

**Main** European and Macassan ships and other watercraft are frequent in contact rock-art throughout coastal Australia. This example, near the East Alligator River, Arnhem Land, Australia, is contemporary with a large body of rock-art that has both traditional and introduced subject matter.

PHOTO: Paul S.C. Taçon

# Illustrating the past

## The rock art of Southeast Asia

From the bison of Lascaux to the intriguing figures from the Sahara, the prehistoric rock art of Europe and Africa is undeniably alluring.

But what about ancient rock art from other parts of the world?

Although it tends to be forgotten, Southeast Asia boasts a unique corpus of material, and almost as much rock art as is known from Europe and Africa combined.

Now, a raft of major new international projects, brought together as part of a new initiative named *Eagleandowl*, is seeking to investigate this rock art and bring it to the world's attention. Here the *Eagleandowl* teams reveal the scope of their work across Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and deep into China.



### PICTURING CHANGE

#### Australia's contact art

**O**ur new initiative, *Eagleandowl*, is a partnership between individuals, local communities, universities, institutions, and governments. Our aim is to explore and promote the rock art of Southeast Asia. Each of our projects is designed to combine the keen eye of the eagle-artist with the wisdom of the owl-scientist (hence our name!). By bringing together new art and science approaches to rock art and its attendant archaeology, we aim to

*Above* Location map showing sites mentioned in the text.

make innovative insights into human evolution, culture, and even the more recent past of Southeast Asia. Much of this art has been forgotten so it is our ambition to bring it to much wider audiences.

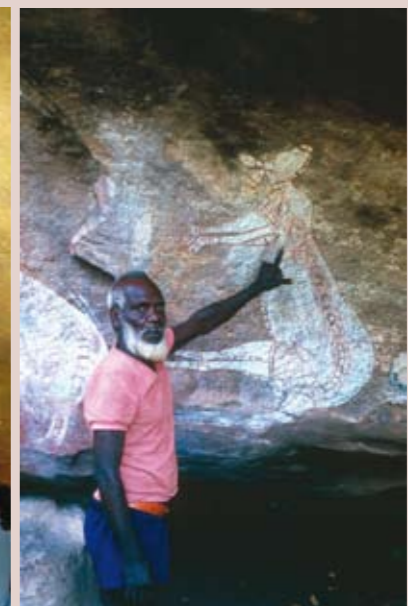
Of all the regions we are investigating, the prehistoric art of Australia is perhaps the best known to the general public. Evidence for indigenous Australian art stretches back at least 50,000 years. It covers a wide range of traditions and appears on a myriad of media including wood carving, body ornamentation, stylised weapons and tools, as well as rock surfaces. Anthropologists report that many Aboriginal groups today use art for multiple purposes, whether to mark territory, order politics, document clan relationships, record history, or to tell stories about the Dreamtime – the epic story of their creation. But what of the art left by previous generations at over 100,000 sites?

In early 2008, *Eagleandowl* launched a new national Australian rock art research project called *Picturing Change*. Its aim is to investigate the rock art produced by Aboriginal people since the recent arrival of Asians and Europeans in different parts of Australia – a time, as the project's name suggests, of great change to the locals. Until now, such art has not been comprehensively studied in Australia, with many previous researchers entirely dismissing it.

This 'contact art' began 500 to 150 years ago, depending on the area, and continued



