



KEYWORDS: *Kimberley – ‘Deer rock’ – Interpretation – Aboriginal ceremony*

OH DEAR! NO DEER!

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Abstract. This paper analyses a Kimberley (north Australia) rock art panel known as ‘Deer Rock’ to visitors and archaeologists working in the area. It will be argued that the painting represents a line of people performing a ceremony on all fours, not animals, and certainly not foreign deer. ‘Antlers’ are in fact headdresses and one figure wears a waist belt. The analysis will provide an example of misinterpretation of Australian rock art when taken out of cultural context by observers with little knowledge of the corpus of Aboriginal rock art or traditional Aboriginal culture.

Introduction

Located three kilometres north-north-east of the Lower Mitchell Falls near the northern coastline of Western Australia, ‘Deer Rock’ acts as a magnet for those seeking rare and exciting rock art, a site where archaeologists have identified a row of South-East Asian deer (Fig. 1) painted on mainland Australia. First described by Ian Wilson in his 2006 book, *Lost world of the Kimberley*, the row of figures identified as deer add to what many people regard as the mystery and intrigue of Kimberley rock art. Apart from this rock art panel, deer were unknown in Australia prior to their

introduction by Europeans.

The art panel currently features on the opening page of the Bradshaw Foundation web site, where this ‘deer painting panel’ is described:

Very likely the species of deer depicted in the painting is the sambar, a magnificently-antlered variety, small herds of which still exist in Borneo, but which may well have been more widespread across the then sub-continental Southeast Asia at the time of the Ice Age.

Opinions vary amongst professional archaeologists and rock art researchers working in the area. I have met some who are adamant the panel represents deer, while others doubt this, but are uncertain as to an



Figure 1. A section of the row of Australian motifs previously identified as foreign deer.



Figure 2. Site photo showing position of art panel immediately below rock overhang.

alternative explanation. I spoke with Aboriginal people from the Kandiwal (Mitchell Plateau) community who had been visited by one well-respected archaeologist who explained to them that this painting indicated the deer were likely to have been in Australia at some time in the distant past.

Site and panel description

The site is amongst a line of rock outliers on a large open plain. The panel is painted on an exposed rock face adjacent to an unusually large rockshelter measuring approximately 26 metres deep, with an entrance approximately 14 metres wide and 6 metres high. This adjacent shelter is tunnel-like with a smaller opening or 'exit' at the other end. Within this shelter are other paintings, a smooth sacred stone, grinding hollows and rocks with rubbed and pitted surfaces, including an unusually soft purple section of bedrock, possibly a mudstone, which has been rubbed and grooved. This purple rock may have provided the pigment used on some painted art panels in the region.

The painting in question is a row of at least 24 similar-shaped motifs ranging in height from 14 cm to 20 cm, with an underlying line, approximately three metres wide. It is painted 2.5 metres above present ground level, high on an exposed vertical rock wall, partially protected by a jutting overhang (Fig. 2). The figures survive in a purplish pigment bonded to

the rock surface.

The deer theory

Proponents of the deer theory see the art panel thus:

- (a) Each motif appears as a quadruped with head, body and limbs, representing an animal of some kind.
- (b) The lack of hands and feet indicates they are unlikely to be human forms.
- (c) Radiating lines from the head of each motif represent deer antlers.
- (d) The row of motifs appears consistent with the representation of a line of these animals walking through the landscape.
- (e) A horizontal line below these motifs represents the ground on which they walk.

By accepting the deer theory, one can then speculate whether (a) a foreigner visited our northern shores and recorded the image of deer from his own lands, (b) an Australian Aborigine travelled overseas and saw deer, then returned to record his sighting, or (c) deer were brought to Australia at some time in the past, but have since died out.

An alternate theory

Before the announcement of this 'deer' panel in 2006, I had seen similar Kimberley paintings where it was clear that people wearing headdresses were depicted performing on all fours. Two such sites were also located within the Mitchell River basin. Hence, I suspected these figures could be the same.

Having now visited the site and examined the painting firsthand, it is clear to me that this panel represents people, not animals, and certainly not deer. I shall draw on several sources of supporting evidence. Firstly, a close examination of the panel; secondly, a description of the shape of Timor deer; thirdly, archival photographs of Aboriginal people performing ceremonies on all fours; and finally, other Kimberley rock art depicting people on all fours.

Close examination of the motifs revealed to me:

- (a) Animal shapes on all fours, with head, body and limbs.
- (b) Limbs are simplistic stick-like straight lines lacking details of paws, hooves, hands or feet.
- (c) None have a tail. (One of very few quadrupeds without a tail is a human on all fours.)
- (d) Each motif has one set of radiating lines leaving the head. Similar radiating lines are seen on other Kimberley paintings when either yam shoots on yam figures or headdresses on human figures are depicted.

