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Evidence of pre-aboriginal Australians?

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Could Australia be the cradle of global culture? It seems a surprising idea, but recently a controversy has been raging about whether a sophisticated people may have lived in the remote and inaccessible Kimberley region of NW Australia as long as 60,000 years ago, before being wiped out by the aborigines. It has all been sparked off by a popular book written by Ian Wilson, author of more than twenty other books, including *The Turin Shroud*, *Jesus: The Evidence*, and *Before the Flood*. He emigrated to Australia in 1995. In January this year his latest opus, *Lost World of the Kimberley* (Allen & Unwin), was savaged by the journalist Nicolas Rothwell in *The Australian*, the country's national daily. There are shades of *The Da Vinci Code* in the row that has developed since.

The key to this strange story is the dating of some extraordinarily beautiful prehistoric rock art which was first discovered and described in 1891 by an early settler, Joseph Bradshaw, when he became lost searching for the million-acre lease he had been granted. He came on a wall of colourful paintings, some life-size, which he likened to those of an Egyptian temple. Since then tens of thousands more sites have been found in the Kimberley with similar "Bradshaw" paintings, and it is postulated that they may predate the much better known aboriginal art, both modern and prehistoric, which is found throughout Australia.

The acknowledged expert on Bradshaw art, which the aborigines call Gwion Gwion, is a reclusive figure, Grahame Walsh, who has been exploring the Kimberley since 1977 and has amassed a huge collection of photographs. He is the author of a lavishly illustrated book published in 1994 by the Geneva-based Bradshaw Foundation, which has become a leading promoter of the study, recording and preservation of early man's artistic achievement all over the world. By far the largest record of this unique and exquisite art form, Walsh's book is now out of print and unavailable except in a few libraries. Interest in the Bradshaws themselves waned until Allen & Unwin (Australia) published Ian Wilson's book this year. The reaction to it has not only raised interest in and speculation about the paintings to an unprecedented level; it has uncovered a hornet's nest of Australian sensitivities and paranoias. While the implications of the debate are earth-shaking, it has so far been kept parochial and is hardly known about outside Australia itself. The book has not yet been published outside Australia and there does not appear to be any plan to do so.

Yet the controversy rages on several fronts. The suggestion that the artists who painted the Bradshaws were not the ancestors of the current aboriginal owners of the land has sparked consternation among the latter that this may in some way diminish their claims to it. However, the fact that they are not the direct descendants of the artists should in no way prejudice their ownership: no one denies that they occupied the land for millennia before the arrival of the Europeans, who stole it from them when Western Australia was annexed in 1829. Many aboriginal people also dislike the pictures, some referring to them as "rubbish art", and for generations many have made efforts to paint over them or to obliterate them. This is evident at many sites throughout the Kimberley. But this, too, should not affect their land rights, as they have been custodians of the sites for tens of thousands of years. To suggest otherwise would be like suggesting that Stonehenge was not part of the British national heritage because it was not built by the Anglo-Saxons.

More serious is the friction between Wilson, the populist author of bestsellers, and Walsh, the solitary amateur archaeologist and art historian. At the heart of this lies the question of whether these extraordinary pictures should become known and visited by a larger audience. Although they may have survived for thousands of years, they are fragile. With changing climatic conditions, the introduction of grazing animals and the burning of vegetation around them, they face new threats today.

People may well represent the greatest threat of all. I have seen for myself far too many cases around the world where enthusiastic tourism has destroyed the thing it came to see, not least prehistoric art. Recently, it has been revealed that almost 5,000 aboriginal petroglyphs have been destroyed on the Burrup peninsula further along the coast through the exploitation of oil and gas reserves. It is easy to see why Grahame Walsh might wish to conceal the precise location of the Bradshaws. During their two brief meetings, he refused to give Ian Wilson any help in locating sites or developing his own theories on their origins.

On the other hand, Walsh seems to carry his protection of Bradshaw art to extreme lengths. He has more than once stated that he was minded to have his unique collection of over one million photographs destroyed within twenty-four hours of his death. And surely, even if access to the paintings could threaten them, there ought to be a record of their locations, which are scattered over an area almost the size of Spain (all the more so if this were to be obtainable only by professionals on a need-to-know basis).

This is a treasure of which Australia should be very proud, yet when I went there this year I found people surprisingly reluctant to talk about it, almost as though they were ashamed. This may be understandable coming from the aborigines, who may be concerned that their own art is somehow diminished by Bradshaw art. I can understand that

art experts and gallery owners, many of whom see the burgeoning market for aboriginal art as part of the last great artistic phenomenon of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, may feel that Bradshaw art, which no one is painting any more, is irrelevant. Even scientists and historians, who will be made to look a bit silly if it is proved that they have been wrong for so long in maintaining that man only arrived in Australia with the first aborigines some 40,000 or 50,000 years ago, can be excused a certain reluctance to rewrite history. But I did find it strange how hostile both the media and the government seemed to be to the subject of Bradshaws. The Rothwell article was the only manifestation of what appears to be a conspiracy to play the whole story down, either from misguided embarrassment or political correctness. Advances in dating techniques will one day provide the truth, but meanwhile it is far too good a story to ignore. Above all, the art itself is delightful and should be known to a wider audience.

