

YENGO COUNTRY



a source of cultural & spiritual awakening

Garry Jones 1993 / 2009

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acknowledging the input of Peter Crousen,
fieldwork partner from 1978 onwards, along
with that of Paul Gordon, our Aboriginal brother
(*Nyampah* language group, *Wongaipuo*n dialect,
Galugeilu 'stone people' clan), 1989 onwards.

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When Australian Aboriginal art is spoken of these days, most people probably think of various examples of portable artworks-cum-commodities. Especially of bark paintings from the Northern Territory and of dot-paintings on canvas from Central Australia. The intricate and usually highly stylized and pattern-based nature of such artworks make them truly vibrant and visually engaging. Being quite decorous *and* portable has meant that they have now also become readily accessible to a world-wide audience already accustomed to appreciating tribal artefacts and imagery. So influential have been these examples that they would appear to dominate, in large part, prevailing views of what constitutes 'Aboriginality' and its artistic expressions. Along with certain ideas concerning the ancient spiritual traditions of the Australian continent as a whole.

Yet, despite features shared across that broader context, the enduring beliefs and the ancient image-making of the tribal peoples of south-eastern Australia remain to this day significantly different. Monotheism centered on the supreme deity *Byarme* and the decidedly non-portable nature of what are quite possibly exceedingly old rock art sites - and which were, prior to European occupation, much visited places along age-old pathways of spiritual pilgrimage (the so-called 'Walkabout') - give the south-eastern traditions their own unique character.

Unfortunately, these relatively little-known and barely-understood traditions have been largely neglected in scholarly circles over the past fifty years or so. For a variety of reasons. Surprisingly, they have never been adequately examined nor properly appreciated from the point of view of artists, black or white... Until fairly recently, that is.

The *Binghai* ('brother') Aboriginal Sites Team has existed since Easter 1976. The team was based at the University of Newcastle and attached to *Wollotuka* Aboriginal Education Unit until 2000 but now operates independent of any formal organisation or institution. Its co-leaders include Paul Gordon (*Nyampah* man), Peter Crousen (artist and educator) and yours truly (artist and formerly lecturer in fine art). The team's fieldwork is concentrated in and around *Yengo* National Park, 120 kilometres to the north-west of the city of Sydney. The *Binghai* title was bestowed on the team by appropriate Aboriginal men in 1990.

I wish to take this opportunity to publicly thank the various team-members who have selflessly contributed so much to the fieldwork program of the team over the many years of its existence, their fresh and unique observations having always been welcomed, and I hereby dedicate this revised online version of the original article to the late Doctors Lenny de Silva and Patricia Vinnicombe, each of whom so generously gave of their time and helped to shape our knowledge, our understanding and our improving approaches to recording sites.

Garry Jones, *Wollombi*, February 2009

Note Spellings of some Aboriginal words, place-names and tribal groups are written phonetically here in accordance with pronunciations suggested by Aboriginal friends and teachers; others follow previous authors.



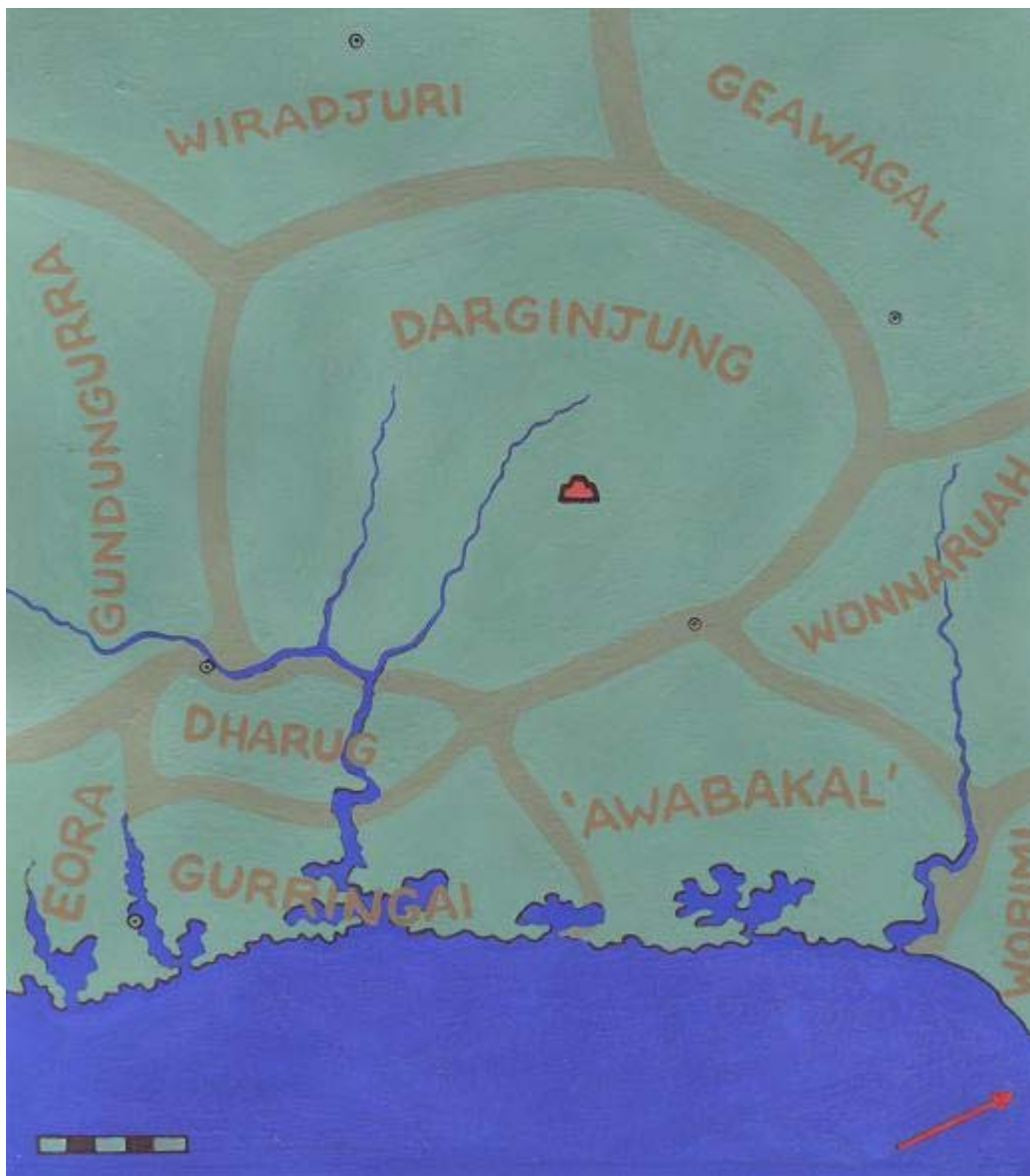
Yengo is to the sandstone country what *Uluru* is to central Australia.

This is a view widely shared by those who are familiar with this place.

Perhaps equally important from a cultural perspective is the realisation that the art of *Yengo* country is part of what is arguably one of the largest collections of rock art to be found anywhere on Earth, rivalled it seems only by the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia, parts of northern Australia and (maybe) the American south-west.

Goorris (Aboriginal people) have lived in and around the sandstone country of south-eastern Australia for at least 20,000 years.¹ Their traditional teachings say that they have done so since time began... since *Byarme* (read 'God Almighty' on Western terms ²) oversaw the land's Creation and the Dreamtime coming of all things living, including humankind.

We know that the sandstone country was home to a large tribal population in late January 1788 when the first makeshift British penal settlement established in Australia was hacked out of the bush at a place the locals called *Warrene* (Sydney Cove). Just how large that population was is a matter of ongoing debate; but estimates must inevitably take into account the devastation wreaked upon those vulnerable communities by the rapid spread of smallpox in the first half of 1789. Clearly, however, it was (and still is for the millions of people living here today) very resource-rich country, from the seashores, inlets and wide sheltered waterways to the broad rivers and estuaries, to the extensive creek and gully systems dissecting the densely-timbered and rugged ridges of the eroded sandstone plateau. Foodstuffs would have been varied and plentiful.



Very Approximate tribal areas of the sandstone country when James Cook sailed by in 1770 [3]

Mount *Yengo* is represented along with four small dots; clockwise from the top these locate the present-day townships of *Kandos*, *Denman*, *Wollombi* and *Windsor*. Sydney Cove is also shown (bottom left). The four long rivers are, from left to right, the *Hawkesbury*, the *Colo*, the *Macdonald* and the *Hunter*. The scale as shown covers 25 kilometres. The base of the map can therefore be considered as a guide to where the coastline was about 15,000 to 20,000 years ago as the sea-level continued rising at the end of the last Ice age, that flooding of the coastal areas assuredly impacting on the eventual locations of the relevant tribal peoples.

Previous published accounts dating back to the late 1700s variously suggest to us that a number of distinct tribal and sub-tribal dialect groups lived here: the *Darginjung*, the *Dharug*, the 'Awabakal', the *Gurringai*, the *Wonnaruah*, the *Eora*, the *Gundungurra*, the north-eastern clans of the *Wiradjuri* and the south-eastern *Geawegal* clans of the *Gamilaroi* language group. Such accounts also report that the signs of constant movement, inter-tribal communications and trading were in evidence throughout this country and that reciprocal visits between tribes were commonplace, as well exemplified by some groups of the *Darginjung* and the *Gurringai* who, according to early white settlers on the coast, actually *exchanged* their tribal lands... and apparently did so on a fairly regular basis, presumably for dietary balance, etc.

Just how the old trading network operated is not easy to determine precisely; but its basic features can be deduced through considering the likely positioning of the various tribal lands involved. And a qualification needs to be added here; namely, that for *these* people the notion of a tribal 'boundary' appears to have had a quite different meaning from that we might normally apply to it in the context of our modern nation-states and formal territories. For, as with tribal groups throughout Australia (and probably elsewhere as well in ancient times), the peoples of the sandstone country, living in variously scattered family- and clan-based groups, were frequently moving throughout their respective lands, the boundaries of which were, in consequence, perpetually expanding and contracting, even if only at the margins in some places. The causes of such 'pulsations' are well-acknowledged: seasonally-based cycles in the weather, food and water supplies, foliage growth and combustibility, etc.

Thinking of the tribal areas in this more malleable or fluid manner helps confirm some of what we already know of the approximate walking routes forming the old trade and communications network. For such routes seem to have generally followed the zones where tribal boundaries probably overlapped, zones which, when connected, provided long meandering lines of passage throughout the sandstone country (and, no doubt, far beyond as well 4). And at regular points we find what might be called 'tri-lingual' places where three (and possibly more) neighbouring tribes met. Such places were the likely vital transmission points for inter-tribal communications and the probable centres for large social and cultural gatherings. The individuals living in and around these places for most of their lives would undoubtedly have spoken the three languages (and there are said to be cases on record of *goorris* who were fluent in twice as many!) and whose familial, clan-based and totemic ties went well beyond their actual tribal affiliations. Such a meshing of bloodlines, languages, stories, songs, dances and other important cultural traditions in these places would thus have helped enrich and stabilize inter-tribal relations over many, many generations.

A case in point is the present-day township of *Wollombi*. *Wollombi* in fact means 'meeting-place' or 'meeting of the waters' (depending on the nineteenth-century source you read) and, as it turns out, the depictions and the stylistic features of the art of the surrounding district appear to confirm the presence there of a variety of distinctly different cultural influences. Early European records (1820 onwards) tell us much the same thing.