Deer antlers differ greatly — this will be discussed later.

- (e) If these figures represent deer wandering at large, they all have antlers, indicating they are all males. (Only female caribou / reindeer, found in North America and northern Eurasia, have antlers.)
- (f) One figure clearly has a gap at the waist (Fig. 3) similar to that seen on *straight part figures* (Welch 1990, 1993, 1999). The artist has deliberately painted the gap with distinct edges. It represents a section originally painted with less stable pigment such as white or yellow, and in this position represents the wearing of a waist belt.

Visiting this site with some supporters of the deer theory, I was able to draw to their attention the existence of this gap, but this did nothing to sway their conviction. Instead, I was told the gap was formed by a 'dribble line' running down across the panel. Interestingly, at another art site, the same people believed that similar gaps through the waists of a line of four *straight part figures* were formed by a horizontal 'geological line' (Fig. 4), rather than loss of pigment as the result of weathering. Such differing conclusions drawn from the same images illustrate how our vision can mislead us in our interpretation of the art.

My close examination of the section of 'deer' motif where this gap occurs revealed no evidence of a water line (Fig. 3). The gap was deliberately painted by the artist who would then have filled the space with a white or yellow pigment, as one finds on the better-preserved examples of *straight part figures*. At several other places along the panel, vertical lines of white and yellow mineralisation caused by water dribbling down the rock face do occur and cross the artwork. However, careful examination of these areas reveals that instead of being washed away, the artist's pigment is retained (Fig. 5).

It should also be noted that the art panel occurs beside the entrance to a large tunnel-like rock shelter, raising the possibility of a connection between the two features, whereby a long line of people performing a ritual or ceremony may have originally passed through this tunnel. Another example of human figures on all fours similarly occurs in a tunnel-like shelter.

South-East Asian deer

Deer are not native to Australia, but have been introduced since European colonisation. The geographically closest species is *Rusa timorensis*, also known as *Cervus timorensis*, Timor Deer, Javan Rusa or Rusa Deer, found on the Indonesian islands to Australia's north. I



Figure 3. One of the 'deer' motifs with a distinct gap, representing a waist belt. The gap has distinct edges and there is no evidence of dribbling water erosion at this point.



Figure 4. Straight part figures with gaps where pigment has weathered from their waist belts, forearms, feet and headdresses.



Figure 5. White and yellow mineralisation caused by dribbling water crosses the rear section of the left motif. Pigment is retained.



Figures 6 and 7. Timor Deer (*Rusa timorensis*) with heads in frontal and profile view showing position of the antlers. Komodo Island, Indonesia.



Figure 8. Kimberley man wearing a ngardaddi (ngadari), Kolaia tribe, 1916. Photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

was able to photograph these on the Indonesian island of Komodo, with their heads in both profile and frontal position, providing comparisons with the rock art panel (Figs 6 and 7). The Sambar Deer (*Rusa unicolor*) is found further north in Borneo, more distant from Australia.

Salient features are the markedly angulated back legs, the presence of a small but prominent tail, and the position of the antlers — facing backwards in profile view and appearing as two antlers branching laterally in frontal view. None of these characteristic features are depicted on the Kimberley rock art panel. In fact, some motifs have their ‘antlers’ forward, rather than showing a dorsal angulation.

Archival photographs of Aboriginal performers on all fours

To gain the best insight into interpreting Aboriginal rock art, we must have an understanding of traditional Aboriginal culture, and in this instance, knowledge of the fact that people often performed ceremonies on all fours when representing animals.

Two photographs from Herbert Basedow’s collection in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, show corroborees with Aboriginal performers on all fours. The first, Figure 8, shows a Kimberley man performing in 1916. Basedow noted on this occasion:

After the usual preliminary noise and excitement, the fires were lit, and the performance begun. A lengthy programme was rendered, which included in separate acts many animal impersonations and hunting scenes, as well as several primitive religious ceremonies of worship, during which the performers acted like fanatics. . . The repertoire included corroborees of the emu, the kangaroo, the crocodile, the fire, and such like. In one of the acts an elaborate peaked head dress was used, which they called *ngardaddi* (Basedow 1918: 230).

This word for the conical headdress is similar to the word *ngadari* used by Gwini and Ngarinyin elders in the 1980s (pers. obs.) when referring to the tall conical headdresses made from rolled up paperbark and commonly worn by human figures in Kimberley rock art.

Remarkably, not only does Basedow’s photograph show a man on all fours with a tall headdress, but he is also wearing a broad waist belt (made from kangaroo fur string in this part of Australia) bearing a strong resemblance to one of the ‘deer’ figures.



