

Petroglyphs of Dampier—Foreword

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When Michel Lorblanchet began his substantive research at the Pilbara's (then) Dampier Island, there were few professional rock art scholars in Australia. They were supported by a few enthusiastic private researchers, most of whom attended the memorable conference convened in 1974 by the imaginative, newly appointed Principal of the (then) Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Peter Ucko. This comprehensive and extended meeting reviewed the state of knowledge in various Aboriginal studies disciplines and suggested goals for future research within Aboriginal Australia. Several seminal publications resulted, most relevantly, the art volume edited by Ucko. These publications set Aboriginal studies within a global perspective and illuminated the potential for research.

Michel Lorblanchet, an authority on European Palaeolithic cave art, was unable to take up his Institute appointment in time to attend the 1974 meeting because of commitments in France, but had sent his paper on Palaeolithic art and this was included in the edited conference proceedings (Ucko, 1977). During his employment as an Institute Research Consultant he initiated fieldwork at Dampier, spending the large part of one year there (1974–1976), and again in 1983. The definitive report of that research is presented in this volume.

Documented interest in the archaeology of the Dampier Archipelago began in the 1960s when local workers reported on magnificent cultural remains they found there. In 1974 Lorblanchet, bringing his professional training to bear, set about applying recording techniques and analytical processes to understand the prehistory of two valleys within the Dampier art complex. Among his innovations were a critical eye for detail, a systematic approach to recording and identification of the value of recording colour contrast (how sharply does a petroglyph visually stand out from its support).

Supported by photography and use of the Mastersix cell, this provided empirical data on the re-marking of specific petroglyphs.

This report identifies features concerning the relationship between the cultural landscape and the rock art that remain as the benchmark for later work within the Dampier Archipelago. It constitutes the only study which has made a major record of all cultural material present on the block slopes, not just of the petroglyphs. It provides the data and analytical evidence for patterns in the rock art that Lorblanchet had only summarized in previously articles, and presents a specific study of the treatment of motifs, not just a bland report listing subject numbers and position. It indicates that children were involved in production, and documents evidence of the re-marking of images, of the renovation over time of the subject.

This book brings together the work undertaken by a scholar who visited Australia to learn, just as much as to share his own knowledge. Experiences and skills developed here in Australia, not least his time with Aboriginal people, he took back to France and applied to understanding the Palaeolithic cave art of his own country. It emphasises the cross-fertilization that can happen when different approaches to rock art research are implemented, and is an excellent example of on-going collaboration between French and Australian scholarship in this area.

For more than 30 years his documentation of Skew Valley and Gum Tree Valley has lain in the archives of AIATSIS. Too often the works carried out by scholars remain inaccessible to a wider public. It is commendable that Lorblanchet, in collaboration with Ken Mulvaney and Graeme Ward, have completed this manuscript and images, to combine into a lavishly illustrated volume.