But a visitor to the sandstone country today needs to realise that the land itself has changed markedly over the past 220 years. Rivers and streams are now severely silted-up, roadways and settlement have obliterated most of the ancient walking paths and what was once a high tree-canopy has been decimated through prolonged logging. Indeed, when reading the accounts of early explorers, settlers, surveyors and travellers, one finds the country as described almost impossible to reconcile with what one sees today. For those accounts describe a landscape and a human abode which contradict the now widespread view that the country in question had always been frightfully inhospitable, monotonously bleak and virtually impassable. Instead, those earlier observations speak of an extensive network of well-beaten walking paths in a spectacular and ever-changing landscape,⁵ of the Hawkesbury River plain having the most fertile soil in the world and able to produce two bumper crops in a single year,⁶ and of the ridges and valleys to the north resembling an English garden under a towering canopy of trees.⁷

But impassable the country undoubtedly was for those newly arrived convicts, soldiers, government officials and the smaller number of free settlers during those first few decades of European colonization; being as they were rather fearful of their new surroundings, many being brutalized and all frequently hungry as they clung desperately and vulnerably to their fledgling settlements in the Sydney basin. It is increasingly understood today that - despite the ravages of smallpox and other introduced diseases - *goorri* resistance to the spreading white population was intense and sustained along the Hawkesbury (typified by the famous *Dharug* leader, *Pemulway*); but more than likely beyond it as well. The fact that it took *thirty years* before a small party of whites (following, incidentally, ancient trails suggested by 'friendly blacks') could successfully make its way from Windsor to the middle Hunter (a distance of only 150 kilometres) speaks for itself.



Typical undulating ridges in the north-eastern portion of the sandstone plateau

Apart from the obvious necessity to check the expansion of the fragile but ever-growing foreign presence radiating out from the Sydney basin during the early 1800s, it is also highly likely that the level of resistance and the courageous (but, of course, inevitably ineffective) warfare waged by the peoples of the sandstone country had a good deal to do with the enduring cultural significance of the land itself. Rather obviously. After all, this was *their* land and these otherwise shy, yet cheerfully courteous people had many of their most important spiritual and teaching places located there: sites passed down to them over untold centuries and embracing paintings, drawings and engravings, plus carved trees, stone arrangements and more...

While these important places are often deep in the heart of particular tribal areas, it does appear that many were visited and used by the peoples of other - and likely very distant - tribal groups on a fairly regular basis. Given the shared spiritual life of the different tribes, such 'incursions' are quite understandable for they would have been required by *Byarme's* Laws.

The so-called 'walkabout' is still today widely misunderstood by non-Aboriginal people. The term itself suggests aimless wandering around in the landscape; but nothing could be further from the truth. For it actually refers to practising a 'Dream-Cycle' pilgrimage in which all members of the tribe would have participated (and, in the cases of some people, for substantial portions of their lives). Because *Byarme* gave *His* people special places for the maintenance of important religious customs and firm moral precepts, it was required that these places be visited *endlessly* in carefully laid-down cycles to keep alive the 'Dreamtime' (pre-Creation and Creation) and its sacred teachings.

For every man, woman and child, the metaphysical dimensions of kinship and conduct, of one's totemic relationships with the rest of Creation, of marriage and parenthood, of growing old (and wise) and death itself were all nourished and unravelled over the course of one's lifetime in the 'Dream-Cycle'. It is this which is the very well-spring of *Goorri* identity, linking people and land under *His* gaze in a binding and lasting fashion.

The spiritual obligations of the peoples of the sandstone country thus required them to be periodically moving along (and sometimes across) tribal boundaries, as well as within their particular tribal lands. And, at important times, the peoples of different tribes would have had to come together for shared ceremonies. This is not to suggest that inter-tribal relations would have always been cordial, peaceful and ordered. But it does underline the precedence that spiritual obligations took over more secular concerns (such as the protection of exclusive hunting domains, etc).

A measure of the pre-eminent place this spiritual dimension necessarily had over day-to-day affairs may be gained from a fascinating and highly-revealing entry in the memoirs of a long-time resident of the *Bulga* ('Big Mountain') district, tucked beside the rugged southern escarpment of the Hunter Valley, on the northern edge of *Yengo* Country and roughly a walk of a day or two to the north-west of *Wollombi*. It was recalled some 70 years after the events that

" [a] ...ceremony was held in the year 1852. The reliable authority of residents... [said] ...it was attended by between 500 and 600 blacks from the various tribes as far away as Mudgee and Goulburn. ...during the months [involved] ...no record is in existence... of a single crime or outrage being perpetrated... [against] any of the white settlers, though they must have been completely at their mercy had the blacks turned hostile. ...It is strange also how strong was the power of this... [for] ...the aboriginals, all feuds being laid aside in the time being." 8

Quite apart from the spiritual concord clearly at work amongst them, the scale and duration of the gathering and the distances travelled by its participants (along with the implied preparation and organisation required to bring them all together at the preordained time) is simply staggering... But, so too, the peaceful manner in which this large number of well-motivated people conducted themselves over a period of some months, obviously sustaining themselves in the surrounding hills and valleys without once disturbing the vastly outnumbered pioneering settlers and their families who were living nearby.

Additionally, that important and informative memoir carries with it the implication that in the decades and centuries prior to 1852 (by which time the *Goorri* population far and wide must have diminished greatly, of course, through disease, mass-poisoning, massacre, displacement, etc.) gatherings far in excess of "600" would have almost certainly been the norm and may well have been - and probably were - attended by representatives of very distant tribal groups indeed.

All these factors are important in introducing what I and fellow *Binghai* team-members simply call, 'YENGO COUNTRY', that north-eastern part of the sandstone country in which we have concentrated almost all of our fieldwork activities over the past 33 years.



The sacred flat-topped Big Yengo Mountain in late afternoon light

For *Yengo* is said to be the place in the sandstone country where *Byarme* stepped back into the sky after His 'angels' and 'archangels' had completed their Creation tasks and after He had given His Laws to His people. Hence, its flattened summit. This uniquely symmetrical and prominent mountain is, therefore, the crucially central key to grasping any fundamental understanding of the the ancient cosmology, spirituality and religious practices once dominating the lives of the peoples of the sandstone country (and, indeed, far beyond), but specifically for those inhabiting the landscape from the Hunter Valley down to the Hawkesbury River and beyond to Port Jackson in the case of the southern-most *Guringai* clans.

Still, having said this, it must also be pointed out that *Yengo* is not the only place of its kind in south-eastern Australia. We have, as other examples, *Oombi Oombi* near Bourke in north-western New South Wales (though renamed and known today as 'Mount Oxley' after the explorer, John Oxley) and the mountain *Mumbulla* near the coast to the south. Apart from these three we know about, there are probably other high landmarks across the south-east of the continent where *Byarme* was present, according to the old peoples of various regions, before ascending back into the sky on His sacred journeying from tribal area to tribal area.



Oombi Oombi (Mt. Oxley) near Bourke

Undoubtedly, it will be both provocative and challenging for many readers to learn of such an ancient (and yet o' so familiar) spiritual focus for the tribes of the south-east of Australia... But *Byarme* (under this and a number of other names) was very well-known to those who spoke directly to the peoples of these tribes during the nineteenth-century (together with A.P. Elkin and others over the first half of the twentieth-century). And, in more recent times, scholars such as Mircea Eliade have collated and re-examined their accounts of this

“.... supreme divinity among the tribes of South-East Australia... [who] dwells in the sky beside a great stream of water (the Milky Way), and receives the souls of the innocent... Thunder is his voice; He causes the rain to fall, making the whole earth green and fertile... For Baiame is self-created and has created everything from nothing... Baiame sees and hears everything.” 9

In more matter-of-fact terms, *Yengo* is a geologically-ancient remnant basalt cap rising more than 300 metres above the surrounding sandstone hills and ridges and is visible over vast distances in all directions: from the Barrington Range north of the Hunter Valley, the *Watagan* mountains to the east near Newcastle, the hills along the Hawkesbury to the south, the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney and from many high points along the Great Dividing Range which arcs along the edge of the horizon to the west and north-west... This prominent peak is, therefore, an obvious focal-point of the physical geography of the entire region and, certainly, for a good portion of the sandstone country as well.



Yengo has an unmistakable shape: a flat crown, steep slopes giving way to rounded shoulders and these, in turn, to gentler, curving slopes which connect the base to its radiating ridges of layered sandstone. Like some mysterious and primordial stepped-pyramid, *Yengo* completely dominates the surrounding countryside. It is little wonder then that so many important *Goorri* sites occupy this land - sacred sites and teaching sites and family shelters, many of which are located along the ancient pathways of pilgrimage - these often enjoying panoramic views of *His* mountain: *Yengo*, His 'stepping-up' place.



The ancient weathering of the old basalt cappings and the prolonged eroding by wind and rain of the broad sandstone plateau itself over the millenia has produced a very diverse landscape throughout the sandstone country. Creek and river flats remain fertile and, depending on the aspect, the ridges and spurs vary greatly: the northern and western slopes tending to be sandy and dry with somewhat sparse vegetation while the southern and eastern slopes are generally moist, luxurious and at times well nigh impenetrable due to the vegetation. And it is in this changing environment of high ridges and deep gullys that cave-overhangs and wind-swept shelters, terraces and broad, open sandstone platforms abound, many of which house the art sites that have occupied the *Binghai* team since 1976.



As might be expected, the art sites of *Yengo* Country are, in the main, very fragile. The sandstone deposits in which they occur are porous and soft, have a tendency to powder and crumble (especially when the lichen-covered outer layer is disturbed in any significant way), are often folded or tessellated and are generally subject to cracking and flake-weathering. Since the majority of the sites are actually open to the elements, we therefore find that rain and seepage, strong winds, bushfires, prolonged droughts, cold winters, falling trees, moving topsoil, encroaching surface vegetation and even nesting birds and insect infestations all contribute to their ongoing deterioration. All this, quite apart from man-made damage though negligent interference, thoughtlessness and deliberate acts of vandalism.

The present-day condition of many sites in the sandstone country, and the fact that they are actually very hard to find (some, it must be said, being almost inaccessible), partly explains why they seem to have been overlooked or largely ignored in modern-day assessments of Australia's rich and varied indigenous heritage. And, since so much of the imagery is exceedingly faint and therefore difficult to discern at the best of times, the various recording methods used in the past simply have not been able to adequately portray its richness, its beauty or its authentic cultural power.

The surprisingly few surveys and reports which have been done to date have tended to be largely unsystematic and of limited scope in terms of the imagery presented and its distribution. But even the exceptions involved are rather deficient from our point of view because the people doing them have usually lacked any adequate formal art training and seem not to have had access to the perspectives of *goorri*s who truly are/were themselves well-informed and willing to share information about aspects of their traditional beliefs and customs. As a result, those researchers have normally tended to focus on conventional and standardised archaeological features, such as techniques, subject tallies, stylistic classifications, etc... But it has precisely been the artistic and cultural aspects of these sites which have engaged our closest attention and interest over the years. Thus, from the outset, we committed ourselves to recording them as accurately, as comprehensively and as sensitively as possible.

By far the most common things we find in *Yengo* country are hand-stencils in the caves and shelters, bird tracks engraved on rock platforms or boulders and axe or spear grooves ground into rocky outcrops in the creek-beds or upon the terraces and rocky saddles of the undulating ridges where rainwater often gathers in pools or seeps to the surface. Occasionally, however, a large cave or rock platform will be adorned with images of people, animals, birds, fish, reptiles, mythological creatures, anthropomorphic or totemic figures, spirit-beings, 'clever men' (shamanic personages), *Byarne's* footprints, images of His winged 'Creation-helpers', maps and warnings, implements and weapons, secret tribal markings, etc... Indeed, the list continues to grow and diversify with each new site located.



