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Deception Creek, Northern South Australia

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The late HERBERT BASEDOW (1914, pp. 204-208, Pls. 3-10) described and illustrated rock engravings in the Red Gorge of Deception Creek in the northern Flinders Ranges of South Australia (Fig. 1).

During 1937, one of the authors (C. P. M.), accompanied by several old men of the local Adnyamatana tribe, visited the same locality with members of an anthropological party from the University of Adelaide. Recently (1963) another visit was made to the area to make a further investigation and record a comprehensive selection of the designs.

Since BASEDOW wrote his paper over fifty years ago, much new information has been collected about the rock engravings both in the Red Gorge and in other parts of South Australia. It is the purpose of this paper therefore to reconsider some of BASEDOW's suggestions in the light of this increased knowledge.

Origin and Age. — When C. P. M. visited the Gorge in 1937 he intentionally did not tell his aboriginal companions the object of the visit. As the party walked along the floor of the Gorge the aborigines passed group after group of clearly defined engravings without apparently having seen them. Even when their attention was drawn to some engravings and they were asked, "What are these things?" the old men, after a casual examination said, "Oh, they're just marks in the rocks" and walked away. Later when the resemblance between some of the engravings and the tracks of kangaroos, emus, lizards and so on, was pointed out, the natives were most surprised and searched enthusiastically for additional examples. But even though they agreed that

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the marks were not the result of natural agencies they were definite that no aboriginal had made them. Nevertheless they were just as ready as some of the white men to give meanings to the engravings. This ignorance of the rock engravings by aborigines was surprising because, as young men, they must have often hunted for wallabies and other game among the rocks of the Red Gorge ¹.

The following morning two of the old men came to my camp to tell me that, after discussing the engravings among themselves on the previous evening, they had agreed that the examples we had seen in the Red Gorge had been engraved by *Iti*, a mythical lizard-man of creation times, who also made the piles of small stones on the saddles of some of the low ranges ².

The aborigines of central Australia, on the other hand (MOUNTFORD 1960, p. 145) although aware of the existence of similar rock engravings in their country, stated that they had not been made by the aboriginal people but by some mythical being who had lived during the early days of the world.

This evidence from the living aborigines suggests that the art of rock engraving belongs to the people of a previous culture. However, there is nothing definite to indicate either the age of the markings, or the people who made them.

BASEDOW (1914, p. 145) submitted a hypothesis, based on the resemblance between a rock engraving at Yunta Springs and the track of the extinct *Diprotodon*, that man and this large creature were contemporaneous. BASEDOW's suggestion is supported by TEDFORD (1955, pp. 299-305) who, during archaeological excavations at Lake Menindee, found evidence that both man and some of the large extinct mammals had lived at the same time in that locality.

There is other evidence to support the hypothesis that these rock engravings are of considerable age. MOUNTFORD (1929, pp. 245-249) described and illustrated a rock engraving of the head of a sea-going crocodile at Panaramitee north. Later MOUNTFORD and EDWARDS (1962, pp. 97-99, Pl. 1) illustrated two other creatures, a salt-water fish at Panaramitee north and a marine turtle at Yunta Springs. The present sea coast is over 100 miles away from these engravings.

Factors indicating age are evident in the examination of the engravings themselves. BASEDOW (1914, p. 198) refers to rocks lying on the floor of the Red Gorge bearing part of a design, the other portion of which remained *in situ* on the cliff above, and rock engravings which have been bisected by a gaping fissure due to earth movement after they had been engraved. Plate 1a illustrates an almost identical example. The writers (1963, p. 142) have also drawn attention to evidence indicating the considerable age of similar engravings at Panaramitee (Fig. 1).

¹ This indicates the care which must be taken when enquiring from the aborigines the meanings of designs, either engraved on rocks or painted in caves. These people will often invent meanings, if only to show their supposed knowledge of things aboriginal.

² MAWSON and HOSSFELD (1926, pp. 23, Pl. 3B) described and illustrated similar piles of stones of unknown origin in the Olary district of South Australia.

Water Supplies. – All previously recorded groups of rock engravings were adjacent to either a temporary or permanent water supply (MOUNTFORD, 1928, p. 342; MOUNTFORD and EDWARDS, 1963, p. 132). Although at the time of the visit to the Red Gorge in 1963 there were no surface waters, there is little doubt that it could have been obtained by digging in the sandy bed of the creek adjacent to the rock engravings.

