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The Petroglyphs of Skew Valley

Michel Lorblanchet

Directeur de Recherches au CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scentifique, retired 1999),
Centre de Préhistoire du Pech Merle, Cabrerets, France, and, during the studies reported here:
Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, Australia (1974–1977)

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Introduction to Skew Valley

The general map (Fig. 2.1) of archaeological remains of Skew Valley and Gum Tree Valley near Dampier (Western Australia) reveals an obvious proximal relationship between the various water sources, shell clusters and dense concentrations of petroglyphs. Petroglyphs are rare or absent in the areas between the shell middens. They become, however, more numerous as one approaches the shell mounds, which themselves are marked by the presence of water sources most often by semi-permanent pools in the beds of temporary watercourses. Throughout the area, the strongest concentrations of petroglyphs thus are associated with habitation. There are some exceptions, notably at the summit of Gum Tree Valley where a group of petroglyphs exist despite the area now lacking water.

In Skew Valley, petroglyphs are particularly numerous in the immediate vicinity of the shell middens that we excavated and near the other mounds that peter out about 80 m upstream from the first. There are a few petroglyphs scattered across the hills dominating the valley but here, as elsewhere, concentrations are less dense than those around the shell middens. On the eastern edge of the excavated midden, at the foot of the slope covered by large blocks, almost all the rocks are carved, so that here the density of the petroglyphs is greater on the eastern side of the valley than on the western slope (Fig. 2.2). The reason for the greater concentration is that the eastern slope is in direct contact with the shell middens comprising the centre of the inhabited area. This is a new indication of the close association between the habitations and the petroglyphs.

At about 50 m to the east of the excavated mound, in a small stepped gorge sheltering a series of pools with potable water, the petroglyphs on the bedrock walls and fractured blocks are extremely numerous (Fig. 2.3). The shells of the bivalve *Anadara granosa*[1] scattered around the petroglyphs show that, even if the builders of the Skew Valley shell mounds were settled in the most accessible and the wider parts of the valley, close to the water sources, they also visited the nearby gorge where their many petroglyphs are near potable water.

As it was not possible to record all the Skew Valley petroglyphs—they are too numerous—we concentrated our study on an area of about 21 × 7 m at the foot of the eastern slope as it connects with the edge of the shell middens (Fig. 2.4). In this sample area of about 150 m^2, we recorded all of the petroglyphs; there were 112 carved surfaces incorporating 328 motifs (Appendix {p. 114}; Chapter 2, Part II). Details of petroglyphs recorded beyond the sample area, and uncovered by the excavation, are provided in the relevant sections below.

The mean density of the petroglyphs, which reaches its maximum in this region, is thus 2.1 per square metre. Bearing in mind the total area containing petroglyphs at Skew Valley (about 50 000 m^2 in all), the high density of petroglyphs in the gorge around the water sources, and its diminution as one moves away from the water and the shells, the total number of petroglyphs of the whole of Skew Valley could be estimated as between 20 000 and 25 000.

The distribution map of carved blocks in the sample area (Figs 2.5 and 2.6) reveals a strong central concentration, which is clearly emphasized by the density curves of the petroglyphs made according to the methods of B. de Jekhowsky (1964) (Fig. 2.7). This map also reveals two concentration zones of petroglyphs: one in the centre, situated in front of the highest point of the shell mound (at