Axe-grooves around a pool, *Wollombi* district

As in other parts of Australia, *Yengo* Country has both mens' and womens' sites, aside from the more public teaching sites and the numerous 'family' cave sites in the headwaters of many creeks. But our fieldwork excludes us from visiting womens' sites for obvious reasons: only women may go there.

For while our fieldwork program has in many senses been a salvage operation to faithfully record, reflect upon and analyse what we can, recent years have enabled our work to be closely integrated with the growing cultural rejuvenation of the *Goorri* community itself. As a result, since 1990, we have been frequently involved in taking emerging guardians/custodians along with visitors from various tribal groups across New South Wales to some of the major teaching sites, in the training of such people in fieldwork and recording techniques to use in their own tribal areas and in introducing young women to the traditional indicators ('sign-posts') relevant to *their* sites. In fact, such activities have tended to dominate our activities over the past two decades.



Paul Gordon in Yengo Country with Bourke-based men of Wokkamurra tribal backgrounds, 2002

In terms of the art sites themselves, the most compelling ones for us have always been the engravings. They are usually the more significant teaching places, some being 'public' and others reserved solely for the men. They truly do exude great presence and often occupy vast rock platforms in spectacular and dramatic locations.



Portion of the broad platform at the 'Southern Map Site', Yengo Country

Accordingly, we have concentrated on illustrating engravings in this presentation. But, since many of the sites are considered to be sacred in nature, the images used have had to be carefully chosen to properly observe traditional *Goorri* customs and sensitivities whilst still, hopefully, being able to convey a strong sense of the diversity and the artistic merits of what exists in the wilderness country surrounding *Yengo*. The illustrations often derive from our tracings of the images and, for the sake of 'naturalism', in some instances we have delineated the weathered edges as well as the punctured and grooved lines. This vibrating edge effect helps to simulate the character of the engraved marks when cast into sharper relief using oblique lamplight, which is how we encounter them in the course of our night recordings.

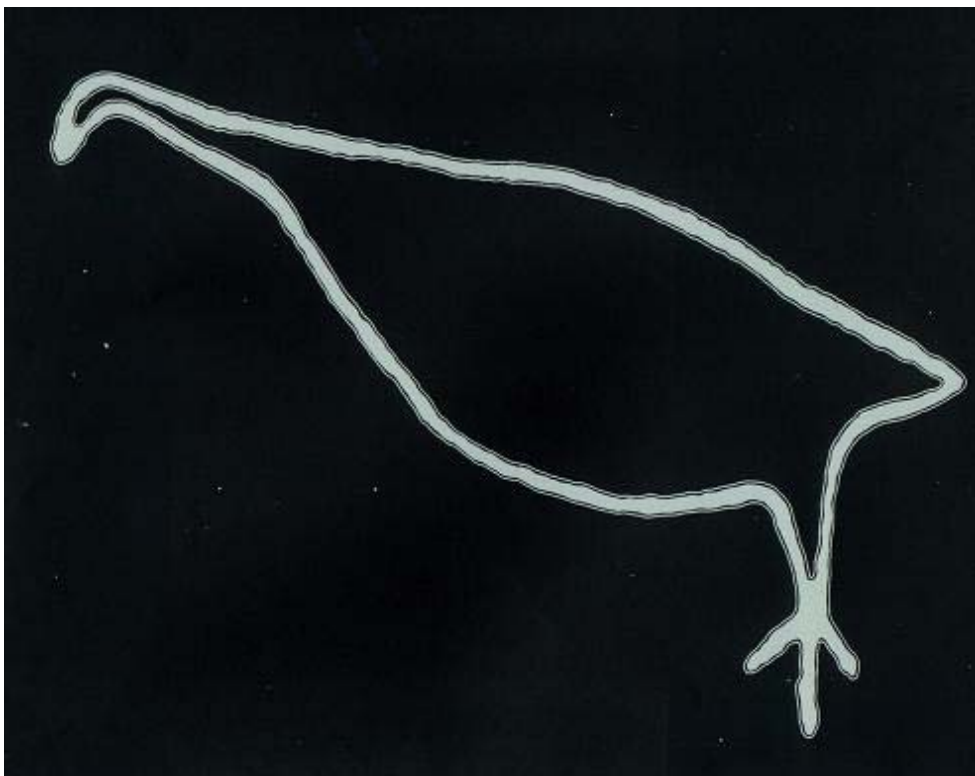
Accurate and comprehensive recording of sites is crucial, of course. Our method in the field is therefore a time-consuming but appropriate one in view of the difficulty in dealing with such very faint and fragile imagery. Once located, an engraving site is revisited in the late afternoon and then, when the sun has set, carefully examined using a modified gas lantern, the low-level and adjustable soft light from which illuminates the undulating sandstone platform and whatever evidence there is of any man-made alterations present. The images are often so faint that it may take literally half the night to discern them properly (and sometimes even longer!). After all, we are talking about ancient weathered grooves in lichen- and moss-covered sandstone, many of which may at most be only one- or two-millimetres in depth. And, yes, at times these grooves disappear altogether; but, tempting though it is to invent the missing portions..., we never do. And never have.



Our 'Starship Enterprise' / low-level gas lantern

Our many experiences of recording or of re-recording sites found by others over the years (normally, for them, in daylight of course) has impressed on us how very important it is to be accurate and thorough in the recording process. For example, many times we have found and thus added significant imagery to site records. Doing so has consequently altered previous and potential site-interpretations dramatically. And we mean *dramatically!* This is in no way meant to be critical of the recording or interpretation efforts of those earlier, intrepid horse-riders, bush-walkers, and rock art aficionados... but it *is* true to say that theirs was often a case of seeking to understand the 'messages' at a given site without having sufficient information to begin with.

We readily concede that our own recordings will - and must - have shortcomings of their own. No doubt, we miss things at times... or may even make mistakes in attempting to depict what we *think* we can see. Which brings lots of good-humoured banter amongst us occasionally, as you may imagine. Certainly, however, we are very loathe to overly disturb a site when carrying out our recording of it. A chief concern being the lichens and mosses, the root-systems of which permeate and bind the thin, sun-baked crust of the layered sandstone; a condition complicated by the fact that each and every deposited layer has its own particular geological constituents, physical properties and resulting susceptibility to weathering. In a very real sense, we find ourselves dealing with faint images housed in what are uniquely varied and easily disturbed micro-ecosystems.



Delightfully streamlined brush turkey from a time well before Brancusi

As to the faint and fragile art itself, It is our view that the feats of draftsmanship evident in these images are truly remarkable and would astound many of the most celebrated artists of modern times (Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi and Pollock come to mind, for example). The ability to convey so much form with so little line on such a scale is impressive to say the least. For some of the images are huge (6 metres plus) and exist on undulating expanses of rock where, at times, it is virtually impossible to see them in their entirety.

Indeed, it is doubtful that any artist living today could possibly ever hope to emulate the achievements of the sandstone engravers. None of our canvases are large enough nor do we retain as deeply-apprehended a spiritual relationship with our materials and surroundings. Nor do we have the same creative motivation.

This may seem a rather harsh view of contemporary western art (and an overly-romanticized view of the sandstone art) but today's thoughtful artist-reader would probably support it. After all, spiritual and totemic kinship with one's subject-matter and the concomitant custodial responsibility in depicting it simply do not apply in our non-tribal societies. Or, to put it another way, *empathy* is no substitute for what we might call 'symbiotic identification': *I AM this kangaroo I am carving...!*

These seemingly simple outline engravings and the (mainly) dry ochre 'paintings' of *Yengo* Country are, as will be seen, rather different from much of the art found elsewhere on the continent. They have a stark, almost raw visual power about them and they actually look very old. None have yet been dated to our knowledge (with debate over possible dating methods for such things continuing to rage inconclusively among international experts) but, because certain important engraved images were undoubtedly refreshed from generation to generation (with many likely being embellished on ceremonial and teaching occasions in the locally-occurring brown, red, orange, yellow and white pigments, plus charcoal), some may very well have been first made 20,000 years ago... and possibly earlier still. But the truth is, we simply do not know. The best we can do for the moment is to compare engravings and try to suggest their relative ages based on the number of discernible punctures preserved in the engraved lines, their weathered state, their breadth, their faintness, etc.



[A small human-type form at the 'Northern Map Site' \(1978\)](#)

As to what Andre Breton and his Surrealist friends would have made of the sandstone art is a rather interesting thought. No doubt, such ancient, magical and metaphorical imagery would have met with their enthusiastic approval, as would the underlying cultural integrity of 'tribal-art-as-teaching'. The point is - and it cannot be overstressed - that the life of every single person of the sandstone tribal groups was imbued from infancy to death with age-old sacred learning. Without even delving into those aspects of cultural depth attending the life of the individual upon his/her initiation into ceremonial being, they can be approached to some extent through using basic commonsense. For example, in our time when awareness of the planet's geography, its geological past and its galactic context are taken to be commonplace knowledge, it is still not impossible to identify with the notion of one's life-existence being framed by the edges of one's all-encompassing horizon (plus that of that mesmerising, ever-twinkling celestial dome above...). For that truly was *the-world-as-given* for the peoples of *Yengo* Country for upwards of 1,000 generations.

And so, to attempt to divide sites into 'sacred' versus 'non-sacred' is rather tenuous in the broader context. A prime example is the hand-stencil; for in south-eastern Australia, at least, the simple act of blowing wet pigment from one's mouth onto one's hand placed on a cave wall is not merely to attest to one's presence there but is, in fact, an act of devotion, of thanks, of quiet celebration of the gift of life itself. The same could also be said, perhaps, of the simple act of sharpening one's axe in a smooth groove beside a pool, that groove having been shaped by one's very own forebears, hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years earlier.



Hand and forearm stencil, Wallabadah Creek district

Such considerations may at least help us to be able to imaginatively reconstruct for ourselves the sense of 'timelessness' and 'connectedness' within which an individual living centuries ago in *Yengo* Country must have found themselves immersed: a worldview shaped by the land, by tradition and by an ever-potent spiritual outlook. Many of our campfire discussions over the years in the course of our fieldwork have tended to dwell on trying to grasp in some meaningful way that particular 'mindset'. Naturally enough. And, whereas our *goorri* team-members and acquaintances can more readily approach it, those of us having different origins, on the other hand, have usually found it necessary to strip away the trappings of the modern world and all its distractions in order to even attempt to do so. Perhaps the most valuable lesson gained in attempting it is the realisation that people everywhere are simply people... and that the individuals who were members of those enduring tribal societies likely acted, in the main, with commonsense and goodwill and, like us, always tried to enjoy life to the full. Of course, those societies were not perfect (as if any *could* be), nor would they have ever been completely free of conflicts or other negative social features; however, they *did* endure for at least 1,000 generations. And that alone tells us something of the efficacy of such a way of living, of course...



Byarme (or, more likely, *Dhurramulan*) at Milbrodale near *Bulga*, those arms measuring over 5 metres across!

Our little team of rock art recorders has quietly gone about its work knowing all along that our present-day understanding of the sites must necessarily be limited. The people who made those images are long gone. So too so very much of the language and the culture that surrounded them. Granted, the living descendants of those people have much in common with them; but even they will tell you that the actual day-to-day realities of the past have gone and that they themselves now have to move forward, accept change (as their forebears undoubtedly always did) and take pride in their own achievements. But it is also true to say that many can and do re-enter that spiritual dimension the sites and the country itself can lead to. And thank goodness for that.

Whereas the resource-laden surrounds of the Hawkesbury system to the south and the south-east are known to yield up to 30 sites per square kilometre (and this figure includes occupation sites in general), the best we've been able to achieve in the dry ridge country around *Yengo* is about 14. But since the terrain itself is so rugged and because the scrubby vegetation makes surveying for sites so difficult (the forest, incidentally, has only recently begun to re-establish itself after many decades of logging, with diverse birdlife widely reappearing only in the mid-1980s), and the fact that ours has always been a very small team of purposeful bushwalkers, we're convinced that site-concentrations are generally much greater than our efforts have been able to show so far.