Techniques Used in the Production of Rock Engravings. – As mentioned by the authors in a previous paper (1963, p. 143) an examination of a large number of engravings has shown that they were not made by any standardized tool. Any boulder of hard stone with sharp corners and small enough to be held in the hand could have been used. The marks produced by such a tool would of course vary widely, a fact that is evident in the illustrations on Plates 1 *a* and 2 *a, b*.

On Plate 2 *a* the whole surface of the rock has been removed by repeated blows from a small pointed tool, while on Plates 1 *a*, 2 *b*, the designs, consisting of widely spaced indentations, have obviously been made with sharply pointed tools of different shapes.

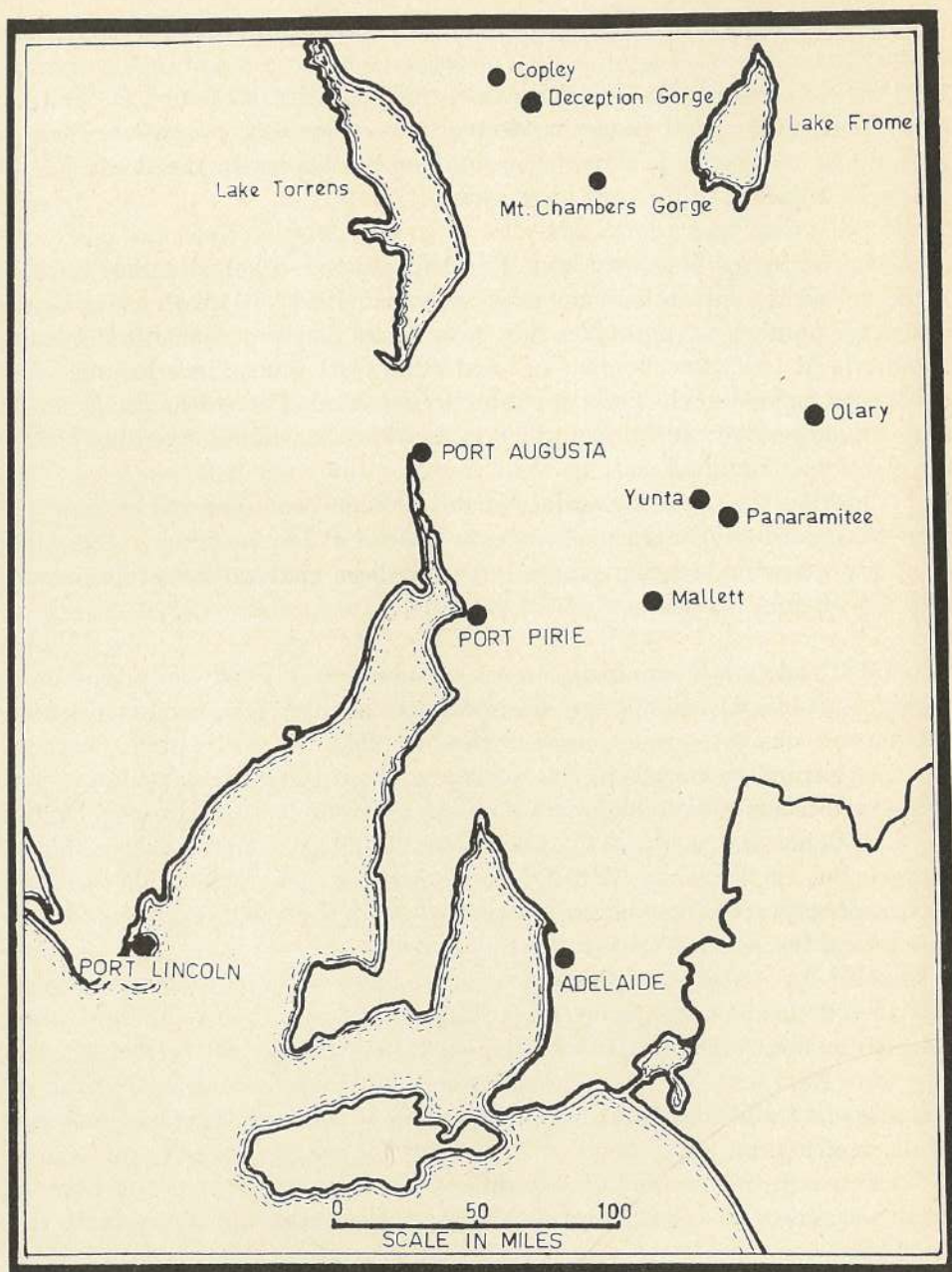
Methods of Recording. – An examination of a number of published descriptions of rock engravings shows that when they have been chalked for the purpose of photography, most of the finer details are obscured. To guard against this and to ensure greater accuracy in recording the carvings at Red Gorge, the technique of chalking was discarded, and the camera used exclusively. By choosing the best lighting, photographing as much as possible at right angles to the surface (to reduce distortion), using colour film and the correct photographic techniques, it was possible in the resulting transparencies to see even the finest details of the engravings.

