

Petroglyphs of Dampier—General Conclusions

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In 1974, fresh from the Palaeolithic painted caves of my country, I was first sent to Dampier by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies where I was employed as a research consultant. It is probably in part due to the extent of my ignorance that I allowed myself to take on this heavy responsibility. The institute expected from me nothing less than a total archaeological appraisal of the importance of the Dampier rock art, its potential for further research and future conservation measures, together with specific proposals on methods of study that might be undertaken! Without my knowing it, I had been sent directly to one of the more prestigious sites of world rock art!

The person who alerted the Institute the necessity of such a mission was Mr Enzo Virili, an engineer with the Dampier Salt Company. He had sent reports to the Institute, and had participated in a conference organized in 1974 by the Institute's Principal, Dr Peter Ucko (Virili, 1974).

With the benefit of hindsight, what I have retained from my stay in Dampier and in Australia is firstly the tremendous scientific and human education that I received during my work on this continent and the friendly collaboration that I established with all the institutions and personalities I met, as well as with the members of my field team, in which I had for a time an Aboriginal assistant, 'Ben'.¹ I have already reported these happy collaborations in my introduction. Recently, this period of collaboration has reached an apotheosis since for more than four years I have worked in the preparation of this book with the constant help of Dr Graeme Ward (AIATSIS), leading to its completion through translation of my text into English and his long and patient editorial work and scientific help, along with the good advice of Dr Ken Mulvaney (author of a recent thesis on Dampier rock art), and the funding for the publication provided by Rio Tinto. It is under auspicious circumstances that this book has been born.

In responding to what was asked of me in 1974, I proposed a method to study the Skew Valley and Gum Tree Valley petroglyphs (Lorblanchet, 1977) and supported my proposal by an example; that is, by undertaking myself the first work that I envisaged: an archaeological study to reveal the exceptional wealth of the area's cultural heritage. This would confirm that the rock art of the Dampier Archipelago was one of the most important areas—to world heritage status in terms of its prehistoric art—since it has hundreds of thousands of depictions associated with a variety of habitats and artefacts. This assemblage highlights the close links established between human communities and their natural environments over more than twenty millennia. There is an inexhaustible field of study that will continue to reveal the multiple ways in which human groups have adapted to environmental changes by altering their ways of life and cultures.

The study method that I proposed initially reflected the vastness of the object of study; it was incommensurate with the European Palaeolithic cave paintings that I had studied previously. It needed to be based on a method permitting a prompt assessment of the scope for future research. I considered, in fact, this work as a large-scale test, an introductory study that eventually would develop over an extended time within a collective, multi-disciplinary and international framework.

My method was based on the following main points that I reiterate briefly here:

- partial excavation of the shell midden in Skew Valley. This was intended to establish quickly an initial basic chronology: to ascertain the stratigraphy and to uncover carved rocks buried under the shells that then could be radiocarbon dated;