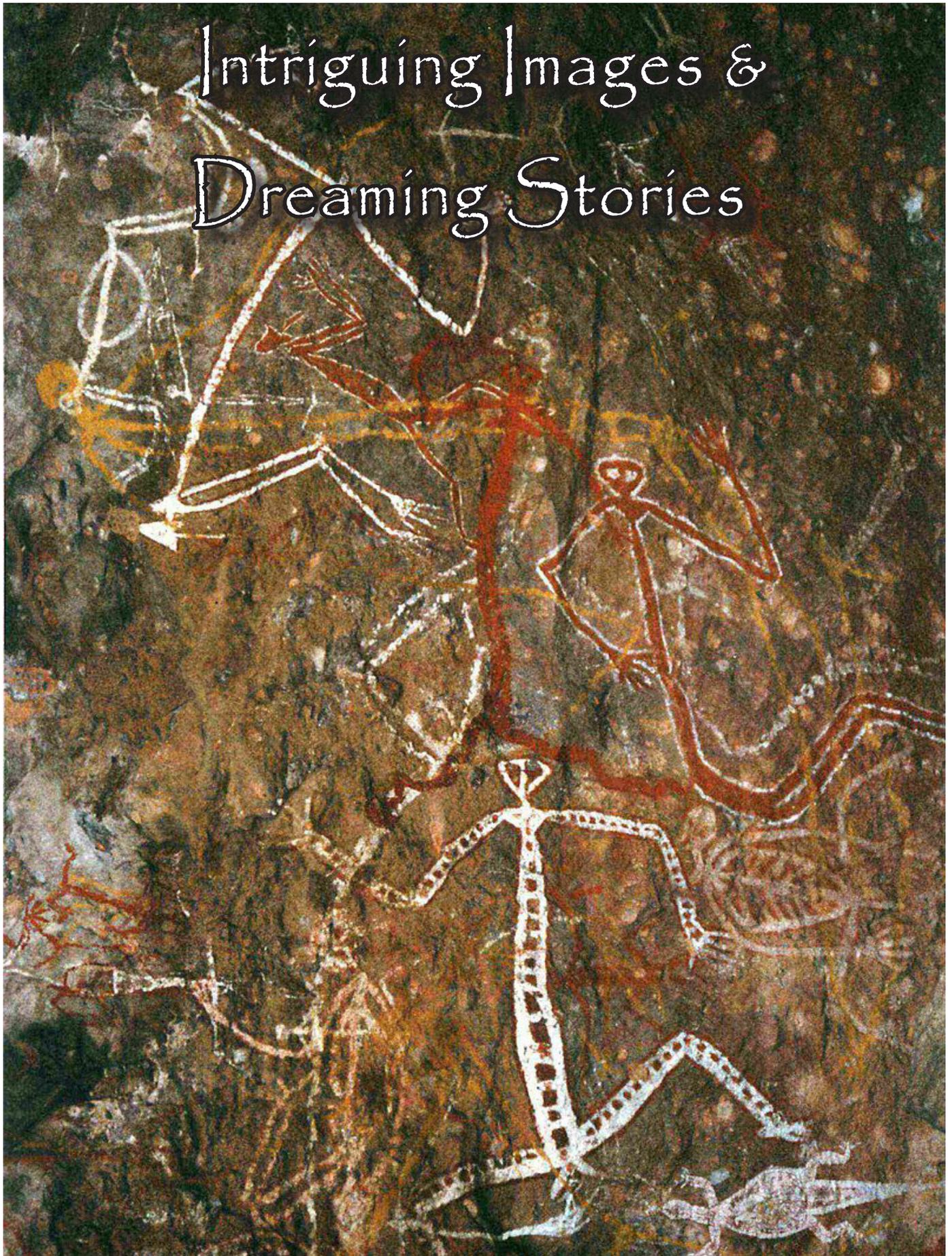


Australian Rock Art

Intriguing Images &
Dreaming Stories





How come that Australia has the most intriguing and vast collection of prehistoric petroglyphs and pictographs worldwide? Certainly there are various reasons for this amazing agglomeration of ancient rock art engravings and paintings. The isolation of the fifth continent is definitely one of them.

