one we regard as the only valid cosmic model. A particularly significant development evoked by this project is the formulation of new theories concerning the advent of the modern human intellect, some of which have already been published (Bednarik 1984a, b), while other reports are being prepared at present (Bednarik in press d, e).

Australian cave art does not consist of one single tradition. At Mt Gambier we recognise three chronologically and stylistically discrete traditions, of which only the oldest is found elsewhere - at least in caves. This is reinforced by our recent discovery of new galleries of the earliest tradition in Western Australia (north and south of Perth; Bednarik in prep.). Multiple finger lines on formerly soft surface deposits, and linear markings engraved with pieces of local limestone, representing the most archaic artistic tradition known, are of uniform characteristics at sites along the entire south coast of the Australian continent, over a distance of some 3000 kilometres. This tradition is so far not securely dated, but is probably older than 20 000 years (Wright 1971: 22-8). It is followed by deeply carved motifs that resemble the archaic petroglyphs at Early Man Shelter (Rosenfeld *et al.* 1981) which appear to be over 15 000 years old, and the rock art of Tasmania which has been suggested to have been introduced before the island became detached towards the end of the Pleistocene (Aslin and Bednarik 1984a). We call this the Karake Style, after the cave where it was first identified. Finally there is a much younger tradition in some of the caves which consists of shallow incisions executed with single strokes, and which, according to our preliminary dating, pertains to the Holocene.

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