The Aboriginal Rock Engravings of the Sydney District

By FREDERICK D. McCARTHY

EVER since Governor Phillip first drew attention to the local rock engravings in a dispatch to Lord Sydney, dated May 15, 1788, Sydney Cove, a great deal of interest, and much controversy, have been aroused regarding them. They are to be found in the area between the coast and the Blue Mountains, extending from National Park in the south to Wollombi in the north, and comprise hundreds of groups of punctured and incised rock drawings of considerable artistic merit. They are engraved on the flat and undulating expanses of rock surface common to the Hawkesbury sandstone formation, often in places which possess a commanding view of the surrounding district; thus a large number of groups is situated on prominent headlands along the numerous waterways which penetrate this rugged country, and others are on the slopes of ridges and sugarloaf hills. Many groups, however, are to be seen in secluded spots amidst thick bush or along creek and river banks.

The method employed in making these outline engravings is generally considered to have been as follows: the outline of the subject was either scratched or drawn upon the rock surface, then a series of punctures, from half an inch to one inch apart, was made with a hardened stick or pointed stone along the outline, and finally the intervening rock surface between the punctures was ground away so as to form a continuous groove. The processes are clearly indicated by the engravings themselves, for many of them are merely punctured outlines; in others, the groove is only partly made, and in others, again, the grooved outline is complete. Only one stone implement is known which can be said definitely to have been used in making the carvings; this implement was employed in the final process of grinding the grooves and was found lying on a rock besides an unfinished carving.1

The subjects depicted are practically all naturalistic, there being exception-

---

1 It is now on exhibit in the Australian Museum.
ally few figures of the geometric type so common in far western New South Wales and in South and Central Australia. Man himself is seen in many moods and poses, as a hunter holding a club or spear, as a fisherman, as a dancer, and in ceremonial postures. In almost all cases the arms are upheld. A most interesting figure is a two-headed man. The mammals include whales, seals, kangaroos and wallabies, koalas, wombats, opossums, echidna or spiny anteaters, and flying phalangers. Birds are surprisingly few, indicating that they were not so important a food as mammals and fish; but emus are common, and penguins, ducks, shags, brush turkeys, and lyre-birds are known. The fish, which are probably in the majority, include hammer-headed and other sharks, sunfish, devil ray and sting-rays, bream, snapper, eels, and many others. Goannas are common, and snakes, tortoises, and turtles occur.

Engravings of weapons include bulbous-headed clubs, plain single-pointed one-piece spears, four-pronged fishing spears, spear-throwers, shields, returning and non-returning boomerangs. Other articles shown comprise belts, loin-girdles and fringes, a twined ornament running from the neck to the opposite shoulder-pit, necklets (of twine and shells), head-plumes, baskets (twined), hafted stone axes, and ceremonial objects. As no specimens of the majority of these objects are to be found in museum collections in Australia, the engravings form an invaluable record of the material culture of the local tribes.

Circles occur scattered amongst other figures in a group; they may be in a row, and men are shown holding circular objects. The concentric circle motif is known, but is very rare.

A number of the figures which cannot be interpreted are probably of ceremonial significance; others are indecipherable on account of the curious angle from which the aborigine portrays his subjects.

Most interesting of all the groups, however, are those of a ritual character, which depict culture heroes and their tracks through the hordes' territory. The culture heroes are always larger figures than ordinary human beings. They comprise male and female figures, often associated in pairs. Some are decorated

