

THE OLDEST CONTINUING CULTURE

Reframing Western Teleology Through Archaeological Evidence of Plant-Centric Motifs in Rock Art

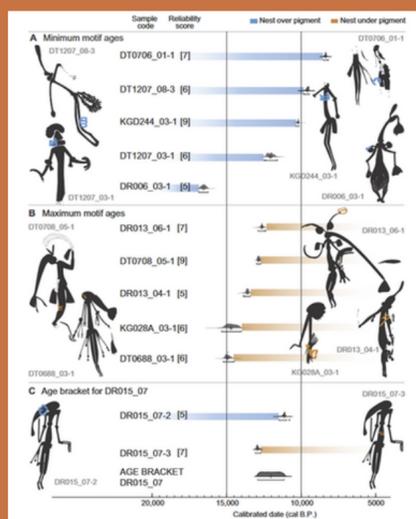
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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal Australians do, indeed, possess the oldest continuing culture on the planet. To comprehensively understand the brevity of this statement requires a thorough understanding of archaeological evidence in relation to traditional knowledge. To suggest it is “the” oldest living culture, however, implies a single, homogenous culture, belying the complexity and diverse regional differences that are evidenced by rock art. Aboriginal culture has varied temporally, linguistically, and stylistically.

OBJECTIVE

To explore the archaeological evidence that attests to the continuously evolving and extremely complex nature of ancient Aboriginal Australian groups. The Kimberley region will be used as a case study, focusing on the development of unique rock art phases, stone tools, and the area’s unique relationality to plants and Country to demonstrate these complex relationships. Evidence from rock art will form the primary basis of discussion.



Gwion art and plant association (plant motifs are indicated in grey) (Veth et al., 2018).

Depicting plant motifs in association with anthropomorphic figures demonstrates physical and cultural management and importance for Aboriginal Australians; rock art served, and continues to serve, as a repository of knowledge, to be read by those who understand the motifs and symbols (Goldhahn et al., 2022). The Gwion’s focus on anthropomorphic figures in association with plant motifs suggests “shift in information exchange and group boundary formation at the Pleistocene-Holocene transition” (Ouzman et al., 2017, p. 471). Gwion art is currently dated to have occurred from the LGM to late-Holocene, a period of great climatic changes, which demonstrates changing societal and territorial relationships alongside environmental changes. These artworks demonstrate plants and anthropomorphs as inherently intertwined, with plants hanging off, conjoined or adorning the body. This suggests that these plants were integral to human identity, territoriality and culture.

As demonstrated by the calibrated minimum and maximum ages, the research demonstrates support for the hypothesis that Gwion rock art was produced around 12,000 ka in the Kimberley region. This demonstrates changes in art style and prominent motifs, moving from animal and plant-centric focuses to anthropomorphs depicted with plants. It is important to combine emic ethnobotanical understanding with the etic knowledge (Veth et al., 2018).

RELATED LITERATURE

While many other sources were used, these sources are most poignant to the research highlighted above:

Ouzman, S., Veth, P., Myers, C., Heaney, P., & Kenneally, K. (2017). Plants Before Animals?: Aboriginal Rock Art as Evidence of Ecoscaping in Australia’s Kimberley. In B. David & I. McNiven (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology and Anthropology of Rock Art* (pp. 469-480). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190607357.013.31>

Porr, M. (2018). Country and Relational Ontology in the Kimberley, Northwest Australia: Implications for Understanding and Representing Archaeological Evidence. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28(3), 395-409. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774318000185>

Veth, P., Myers, C., Heaney, P., & Ouzman, S. (2018). Plants before farming: The deep history of plant-use and representations in the rock art of Australia’s Kimberley region. *Quaternary International* 489, 26-25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2016.08.036>

METHODOLOGY

Paleoenvironmental relationships are analysed as indicative of the changing relationships between people, culture and their environment. This is ascertained via analysis of rock art phases and the prominence of plant-centric motifs.

Mud wasp nest dating both on top of and underlying motifs is used to determine the date of rock art motifs and stylistic changes, demonstrating changes across time.

Associated stone tools are used to demonstrate evolving economies of complexity.

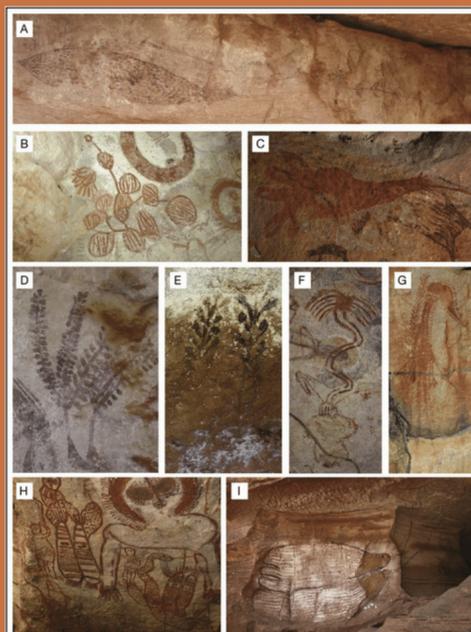
The complexity of cultures is analysed via the unique development of rock art styles in the Kimberley region, together with stone tools and relationality to plants and Country.

