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SIMPLE ROCK ENGRAVINGS IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

by

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Existing records show that simple rock engravings, made up of a number of indentations in the rock surface, are sporadically but widely distributed over much of eastern Australia, in Queensland, Northern Australia, the north-eastern districts of New South Wales, north-eastern South Australia and in Tasmania. More complex designs, employing similar techniques, exist in north-western Australia. With these, however, I will not deal.

Distribution

It is a puzzling fact that, although no rock engravings have been found along the southern and south-eastern coasts of Australia, they are widely but sparsely distributed throughout Tasmania. Equally puzzling is the fact that wherever these simple engravings exist the motifs are similar. For instance, there is a general resemblance between the designs on the rocks of the Burnett River, north-western Queensland (Matthews, 1919, pp. 498f.), Pigeon Creek, central Queensland (Tyron, 1885, pp. 43-7); Moortwingee (Pullihere, 1936, pp. 101-5); and Sturt Meadows (Black, 1943, pp. 16-23), both of north-eastern New South Wales; Delemere, in Northern Australia (Davidson, 1936, p. 58); Pararamuttee and other localities in South Australia (Mountford, 1939, pp. 332-66); Mount Cameron west in Tasmania (McCon, 1934, pp. 36-40), and central Australian groups which I have investigated in more recent years (fig. 1).

Origin and Meanings

From the statements of the aborigines, it would appear that the simple rock markings discussed in this paper belong to an extinct art. During 1937, accompanied by a group of aged local aborigines, I visited Deception Gorge, northern South Australia, to photograph rock engravings previously recorded by Basedow (1914, p. 208). To my surprise, the aborigines did not recognize those rock engravings as human handwork, even though they must have passed through that gorge many times on their hunting journeys. But when I started to photograph, my aboriginal companions quickly recognized the engravings of human and animal footprints, and suggested meanings for the more complex designs as readily as my European companions.

Some years later (1942), I found rock engravings at the Kopporilya and Iromba waterholes in central Australia (fig. 1). On that occasion, my aboriginal companions knew of the existence of the markings, but were definite that they had not been cut in the rock by human hands, but by some mythical hero during the creation period. Similarly, in more recent years, the aborigines at Kamalba, Watel-

FIG. 1. SITES OF ROCK ENGRAVINGS IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Techniques

Because this rock art is no longer a part of the living culture, we have no first-hand information about either the tools used or the methods employed to produce these rock engravings. As it is possible, however, to cut identical markings by striking the rock surface with a sharp-edged boulder of hard stone, it appears likely that those who made the ancient rock markings used similar tools.

Rock Engravings in Central Australia

Rock markings have been known in central Australia for more than a century. During 1934, Miss Helen Teague photographed and made rough sketches of a number of rock engravings at the 70-mile gap on the Glen Helen station (fig. 1). Miss Teague gave me these sketches in 1937.

In a geological paper Tindale (1931, p. 37) made a particularly short reference to rock markings near McDonald

* With Plate M and seven text figures

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(a) Rock Engraving Site at Ewaninga (for numbering see text and figures)

(b) Types of Rock Engravings

ROCK ENGRAVINGS AT EWANINGA, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA
Downs, central Australia. The description, however, was too short to distinguish the type of marking to which he referred.¹

**Fig. 2. Rock Engravings at Ewaninga**

During 1940, I saw rock markings at Mount Olga,² and in 1942 groups (mentioned previously) at Korporkiya and Imamba waterholes. Since then I have found other examples of rock engravings at Kamala, Watcoring and Ngaama. Interested friends have also helped me in this research. About 1952, the late Roy Vyas gave me a photograph of a small group of rock markings near Temple Bar gap.³ More recently I received photographs from Mr. H. L. Ryddell of rock markings near Owen Springs, from Mr. Eric Morris of a group at Loves Creek, and from Mr. Rex Botterbee of a decorated face at Areyonga. All the above-mentioned localities are shown on fig. 1.

**Fig. 3. Rock Engravings at Ewaninga**

During August, 1959, the kindness of Mr. Leo Corbett, of Alice Springs, enabled me to investigate a remarkable group of rock engravings at Ewaninga, a few miles south of the Ewaninga railway station. These engravings form the main subject of this paper; the other groups await preparation for publication.

**The Ewaninga Engravings**

These engravings were found on a much weathered and collapsed outcrop of horizontally bedded rocks (Plate Ma) situated on the edge of a claypan which would hold water for several months of the year. The level surfaces of this outcrop, some of the vertical faces and those underneath the tumbling boulders were covered with a maze of simple rock engravings. I was able to record all of the engravings on the level surfaces, but time did not allow me to trace more than a few (fig. 5) on the more inaccessible faces.

**Fig. 5. Rock Engravings at Ewaninga**

So that I might record more accurately this maze of designs, I marked the level surfaces with a series of two-foot squares. Then, when the sun was nearing the horizon, which brought the markings into strong relief, the whole area was photographed. From these photographs, all of the same scale, I constructed a photomosaic, from which figs. 2–4 were traced. Some of the more inaccessible engravings (fig. 5) were prepared from tracings made on transparent paper.

**Fig. 6. Cup-shaped depressions at Ewaninga**

To facilitate description, I have numbered the individual rock faces on the photograph (Plate Ma). These agree with figs. 2–4.

**Description**

Fig. 2 illustrates the engraved designs on the largest rock face at Ewaninga (Plate Ma, face 1). Meandering lines, AA, etc., extend the whole length of the stone; other designs are circles, concentric circles, a barred circle at C, a few bird tracks at D, and a curious rake-like design at E. The remainder of the engravings are indiscernible.
Although, as with the rock engravings, we have no first-hand knowledge of the techniques employed to produce these straight-line marks, it is possible to make identical marks with an aboriginal stone axe, without blunting the tool.

Summary

This paper records an extensive group of rock engravings at Ewaninga, central Australia. The design is figured, distribution of simple rock engravings in Australia discussed and attention drawn to the wide distribution of specialist forms, both at this locality and elsewhere.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge first of all my indebtedness to Mr. Leo Corbett, for taking me to Ewaninga group and assisting in the research, and to Messrs. Rex Bartersee, Eric Miller, H. L. Blythall and the late Roy Vyse, for photographs of existing rock engravings which I have not, as yet, been able to investigate.

References

Adam, L., letter to the Editor, Man, 1959, 312.
Black, L., Aboriginal Art Galleries of Western New South Wales (1943).

Notes

1 As I have recorded (1955, pp. 344), rock-pounding, a relaxed technique to that of the simple rock engravings, is a living art in central Australia. It is possible that the markings referred to by Tindale are of this type.
2 Some of these markings have been described by Pringle and Kollroch (1958, pp. 111–9).
3 These are almost certainly the same group as those mentioned by Dr. Adam in a letter to the Hon. Editor of Man (1959, 312). For that reason, they are not included on the map (fig. 1).