PHOTOS: Paul S.C. Taçon

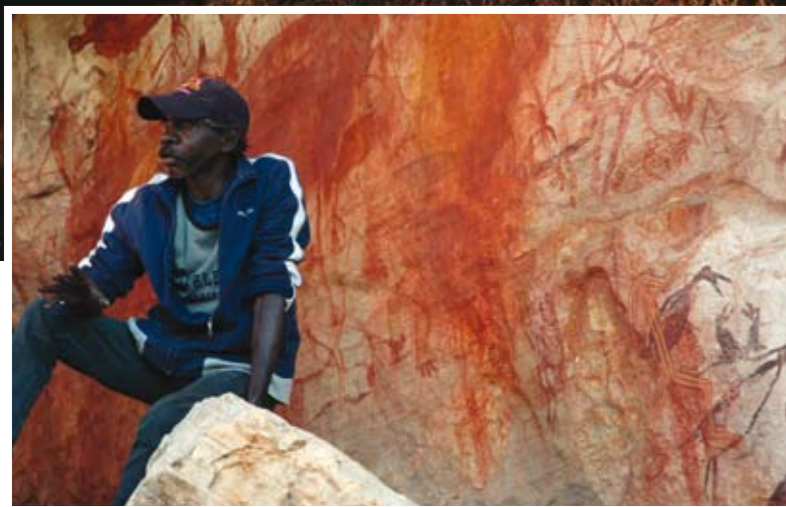


*Far left* Horses are another common theme in Australian contact rock art. This life-size horse, from northwest of Sydney, is one of the earliest from southeast Australia. *Left* Bobby Nganjmirra was a prolific bark painter until his death in the early 1990s. He was also a traditional rock-painter, and this kangaroo from Arnhem Land was made by him in the late 1940s.

PHOTO: Tristram Miller



PHOTO: Sally K May



**Above** Dr Matthew Kelleher next to an engraving of the Eagle Ancestor on a platform discovered in late 2006, Wollemi National Park, New South Wales, Australia (photo by Tristram Miller).

**Left** Wilfrid Nawirridj explaining the cultural significance of rock-art at Injalak, Arnhem Land, Australia (photo by Sally K May).

virtually to the present. Such art tends to tell stories about the issues and dilemmas involved in the arrival of new people, as well as reiterating old beliefs about the land and indigenous culture. *Picturing Change* brings together four existing projects under a new theme, with field research being undertaken by Paul Taçon and Sally K May of Australia's Griffith University, June Ross of the University of New England, and Alistair Paterson of the University of Western Australia. They are each investigating one of four widely separated parts of Australia: the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area of New South Wales, Central Australia, the Pilbara of Western Australia, and western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Their aim is to record the images, gather oral histories, and so ultimately build up a comprehensive account of Australia's recent indigenous rock art.

Prior to the project's launch, each scholar had recorded many exceptional and culturally important rock art sites. One highlight was the 2006 discovery by Taçon's team of archaeologists and

Aboriginal community members of the largest known Blue Mountains engraved platform in rugged, wild Wollemi National Park, near Sydney. This has spectacular images of varying age covering an area the size of a football field. One of the most remarkable and culturally significant figures at the site is the only known life-size engraving of the 'Eagle Ancestor'.

According to the oral histories, this is a key Ancestral Being for the Aboriginal people of the greater Sydney region. A drawn representation, with additions made during the contact period, was also found at a nearby shelter site. These images are essential to the region's history since they verify late 1800s oral accounts of a local Aboriginal presence, and because they demonstrate that Aboriginal people were interacting with ancestral sites in rugged areas near Sydney long after the arrival of Europeans. Recording this contact art, and bringing attention to it, has been a fulfilling pursuit for the researchers who are keen to give this forgotten art the recognition it deserves.



**SCOPING JUNGLE ART**

**Above** Location map showing sites mentioned in the text.

**The First National Malaysian rock-art project**

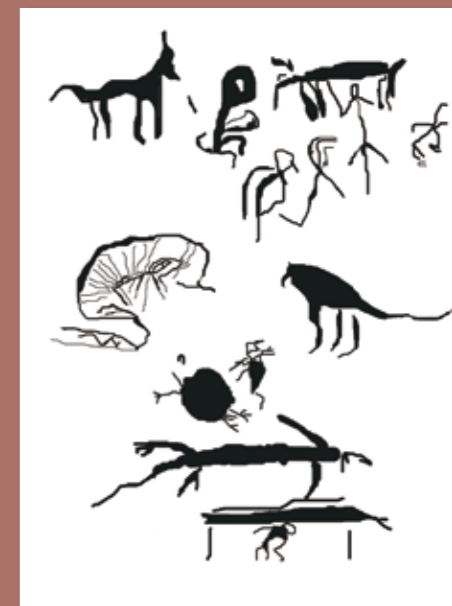
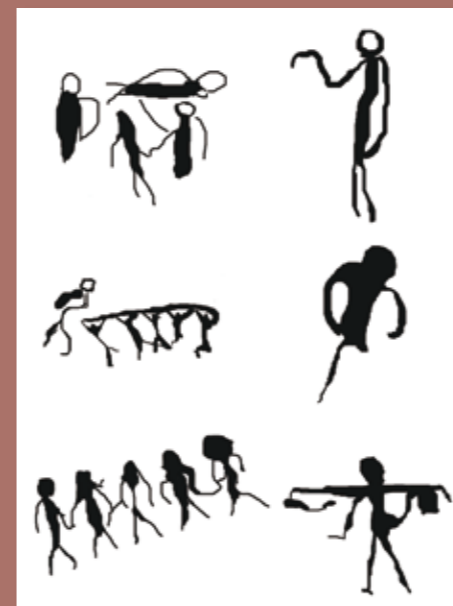
**M**oving north from Australia to Malaysia, there exists yet more contact and pre-contact rock art. Significant sites have been found both on the Peninsula and in Sarawak and Sabah, on the island of Borneo. Sabah is the northeast portion of the island of Borneo, and is along with Sarawak to its west, a state of Malaysia. Although various rock art sites have been recorded by archaeologists