ANALYSIS

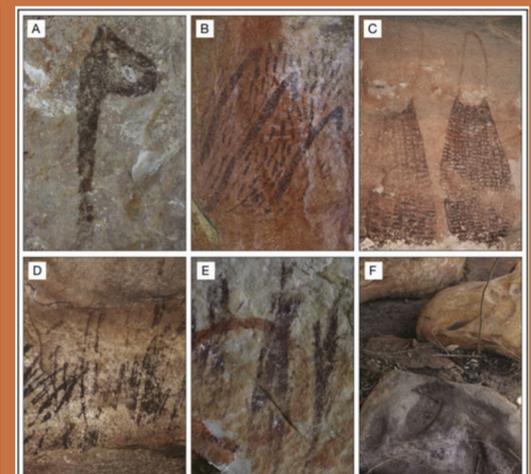
Rock art reflects the complex and changing relationship of people and geography, relating space, time and the environment together in a complex and continuous relationship (Porr, 2018). Plant motifs occurred through all phases of Kimberley rock art, demonstrating the passing of knowledge between generations, preservation of this cultural knowledge, and the important role plants played in Kimberley culture.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Kimberley rock art contains plant-centric motifs of food and medicinal plants such as yams, tubers, and fruits in “structured iconographic and landscape contexts” (Ouzman et al., 2017, p. 469). This is not common in rock art globally, with the Kimberley region offering “archaeologically and paleoenvironmentally contextualised evidence of plants in both daily life and symbolic thought” (Ouzman et al., 2017, p. 469). This rock art demonstrates an entangled relationship with the natural landscape, demonstrating how Aboriginal Australians managed to survive throughout environmental changes and adapt socially, economically and culturally to the landscape and plants (Ouzman et al., 2017). Similarly, Veth et al. (2018) argue for use and symbolic importance of tuberous, cormous and bulbous plants began in the terminal Pleistocene, demonstrating earlier than previously argued forager activities and cultivation. It is proposed that the depiction of plants in rock art sequences were created for “economic, ritual, totemic, and potentially other purposes” (Ouzman et al., 2017).



Plant-centric motifs in Kimberley rock art. A) IIAP style tuber with tendrils, vine and leaves, B) Wanjinia style string of yams, C) Painted Hand style yam, D) Gwion style plant, E) Painted Hand style sprig of fruit motifs, F) Painted Hand style lily G) Gwion style human figure with fern leaf, H) Wanjinia style 'yams with eyes' associated with human figures, I) Wanjinia style yams with tendrils, vine and leaves (Veth et al., 2018).



Rock art demonstrating plant-based material culture. A) Wood-hafted stone axe, B) Three hooked sticks, C) Two dilly bags, D) String imprints, E) Grass imprints, F) Grinding hollows (Veth et al., 2018).

Depictions of dilly bags occur in the Irregular Infill Animal Period and later art phases alongside wood-hafted stones, hooked sticks, and at sites with grinding hollows present with this rock art. Ground-stone axes found in the southern Kimberley are some of the earliest examples of this technology in Sahul, appearing around 50-40 ka (Norman et al., 2022). Evidence of processing lower ranked food sources such as seeds, palm, and starchy resources is evidenced to have occurred within the last 7,000 years as well as Pleistocene samples (Veth et al., 2018). These, combined with technologies associated with plant processing, demonstrate that manipulation of lower ranked food sources occurred in the Kimberley region.

Rock art that contains plant-centric motifs is demonstrative of the complex relationship between people, land and plants. Porr’s ontological framework for understanding this region and Traditional Owner groups is imperative to understanding this unique relationality. The Wanjinia Wungurr people of the Northwest and Central Kimberley regard their homeland as the physical realisation of Country, with the land, sky and sea embodying the anthropomorphic creators of Country. These beings also appear in Gwion art phases as plants and vegetation alongside anthropomorphic figures. Together, these ideas constitute Lalai, creator beings that exist in a past, present and future continuum in Country (Porr, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Porr’s ontological focus is key to understanding the environment as the embodiment of Country as a continuously existing and evolving entity and representing creators of the land, sea and sky (Porr, 2018). This idea is key to understanding the cultural and symbolic importance of the land, plants and associated technologies in the Kimberley region as evidenced most saliently in rock art. The evolving art phases from IIAP to Gwion and Wanjinia demonstrate this complex and evolving relationship that has developed over time. The plant-centric motifs discussed demonstrate the importance of plants in Kimberley culture (Veth et al., 2018). The unique use of plant motifs attests to knowledge that is “always local, and... has a fundamentally spatial character” (Porr, 2018, p. 397)