Also, by making the six-inch scale (included in every photograph), the same length in the subsequent enlargements, each rock engraving illustration was then in accurate correlation to the whole. The designs of the rock engravings were then inked in, the photographic image bleached away and the remaining black and white drawings, with a scale to indicate their size, mounted as the text figures.

Although this method of recording is laborious, the writers feel that the greater accuracy of the illustrations is worth the extra labour involved.

Description. – As mentioned earlier, the 1963 survey revealed a number of human figures among the engravings at the Red Gorge. Seventeen of these figures are illustrated on Fig. 2 A-K and Fig. 3 A, C and L.

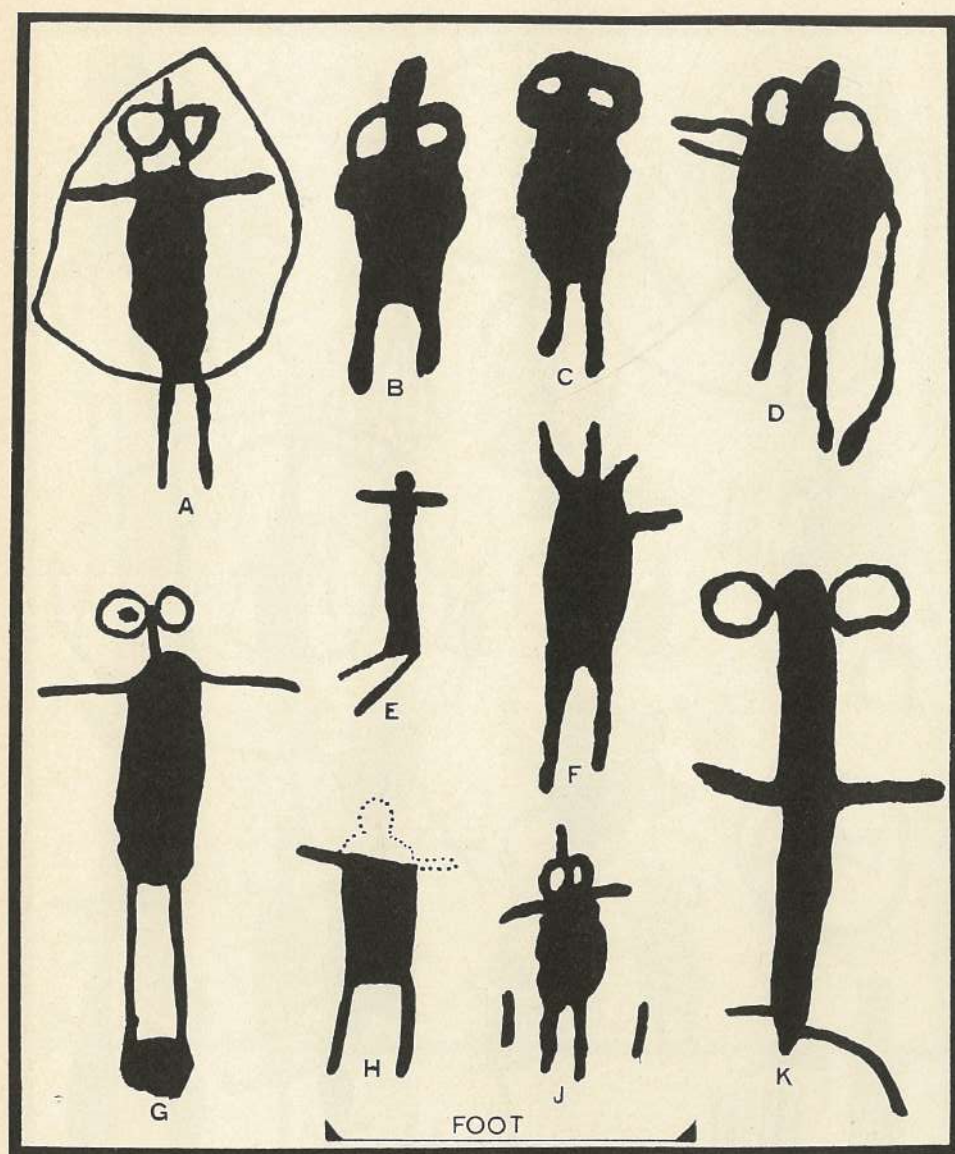
BASEDOW described his Pl. 4 A, B (our Figs. 2 A, B) as owls, but the discovery of a number of similar figures with arms and legs suggests that these engravings represent men and women. It is possible, however, that the engravings of human figures with two large eyes (Figs. 2 A, B, C, D, G, J, K and 3 L) could represent mythical owl-men, although we have no evidence to support this supposition.