*Engraving of a wallaby in which the outline is punctured.*
with longitudinal and transverse incisions, others are wearing headdresses, loin, neck and shoulder ornaments, or they may be holding in their hands a fish, shield, boomerang, or hafted stone axe. The predominant type is a large male figure shown from the side so that only one leg and one arm are seen, and it occurs in many parts of the area in which the engravings are found. Among Australian tribes throughout the continent culture heroes form an important feature of religion and mythology, and they are believed to possess supernatural powers and superhuman abilities. Distinct historical rites are enacted which tell the story of their lives and their contributions to the culture of the aborigines, for they are credited with creating the social institutions and laws, the initiation rites, various customs, weapons and implements, and with punishing evil-doers. Their tracks may be seen in the groups of engravings as human footprints, ovals, circles, emu or kangaroo footprints, and these often lead for hundreds of yards from rock to rock and from group to group of engravings in a horde's territory in many parts of Australia. These tracks, with their sacred rites (e.g., groups of engravings), are imbued with the magical and supernatural sanctity of the spiritual ancestors; they are enshrined in myths and legends, and are the scene of the most important and secret initiation, totemic and historical rites of the tribes. Such places are taboo to the women and uninitiated, for the fully initiated men only were taught the rituals.

Finally, there are figures which are combined fish and man, bird and man, mammal and man, which represent the beginning of the race, for in the myths and legends in other parts of Australia is the belief that from these creatures the culture heroes created man and the animals which form his food supply.
The human figure is stylized to a uniform pattern, in which the neck is absent or ill-defined, the elbows and knees are usually sharp projections, and the toes often not shown. No. 1 is wearing a ceremonial head-dress, and two styles of wearing the hair are shown in Nos. 2 and 8. No. 7 is holding a circular object, and No. 3 appears to be participating in a boomerang duel. Women’s breasts always project laterally, as in Nos. 5 and 6. No. 1 is wearing armlets, and No. 7 a loin girdle.

The size of the individual figures varies a great deal. Many are life size, others are enlarged out of all proportion to their natural size, and some are reduced in size. The whales and culture heroes are the largest, the former ranging up to sixty feet in length.

The artistic merit of the various animals shown in this comprehensive range of subjects is considerable. The aboriginal artists engraved their subjects in outline and did not show contour form; they were careless about details of structure, such as toes, fingers, mouth, ears and eyes. Their skill, however, is well exemplified by the manner in which they have been able to get the correct attitude and poise of the kangaroo in many poses, such as sitting in an alert position, feeding, hopping along in a line, and being hit with a spear or boomerang. This also applies to the engravings of many fish and whales. The artist has often done his work so well that a vivid mental picture of the living creature is immediately suggested in the mind of the

Mammals. Engravings of the whale (centre), and (from top left to right) two dingoes, kangaroo-rat, flying phalanger, echidna or spiny ant-eater, wombat, and an unidentified creature. On the middle left a koala, and lower left a series of rabbit-like creatures. Rabbits were introduced in 1788 and were plentiful in the Sydney district by 1820.
Birds and Reptiles. Engravings of the shag, emu, penguin, lyre-bird, and other birds, and of the goanna, snake, and turtle.

observer. This skill, no doubt, is due to the aboriginal's intimate knowledge of the appearance and habits of the creatures, gained from a lifelong observation of them in his quest for food and, further, in his use of them as ritual symbols. When we consider the medium and the laborious technique, we must admit that the task has been accomplished with admirable results.

An aspect of the significance of these rock engravings which has not yet been thoroughly studied, owing to the fact that a large number of the groups has not yet been recorded, is the relationship of the figures in one group to one another, and of group to group. The figures in most of the groups consist of a heterogeneous mixture of mammals, fish, anthropomorphs, weapons, and others more uncommon, a feature which causes much difficulty in interpretation. The lines of ovals, human feet, kangaroo and wallaby pads, and emu tracks, indicate a connecting link between figures in the one group and between groups, and figures are associated in those groups where pictorial compositions are present. To understand this important factor in its correct interpretation, it would be necessary to possess a detailed knowledge of the myths and legends associated with the carvings, and to have a complete knowledge of the secret life and rites of the tribes. Unfortunately, practically none of this information has been preserved, because when the country was first settled the conflict between black and white soon wiped out the aborigines, and, although many of their customs and their material culture have been described in early literature, there is little reference to their ritual life. Fortunately, however, it is possible to interpret many of the groups of engravings of ceremonial nature by analogy with the practices of the tribes in other parts of New South Wales, whose ritual life varied in detail, but followed the same general pattern.