Once populated its inhabitants were left with their vivid natural imaginations and spiritual beliefs resulting in a rather distinctive story of the creation of their world. And which they vibrantly documented in their skillful paintings and elaborated engravings.

This is also the reason why Australian rock art images are so different and multi-faceted compared to prehistoric rock art on other continents. But there are also surprising similarities. And Australia is not alone with it. Those I will explain in more detail in this article. Australian rock art is really unique in various aspects as you will see.

The Stories Behind

Australian rock art is the oldest traceable spiritual belief system worldwide and Aboriginal elders still

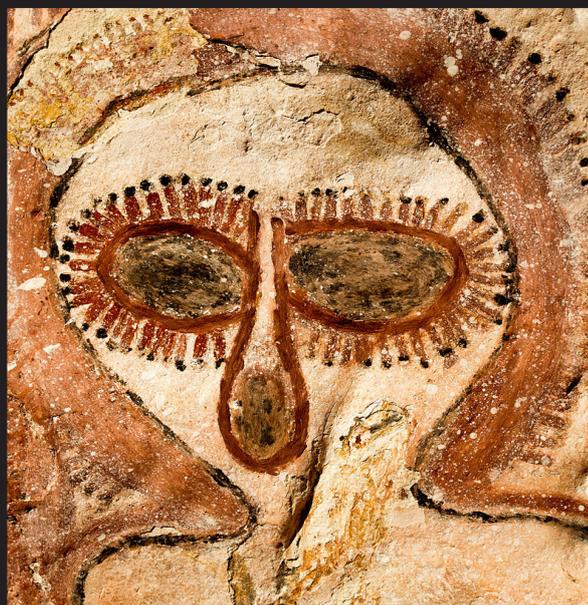
can explain the meaning and stories behind most image galleries. Here the longest uninterrupted creation of rock art has taken place and was continued until recently. All rock art creations have a deep mythological meaning always related to “dreaming”.

Dreaming ?

Now let us look at some of the important facts why those intriguing image galleries were created on rock surfaces. In Aboriginal belief life started with the so-called jukurrpa or “dream time”. It was the period of creation during which creator gods or ancestral beings in human form wondered on “dream streets” about the earth to create landscapes and speech, set

rules to live after and gave them rituals to be followed. They then turned into animals and plants but also created human beings via birth.

Clan members connected with those ancestral figures at “dream places” celebrating important rituals and specific ceremonies. Some of the rituals are bora or the initiation ceremony, luraga the



cleansing ceremony after circumcision or jarrada the marriage ceremony plus many others. The ngangkari or healers in clans are traditionally the custodians of the dream stories.

Scientific Proof ?

We might have here the only uninterrupted belief system. Which is fantastic otherwise we would have any explanations at all. But some of the dreaming stories are far from being able to be scientifically provable. Let us look at the facts. From the beginning of the major rock art creation period around 750 generations have passed. That alone might have changed or added some of the details.

Further dreaming stories offer quite substantial regional differences. That is normal as beliefs change over time based on different clan experiences and living conditions. So there are certain contradictions and doubts. But some stories are just that with no or little scientific proof as can be seen in the bird creator story of gwion images explained further on.

Higher Sophistication

Scientists established that homo sapiens about 50,000 years ago had already undergone an enormous push in development. Our ancestors at the time had much higher capabilities than we estimated so far.

They had a well-developed pre-frontal cortex and were capable of structured thinking and precise plan-

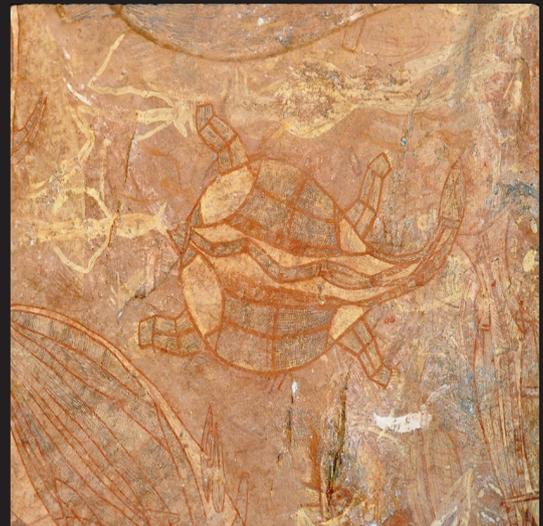
ning, clear reasoning and complex decision taking. They could communicate very well in words, pictures and even music.