over the past 90 years - including art from the famed Niah limestone caves complex (see CWA 2) - only brief reports exist with no detailed scientific studies.

Therefore, in 2007 The Centre for Archaeological Research Malaysia (CARM), Universiti Sains Malaysia, launched the first scientific Malaysian national rock art project. CARM began the project by mapping the rock art in the Lenggong limestone caves complex and surveying for unrecorded sites in eastern Sabah.

The Lenggong Valley contains some of Malaysia and South East Asia's oldest human occupation sites such as Kota Tampan dating to 74,000 years ago, and includes a number of cave rock-art sites depicting everyday activities. Some of these sites contain rock art that is clearly ancient but there is one notable site, Gua Badak, that also contains more recent contact period charcoal drawings showing cars and men wearing hats. Some sites show abstract representations, like geometric patterns.

The work in Sabah - some illustrated here for the first time anywhere - shows the range of motifs in this important and emerging body of art. Among the many intriguing discoveries made by the project, led by Mokhtar Saidin of the Universiti Sains Malaysia, is the first engraved figures known from Sabah. Documenting them has been no small feat: they come from the east portion of Sabah, which is covered in wet, dense jungle and is very difficult to access. Having



**Left** Variety of human figures in charcoal from the limestone caves of Lenggong, Perak, Malaysia. **Above** Charcoal geometric images from Lenggong, Perak, Malaysia. **Right** Charcoal animals and human-like figures, Lenggong, Perak, Malaysia.

DRAWINGS: Mokhtar Saidin

**Top** Charcoal drawings of animals and watercraft discovered in 2007, East Sabah, Malaysia. Note the distinctive inverted triangular bodies of the human figures – comparable to the engraving below.

**Bottom** Engraved human figure and watercraft from a cave site discovered in 2007, East Sabah, Malaysia.



PHOTOS: Mokhtar Saidin

forged their way through the tropical canopy, avoiding the various reticulated pythons, they found engravings just inside a cave. These engravings show a human figure with a characteristic triangular body and a watercraft. The work is still in its early stages, however these engravings have the potential to be ancient. Additional charcoal drawings show stylised animals and human figures, as well as humans in a boat, again with the distinctive triangular bodies. Some charcoal samples were obtained from these images, which will be radiocarbon dated, while much further survey and recording is planned.

Finally, the rock art is again gaining much needed attention and study. In November 2007, a new collaboration was forged between Mokhtar Saidin, Paul Taçon, and Barry Lewis (of Trent & Peak Archaeology) to advance the scientific study of Malaysian rock art, with a commitment to promote and support rock-art research across Malaysia, including further work both in the Lennong Valley and Sabah.

Having forged their way through the tropical canopy, avoiding the various reticulated pythons, they found engravings just inside a cave.

## ILLUMINATING INDONESIAN ART

### Using rock art to revisit the past

The balmy islands of Indonesia, just to the south of Malaysia, tell the same story: they, too, boast significant rock art that has been woefully under-researched, especially by researchers outside the region. Yet during the past few years, local interest has intensified with important discoveries at the remote cave sites of Grotte de Gua Marsi and Grotte d'Illas Kenceng in Kalimantan, Borneo. For example in the year 2000, researchers found multiple hand stencils dating to around 6000 years ago within the caves of Borneo. Recent work by Indonesian rock art researcher Engkos Kosasih has done much to enhance the complex issues of regional development of the various rock art styles that extend across the region and current research



projects are locating around five major sites each year.

