

A REMARKABLE RITUAL GALLERY OF CAVE PAINTINGS IN EASTERN NEW SOUTH WALES

By **FREDERICK D. McCARTHY**,
Australian Museum

(Figs. 1-71)

(Plates 7-8)

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The rock shelter containing this extraordinarily fine set of drawings and stencils is situated in the Hawkesbury district on Crown land. Because of the need to protect the gallery from vandals its precise locality cannot be disclosed. For this reason, also, the Cumberland County Council has erected a thick wire screen across the entire front of the shelter.

The shelter forms part of the vertical face, about 8 ft. high, of an extensive sandstone rock surface which runs across the base of a marsh. A dozen potholes, 3 ft. to 4 ft. in diameter and up to 2 ft. deep, have been formed in the bed of the main flow of water, which runs in rainy weather and is usually seeping over the rock. Beside some of these pools are, in all, several dozen axe-grinding grooves.

The rock shelter is one chain west of the potholes. It is 60 ft. long, 9 ft. deep and high, and runs south-east to north-west. The sandstone is hard, dry and durable, and the drawings are in perfect condition. The front of the ceiling is blackened by fire-smoke, due mainly to bush fires burning scrub at the entrance to the cave. The shelter was not used by the natives as a camp site, but was of ritual importance to them.

The shallow loamy floor deposit contains specks of wood ash, and from it were recovered several small chert waste flakes, a quartz bipolar flake and a jasper microlithic side scraper, but none of these pieces is a specialized type of implement that can be assigned to a specific culture period. Pieces of ferruginous sandstone were also found, but none of them shows any signs of rubbing or use as red pigment. No ochres were present in the deposit.

The stencils were done with a water-mixed paint, but all of the other figures were drawn with dry pigment and are therefore referred to as drawings, not paintings. The series is described in six periods, revealed by a study of the superimpositions.

I. STENCIL PERIOD

There are 26 white, 19 red and one yellow human hand stencils the great majority of which are opened left hands. None was observed with the little or other fingers turned down. Most of the red hands are stencilled along a higher level than the white hands, but both occur along the full length of the frieze. Five stencilled boomerangs (Figs. 20, 29, 34, 38, 66) belong to this period, most of them being long and shallow curved types, 2 ft. to 2ft. 6in. long, but one is sharply angled with two distinct arms. A red line design has been drawn in dry pigment within the stencil of Fig. 20.

Other stencils comprise two hafted ground-edge axes (14, 58) 9 in. long, a club 13 in. long (19), and six small crescents from 5 in. to 8 in. long (67) of a kind not previously recorded.

All of these stencils were done with the splash method, in which paint was blown from the mouth over the object placed against the wall.

II. RED AND WHITE PERIOD

The forepart of a large kangaroo (22), and the complete figure of a short, broad man (30), both 3 ft. 6 in. long, apparently represent a hunting episode. When they were drawn the wall between them was blank. The kangaroo has a well poised head, and the drawing of one forepaw upwards and one downwards is exceptional, the usual style in the central coastal area being to show them as a pair at one angle or as a single limb.

Red Outline

A woman 2 ft. 3 in. long (60) and a faint human figure 3 ft. 6 in. long (69) are at the northern end of the shelter. Both lie horizontally in relation to the main frieze. There are also an oval line figure (24) and the hind portion of a kangaroo (65). Faded lines of other indeterminate figures in this style are to be seen in various places.