Given that we ourselves have only 'adequately' surveyed an area of about 50 square kilometres in all (out of a possible 2,500+... that potential area being *our* chosen fieldwork range and, in reality, what amounts to being just a small triangular portion of the sandstone country as a whole anyway!), the magnitude of the task ahead is absolutely awesome. Centuries of ongoing fieldwork thus await the generations of custodians and recorders to come. Should they wish to continue. In any event, the chances are that whatever truly does exist in *Yengo* Country will *never* all be found... let alone recorded.

Which raises the issue of the extent of this extraordinary outdoor collection of ancient rock art and its significance on the world stage. The only other areas on the planet we ourselves are aware of that may (but only *may*), in terms of scale and diversity, rival the rock art of the sandstone country in south-eastern Australia are the Pilbara and the Kimberley regions of Western Australia, parts of Northern Australia and (possibly) the American south-west. That this has not been widely acknowledged nor appreciated is a great pity, in our view. But, of course, the relatively uninhabited and - in many places - even unexplored landscape involved has played a key part in keeping the collection from broader public awareness. So too, however, the faintness of the imagery and its unsystematic and largely unsatisfactory recording to this point in time. A further reason involves a tendency for researchers - the *Binghai* team included - to keep the locations of many important sites very much to themselves. This is because most will undoubtedly have learned from bitter experience how visitation to sites grows exponentially once their whereabouts become known, thus steadily resulting in all manner of damage occurring. Sad but true.

For over 30 years now, *Binghai* team-members have consistently held the view that the rock art collection of the sandstone country, sitting as it is so close to the three-city metropolis of Wollongong-Sydney-Newcastle, is arguably one of the best-kept secrets in the history of modern Australian culture... No doubt there are other rock art researchers and archaeologists working in the field who hold very much the same view.

Quite apart from the ongoing damage to sites from natural weathering, carelessness and instances of deliberate interference or actual vandalism, a very alarming prospect has begun to surface in recent years; namely, the idea that these faint and fading images should now be re-engraved for posterity. I admit that I and other team-members entertained just such a notion about 20 years ago, though never really seriously. However, as I understand it, there *are* some people who are now seriously talking about it. All I can say to them is that any actions along such lines (literally!) should be very, very carefully considered beforehand. And I would urge anyone thinking about it to adopt the cardinal rule used in museums whenever restoration of something is contemplated: *only take that action if it can be reversed !!!*

* * *

This revised online presentation now allows me to expand on what was originally a smaller article (essentially, most of the above), dictated by a word and image restriction for the *Pacific Arts* version. And so, since the opportunity exists, I'll return to the art sites of *Yengo* Country - specifically the engravings - because I know they are of great interest to people who have seen examples of them but who might also wonder, as I frequently did in the early years when finding, recording and studying them *in-situ*, how they can be approached and compared in some meaningful way with the artworks housed in our museums and galleries.

Though it is generally true to say that the 'language' of art tends to be exceedingly complex - despite what people often suppose (or, at least, hope) - I think it is reasonable to suggest that in the case of the engravings of the sandstone country we are looking at a largely integrated body of images, almost all of which share certain technical and stylistic features. There are the occasional notable exceptions, it is true; as it is also the case that the subject-matter varies considerably from place to place (which is to be expected, given, say, coastal versus inland habitats, their different fauna and their particular food resources, etc). But, on the whole, what this consistency across the engraved imagery means for the attentive observer is that the 'language' involved is also largely consistent. And thus, it lends itself to preliminary analysis and a measure of exegesis.

"A line is a force; it borrows its force from the energy of the man who drew it."

(Henry van der Velde, c.1900)

The specific visual qualities at work in producing the unmistakable resonant power of these normally outline-based images had intrigued and puzzled me greatly for decades. Along with most of our artist team-members, I suspect. And probably others too. But recent years, and after now having seen thousands of examples, have led me to look at them afresh with the artist's eye and to carefully note and compare their attributes with those of the linework and shape-making of Western art (and some Eastern art) down through the ages.

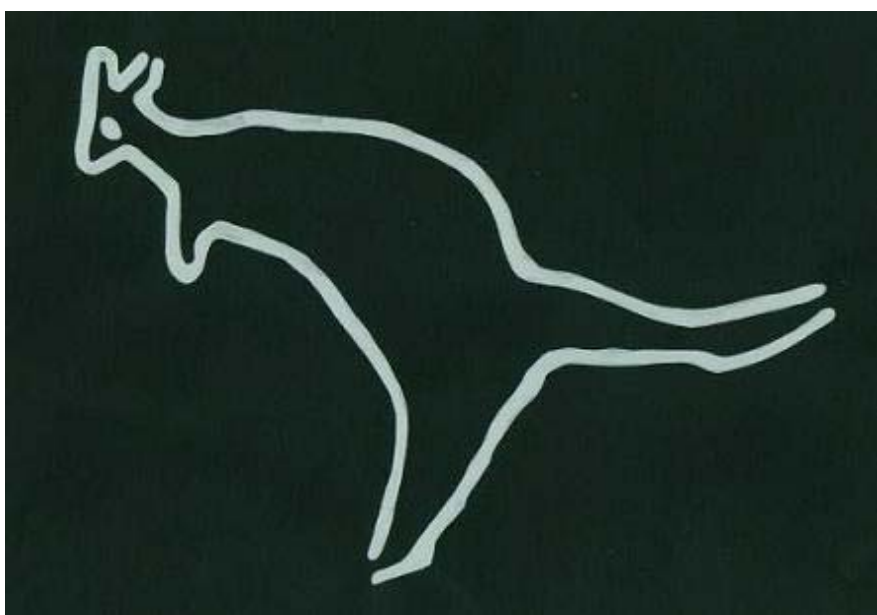
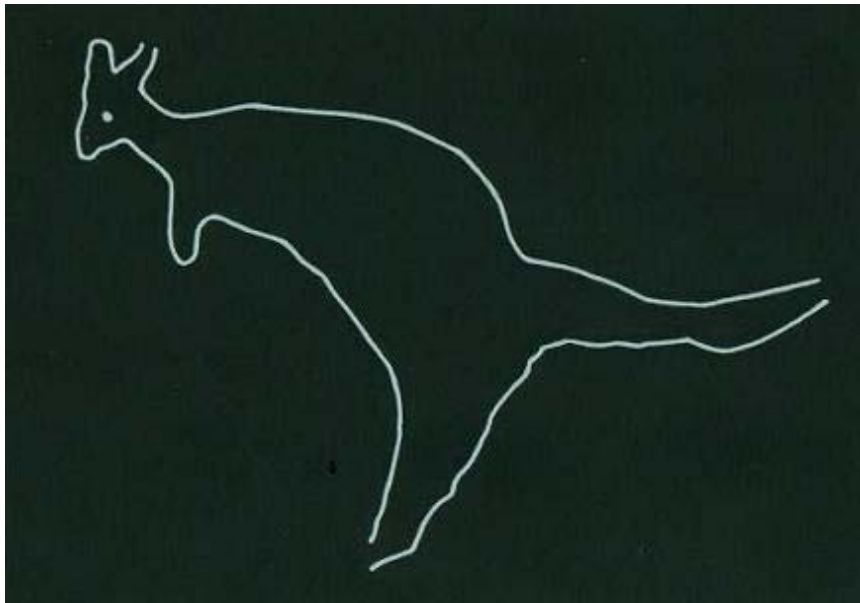
Having formally studied drawing in earnest at a tertiary level for almost seven years, having visited many major collections of art overseas (along with various ancient sites in France and the United States) and having also taught the discipline of drawing in art schools using diverse approaches for a further 25+ years - along with related disciplines, including aesthetic theory for five years - naturally prompts me to attempt to offer some pertinent comments in this regard.

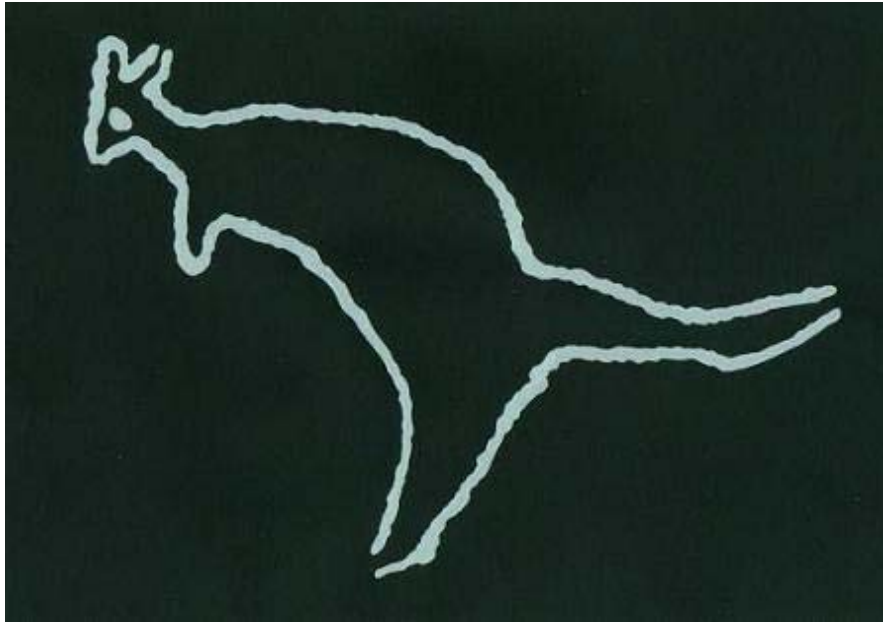
The van der Velde quotation above comes from roughly a century ago, from a time when European artists and theorists had only just begun to properly investigate the abstract qualities of lines, shapes and colours (and undoubtedly due, in no small measure, to their recent exposure to the rich traditions of Eastern art). Following their lead, I will, for my part, seek to broaden that investigation a little by attempting to draw attention to the specific visual properties of the linework of the sandstone engravers of *Yengo* Country; at least, as I myself see them. But, before I do so, and should you happen to doubt the veracity and relevance of van der Velde's insightful remark, I will simply urge you to pause and consider for a moment your own handwriting, its variations and its evolution from your infant years onwards. After all, handwriting is, in truth, a personal expression of drawing in line, no matter how codified it may otherwise appear to be...

I begin this discussion by recounting the presumed dominant method of engraving used throughout the sandstone country (a method actually witnessed by the first Europeans in the 1790s to the east of the Sydney Cove settlement, in the area of South Head, and with their accounts being borne out by a number of unfinished examples in various locations). Technically-speaking, the method used has long been known as 'conjoined-puncture', whereby a series of small punctures or pit-marks (roughly 1cm to 2cm in diameter) produce a 'dotted' line which is then chipped and abraded along its length to achieve a relatively even and uninterrupted carved or engraved line...

But I do say *relatively*. For I am now convinced that the *relative unevenness* of the linework of the sandstone engravings (along with, I observe, similar examples across the world) is the *very* thing that *gives* them their energy.

Probably the best way to illustrate this is to use an example from *Yengo Country* - that of a life-size kangaroo on the move - and to represent that image in three different ways: by a single fine line drawn through the centre of the engraved outline (far and away the most common mode of depiction used by recorders over years past); by a solid bold line streamlining the unevenness of the actual engraving (sadly, what happens when people scratch or abrade engravings using rocks, chisels or - Heaven forbid! - *sand-blasters* and the like in order to make them more visible...); finally, by a simple graphic translation of our traced version whereby the *uneven* width of the engraved groove is preserved in all its subtlety.