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Fig. 3 A illustrates another interesting group of human figures. On the extreme left is a lizard-like man carrying a shield in his left hand. Next to him is another man carrying two boomerangs in each hand³. On the right is

³ Similar designs depicting men holding boomerangs in either hand are found in the cave and rock art of western New South Wales (BLACK, 1943, Pls. 133, 136 and MCCARTHY and MACINTOSH, 1962, text fig. 2).

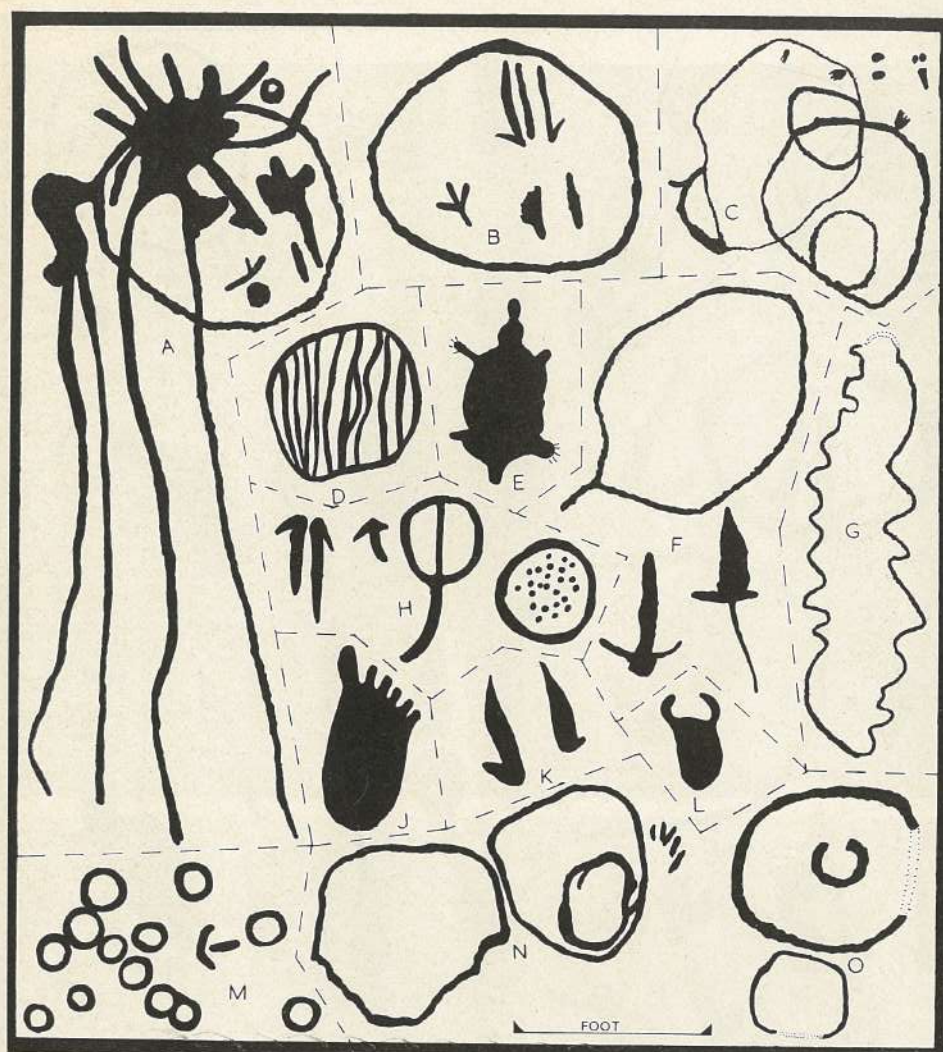


another human figure with a stick; on the extreme right there is a man with a large penis, wearing some form of headdress and holding a spear. There are also two simple human designs on Fig. 3 C.

The human figures in the Red Gorge are of particular interest because this is the only locality in the State, except at Eucola (HALL, MCGOWAN and GULEKSEN, 1951, Figs. 16, 17, Pls. 26E) where they have been found.

On Figs. 3, 5 and 6 there are many representations of lizards. Some of these may represent goannas, although Figs. 3P, 5J and 6D certainly illustrate





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other species. Three engravings at Fig. 3E bear a resemblance to marine turtles. Other engravings, Figs. 3K, O, R and 6H, J, K, illustrate unidentified turtle-shaped creatures. Fig. 4E could depict either an echidna or a platypus. BASEDOW (1914, p. 202) who also illustrates this engraving makes the same suggestion.

There are examples of well-engraved human footprints at Figs. 4J; 5B, D, J, K, a distorted example at 5E and a number of engravings of bird and animal tracks on Figs. 4 and 5. There are also five sets of dingo tracks on Fig. 5A, M. In a previous publication (1962, p.98), the authors, who up to that time had not seen any representations of dingo footprints among the many thousands of rock engravings they had examined, suggested that this creature may not have





a)



b)

- a) Rock engraving showing earth movement since executed
- b) Eastern face of Red Gorge



- a) Complex engraving in which whole design removed by small tool
b) Engraving of human footprint with widely spaced indentations



