

THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF DEPUCH ISLAND, NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA

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(Figs. 1-292) (Plates IX-XV) Manuscript received 14.4.60

Depuch Island was named by the Baudin Expedition (Peron and Freycinet, 1824) in 1801 in honour of Louis Depuch, mineralogist of the expedition, who died at L'Île de France in 1803, the year in which the Forestier's Archipelago was discovered and named. It is by far the most prominent island in the archipelago, all of the others being low and sandy. M. Ronsard, the engineer, spent almost a week examining Depuch Island, which he recorded as being in lat. 20° 35' 30", and long. 115° 12' 50", and between four and five miles in length.

None of the scientists were allowed to accompany him or to land, and this omission probably explains why the remarkable series of rock engravings was not noted by the expedition. Ronsard remarked on the columnar basalt structure of the island, with the prisms lying at all angles and, in some places, forming pavements. The colour of the rock he noted to be bluish grey, and the texture very fine and compact. Only one quadruped was seen, which was thought to be a dog, and one of the seamen saw a small kangaroo¹. A few kinds of flycatchers and waterfowl were seen, and also a brown serpent, about 5 ft. in length, of the boa kind. Various insects and shells complete the fauna recorded on the island. A small quantity of ferruginous water was obtained from hollows, where beautiful shrubs and trees formed pleasant groves; elsewhere there was absolute sterility. Ronsard was impressed by the melancholy and monotony of the island, and the discomfort of the walking. No natives were seen, but fireplaces and newly-broken pieces of basalt proved that they visited the island.

H.M.S. Beagle was the next vessel to visit Depuch to obtain water. Captain Wickham (1842, whose description was republished by Stokes in 1846) said the island was a vast pile of reddish-coloured blocks, eight miles in circumference and 514 ft. high, with an even silhouette from seaward. Mr. Bynoe, from the Beagle, found a reservoir of water in the main valley, called Watering Valley by Wickham, which runs into the heart of the island from the northern end of Beagle Beach. As no rafts² were seen in this area, it was presumed that the natives walked³ across the sandbanks at low tide to visit the islands, of which Depuch appeared to be their favourite resort, to secure turtles and fish. Several huts were seen on the island, but no natives, and those observed on the nearby mainland fled immediately an attempt was made to approach them. Another purpose of their visits was to "exercise their talents for drawing representations of whatever they had seen upon the flat surface of the rocks. This they do by removing the hard red outer coating, and baring to view the natural colour of the greenstone according to the outline they have traced". Thirteen figures were published out of the 94 listed, and apparently drawn, by Wickham, who took an unusually keen interest in this art during "many an excursion over that dreary heap of desolation".

Depuch Island, called Womalantha by the natives, is situated between Port Hedland and Roebourne (in Nickol Bay) on the north-west coast of Australia. It is opposite the "ghost" port of Balla Balla, which is now almost completely obliterated. Peawah Hill, some six miles to the south on the mainland, and on which are some engravings I did not have time to record, is a similar igneous outcrop. The rock is identified as an epidiorite or altered dolerite (David's geological map of Australia).

There are several fine sandy beaches on the island. Petri and Schulz (1951) said there was no water there, but it is available in small pools along the rocky shore above high-water mark, particularly on the southern side of Anchor Hill, directly below the engravings. An abundant supply is available from large pools in Watering Valley. The island was declared a sanctuary in 1958 for the protection of the engravings and fauna.

Smyth (1878, I, 292-3, figs. 44-46) mistakenly described the art as that of painting, an error repeated by Mathew (1893, 42). Mathew (1895) obtained information from Messrs. A. A. Hall and W. Byron about the art which corroborated Wickham's original account. Davidson (1936, 1952) discussed the techniques, styles and subjects, and McCarthy (1958) referred briefly to them.

¹ Both were probably rock wallabies.

² Richardson (1886, 298) said the natives of this area sat "astride" a log of wood and propelled it with their hands.

³ Depuch Island cannot be reached in this way at present, owing to a deep channel along the southern shore.