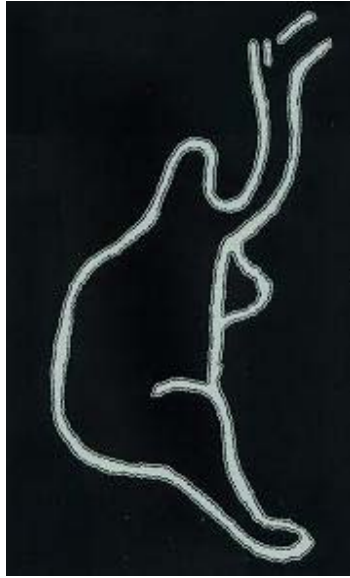
It seems self-evident to my artist's eye which of the three graphic depictions is the most visually engaging and energetic; namely, the last one. As it happens, it is also the one which best represents the actual engraving two-dimensionally since it reproduces the full graphic detail of the linear grooves by way of the irregular movements of their outer contours. Admittedly, as a two-dimensional version, it cannot reproduce the actual depth of the carving involved such that, in effect, it merely serves as a graphic portrayal. Yes, photogrammetry *can* be used now (as shown by John Fryer's work over recent years); unfortunately, however, images larger than 1.5 metres or so have not been successfully recorded with this new technology. But, one day soon, perhaps...

Regardless of the coming of new technology, however, further relevant discussion is prompted by the three graphic depictions I've used here of the same engraved image. It is important to note from the outset that they are very different from one another as *graphic expressions*. For example, if we try to find words to describe each one we will probably find ourselves using "timid, gentle, friendly...", even "quaint" to describe the first depiction. The second, we might say, is "bold, assertive, strident...", perhaps even "brash"... and, certainly "very graphic" and thus akin to bold logos, traffic signs and the like. The last, I would personally describe, as "having immediacy" and being "vibrant, animated and full of energy". Well, all I can obviously do is to apply such words and you'll have to decide for yourself whether or not I've come close to what you personally think about the three depictions as expressive images.

But this is not just some minor matter of quibbling about the best way of recording sandstone engravings (and possibly leading to their 2D presentation in publications). Rather, in my estimation, it goes to the very heart of the imagery itself. And it does so because I maintain that *what we think of an image as an expression* must naturally come to play a crucially important part in how we try to *interpret* the image. I began to realise this many years ago when poring over rather small-scale site charts of huge images from various locations (all using the fine line graphic mode). The result for me was that what had to be - in reality - large, overpowering and rather awesome creatures (some being *really* scary!) looked as if they were merely meek and friendly big pets of some kind... Sometime later, when I actually got to see a few of those gigantic images in their engraved reality, it struck me how absurd and confusing that standardised graphic mode of depicting them was. And is.

In my judgement, the engravings of the sandstone country as a whole have probably been greatly undervalued as *expressive images* simply because most of the recordings produced and published over the past fifty years or so (not that there have really been that many) have largely reduced them to quaint 'cartoon-like' characters. And, prior to 1950 or thereabouts, the earlier generations of people recording them generally did so via very inaccurate, often incomplete and crudely drawn sketches anyway... All I can honestly report to you is that the stuff out there in the bush - maybe just beyond your own back fence - is mighty powerful and highly-sophisticated. And don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise.

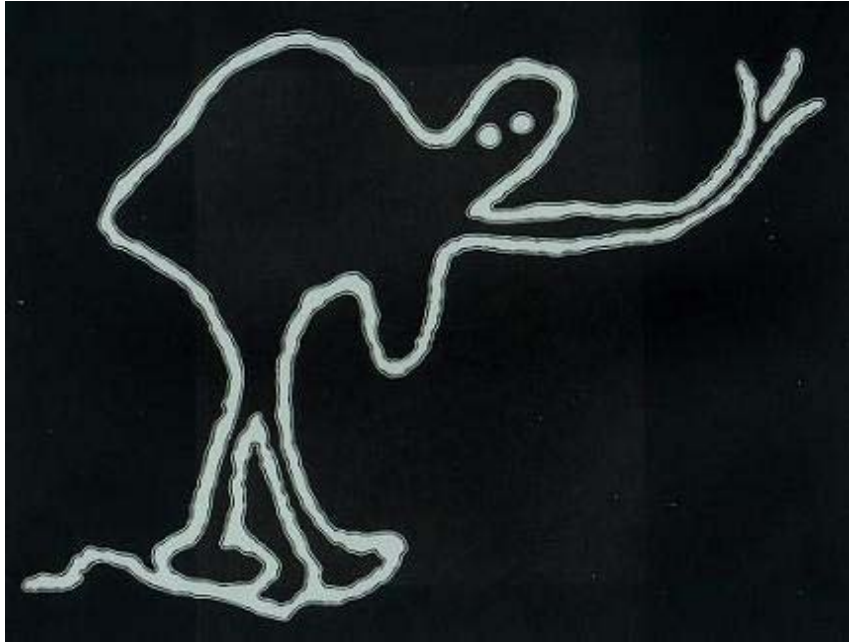
Which leads me to a somewhat surprising and noteworthy feature of the diverse depictions we find in *Yengo* Country. For the level of sophistication involved is revealed by the plain fact that, at times, these engravings actually contradict the rather widespread view that ancient peoples the world over were quite unaware of - and thus incapable of representing - *pictorial depth*. I illustrate my point using two examples: one of a small pointing woman and the other of a goanna.



In the case of the woman, it is obvious that pictorial depth has been achieved via three overlapping planes: thigh over trunk over breast. It is both simple and effective. The goanna, by contrast, is a deceptively simple image at first glance; that is, until its depiction is properly considered. For this is no basic, simplistic form at all. Rather, it is subtle, complex and highly animated as an image and is far from being just a mundane, schematic, flattened and frozen plan-view of the reptile. The careful observation and understanding of a goanna's shape, movements and dispositions of the body is, in my opinion, clearly in evidence here and the viewpoint afforded us by that unknown artist is - if you examine it carefully - a downward one, on a slight angle.



The rich metaphorical conjunctions found in some of the imagery of *Yengo* Country (and elsewhere across the sandstone country as a whole) are virtually without precedent, in my experience. A particular favorite of mine (shown on the next page) is that of the Emu/Woman at the 'Northern Map' site just to the west of the Finchley lookout. There can be no mistaking that this is the image of a woman...; yet, clearly, she is also an *emu*... Remarkable. Compelling. And, as with every true metaphorical expression, our minds oscillate back and forth across these two perceptions... Either that, or (as some cultural theorists would have it) these two perceptions somehow comfortably coexist in a very magical and enchanting way within the brain, within the *mind's eye*...



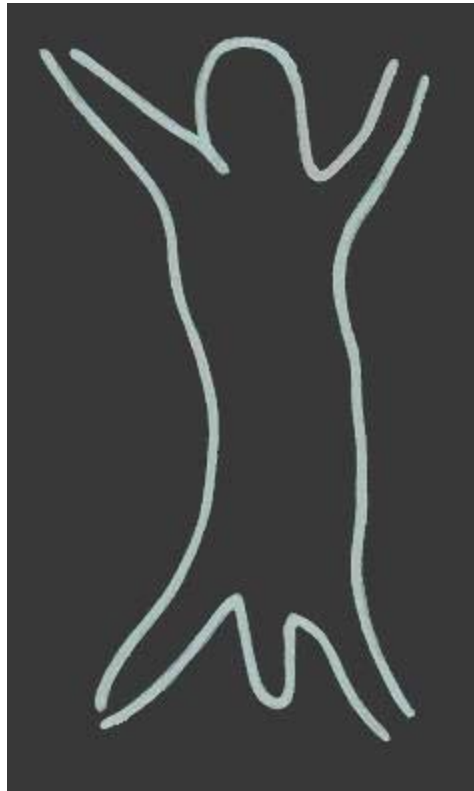
A further related observation of some importance I wish to make about the visual power of many of the engravings of humans (plus, it must be said, certain other images) concerns our *relationship as viewers with them*. It is a feature Paul Gordon, Peter Crousen and I (and others) discussed from the earliest times we explored sites together and it is one I now consider vital to increasing our understanding of what is actually being represented. It concerns the depictions we find of gesture and 'body language'/body disposition and I now always use a simple strategy in this regard when encountering an image for the first time. What I try to do is to *mimic* the gesture and posture of the image with my own body. Doing this tends to enable me as the viewer to better identify and connect with the physical (and emotional-cum-conceptual) state of the human being (or animal, etc.) depicted there on the rock surface in front of me. *That* gesture and/or posture becomes mine... and, consequently, *my* inner state (hopefully) becomes attuned to some degree with that of the image in question... or, properly speaking, with the inner state that ancient artist had consciously intended it to convey.



'Halt! Entering Mens' Country!' An unmistakable, universal gesture

The fact that distortion is used in many images across the sandstone country is related to this, I feel. And it certainly applies in those cases where human forms have been deliberately and selectively distorted. Again, an example from *Yengo Country* illustrates my point. In this very faint (and probably old, since no discernible punctures are present in the weathered grooves) engraving of a human male, the torso has been greatly stretched. Of course, none of us (except Rubberman!) could possibly mimic what this figure depicts; but we can at least *imagine* what having the torso stretched to such an extreme must feel like...

My own effort to do so, inflating my chest and stretching upwards to the sky, suggests to me that the emotional state prompted by the exaggeration of a stretched torso is one of intense well-being, euphoria, ecstatic celebration... Just as when you stretch upon waking on a beautiful morning after a good night's sleep, perhaps. Given the spiritual dimension so crucial to *Yengo Country*, such a state of being would, of course, be quite understandable.



Which leads me at this point to briefly discuss *anthropomorphism*: the morphing of humans into other creatures... or *vice-versa*, as in the concisely expressed example below where an emu steps forward and moves into human guise. For *Yengo Country* abounds in such imagery; as, indeed, does the sandstone country everywhere, it seems.



My own understanding of anthropomorphic image-making in southeastern Australia is that, in many instances, it yields us vital information about the clan-based and tribal totems operating in given districts. I say this because of our team's findings that reveal certain morphed imagery is often repeated a number of times in localised areas... but *not* elsewhere to any great extent. In effect, our findings show that some parts of the country consistently contain 'kangaroo-men', others 'emu-women', others 'dingo-men', and so forth. Thus, a *pattern of totemic kinships* is steadily being revealed. In time, further findings will extend our knowledge of such matters.

An important obvious difference between the rock art sites of *Yengo Country* and the artworks everyone would be familiar with on the walls or placed on the floors of museums, galleries and peoples' homes naturally relates to the physical (and the socio-cultural) contexts involved. Clearly, these are *not* engravings or drawings or paintings floating in flat, vertical/horizontal, well-defined rectangles... within architectural rectangles... or anything vaguely like that. Instead, they are framed only by the naturally irregular and undulating sandstone platforms or the generally curving cave walls they occupy. An important difference in purely physical contexts, to be sure. But this difference melds into that other, less obvious one... and one touched on already when speaking of our relationship to the images... and to their depictions.

Until Paul Gordon joined us in our fieldwork in late 1989, I confess to laboring under an insidious delusion brought about by habitual thinking; namely, that of looking at - for example - an engraving site as a *whole unit*, as if it were a unified 'composition' of some sort... just like all the art I'd ever seen or made within the modern Western tradition. What Paul (and then others) impressed on Peter Crousen and me was that one should *never* view these places in that way; because, if you do, you will not grasp their *multi-functional purposes*. To explain this crucially different understanding of groups of images co-existing side-by-side at the same site, I will illustrate by using a site-chart adapted from that made by the finest linear recorder who ever mapped sites in *Yengo Country* (or the whole south-east of Australia, in my opinion) - Ian Sim - before we went out there over a decade later and began to trace images and make charts of our own based on our findings.