Man also had acquired a high level of creativity and ability to paint animals with great deal of imagination, abstraction, composition, perspective, dimension with space, scale and form. He was able to produce defined working tools for very specific purpose made from stone, bone, antler and animal tees including ivory.

Global Comparison

It is interesting to see how human development took place worldwide and despite impossible cultural connections across continents the results were often similar. There is no difference in prehistoric rock art.

The choice of colors for example and their pigment manufacture are similar and the naturalistic style of animal images do not differ much. Only human representations differ





which can be explained with changed belief systems under different living conditions.

Huge Amount of Images

Now let us look at Australian rock art again. The enormous number of sites and image galleries is amazing. In total there are several hundred thousand rock art sites spread all over Australia.

Recently in the Kimberly area alone 1,500 new sites were recorded with over 1,5 million images. Different to other sites worldwide rock art here was produced on any rock surface because the place was of importance due to ceremonies held there.

Step Back in History

There are two continents the Americas and Australia which rather late in history but about the same time were discovered and immigrated by human beings. At first homo erectus left Africa about 1,8 million years ago and moved via the Middle East into Asia and later Europe.

Further homo species developed in different regions including homo neanderthalensis about 600,000 years ago in Eurasia. But our ancestor

homo sapiens developed as a new species in Africa about 300,000 years ago and set out successfully to conquer the world.

Australian Immigration

If we look at Australia there is definite proof that the fifth continent was discovered by prehistoric sea farers about 50,000 years ago. But recent research might indicate a much earlier immigration around 80,000 to 120,000 BP before present.

It is interesting that these traces were found in South West Australia quite far away from the closest coastal distance with the Asian continent. And we can be certain that vari-

ous waves of immigration took place too. One day with new findings Australian history might have to be rewritten.

This is not impossible because experts across the world find more and more evidence that our ancestors were far more intelligent and developed than we have so far believed. A short example: experts were stunned in 2009 when the oldest hunting spears were found in Germany produced 300,000 years ago by homo heidelbergensis.

Oldest Hunting Spears

These spears were 90 percent identical in length, weight, point of gravity and flight pass as today's high-tech Olympic spears and could kill wild horses at a distance of up to 70 meters. For further details please see my article "Paleolithic Spears".

First Boat Trips

The stretch of open sea between Asia and Australia was only about 60 miles and at some stage the sea level was 130 meters below today's level so that the island of Papua New Guinea was connected with Australia.





One of the logical areas for first human settlement were the coastal region and valleys further inland in the Arnhem Land area in the Northern Territory with important archeological sites such as Malakunaja, Nauwalabila and Nawarla Gabarnmang which were dated 55,000 to 45,000 years ago. At Lake Mungo in New South Wales various skeletons of a dynamic population were found.

But future discoveries might prove even earlier human presence on the Australian continent. Estimates indicate a total population around 15,000

years ago of up to 300,000 rising to a million when first Europeans arrived.

Prehistoric Climate

If we look at the climatic conditions at the time the first question always is could men survive here. We know that climate made our ancestors move either to the bad when ice age made them move south or to the good for better living and hunting conditions.

