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A TASMANIAN PAINTING SITE (?)

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(with two text-figures and one plate)

ABSTRACT

While attempting to relocate a published Tasmanian painting site, another nearby rock shelter was found to contain painting on its walls. The new cave contains at least three hand stencils and other marks in red and yellow ochre. As the site previously published has been destroyed by the flooding of Meadowbank Dam, the new site, designated Meg's Mit rock shelter, is the only known painting site in Tasmania. The painting is described and possible hypotheses for its origin proposed. An archaeological strategy for the site is outlined.

A TASMANIAN PAINTING SITE (?)

In 1958 De Teliga and Bryden (1958, p.191) reported hands painted on the wall of a cave in the Derwent Valley to the Royal Society. This was the first report in recent times of such painting in Tasmania.

The original description was vague "Our investigations showed that in the sandstone cave there were a few rough outlines, but what they were supposed to represent we could not determine. There were, however, a number of impressions or drawings of hands, both right and left. Red ochre had been smeared across some of the sandstone and the hand traced or drawn by using what appeared to us to be marl or limestone". De Teliga and Bryden published this description of the site and this led to the eventual relocation of the cave. The site has been referred to repeatedly in the literature since that time (e.g. Lourandos 1970 p.35; Stockton 1975b). It was located but now is flooded by an artificial lake. The cave wall was examined by diving but no trace of pigment could be found on the walls.

During a search for this cave, another rock shelter with aboriginal paintings was found. This cave, called Meg's Mit rock shelter, is the only aboriginal painting site known in Tasmania.

The paintings consist of three clear but faded hands stencilled in red ochre (pl.1 and fig. 1) and several indecipherable lines in yellow (fig. 2). In other parts of the walls of the cave are red ochre marks but they are mostly irregular blobs. The hands in De Teliga and Bryden's site were similarly stencilled on the rock wall in red ochre (pers. comm. E. Bannister). Although about 300 rock shelters in the adjacent area were examined, none were found to contain recognisable paintings. However, once again, blobs of red ochre adhering to the walls were noted.

Plate 1 is a photograph of the clearest hand stencil. Figure 1 is a scale drawing of the hand stencils.

The implication of this site for Tasmanian prehistory is interesting. The hand stencils in these two sites are identical in form to those found throughout mainland Australia. Tasmania has been separated from the mainland for about 10,000 years by the rising post-glacial sea level. However, it is possible that the paintings are actually of post-European settlement origin. Aborigines from the Sydney area were brought to Tasmania in the 1830's to be used to hunt and capture the locals. Others were brought as convicts, for offences in New South Wales. Hand stencils are prolific

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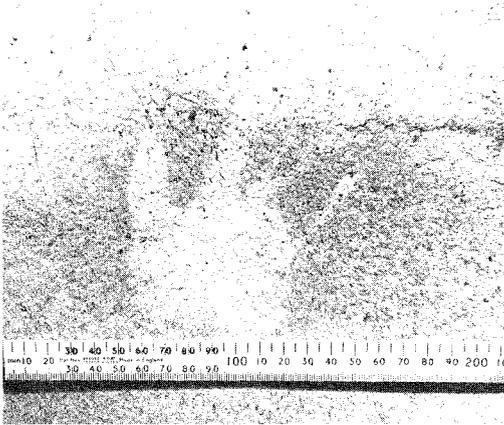


PLATE 1 - The clearest hand stencil in Meg's Mit Cave

by Péron of the Baudin expedition in 1802 on Maria Island off the south-east coast (Lourandos 1970, p. 35).

in the Sydney and Hawkesbury regions. This sandstone shelter is very similar to those of the Hawkesbury Sandstone outcrop. Meg's Mit Rock Shelter is certainly the best accommodation available in the immediate vicinity and may have been used as a camp by visitors.

ETHNOHISTORICAL DATA

Ethnographic records of the Tasmanians at the time of contact are scarce and post-settlement accounts are often unreliable. Very little was recorded about painting in Tasmania, although considerable attention was paid to rock engraving sites.

