

KIMBERLEY ROCK ART

Grahame Walsh, the speaker at the March 1997 meeting, was born and raised on a station in Queensland and has pursued rock art since 1957. He had 12 years with Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, creating and running the Historic Sites Section. He was employed as Cultural Consultant to the Rockhampton Aboriginal Organisation Dreamtime Cultural Corporation for four years and since has operated as a private rock art consultant. Grahame established the Takarakka Rock Art Research Centre in Carnarvon Gorge (Qld) and, with its repository now exceeding 1.2 million catalogued images of rock art sites and associated culture, the Centre is believed to be the largest in the world.

This trip to WA is only Grahame's third but he has been involved in Kimberley rock art research since 1977. He showed a representative 80 slides of excellent quality, and he spoke primarily about the "stick" figures that he and others call Bradshaw paintings. Bradshaw, according to Grahame, was a surveyor, and it was his reports of the ancient art that brought it to the notice of western eyes. Some people prefer to call the art by the Aboriginal names of Djennaggi or Goyon/Koian/Gueon-Gueon paintings but Grahame rejects these names. In his view, there are three epochs of art, which he identifies as the "Archaic", the "Erudite" and the "Aborigine". And, within each one, to assist with his cataloguing of the art, he has assigned names to the various types of work that occur. Grahame describes the "Archaic" epoch as the "animal infill period", saying that the oldest sites are believed to be in Arnhemland and that the hand stencils of this epoch should not strictly be considered as art. His "Erudite" epoch includes the so-called Bradshaws and "clothes peg" figures while his "Aborigine" epoch includes the "clawed hand" period, grass prints, string prints and the famous Wandjina art.

As Grahame showed his slides, he spoke enthusiastically about the attributes by which he differentiates one piece of rock art from another. He pointed out how, in the "Archaic" epoch, the inside of the drawings is filled with colour and some look like fork-tailed cat fish. There were also "feather" prints, named for the feathers with which they were made. This art is found very high up on sheer walls and now, even though the topography may have altered, one has to wonder how the artists could have worked at these heights. With regard to some "positive" hand prints, Grahame pointed out that these show enormous hands with rounded fingers that are nothing like the long, slender fingers of today's Aboriginal people. When he moved on to his "Erudite" epoch, talking about "clothes peg" figures, "tassel Bradshaws", and figures with "sashes", "cords", "Afro" headdresses, "fluffy arm bands" and "bangles", he became particularly animated. Grahame uses these "sashes" and the like to argue the existence of sequential styles in the art form and, whilst he would not reveal any of the latest findings, he told how experts have recently dated some

fossilised wasp nest found at the site, thereby offering scientific evidence of the age of the paintings. Grahame says these elegant figures occur only in the Kimberley and that, while they extend as far as the Caroline Ranges, they are found mainly in the Drysdale River area. It is probable the distribution was more widespread in the past, however, as weathering of the rock surfaces causes deterioration and many of the paintings may have disappeared.

The slides, and Grahame's commentary on them, offered great insight into the diversity of rock art in the Kimberley. The strong interest from the audience resulted in many questions and it was clear that members and guests were intrigued with the evening's subject matter.

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