This is a slightly edited version of Ian's chart showing the main group of images at what is now generally known within the *Goorri* community as the 'Northern Map Site' (or the 'Finchley Engraving Site' in the minds of others). Very impressive, yes, and partly because the area shown here is approximately 19 metres across, from left to right! But, aside from its typically large scale when it comes to the major engraving sites all across the sandstone country, it shows that a number of different viewpoints are at work here. In fact, the arc of the seven figures shown more-or-less vertically here also tends to follow the actual contours of the rock platform, such that most of them are slightly above your feet when standing there viewing them. The remaining three principal figures (two of which have been illustrated earlier) are obviously to be viewed from other angles. Also noteworthy is the fact that some of the figures are isolated as individual images... whereas at least two groupings or conjunctions are in evidence as well.

As Paul Gordon made clear to us the very first time he visited the site with us, these various images - as isolated figures or as small groups - each infer a story, a teaching, a moral all its own. In that sense, the site is an *amalgam of teachings* rather than some consciously unified pictorial composition (made, say, by a single individual) in its own right. Unfortunately, those of us accustomed to conventional compositional approaches do find this a touch perplexing and, of course, our tendency to make framed rectilinear site-charts of what we find on these irregular and folded expanses of rock leads us almost inevitably, I suggest, to fall time and again into that 'unified composition paradigm' trap. When such material ends up being published then, to some extent, that deceptive trap is even further reinforced for others, especially if they have never experienced the site for themselves.

This realisation that a fundamental cultural difference applies when looking at groups of images needs to be teased out further, however. It is my personal view that the *amalgam of teachings* present in the above site chart suggests that not only were the original images likely to have been made by various people at various times (and possibly over a very long period), but it may well be the case that whenever the site was visited and used for teaching purposes *only some* of the images/stories might have been used for instruction. Those particular images may well have been painted up or otherwise embellished... while others could even have been covered or hidden until a later visit with its appropriate teaching session... It may even be that certain images would *only* have been used for instructive purposes when the relevant custodian or keeper of that image/story was present to speak on its behalf. I say all this because I feel that far too much written interpretation of the sites in the sandstone country as a whole has, probably quite erroneously, sought to make thematic connections of various kinds *between images* simply because they happen to occupy the same rock platform... Given the complicating factors I've introduced here suggests to me that we probably need to consider a host of possibilities when looking at such sites and admit to ourselves that the 'unified composition paradigm' (or single teaching session idea) may, in fact, be hampering our best efforts to interpret them.

The second main group of images at the site (also from Ian Sim's recording), located to the north of the main group and separated from it by a rather broad area of shrubs and trees, allows me to speak more thoroughly about an aspect hinted at earlier, one which also explains the *Goorri* preference of title for the site.

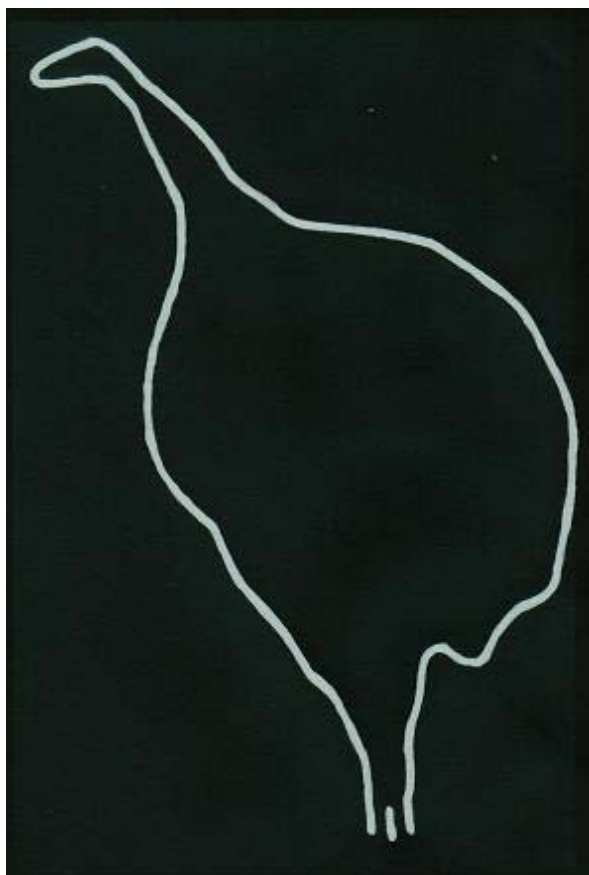


The two obvious features of relevance are, firstly, the lines of bird and marsupial tracks and, secondly, the orientations of the figures of birds and people. For in each case the 'mapping' function of the site comes into play. The feet of bird forms throughout the sandstone country as a whole, as in this instance, are shaped to match the actual tracks birds make (an obviously expected outcome when you think on it) and thus engraved bird tracks as well. In this particular group we find three different kinds of birds represented: left to right being an emu, a small 'water-bird' (?) and a brush turkey. If they are indeed clan totem indicators - and that does appear to be the case, given our knowledge of sites in the surrounding district - then, appropriately, their feet point in the relevant directions. As to the tracks themselves, well, they appear to show us the relevant pathways followed by 'bird-totem people' and 'kangaroo-totem people'; remembering, of course, that they are *not arrows* like our road-signs but must be read in reverse as *tracks*.

The two human figures present have related - though significantly different - mapping functions. The man can be interpreted as either leaping or as being on bended knee... Either way, the orientation and the pointing arm are relevant here because *Yengo* itself is the destination. The woman (who *could* be pregnant) clearly points with her own curving arm and fingered hand to a destination in another direction entirely - roughly south-east as it turns out - and does so consistent with female forms in profile throughout the area. Indeed, following these indicators for women in this part of *Yengo* Country always lead *around* mens' country to, after only a few days of ambling... womens' country.

A feature of some rare engravings in *Yengo* Country is that of the artist apparently selecting and using natural formations as an integral part of the image-making process. This is something already well-known and acknowledged with respect to ancient rock art in various parts of the world and, as in those cases, the example shown here begs the question: has the artist, in fact, been inspired *by* that natural form? Quite possibly so.

In this elegant example, the circular 'bowl' forming the body of the oversize emu has been outlined within the very edge of a large circular section of flake-weathering, a common form of weathering found all over the sandstone country (and often mistakenly identified as so-called "fire-pits" by enthusiastic, though rather inexperienced researchers). Apart from reinforcing much of the weathered flake depression's circumference with engraved line, the artist has then simply added the neck and head, the tail and the leg with a fine economy of means to arrive at this rather beautiful depiction of that massive, flightless bird. Still, as I say, it is a rather rare occurrence in our fieldwork experience and, actually, it is the only obvious one we ourselves have found though, presumably, there will be various other examples waiting to be discovered out there somewhere.



As to the level of sophistication involved - sampled here with the various examples used - there may well be some people who might continue to mistakenly hold the view that the rock art of the sandstone country can somehow be favorably compared with the art of children... Well, those who are experts in the field of pre-adolescent image-making will (as indeed they have done) support me in strenuously refuting that commonplace misconception. No matter how imaginative a child is or appears to be, it *never* expresses itself visually in ways approaching anything like the depth and complexity evident in the works of these pre-modern-era sandstone engravers. My own art education background has helped me in this regard but it has led me further as well. For it seems to me that those who postulate about the 'evolution' of rock art on stylistic grounds have probably misunderstood and misapplied research of image development in children. Though this is not really the appropriate place for buying into such an academic matter, I'll briefly discuss my reasons for challenging that influential overview.

The widely-read theses regarding this matter essentially hypothesize that in Australian rock art a simple geometric or schematic art (stick-figures, grids, whorls, spirals, etc.) in time led on to more naturalistic art (lifelike people, animals, implements, etc.) in much the same way we see infantile picture-making develop into more recognizable late-childhood versions. If one accepts this - as many people appear to have done - then it basically says that, for example, the art of the Pilbara in Western Australia must necessarily *pre-date* that of the sandstone country.

Of course, I am unashamedly biased and, yes, a bit peeved by this overview. My basic objection is this: abstract concepts require abstract expression while more visceral, palpable and emotion-laden concepts require their own appropriate forms of expression. Indeed, contemporary artist friends of mine agree with me and shake their heads in bewilderment at those who do not seem to understand this basic tenet of art-making and the plain fact that many different forms of artistic expression are almost always going to co-exist in time within *any* given society. That should be obvious to everybody... But in the case of this Australia-wide overview there is another factor to consider too. The salient counter-argument I myself would offer - aside from the above - is to say to such people that the evidence of very abstract, often intricate and geometricized artistic expressions was *everywhere* across southeastern Australia in January 1788. Not so much in the rock art, it is true, but there on a rather rare commodity in areas like the Pilbara: countless large, mature trees which had been carved and remained standing even into the late 1800s (and well beyond, actually) when people like Etheridge recorded them in drawings and photographs under the rather twee label, "dendroglyphs".

Speaking of contemporary artists, however, does return me to the level of praise I tend to bestow on those now-gone artists of the sandstone country, a praise openly going beyond that I generally find myself offering in appreciation of the works of modern and contemporary artists the world over. For it really does seem to me to be self-evident - even if it runs counter to some of the central tenets of the modern age (and will, doubtless, be hotly disputed by some in art circles) - that *no* individual's personal vision is ever likely to be able to surpass in *creative integrity* what appears to characterize much of this imagery carved in stone - and using only simple stone tools, remember - so many years ago... and now inexorably weathering away, open to all the elements... and largely forgotten.

I accept that individual artists today will, on the whole, be making their own very best efforts - as has been true for so many before them - to define, refine and develop their personal visions; yet, since *their* visions must largely be self-generated (even when acutely mindful of and responsive to historical and cultural contexts), it still seems to me that they cannot really pretend to be capable of achieving the communicative levels or the cultural scope pertaining to *shared* visions... such as that apparently at work in the 'art' of *Yengo* Country.

I also accept that my views on this matter may appear biased and it can be said, perhaps with some justification, that there may in fact be little true difference between a now vanished individual sandstone engraver and his/her contemporary artist counterpart in the terms I have been using. My hunch, however, is that this comparative assessment broadly remains a valid one.

Which leads me to extend this notion in a vitally different direction by pointing out that well-intentioned and culturally-sensitive members of the *Goorri* community will tell you that, despite their best efforts to do so, the *actual mindset* of those who made the sites in *Yengo* Country can no longer be, in truth, fully understood and therefore emulated with anything approaching absolute certainty. And so, of course, this makes the protection and preservation of that magical country and its still largely mysterious sites so very important for all of us. Little wonder then that they and others - myself very much included - are simply outraged with people making *new* images (such as hand-stencils and the like), or disturbing and rearranging ancient rock piles or *touching-up* faint imagery in the caves there... or, just as disrespectful - if not moreso, through its egoistic urge - in *creating entirely new sites* in the vicinity of existing ones (or anywhere else in *Yengo* Country for that matter).

The simple truth is that *Yengo* Country has *not* been properly surveyed for sites - nor even barely explored in most parts - such that this overlapping of *different* cultural mindsets and artistic intentions will ultimately confuse, distort and degrade our understanding of it in the longer term. My attitude to this is that *Yengo* Country should be, so far as humanly possible, left for what it is. And respected and enjoyed for what it is.

This then raises a challenging issue of its own with regard to *Yengo* County because the question inevitably arises as to *who* actually made these remarkable images at given sites in particular locations. Our campfire discussions over the years have led us almost unanimously to conclude that only certain individuals commanding immense respect within their own community (and, quite possibly, across the broader *Goorri* community as a whole, regardless of their tribal affiliations) would have been permitted and encouraged to leave behind important images.