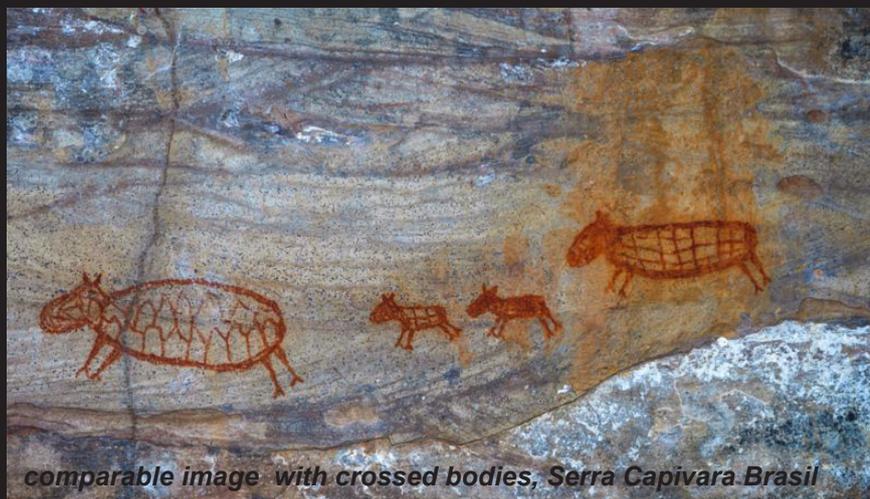
In the period between 120,000 to 60,000 BP the climate in Australia was similar as today. But thereafter until

40,000 BP climate became wetter and offered best living conditions for men and wild animals. Unfortunately after 40,000 BP conditions became slowly more arid. From 15,000 BP onwards climate changed again to slightly wetter and conditions became again similar as today.

Rock Art Periods

Red ochre painted images are the oldest created around 50,000 years ago. During the middle period a smaller number of representations were painted and engraved. The majority of prehistoric rock art was created from 15,000 BP onwards. We also see superimposed images at that stage whereby older creations were over painted.

The wide spread of prehistoric rock art and their similarities is proof of existing long distance contact between several hundred Aboriginal groups. This contact helped them to interchange genes and overcome incest problems in isolated local communities. The



comparable image with crossed bodies, Serra Capivara Brasil



fact that they spoke over 250 different languages might have developed only over time with separation.

Rock Art Details

We encounter various types such as: paintings called pictographs, simple drawings, but also engravings called petroglyphs, stencils mostly of hands both positive and negative images, including incisions and grooves, bas-relief carvings, as well as figures made of beeswax, plus cup holes which are the oldest rock art creations.

As forms we see: geometric, circles, concentric circles, arcs, dots and animal tracks. But there are regional differences as well. A circle could signify a campfire, hill, waterhole or tree.

Human figures for example could be realistic and abstract, show silhouettes of humans, being created as simple outline or complex compositions. Animal images are no different. The so-called "x-ray" figures show internal organs and only exist in such a detailed presentation in Australian rock art. There is much debate how their creators arrived at that knowledge. Were shamans following specific

practices with deceased or advanced healing procedures?

Various colors were used such as: charcoal, clay, chalk, ochre from pale yellow to reddish or dark brown. Colors were also made from berries, vegetables, urine and blood often mixed mineral powders. Colors had specific meanings such as yellow being sun, brown representing soil, red the desert and white clouds and sky.

Gwion Gwion Figures

They were initially called Bradshaw figures as they were first described in 1891 by a herding farmer by this name. In total close to 9,000 human figures were discovered in the Kimberley area. Primarily they were thought to be 50,000 years old. As they were painted with inorganic pigments they were difficult to date. Recent research shows that they were created around 12,000 years ago.

But what makes them so special? Just look at the intriguing naturalistic design of these elongated human bodies with head dresses, loin cloth, bags and weapons such as boomerang and spears with hooked heads. The hooked spears are

something of the past and since long not used by Aboriginal tribesmen. Elders explain that these "dream-time" figures have been painted by black birds with their own blood and feathers. Others recall the birds painted those humans with their peaks.

Interesting Similarity

For your own comparison and better understanding I have added a few pictures of San rock art from South Africa. How is it possible that so far away very similar pictures have been created? Again we have to look at the story behind.