February is the height of the rainy season, known as the "Wet" in North West Australia. Almost no one goes into the heart of Kimberley during the "Wet". It is impossible by road, as the few tracks are flooded, and the place has a bad reputation as the most hostile of all Australia's various hostile environments. It teems with poisonous snakes and spiders, as well as crocodiles and mad wild bulls. (Russell Crowe, who is planning to make a film there, described it as "rough as guts".) Due to the sensitivity about land rights and ancient art, we found that it would be time-consuming and probably impossible to obtain permission to visit a selection of known Bradshaw sites. Instead, my wife Louella and I arranged a flight into the interior from Broome and then spent a couple of hard days walking in to near the Mitchell Falls. Our companion, Jim, who wanted to photograph the falls in full flood, had brought an inflatable rubber boat, which he wheeled in along the muddy track in a wheelbarrow. It was a mode of transport we had never used on an expedition before and it is not recommended unless there is no alternative, but we made it, exhausted. We then spent another day manoeuvring the boat several kilometres down a series of rapids and lowering it some twenty-five metres down the Little Mertens Falls on a rope. In between the rapids were long stretches of deep water where we swam, pushing the inflatable through a tunnel of overhanging trees and past clumps of submerged pandanus palm. Jim assured us that the extremely dangerous estuarine crocodiles seldom made it above the falls and that the less dangerous freshwater crocodile only bites if you tread on it. We were out of our depth most of the time and preferred it that way, as every submerged log felt very like a crocodile.

Around each of the falls we came to, and sometimes visible from the river, were lots of paintings. Usually, it was the larger aboriginal pictures we spotted first; but hidden among them, often over-painted or half destroyed by scratching, were examples of Bradshaw art. We reached the first site by scrambling up a jumble of colossal rocks, avoiding the thorny undergrowth and sometimes having to leap across dark chasms. It was a familiar environment, which reminded me strongly of parts of Africa where I have sought rock art over the past forty-four years since I first travelled by camel in the Central Sahara in 1962. The same thrilling anticipation as each overhang, streaked with red and yellow lines of oxide and ochre, looked to my eager eye like a wonderful painting, only to turn out to be natural staining. Then came the first actual painted site: a mass of large figures with bold outlines, representing familiar aboriginal motifs – fat snakes, kangaroos, human shapes and hands. It was exciting, but nothing to the shock of recognition when I saw my first Bradshaw.

Quite different from the other pictures, these elegant little figures were immediately familiar to me in a way aboriginal art is not. Aboriginal legend has it that they were created by birds, which pecked at the rocks until their beaks bled. Then, with their tail feathers they used their blood to create these delicate paintings. Due to their great age, a glaze has formed over the pigment, or they may have been laminated in some way when painted, so that carbon dating cannot be used, making it impossible, so far, to date them accurately. The pigments themselves have become part of the rock and so cannot be isolated for dating. One site was found by Walsh where a fossilized wasps' nest had covered a picture and this was dated as at least 17,000 years old, putting it at the end of the last Ice Age. It seems likely that further research will push dates much farther back in time.

They are sophisticated pictures of people who had clearly reached a high level of culture. They appear to be wearing clothes, or at least to decorate their bodies with hanging tassels, sashes and arm bands. Many have elaborate headdresses. With a real sense of shock, I realized that I had seen similar figures in the Tassili n'Ajjer in southern Algeria, which I was one of the first people to see and the first to film. I have in front of me, as I write, a photograph from there of a figure with a sash hanging from his or her waist which is just like those to be seen throughout the north-west Kimberley. Yet they were painted 13,000 kilometres, and probably much more than 10,000 years apart.

The attraction for me of prehistoric art has always been the true aesthetic skill glimpsed from time to time, the sudden recognition of talent which is timeless. Bradshaw paintings have been compared with Matisse and even Durer. Ian Wilson claims that "at a time when most of Europe lay deep beneath ice sheets a people in Australia [were] creating figurative paintings of verve and talent that surpasses all other of the world's rock art, and would not be seen again until the rise of the ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern civilizations". Having seen a fair amount of prehistoric art around the world, I think he may be exaggerating a bit, but there is no question but that the Bradshaw paintings are exquisite and should be preserved. His thesis is that an awareness of Bradshaw art is "fundamental to our understanding of the whole history of humankind, to its Ice Age infancy" and that, at the very least, it disproves the idea that Australia has no history.

Some of Wilson's hypotheses are rather bizarre, such as the links he sees with Artemis of Ephesus and European Earth Mother myths, and he has been slated for them in the Australian press. One criticism, however, did not ring true for me. Rothwell ridicules him for claiming to have found representations of "reindeer" and for speculating on whether this illustrated a folk memory from earlier migrations. Wilson himself finds no evidence of deer, which are of course not found in Australia, anywhere to the east of Wallace's Line, the hypothetical divide between hooved animals and marsupials. But I recalled seeing a large antlered deer in the remote interior of Sulawesi on an expedition in 1974. Further research revealed that mammals have indeed crossed Wallace's Line either accidentally or with human help in the quite distant past. For instance, pigs may have been introduced to New Guinea as long as

10,000 years ago, and deer are certainly now common there. And so the idea that people who had migrated only a relatively short distance further should remember and paint pictures of them is not as far-fetched as it originally seemed.

Perhaps our most remote ancestors really did travel much further out of Africa, much earlier than has previously been believed. Perhaps they did stumble on a perfect Eden where, for tens of thousands of years, much of the Timor Sea was dry and great grasslands formed, on which vast herds of animals that had not yet learned to fear man, grazed in easy reach of boomerangs and spears. Perhaps a prosperous society developed on those now sunken plains; gentle, little people learned to dress elegantly in tassels and mini-skirts and to decorate their hair elaborately. Their search to approach their gods would have led their shamans into the barren high hills which now form the Kimberley. After the seas rose and the ancestors of today's aborigines arrived, they were wiped out, and almost all trace of the first real culture the world had known was lost. But perhaps Australia really was where it all began.