Granted, family shelters and such would have likely afforded *anyone* the chance to leave behind some 'signature' images of their own (a hand stencil - or stencils - smaller charcoal and/or ochre drawings/paintings; even, perhaps, the occasional bird track or other image as a pathway indicator, etc.). However, it has ever seemed to us that all the important images at the major sites would have almost certainly been made only by particular men - and, quite possibly, by certain women as well - and that those people (either as individuals or in groups) would have been making them as important and lasting adjuncts to significant ideas, understandings, teachings, dreams, stories (and probably, chants, songs, dances too...) which dovetailed beautifully into the existing socio-cultural and spiritual traditions and would thus have expanded them by adding greater complexity, meaning and richness to them.

Of course, none of this can be proved. But it seems to be the most plausible scenario since it fits what the few surviving documents and ethnographic overviews remaining from the past 220 years have told us of the lives and cultural practices of these peoples. And it is a scenario which echoes those generally still applying in those parts of Australia (and other places around the world) where tribally-based societies are able to endure and maintain uninterrupted their old and highly-integrated ways.

At a purely personal level, I can honestly say that Peter Crousen and I are humbled and gratified to have spent all the years we have in closely attending to these remarkable images - and coming to know many of them intimately in the quiet process of tracing all their finest subtleties and nuances, their tiny bumps and graceful contours - such that we do indeed feel deeply connected with them now...; and, yes, at times we dream about them too... Just as we rightly should.

Finally, I wish to make a broader personal observation by way of generalisation about the rock art sites which have so dominated my life and the lives of the *Binghai* team-members for the past 30 years or so. It is this: I believe one of the main reasons why these places produce such extraordinary resonance deep within us is that - quite apart from *what* they are as 'artworks', what they might depict, represent or signify - they are more than capable of reminding us all in rather powerful ways that, despite our many different hybrid genealogies, *all* our ancestors once made and visited and learned from very similar places, perhaps as recently as only four- or five-thousand years ago (or even less...); moreover, that *our* ancestors would also have lived and learned, loved, raised children, matured... died and were mourned within very similar clan-based societies to those which produced the ancient art of *Yengo* Country, together with that found in comparable places all across the planet.

Binghai ...

Yes.

Brothers and Sisters all...

Quite regardless of time or place.

Notes & Sources

- 1 Source: Ms. Margrit Koettig (Sydney-based archaeologist), March 1992, who indicated at the time that this was the oldest of the relatively few radiocarbon dates which had been obtained in the Hunter Valley. Perhaps older dates have now been obtained...
- 2 My personal preference would be to resist using this or any other traditional *Goorri* name for the deity; however, since it *is* a name widely used by people today when speaking of the spiritual beliefs of the south-east, I will reluctantly follow suit.
- 3 The map shown here is, as it must be, a work-in-progress. Based on previous attempts to reconstruct a picture of tribal lands by Mathews, Tindale, Moore and Vinnicombe, this version takes into account other subtle information contained in past records, plus others developed in conversations with *goorri*s themselves and then applying commonsense suppositions in order to link those inputs. In no way is it intended to suggest that what is depicted is an accurate picture of the way things were in 1770; rather, it is the best that I can offer at the present time.
- 4 These hypothetical - though plausible - meandering lines of passage are not presented here in the belief that people using them could simply do so at will and without due regard to those whose country they were passing through. Sufficient archival and published material suggests, instead, that message-sticks or other recognised credentials may well have come into play to permit such free-ranging movement.
- 5 See the early 1790s journals of John Hunter in this regard where he speaks of such paths in the hills immediately to the north of Port Jackson (and now long-gone under the sprawl of Sydney's northern suburbs).
- 6 See the diaries of Joseph Holt which cover his farming experience in the colony during the early 1800s ('A Rum Story': Ed. by P. O'Shaughnessy, 1988).
- 7 See Lt. Breton's account of his journey by horseback from the Hawkesbury to the Hunter – and through the Wollombi Valley – in the 1830s ('Excursions in New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land', 1842) where he describes the land in just such a fashion.
- 8 'The History of Bulga near Singleton N S Wales from 1820 to 1921 by A. N. Eather' * (The University of Newcastle Archives, as transcribed by Gianni DiGravio)
- 9 Mircea Eliade, 'Patterns in Comparative Religion', 1958.

A Relevant Postscript: John Clegg's presentation at the *Wollombi Valley Community & Heritage* gathering on February 14th, 2009 (Laguna Community Hall) addressed in part the ongoing debate - one last raging in scholarly circles almost a century ago - concerning the historical evidence in support of (or refuting) the authenticity of the cosmology and religious beliefs surrounding the *Byarme* 'myth'. Essentially it revolves around the notion that early missionary influences (notably that of Threlkeld at Lake Macquarie to the east of *Yengo* Country in the first half of the nineteenth-century) saw the local tribespeople adapt their beliefs to accommodate those of the newly arrived Europeans, thus installing *Byarme* as the principal 'sky hero' above all others. Mine is a neutral position; however, all I have heard from my own *Goorri* sources over the years (Uncle Lenny de Silva included) says otherwise... namely, '... the reason the Christian missionaries were so successful is that we were being told something we already knew...' or words to that effect.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT PHOTOGRAPHS OF
DECEASED GOORRIS ARE INCLUDED IN
THE FOLLOWING GALLERY OF IMAGES**

A Gallery of Additional Images



Pat Vinnicombe in the Hawkesbury River district, 1978

It was Pat (a South African-born and raised archaeologist, previously a highly-respected researcher of Bushman culture *and* the first woman Fellow of Cambridge!) who introduced us to the tracing method we continue to use today (delineating both the groove contours and the discernible punctures within the grooves) and we continue to accept her assertion that using this method - quite apart from being both accurate and comprehensive - enables researchers to quantify weathering or man-made degradation over time as well as providing relative age indicators when comparing engravings.



Historic raising of the Aboriginal flag at Wollombi on the morning of the Corroborree in 1990

This symbolic gesture of true reconciliation between the *Wollombi* Valley community and the *Goorri* community marked a special moment in the restoration of pride and goodwill for all involved. Support of Aboriginal land claims in the district was widespread throughout the preceding months and this coming together of peoples for just and mutually beneficial purposes thus pre-empted that process in the broader population by at least a decade. A fine example for others to follow.

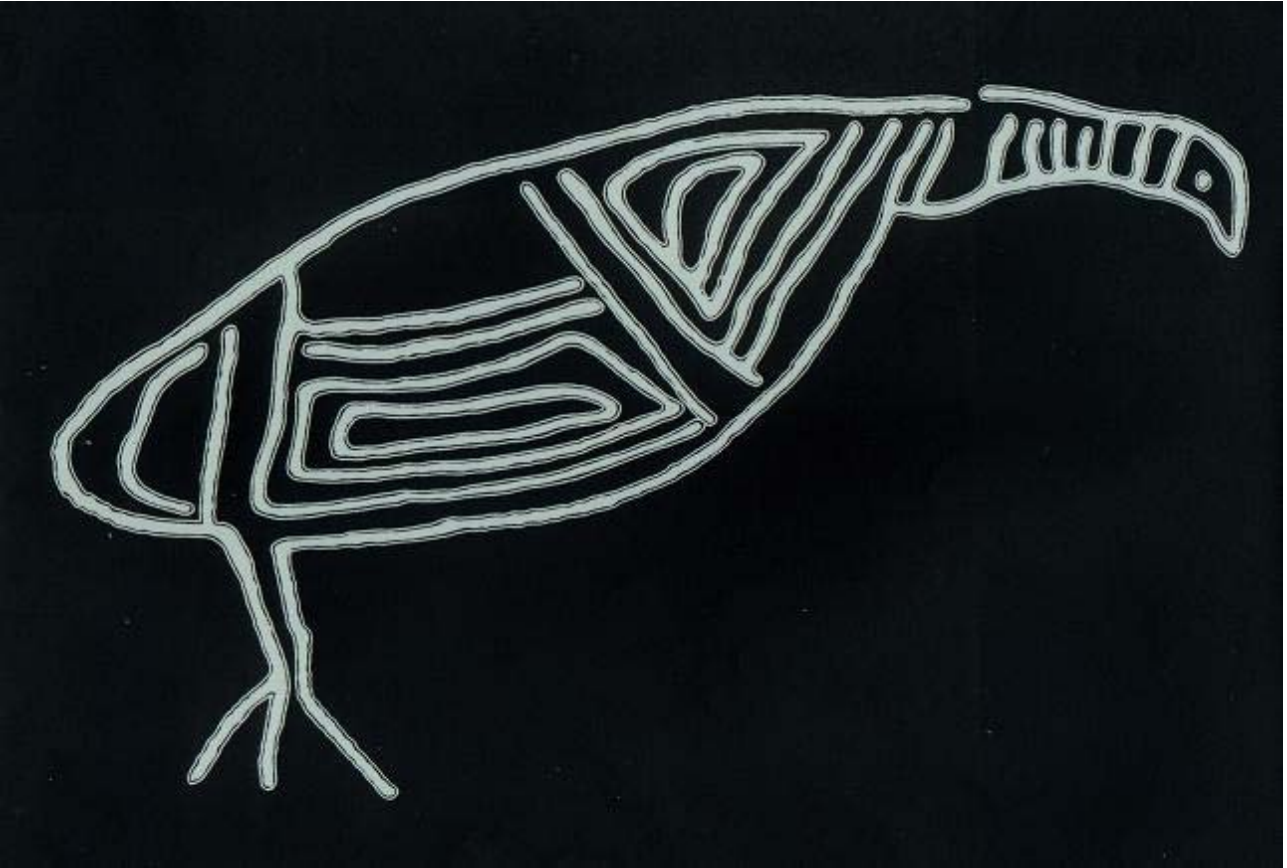


The three Uncs/Uncles that same morning: Lenny, Mangie & Leeton



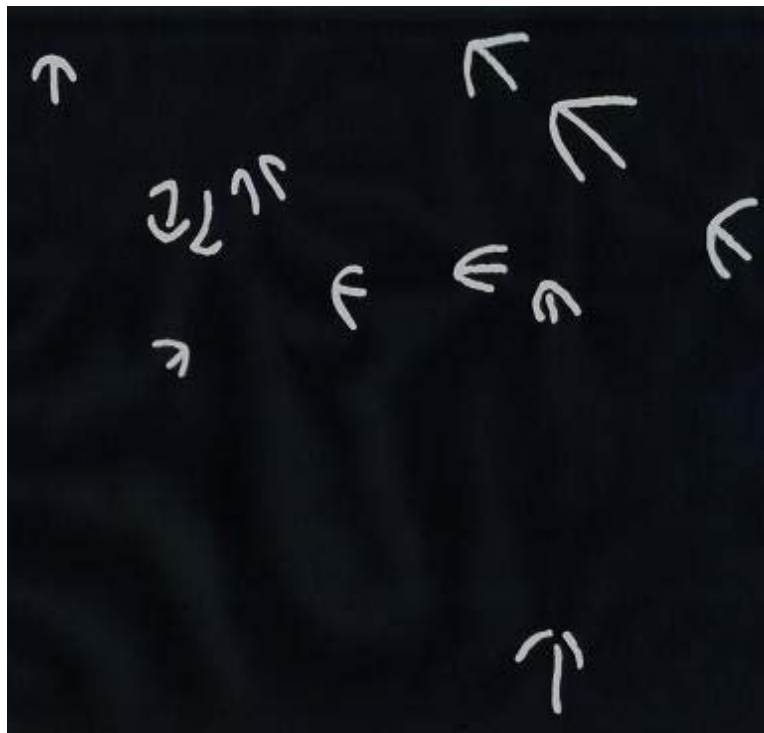
The dancers who participated in that corroboree of thanks & celebration, *Wollombi Brook*, 22 September 1990

Representing a number of different tribal groups across New South Wales, these men performed traditional dances in what was probably the first public display of its kind held in the lower Hunter in more than 170 years. The Selwood family generously hosted the event and were tireless in preparing the corroboree ground for the thousands of people present.