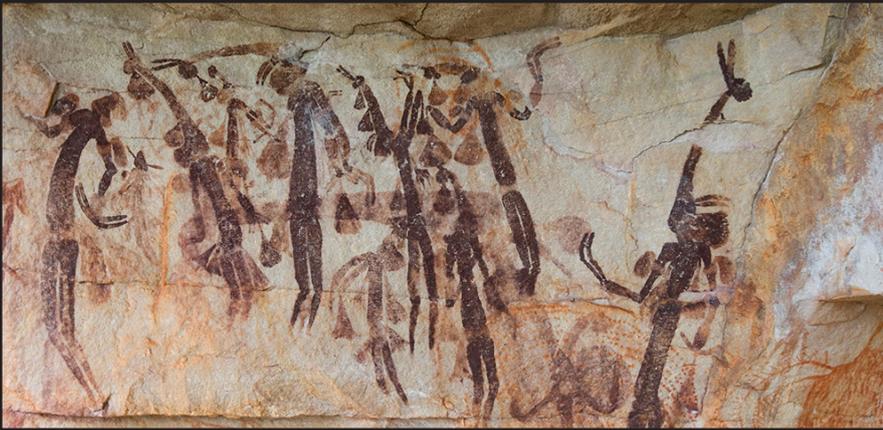
San tribes practiced regular trance dances induced with repetitive singing, clapping and possibly specific liquids or smoke. This is how dancers experienced their visions and dreams of elongated human bodies possibly themselves. For further details please read my article "Bushmen Rock Art".

Possible Trance Dances ?

Could it be that gwion images represent shamans in trance? Or do they show a kind of transition into the dream world visiting or conferring with their ancestors? Gwion figures on average are only 25 to 30 cm high. This is rather small to some paintings of life size figures for example in the Baiame rock shelter. But in South Africa the comparative bushmen figures are about the same size.

Rock Art Figures

There are various important figures created at wide spread rock art sites. For example the so-called quinkins



which were first found in great numbers at various locations in Queensland. They are ghosts with deformed heads, unproportioned arms and legs,

malformed genitals. They are representing the uninhibited sexual instinctiveness and are known to molest women and turn up as a nocturnal plague.



two South African images for comparison



The ancestral spirits are manifold such as the rainbow serpent which is the most powerful and widespread ancestral being, found across Australia. 107 different images have been found at numerous sites and have been studied.

Possibly the serpent is rather a pipefish and the question arise why are these images found so far inland? The answer is simple due to the huge differences of sea levels in history it can be explained why these images are found so far inland.

Other important ancestral spirits are baiame, dirawong and bunjil which all are also names of specific rock art sites.

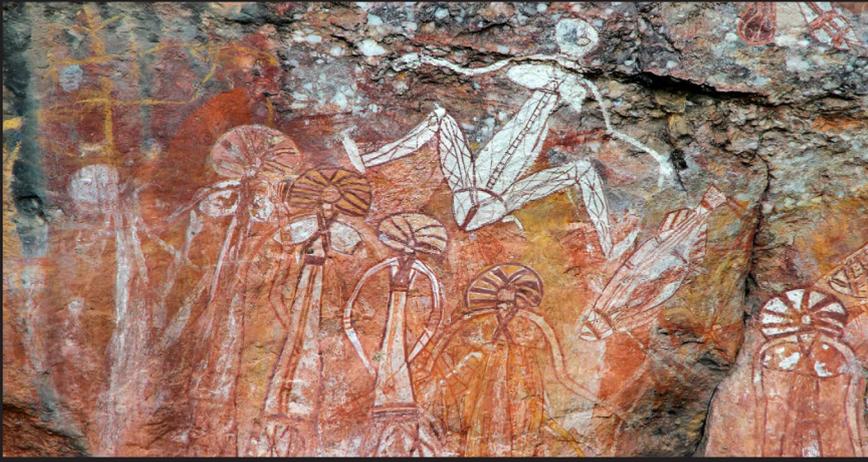
Rock Art Periods

It is difficult to date rock art with different scientific methods. Therefore experts try to establish periods for certain images. The first and oldest period is certainly the creation of cupules or cupholes including pits and grooves.

Thereafter followed the archaic or irregular infill animals period with naturalistic images during the Pleistocene period including stencils and early Kimberley paintings.