One of the most reliable ethnographic sources are the French expeditions. Schematic signs drawn in charcoal on the inside walls of bark shelters were recorded

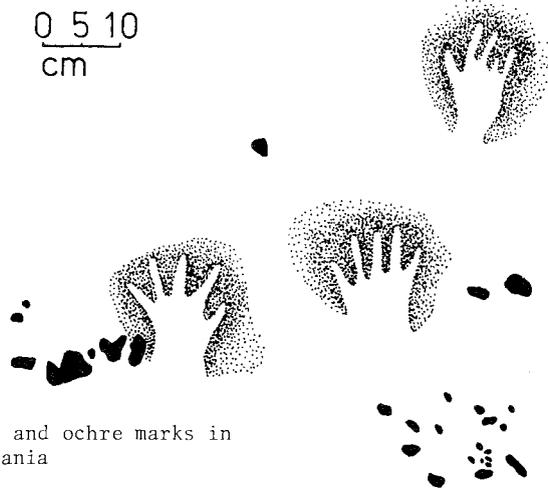


FIG. 1 - Hand stencils and ochre marks in Meg's Mit Cave, Tasmania

One of the largest descriptions of Tasmanian art work comes from one of the most unreliable sources, Bonwick (1967, p. 47):

"Our Aborigines, though an unlettered people, possessed some dim notion of the Fine Arts. As upon the sandstone of Sydney Heads are rude resemblances of fish and quadrupeds, so have marks or tokens been detected on trees and rocks in Tasmania. Mr John Batman described some he witnessed. Mr G.A. Robinson saw drawings of men and women, with some curious hieroglyphics, like the totems of tribes, when he was on the west coast in 1831. Inside the substantial huts of the Macquarie Harbour tribe were found a number of sketches of birds, beasts, and men, some of which were fairly executed. Dr Ross relates his discovery of geometrical figures, as squares and circles, on the bark in the valley of the Ouse. In the lovely vale of Belvoir, where the basaltic columns of May Hills tower over the limestone plain, a piece of bark was found, after the first two bullock drays passed that way, bearing a really good copy

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of the drays, bullocks, and the men with their whips: it was better done than the markings of the cave-men of Perigord on the bones of the mammoth.

I append some rude Tasmanian sketches of men and animals with five drawings, as seen by Mr Commissary Browne on a tree, representing the sun, the moon, some snakes, and five persons in a boat."

FIG. 2 - Yellow markings,
Meg's Mit Cave



Roth (1899, pp. 127-8) also deals with painting but only describes body painting. Similarly, Robinson describes aboriginal use of ochre for body painting and also describes sketches in charcoal on the inside walls of bark huts (Plomley 1966, pp. 197, 514-5, 542-3, 563, 571, 884, 917n.98). Motifs of these sketches included "circles, broad arrows and other hieroglyphical figures representing men and women, and round circles which from their different diameters I judge to have been done by a pair of scissors (Plomley 1966, pp. 514-5). Naturalistic forms were also recorded e.g. a porcupine (*ibid.*, pp. 884, 917n.98).

However, nowhere in the literature is stencilling described as a technique nor are stencils found. It is not until 1958 that the first account of stencilling in Tasmania was described and even then only one site in the whole of Tasmania was known. Finding the second site does not really solve the enigma as, above the present water line, Meg's Mit rock shelter represents the most comfortable camping shelter adjacent to de Teliga's cave, though more shelters may have existed below the present dam.

THE CONTACT PERIOD

The ethnohistorical period was one of outright warfare between the Aborigines and the Europeans. One of the more imaginative attempts to defeat the local inhabitants involved the importation of a group of Sydney Aborigines under the control of John Batman to help hunt and capture the local people. After some freelance operations, Batman and his Sydney Aborigines were used in a co-ordinated operation with Robinson and his local assistants. (Plomley 1966, pp. 481, 575). In October 1831 both parties moved south from Launceston with the object of capturing the Big River Tribe. The exact movements of the Sydney group, led by Cotterell, are not recorded but Robinson's party spent several weeks around Oatlands and Campbell Town. The lack of detail in Robinson's diaries about his competitors is not surprising as Batman was in effect a commercial operator. Later, Robinson does record some scandal about Batman and his treatment of his Aborigines (Plomley 1966, p. 833).