Decorated brush turkey near *Wollombi*, from the site that now goes by that name

The *Binghai* team relocated this important site in 1976 and were probably the first planned visitors to it since Sir Frederick McCarthy sketched and reported it in 1940. Typical of the blatant and careless damage done to sites in the district, within weeks of its rediscovery an intact and moss-covered cairn of stones, likely untouched since *goorris* were there, was scattered and rebuilt as a fire-place (!). Today the site is now seriously threatened by encroaching debris gravitating downwards from a short and totally unnecessary access road some thoughtless bull-dozer driver saw fit to make. On a brighter note, that 1990 Corroboree was held within earshot of this site... such that Uncle Lenny's beautiful old songs in *Gumbainggar* would have carried and echoed there.



Tracks indicating pathways, district of *Boree* in *Yengo* Country



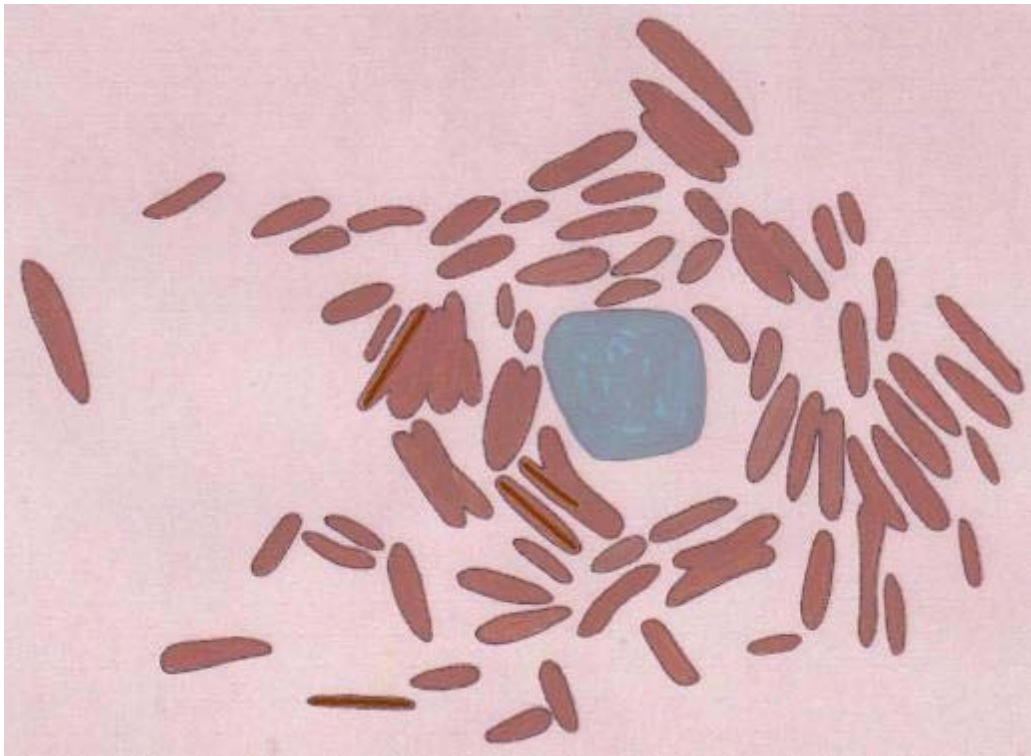
Boomerang and hand stencils typical of the 'family' caves in Yengo Country



As fresh as they come... stencils and smeared finger-marks in a wonderful state of preservation



Typical grinding-groove site located on a ridge with a panoramic view of Yengo



Typical configuration of grinding-grooves one finds in the sandstone country

Pat Vinnicombe passed on some insightful remarks to us regarding these ubiquitous sites, such that we now find ourselves considering various aspects of their possible socio-cultural contexts. This particular example is about 3.5 metres across and suggests that perhaps up to six adults (and possibly a few children, judging by the smaller grooves at the periphery) may have been able to work shoulder-to-shoulder at this place. The four darker lines show narrow v-shaped honing grooves within the more standard round-bottomed ones, a somewhat rare feature of the grinding sites in Yengo Country compared with those along the Hawesbury (the latter estuarine locations perhaps suggesting that the stone axes there were in more constant need of honing, especially if they were being used to regularly prise open brittle shells and the like).



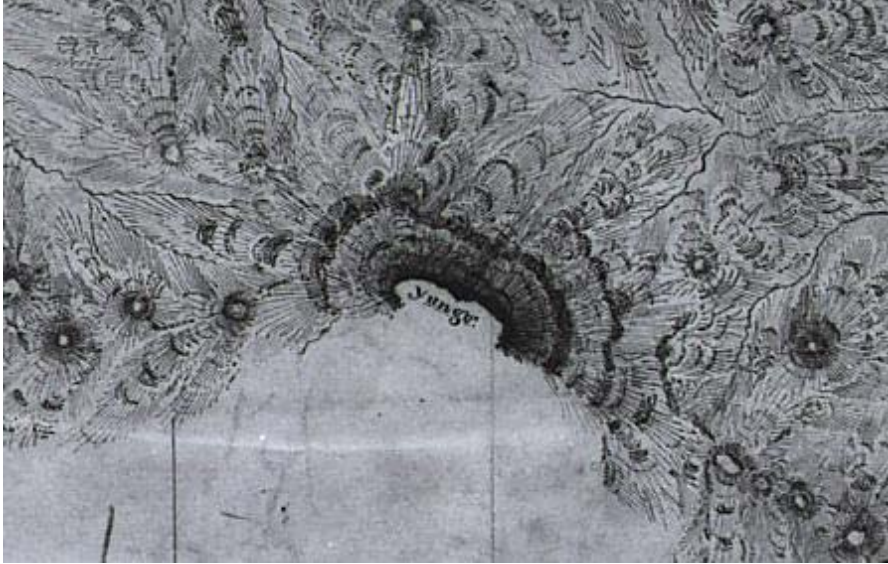
Examples of the scale & grandeur of sites in their surroundings



Paul Gordon in a huge overhang, deep in the heart of Yengo Country



Yengo: a high-flying eagle's eye view



Yengo recorded as "Yungo" by Darcy in 1833

As the first to map the country between that sacred mountain and the Macdonald River to the south-west, Darcy appears to have been following the specific instruction from the Surveyor General to record wherever possible the *Goorri* names of the landscape features encountered. We may be safe in assuming (though this could possibly be verified if Darcy's journal and/or field notebook survive) that his informant was a local inhabitant who pronounced the name in this particular way, a form conveying a somewhat deeper resonance than the flatter, nasal versions of *Yango* and *Yengo*, both of which are applied in the area (*Yango* Creek versus Big *Yengo* Creek, for example) and which have appeared on maps and in public records from the earliest years of European settlement in the district.

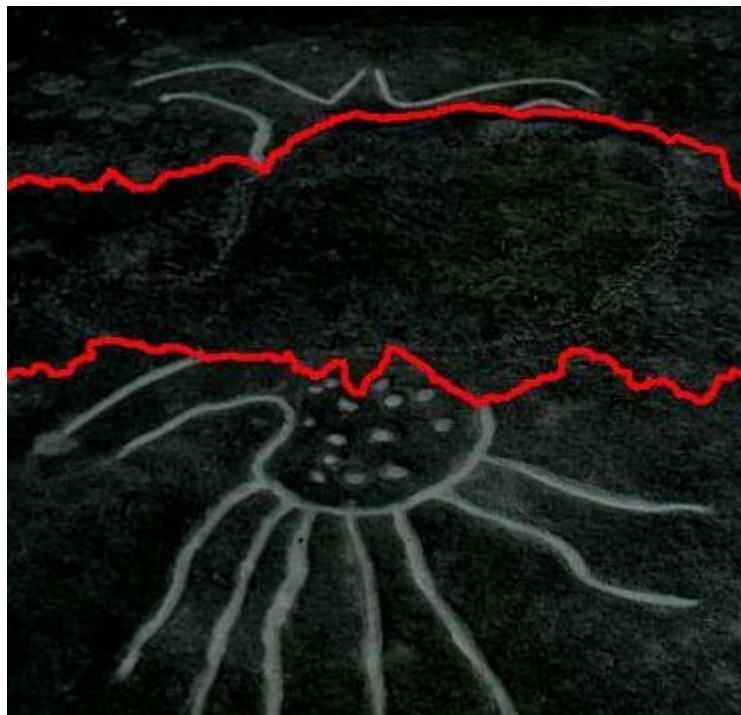


How to 'brand' a highly-significant site with graffiti almost a century-and-a-half ago



The problem of chalk and the thoughtless visitor

Though not as damaging as people outlining engravings with stones, with trails of sand or using mechanical devices, the hard dustless chalks of today actually dislodge tiny particles of silica from the rock surface and disturb the root systems of the lichen, causing them to die and thus turning the sandstone crust they live within to powder. Even merely walking around on a site has these detrimental effects, such that we ourselves recommend to people to always remove their shoes and socks and to then experience the site and the images just as all those old people once did...



A beautiful image destroyed

Between the early 1960s (when Ian Sim mapped it) and Easter 1976 when our team photographed it, this beautiful decorated figure had been dreadfully vandalised. One assumes that the missing section was a weathered flake easily prised up and removed to somebody's home... But it must also be said that from the time the 'Northern Map' site became more easily accessed via the declaration of *Yengo* National Park in 1988 the entire site has suffered greatly. Our team wholeheartedly supports *goorri* proposals put to authorities in the early 1990s - but ignored, along with other important conservation proposals - that the existing road running beside the site should be removed and re-landscaped, with a new road made below the ridgeline to the east. For, unless something is done along these lines, we are convinced that the increasing visitation and resulting damage will see this site completely lost, perhaps even within a single generation.



Spectacular *Burrigurra*: a heartbreaking example of ignorance, mismanagement and pig-headedness

It really is time something is done about this magnificent place, one visited by Darcy way back in 1833 when first mapping the district and today, from what people tell me, in a woeful state indeed... You see, I have not been there since 1992 when Peter Crousen and I last visited it in the company of Uncle Lenny and Uncle Leeton Smith. The disgraceful vandalism was so dreadful and the pain this brought for those old men was so palpable that particular evening that I can *never* go there again. Peter says the same thing.

Very soon afterwards, I was present at a meeting at the Bucketty office of the National Parks & Wildlife Service which brought together that authority's rangers and officers along with representatives of various Local Aboriginal Land Councils all vying for a slice of *Yengo* Country and its yet to be properly-surveyed-for sites. Uncle Lenny himself was present. I took minutes.

Uncle Lenny said this of the *Burrigurra* district (I paraphrase): This entire area must be closed to the public and vehicular access must be restricted by means of a locked gate located just south of the Little *Boree* access road. This is an area of *very* sacred *Goorrii* sites. If people insist on visiting this place then they should be forced to walk to it. Trailbikers and others can turn around and go elsewhere. Keys to the locked gate should be made available only to those who require them (NPWS, the sole property-owners on the *Bala* range, the rural fire service, emergency workers, etc.).

This old man was an initiated man. He was present at a ceremony held in 1935 at Bellbrook on the mid-North-Coast. NPWS itself publicly acknowledges that this ceremony took place and has been informed by its own *Goorrii* staff that Uncle Lenny was a participant.

Not a single thing he said that day at Bucketty almost seventeen years ago has been heeded.