As a third period the gwion gwion figures as complex record of prehistoric life and beliefs with fine painted human figures could be defined. Followed by static polychrome images of schematized human form and groups with headdress and weapons.

Finally the wanjina spiritual ancestral anthropomorphic form was created representing supernatural power with halo-like headdress, large round eyes, mouthless. Those were



also overpainted various times in an annual renewal ceremony.

The more recent creations of the contact period showing European settlers arriving in sailing ships is often not regarded as prehistoric or Neolithic rock art by experts.

Below we list for your information some of the most interesting sites you might want to visit during your stay in Australia.

Northern Territory Sites

In this province there is the famous Kakadu National Park with many exciting sites. Kakadu National Park is situated 300 kms east of Darwin.

One of the most intriguing sites here is Ubirr with the so-called "x-ray" images showing human and animal skeletons with bones and internal organs.

In addition mimi spirits, fish like barramundi or sea brass, mullet, catfish as well as goanna or monitor lizard, long neck turtle, pig-nosed turtle, rock ringtail possum and wallaby can be seen here.

The rare Tasmanian tiger image is dated about 15,000 BP but this tiger species is already extinct for 3,000 years.

Ubirr galleries offer images from three different creation periods 40,000 to 6,000 years ago, 6,000 to 500 years and newer images created thereafter. These are called European contact art

and can be seen at Ubirr and Nourlangie.

The Nourlangie or burrunggui site is one of the most important sites in Australia and situated in Arnhem Land and its prehistoric rock art paintings are about 20,000 years old.

The Anbangbang rock shelter is close by and was in antiquity inhabited by a clan of about 15 members. Its gallery shows various ancestral figures including namondjak and his family as well as the spiritual figure namarrgon the lightning man painted in white. He can be seen on the right with the halo circle which represents the lightning strike.

The Arnhem Land region is one of the earliest settlement areas. Therefore rock art images here are dated around 45,000 BP. They include water and land animals in "x-ray" style with bones and internal organs as well as depictions of the famous spiritual rainbow serpent.

Narwala Gabarnmang rock shelter site is unique as it is an important open cave site with natural pillars and skillfully painted ceilings with many fish, wallabies, crocodiles, humans and spiritual figures motifs created about 28,000 years ago. At Injalak Hill close to aboriginal community of Gunbalanya the five galleries are much younger and were painted only 8,000 BP.

The Djulirri rock shelter site in the Wellington Range is one of the largest site with 3,100 paintings, stencils, prints, beeswax figures, rare stencils of birds which were dated about 9,000 BP. But also more recent rock art from European immigration

times with 28 ships can be seen here. With 80 more ship images added close by.

Close to Alice Springs in the Mac Donnell Range we have the most important historic site in Australia Uluru or Ayers Rock with rock art caves. Interesting is the Mala and Kuniya Walk with rock art sites along the way. They are named after the story of kuniya and liru the python woman and poisonous snake man creating Uluru Ayers Rock.

Another site is Cave Hill situated rather remote in Pitjantjatjara Land close to Uluru. This is one of the most sacred sites in Australia with paintings of the seven sisters representing Pleiades stars.

Jessie Gaps and N'Dhala Gorge sites are situated in East Mac Donnell Range near Emily with 6,000 carvings dated 10,000 BP. Wallace Rockhole, Tnorala, Ewaninga Rock and Rainbow Valley are four sites situated in the West Mac Donnell Range.