It also appears from the sketchy records that a group of Sydney natives were in the Ouse and Derwent Valleys for at least some weeks in 1831. Equally important, Robinson was in the region and, although he noted the sandstone caverns of the area, he did not mention any form of painting in them (Plomley 1966, p. 529).

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Hand stencilling in the Sydney and Hawkesbury region is prolific, and examples are to be found in rock shelters which contain typical occupational debris. Stencils covered a variety of motifs and had a range of purposes in the secular and sacred contexts. Some stencils, notably of hands, appear to have been made as prosaic ornaments of habitation areas, and may well have been made in the sense of leaving a calling card. (D. Moore pers. comm.) The equivalent practice today is to write initials on the cave wall with charcoal. This has actually happened in Meg's Mit rock shelter. As a tentative hypothesis, it is proposed that Tasmanian authorship is unlikely in view of the absence of reports of stencilling in the ethnographic record and the confinement of recorded stencilling sites to two shelters which are only a few hundred metres apart. Given the presence of Sydney Aborigines in the region in the 1830s, it is important to note that Meg's Mit rock shelter offers a good camping site, and De Teliga's site is adjacent to what would then have been a small fresh water stream, which would have provided the most convenient water supply. The Derwent River at this point flowed through a deep gorge approximately 15 m below the surface of the present Meadowbank Dam.

There is one last problem to consider. There is no scale in the illustration published by De Teliga and Bryden and measurements are not included in the description. However, the discoverer and property holder, Mr. E. Bannister, recalls that the stencils were about the size of small man's hand. The hands in Meg's Mit rock shelter are quite small, particularly the single stencilled right hand to the right of the matched pair. (fig. 1 and pl. 1). This is a point worth investigating but lack of measurements or reliable comparative figures preclude its consideration here.

A PROPOSED EXCAVATION STRATEGY

An excavation strategy has been proposed by Dr Jim Allen of the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

The mouth of the cave and the adjacent talus slope contain an area of deposit which appears to be undisturbed and is stabilized by grass and small bushes. At this site ochre was prepared for the execution of the stencils. If so, nodules of discarded ochre will be found in the deposit. Similar nodules of ochre with abraded surfaces have been found upstream near the present Cluny Dam site, approximately 10 km away. If these nodules can be located in the deposit in a datable context such as hearth or even in association with scattered isolated charcoal, it would be possible to get some indication of the approximate date at which they were discarded. Then, by an analysis of the composition of the discarded ochre nodules and the composition of the ochre on the walls, it may be possible to get some estimate of the antiquity of the art work.

A pre-contact date will be necessary before we can ascribe the painting to Tasmanian authorship with certainty. In view of the scientific importance of this site and the extent of public interest, excavation should be undertaken as soon as possible before both the painting and the deposit are destroyed.

CONCLUSION

Some of the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of an art site when reliable ethnographic data and comparative sites are lacking have been outlined. If the stencils are by Tasmanian aborigines, an interesting facet of cultural continuity lasting over some 10,000 years is demonstrated. The depletion of the Tasmanian aboriginal diet and tool kit has been documented by Jones (1966) and his proposed model for an archaeological sequence has not been contradicted. In view of the characteristics being sloughed off through time it would be interesting to find that an artistic form of only prosaic significance continued when items vital to survival were discontinued. Unless more stencilling sites are found or excavation results demonstrate a pre-contact

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antiquity, the enigma of Meg's Mit rock shelter is most easily explained by a hypothesis of homesick visitors. If this is so, then the site represents an example of cultural diffusion in a period of acute culture shock and dislocation.

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