The carvings portray many of the totems of clans and of individuals. In this part of New South Wales each of the many clans in a tribe has a totem, and members of the same clan were not allowed to marry. In addition, individuals possessed separate totems of their own. The totem served as a guardian and emblem, but it is not definitely known, although thought probable, that ceremonies such as those of the tribes on the north coast of New South Wales for the increase of the species serving as the totem, were carried out in the area in which the engraving occurs.

The question might now be asked: What is the antiquity of the petroglyphs? This is difficult to estimate, for several reasons. The earliest carvings have undoubtedly weathered away and dis-
Fish. The engravings of fish include the hammer-headed, tiger, whaler, and other sharks, various rays, sunfish, and many of the species common to the Sydney district.

appeared, because the sandstone into which they are cut is a soft rock which is comparatively soon worn down by the action of wind-blown sand and by water. Moreover, some of the figures are so lightly incised that they are difficult to discern, while others have deep, wide grooves. It is possible that many of the latter were regrooved for ceremonies, since most of the culture heroes are deeply grooved. Notwithstanding these difficulties, many claims have been made about their origin. Following Hargrave (Lope de Vega, 1911, typescript privately distributed), many have attributed them to early Spanish adventurers who came here to look for gold, whilst others give early Asiatic navigators (Vogan, A. J., Journ. Polyn Soc., xlii, 3, 99–101, fig. 1) the credit for them. Attempts have been made to interpret their meaning according to the languages and picture-writing of ancient Egyptian and other classical civilizations. Such contentions are
Weapons and Other Objects. Engravings of (reading from left and down) spear and woot-woot, three shields, four boomerangs, shell or seed ornament, netted bag, loin fringe, twined basket, hafted and unhafted stone axes, three clubs, multi-pronged fish-spear, and a lil-lil club.

Futile for several reasons. Rock engravings occur throughout Australia, not only on the coast as some believe, and one can hardly imagine the early Spanish and Asiatic navigators spending their time in the interior laboriously carving figures in the rocks. Further, the subjects depicted in Australian engravings, both naturalistic and geometric, are so illustrative of the secret and daily life of the aborigines, as this brief article has shown, that we need go no further to find out who made them.

Similar rock engravings occur in all continents, and are especially plentiful in Australia, Africa, and America, where the primitive aborigines had no written language, and in each locality the subjects depicted are indigenous in nature. The earliest known are those of the Aurignacian and Magdalenian periods of Europe and Spain, in which the designs are principally naturalistic. Rock engravings comprising geometric designs are associated with the early metal ages in Spain (Obermaier, H., Fossil Man in Spain, 1925), and scientific investigation by competent research workers is adding valuable data to our knowledge about their age and cultural associations in Scandinavia, India, and Africa. The occurrence of rock engravings in so many parts of the world is due to the migrations of the peoples of whose cultures they form an element, and by their contact with other peoples the techniques were diffused far and wide.

In Australia several phases of rock engraving have appeared, as follows: 1. Grooving, produced by (a) scratching the rock surface with a sharp stone or hardened stick to make a series of narrow and shallow incisions, and (b) grinding deep grooves with a sharpened stone. 2. Puncturing: making a series of punctures to form an outline of the figure. 3. Puncturing and then grooving of the outline. 4. Hammer-dressing: hammering the whole surface of the figure with a hammer-stone to form an intaglio. Thus, in considering the question of origin or antiquity, we become involved in a mixture of diffusion of techniques and migrations of people, one of a number of similar problems in Oceanic cultural history. Outline grooving occurs in New Guinea, New Caledonia, and Fiji, so that it is not strictly an Australian problem; it may have been brought by an early people who settled throughout the area of distribution, or to one locality from which it diffused, or it may have diffused to Oceania without the migration of people. The intaglio technique in the interior of Australia may be more definitely placed. The technique of hammer-dressing is one which spread through southern Asia, Malaya, and Oceania in early neolithic times (McCarthy, F. D., Report of 4th Congress of Prehistorians of Far East, Singapore, January, 1938, now in press). It was employed in Central and eastern Australia for shaping ground-edge axes, and along the Darling River for shaping ground-edge axes, grooved ground-edge axes, millstones, mullers, and cylindrical stones; within this distribution the same technique has been employed to make the intaglio rock engravings, some
Culture Heroes and Enigmatic Figures. No. 7 is a common type of culture hero, depicted with one leg and one arm; he is holding a hafted stone axe. The woman in No. 6 is wearing a necklet, and loin girdles are worn by Nos. 4 to 6, and 8. No. 3 is a large and unusual emu-like figure, and No. 2 an enigma.