It is impossible to write of one, unique Indonesian style, for many of the regional prehistoric rock art assemblages display a distinct style and form that sometimes even extend into the historical periods. Thus, prehistoric imagery - such as stylised anthropomorphs, human ancestral images and footprints - is sometimes adopted by more recent artists who also carved text onto rock surfaces. A good example of this was recently studied by George Nash of Bristol University, UK.

In 2003, George Nash reported an historic rock-art assemblage from western Java, dating from the later 1st millennium AD onwards, at a time when most of Southeast Asia was influenced by people using Pallava and Sanskrit script. Pallava and Sanskrit are understood to have originated in India, some 350 to 400 miles away, with Sanskrit as the later, classical, language and script of India, and the liturgical language of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Indeed, at around the 8th and 9th centuries AD, in western Java, the massive Buddhist temple sites of Borobudur and Prembanan were in use.

George Nash's work centred on six large unique stones from this period. Each stone occupied a prominent area of the landscape, and though providing a fragmented record, are adorned with illuminating text. Each stone conveys a series of political and economic statements used to exercise legal and taxation information as well as acting as boundary markers for the local nobility.

The stones are now displayed in western Java's Bandung Museum.

**Above** The red dots mark new rock art discoveries made since 1995 in Indonesia (after Nash).

**Below** The Kampong Gradak Stone, now standing in the courtyard of Bandung Museum.

**Inset** Detail of the representative imagery on the Kampong Gradak Stone.

However, the most ornate and complex stone within this group once stood near Kampong Gradak, west of Bogor and is inscribed with two forms of the local Pallava-Grantha script with the main text consisting of four lines of metrical Sanskrit (written in Anustubh, a regional form of Sanskrit used here during the latter part of the 1st millennium AD). The text appears to date from the 5th century AD. Associated with the text are two incised footprints that are located on top of the stone. Above the toes on each foot is a spider-like image that may



PHOTOS: George Nash

PHOTO: George Nash



Tarmanagara'. This stone would have probably stood on a boundary, displaying land ownership and is perhaps 12th century or earlier. Text sections from this stone also appear on an 8th century rounded boulder nearby. The footprints behave as an absolute seal and appear to be a universal symbol that was also used in the European theatre 2000 years previously by Bronze Age people.

Within the same collection and analysed by Nash, is a sandstone slab with an unusual textual arrangement. The text is of Pallava script (arranged in Tamil style) and represents a religious taxation statement.

As can be seen, within Indonesia there are many opportunities for both research in areas not yet explored for rock art and on known examples. This rock art, and art from other sites in Java, portrays a society that is both literate and complex. More importantly, the meaning from each of the stones shows a society that is stratified: the stones communicate who owns what, and explains the protocol (usually in the form of taxes) that should be observed. Clearly, this sort of art is more than illuminating!

represent personal insignia. The text, positioned below the footprints, states that 'This pair of footprints, like that of Vishnu, belongs to the illustrious King Purnavarman, the lord of

**Above** Pre-14th century legal transaction over land ownership in Pallava script.



## ART OF THE DEEP PAST

### Rock art of Myanmar and China

In 2004, Paul Taçon and others began to investigate the little-known prehistoric heritage of Myanmar (Burma). Myanmar is a fascinating country with over a hundred ethnic minorities, rich archaeological sites dated to the past few thousand years, and spectacular landscapes. However, little research into prehistoric sites or rock art has taken place since World War II. Field research highlighted the potential of this area for investigations into human evolution as Myanmar's rich cave sites are situated on the route anatomically modern humans would have taken on their way to Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia.

A number of intriguing rock art discoveries were also made, including the first cupule petroglyph site (consisting of at least 346 circular cup marks) in mainland East Asia, and what appears to be an extremely old pigment site consisting of faded hand and string-like prints high on a wall near the entrance to a deep cave. Previously, string and other 'thrown' object prints were only known from a handful of sites over 10,000 years

of age in northern Australia, so this discovery hints at a possible ancient widespread tradition.