Figure 9. Men on all fours mimicking dingoes. Photograph courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Another photograph by Basedow (Fig. 9) shows men of the Kukata (Kokatha) tribe, west of Mount Eba in South Australia, performing a 'wild dog' (dingo) ceremony in about 1920. They are decorated with body paint and one performer, third from the left, wears a broad belt, best seen in the enlargement of this section of the photograph (Figure 9a).

Another archival photograph showing this aspect of Aboriginal corroboree, with performers crawling along the ground, appears in my republication of *Savage life in central Australia* (Aiston and Horne 2009: 176).



Figure 9a. Magnification, showing one man wearing a broad waist belt.

Similar motifs at other Kimberley rock art sites

Important clues as to the nature of these human-like figures are found by comparing them with similar motifs in other Kimberley rock art sites.

Figure 10 shows a row of unequivocal human figures on all fours, each wearing a tall headdress. Tassels or other decoration hang from each headdress and the arms of some of the figures. Projecting lines from the headdresses probably represent decorative sticks or feathers. Note the markedly similar radiating pattern of these lines crowning the headdresses with the alleged 'antlers' on the 'deer' paintings. This panel is located beside a creek flowing into the Mitchell River above the Mitchell Falls, about 12 kilometres from the site in question.

Figure 11 shows a row of weathered simple human figures, some wearing tall headdresses, from a panel within a shelter beside the Mitchell River above the main Mitchell Falls. Of these figures, three at the right are in a standing position,



Figure 10. Unequivocal human figures on all fours wearing elaborate headdresses and tassels.

while the rest are bent forward. Some of those in the bent position have one raised leg, suggesting either a gymnastic position or the mimicking of a dog raising its leg to urinate. The variety of body alignments shown here also raises the possibility that this row of



Figure 11. Row of human figures on all fours at the left and standing at the right.



Figure 12. Rows of human figures on all fours, wearing tall headdresses.

figures might even represent an 'animated cartoon' of one performer or actor moving through each of these positions.

A third panel (Fig. 12), 145 cm across, is painted on the side of an exposed boulder at plain level, located approximately 100 kilometres south of the previous sites. Three rows of human figures appear on all fours. As with the 'deer' site, the artist has drawn a line below each row of figures as a means of defining the ground, a pathway or a long ceremonial string. The top right group has the largest figures, one measuring 26 cm tall. All face to the left and wear long conical headdresses with tassels from the end. The top left group has 17 figures all facing to the right, each wearing a tall pointed headdress with no tassels. These are smaller,

some measuring only 10 cm tall. Below these is a third group with at least seven individual figures. Weathering has obliterated others.

The top two rows of figures, facing opposite directions and wearing different headdresses, suggests two distinct groups of performers. This may occur, for example, when people decorate themselves differently according to their moiety (e.g. Love 2009: 244 and 246).

Could some observers interpret these tall headdresses as indicating the past presence of not only deer, but also giraffes in Australia?!

Figure 13 is a further Kimberley panel giving an insight into the manner in which an Aboriginal artist perceives the human-animal interplay. A row of six simple human figures have a macropod (kangaroo or wallaby) placed in their midst (second from the right). The far-left human figure, in profile, wears a rayed headdress and its body alignment, similar to that of the macropod, suggests it may be a human mimicking that animal.

Basedow's description of totemic animal ceremonies, described earlier, comes to mind. People decorate

themselves and perform ceremonies where they mimic animals and re-enact legends of the past. In life, the performers can only mimic the animals, but in art, the artist can paint both the performers and the animals they represent. Here, the presence of the macropod may represent both a real macropod and the performer imitating that macropod. Similar human-animal associations occur throughout northern Australian rock art.

Conclusions

In summary, there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating these figures are not deer, nor any other animal, but rather the representation of human figures performing on all fours, portraying animals.



Figure 13. A macropod (second from the right) forms part of a group of simple human figures.

The ongoing belief that this painting represents deer provides an example of where ancient Australian rock art, removed from its cultural context, is completely misinterpreted, a common occurrence in Kimberley rock art.

Without other evidence, the presence of a distinct gap on one of the figures, representing a section where a waist belt was originally painted in less stable yellow or white pigment, is crucial to the interpretation of this art as representing human performers. It is feasible the artist added this subtlety for anyone who might be confused by his imagery. Alternatively, it may have been the custom for only one performer to wear a waist belt for this particular performance, as in Basedow's photograph. Some of the other figures are heavily weathered and it is possible that a belt existed on more than one.

Regarding the age of this panel; the degree of weathering, the artistic style with straight limbs and the presence of the waist belt gap place these figures around the time of the *period of straight part figures*, possibly greater than 6000 years ago.

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