of which are of such recent origin that they are not patinated.

Let us consider the motifs. According to Obermaier, the geometrical patterns were developed in Spain by the conventionalization and stylization of the naturalistic drawings. This is not true of all of the geometrical motifs in Australia, although the zigzag motif of Western Australian decorative art is a conventionalized snake. There is no evidence to indicate that the concentric circle so typical of Central Australian pictographic and decorative art, and of far western New South Wales rock engravings, and the concentric diamond characteristic of eastern Australian decorative art, developed from naturalistic subjects; they no doubt diffused into Australia from New Guinea, where both are common on utilitarian and sacred objects.

Unfortunately, a great deal of mutilation and destruction of these interesting relics has taken place, as pointed out by Professor J. L. Shellshear in a recent
issue of this Magazine (Vol. vi, 1937, p. 169). One of the most serious factors militating against their preservation is the spread of settlement on the outskirts of the city. In practically all instances where homes have been built near groups, the occupants, and especially their children, have added lines, recut the engravings, written and carved their names over them, and otherwise defaced the work of the aborigines. Instead of committing such vandalism, people who live near these valuable relics should appoint themselves guardians and take care that no one is allowed to tamper with them. Even in our national reserves, groups of rock engravings have been destroyed by road-building operations, and each year more groups are obliterated. It is imperative that the public conscience should be awakened to the need for the preservation of such relics of a past race, for they are of great value to the scientist who understands their meaning and function in the life of the aborigines. The line illustrations have been made and arranged by Miss E. Bramell, after Campbell and from records in the Australian Museum.


This splendid book is the product of a scientist who has had unique opportunities to study the life and culture of the Australian aborigines. Professor Elkin has carried out extensive field-work among these people, he is widely acknowledged as our greatest authority on their magico-religious life and social organization, and he has directed Rockefeller Foundation research work in Australia for many years. In addition his interest in the aborigines is not only that of a scientist, but that of a humanitarian also.

A general account of how the aborigines live and of their attitude to their lands is given, the function and place of the family, various social groups, and kinship are then dealt with, followed by a discussion of totemism, the secret life, initiation, magic, and death, in their cultural setting. Professor Elkin has dealt with these aspects of the subject from the point of view of the aborigines, that is, according to their philosophy and attitude, so that the reader is given a deeper insight into their thoughts and mind than has previously been obtainable in book form. Although material culture is only briefly mentioned, emphasis is placed on the manner in which the ritual, art and daily life are interdependent and interwoven. Thus, the study of the food quest involves the weapons and objects used, their decoration and explanatory myths of the motifs employed, the social implications, and ritual background. The explanation of puzzling customs, such as social avoidances, obligations of marriage and of blood relatives, how wives are obtained and treated, the use of the pointing-bone, and others, should be of great interest to those who have read fantastic accounts of them in newspapers and novels.

Professor Elkin reveals in its proper light a world of mysticism and religious fervour in aboriginal life that will astonish those people whose knowledge of the aborigines is limited to the boomerang and death-pointer. One is impressed with the author’s deep respect for, and understanding of, our stone-age folk, and one hopes that missionaries and administrators (not only in Australia but among the Pacific islanders) will heed his constructive advice to adapt their teachings to culture patterns, rather than destroy all that is essential to the happiness of the individual and well-being of the society. In other words, that the teacher should understand those to be taught. The book is written in a simple and lucid style, and may be read by the layman or student. The illustrations form a well-selected series.

F. McC.