At some sites in the Keep River region, Kakadu and Arnhem Land, of northern Australia, there are red ochre prints high on shelter walls. It appears they were made by someone soaking string, vines or some other plant fibre in red paint - made using ochre, water and possibly other substances - and then thrown against the wall, often as high as possible. The result is a red print of varying shape, sometimes with lots of stringy bits, other times with a more flattened ball shape, depending on how the soaked object hit the wall.

With the current political conditions in Burma, the archaeologists' work is now on hold but they have initiated a second project in nearby Yunnan Province, China, which is set to run until 2012. This project involves a multi-disciplinary team of Chinese and Australian scientists led by Ji Xueping, Yunnan Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology (YICRA), and Darren Curnoe, University of New South Wales (UNSW).

Their focus is on the late Pleistocene (about 50,000 to 10,000 years ago) evidence from Yunnan Province, the most ethnically diverse part of China. This includes human skeletal remains that allows them to study human evolution, geoarchaeological material that allows



**Left** The diverse Gua Tambun rock paintings, Malaysia, may illustrate connections between many different groups of people as well as change over time. **Below** Gua Tambun rock paintings with 'x-ray' detail, Malaysia, resemble some rock art of India, China and northern Australia.



PHOTOS: Barry Lewis

## ■ Southeast Asia

a study of the climate and environmental history of the region, archaeological excavation and rock art from which they can investigate changes in material culture and symbolic expression. Paul Taçon and Yang Decong head up the rock art investigations, with fieldwork to date what appears to be China's oldest rock art planned for late 2008.

Preliminary research suggests Yunnan may have been a key entry point into China for anatomically modern humans and that they may have met other archaic human groups in the area. It also suggests that during periods of harsh climate, Yunnan offered refuges for plants, animals and human groups. Indeed, Yunnan today is not only ethnically diverse but also contains China's largest range of plants and animals. Work on the rock art is trying to unravel the dates, the animals depicted, the likely environment, and the relationship between the various rock art sites (and, by extension, the people who left the art). As such, the art should provide a key to unlocking some of the secret's of this region's past.

### ARTFUL THINKING

## Raising rock art awareness

**A**s this round up of the latest research reveals, exciting new discoveries are being made by the year and much is to be gained from a careful study of this art. However, rock art has often taken a side-position in archaeology. It is notoriously difficult to date, is often hard to record, difficult to assess, and consequently lends itself to some of archaeology's craziest analyses. Thankfully, scholars are now recognising the importance of the global rock art resource. We are understanding how and why it should be recorded. There are also agreed codes of conduct with most investigators believing that indigenous groups, especially those who still covet the art, should be involved in the recording process.


For example, Sally K May (whose Australian work is described above) has been conducting a unique rock art field school in western Arnhem Land, part of Australia's Northern Territory,

“Our research is demonstrating the scope and breadth of human creativity in Southeast Asia as never before.”

The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus and Trent & Peak Archaeology in conjunction with Universiti Sains Malaysia and most of the authors listed below are contributing to the *World Rock Art, Landscapes and Creativity* course (see page 39 for more details).

since 2004. Here she involves the local Aboriginal elders alongside international experts. It is the only field school of its kind in the region and attracts students from across the world. Students learn field archaeological skills while at the same time developing other practical and personal skills needed to conduct research with Aboriginal communities in remote areas. This is just one of a range of new collaborative research projects and courses across Southeast Asia that demonstrate a long-term investment in the future of Southeast Asia's rock art heritage.

Southeast Asia contains a unique corpus of material, with almost as much rock art as Africa and Europe combined, yet there are many areas where rock art research has not yet taken place. Each year exciting new discoveries are made, highlighting the region's rich potential. These are early days and we are delighted to share the teams' vision in these pages. *Eagleandowl* wants to raise awareness of this special, yet relatively unknown, heritage and inspire others to help manage and protect it for future generations.

*Eagleandowl's* rock art research is demonstrating the scope and breadth of human creativity in Southeast Asia as never before. Many fascinating stories about culture contact, cultural change and adaptation to shifting climate are unfolding. This work is revealing that Southeast Asia is a region where art has always been fundamental to human expression and identity despite great cultural and environmental variability. 

#### Authors

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