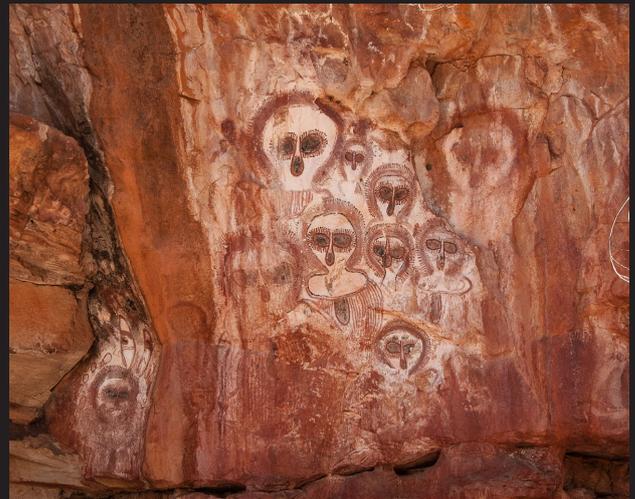
Nitmiluk National Park is situated 30 kms northeast of Katherine, nitmiluk means cicada place. At Katherine Gorge picture galleries include dream time creation images plus a so-called women site, all dated about 40,000 BP. Nipbamjarn Boy initiation site is also worth seeing. As well as the Jatbula Trail with various images along its 60 kms way.

Western Australia Sites

This province is scattered with prehistoric rock art sites. For example the Burrup Peninsula also called murujuga with the Pilbara site 200 kms west of Port Hedland has some of the oldest dated images with over 30,000 years. The average rock art here is dated 10,000 BP and the different sites offer an enormous number of over one million rock paintings and carvings.

But the star site is definitely Kimberley offering over 100,000 sites spread over an area of 50 square kms. It is one of the leading rock art areas with two types of images wanjina and gwion gwion style with images of spirits and humans. The crude looking animals are the oldest dated around 40,000 BP.

The gwion galleries show elongated human figures with elaborated dresses, including headdresses, ornaments, weapons like boomerang and spear dated around 12,000 BP. These figures are similar to San bushmen rock art images in South Africa.



merang and spear dated around 12,000 BP. These figures are similar to San bushmen rock art images in South Africa.

There are plenty of other sites to visit such as: Donkey Ridge, Wunnumurru Gorge at Barnett River, Namadgi National Park, Mitchell Plateau or Munurru, Vansittart Bay, Eagle Falls, Raft Point, Adcock Gorge, Manning Gorge, Galvans Gorge and Tunnel Creek site.

Queensland Sites

For those who are planning to have a look themselves at the amazing rock art in Australia we point out here some sites worth visiting. Quinkan Country about 200 km northwest of the city of Laura offers various sites dated 15,000 BP with animals, spirits and human images.

In the Carnarvon National Park a gorge site close to the town of Injune and Rolleston depicts an interesting rainbow serpent representation.

Or you might want to visit Fern Cave which images are dated 12,000 BP.

New South Wales Sites

An advisable visit to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park could include Lambert Peninsula with images dated 5,000 BP and Hawesbury River only 25 kms north of Sydney.

The Wollemi National Park offers 120 sites such as Eagle's Reach with over 200 motifs including stencils dated 4,000 BP.

Baiame Cave is situated close Milbrodale. The rock shelter above the Bulga Creek shows a larger than life male figure with outstretched arms.

And the Mount Grenfell site is about 40 kms northwest of the town of Cobar. The image galleries include various human figures, spirits and numerous animals.

South Australia Sites

Even in the south rather old rock art images are found. In the Olary District they are dated about 40,000 BP and include extinct megafauna like genyornis, thylacoleo from the Pleistocene Period.

Victoria Sites

Here the Grampians National Park is worth visiting with four rock art sites including the Bunjil rock shelter offering various dingoe paintings.

Tasmania Sites

The Preminghana site is relatively young with images only 1,500 years old showing carved abstract designs. Newcomers to prehistoric rock art are often surprised to hear that abstract and primitive looking images are the youngest and most naturalistic and skillful paintings are the oldest.

Summery

Australia is the leading location for rock art enthusiasts because it offers such a diversity and enormous number of prehistoric picture galleries.

In second and third place comes India and South Africa followed by unknown Saudi Arabia. The latter only recently started to acknowledge their pre-islamic treasures and started a national database to record all images.

Australia started this too in 2011 but their national register is far from complete and will take many more years.

The biggest problems are bushfires and vandalisme. This is why the register is so important to save these national treasures and unique Aboriginal history and dream stories for future generations.



Picture Credits:
We thank Australian Geographic, Griffith University, Smithsonian and Trezise Family for using some of their pictures.