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reached Australia until after the aborigines had engraved some of the rocks in northeastern South Australia. The findings of these tracks at the Red Gorge effectively destroyed their earlier hypothesis.

BASEDOW, with reservations, interpreted Fig. 5H as long-handled stone knives. The fact that one of us (C. P. M.) has noticed similar marks in the soft mud on the edge of a waterhole where a euro or kangaroo had rested on his heels suggests a different meaning.

There are grouped boomerangs on Fig. 6F, and a curious pattern of meandering lines at Fig. 4A (also recorded by BASEDOW 1914, Pl. 7B) of which there is no reasonable explanation. Fig. 7 illustrates a portion of a group of heavily eroded engravings on a horizontal surface.



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Motifs. — Several of the well-known motifs engraved on the rocks and other localities in South Australia were either rare or absent in the Red Gorge.

They are: —

(a) Straight line markings present in large numbers at Mallett (BASEDOW 1914, Pl. 17), Winnininnie Springs and Wabricoola (MOUNTFORD 1928, Pl. 1, Fig. 2 and p. 360) and at many other rock engraving sites in South Australia.

(b) U within U designs, such as recorded at Yunta and Mallett, (BASEDOW 1914, Pls. 12A and 1B).

(c) Concentric circles, found at Mt. Chambers Gorge by MOUNTFORD (1928, Figs. 178, 198) and at Panaramitee by MOUNTFORD and EDWARDS (1963, Figs. 2C; 4R; and 8N).

(d) Barred circles which dominate the designs at Mt. Chambers Gorge (MOUNTFORD 1928, Figs. 165, 180, 173-177) and at Panaramitee (MOUNTFORD and EDWARDS 1963, Figs. 9 and 10).

There are only two examples of barred circles at Red Gorge, i. e. Fig. 4D and H. On the other hand there are many engravings of the human figure. This motif, as already mentioned, is almost entirely absent in the rock engraving sites of South Australia.

This paper records a group of aboriginal rock engravings in the Red Gorge of Deception Creek, northern South Australia. The designs are figured and their history, origin, age, technique and motifs discussed.

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