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BUNYIP, BUNJIL AND MOTHER-IN-LAW AVOIDANCE: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE INTERPRETATION OF BUNJILS SHELTER, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract. Bunjils Shelter in the Black Range near Stawell, Victoria, Australia, is generally regarded as one of the most significant rock art sites in Victoria. However, its provenance has been marked by nagging doubts about its authenticity, and for a short period of time it was delisted from the site register of the Victoria Archaeological Survey. A 1925 newspaper article by Rev. John Mathew based on information he obtained from a Wimmera Aboriginal woman at Lake Tyers Aboriginal station in 1924 has the potential to augment the interpretive significance of the site. We now know that the site is commemorative of a major clash between Bunjil and Bunyip and is interwoven with the principle of mother-in-law avoidance. This paper briefly revisits the history of the provenance of the site before discussing the 'new' interpretation.

Bunjils Shelter (see Figs 1 and 2), formerly known as 'Bunjil's Cave', in the Black Range, near Stawell, in Victoria, Australia, is situated in Djabwurrung country, and is the only known site in Victoria to contain bichrome figures and an anthropomorphic figure whose identity is known (see Gunn 1983, 1987). The site is generally regarded to be one of the most significant of the 150 or so Aboriginal rock art sites in Victoria, and yet its management has been characterised by nagging doubts about its authenticity and poor site management by relevant government agencies (see Clark 1991, 2005, 2014). Clark (1991, 2005) specifically addressed aspects of the authenticity debate, covering the additional knowledge to be gained from consulting the Howitt source notes which revealed how a misrepresentation of the site in Howitt (1904) had contributed to doubts about authorship.

Interpretation of the origin of the painting has been characterised by three views: (a) that the paintings were Aboriginal (Ord 1986; Howitt 1904); (b) that some of the paintings have been added to and 'touched up' by Europeans (Massola 1957; Banfield 1974); and (c) that the paintings were entirely the work of Europeans (the belief of various local informants; Sullivan 1979; and Coutts correspondence 1979 in Aboriginal Affairs Victoria n.d.). Sometime between 1979 and 1980 the site was struck from the Victoria Archaeological Survey (VAS) Site Register when the European view became accepted within VAS. Despite the fact that in late 1981 scanning electron microscopy analysis had finally established the Aboriginal origin of the site — the

internal red and white outlines of all three bichrome figures, i.e. Bunjil and both 'dogs' had been painted using traditional ochres (kaolinite and iron-rich clay) — it was not restored to the Register until early 1983. The irony in this brouhaha is that there were two sources of information available to the public which would have removed any ambiguity of its Aboriginal origin, had they been consulted — Howitt's 1883–4 field notes (see Howitt n.d.), which were deposited with the State Library of Victoria and became available to the public in 1972 (previously discussed in Clark 2005); and an article published in 1925 in *The Australasian* newspaper by Rev. John Mathew entitled 'Aboriginal sketch — gleanings in Aboriginal magic'.

Mathew published the account from information he obtained during a visit to Lake Tyers Aboriginal station in June 1924. The article's existence is noted in Prentis's (1998a: 152) biography of Mathew, and a paper on Mathew and his Aboriginal informants (Prentis 1998b), but its significance is not discussed in either publication. It is interesting as it brings together Bunjils Shelter near Stawell, Bunjil as creator, a clash with Bunyip, and mother-in-law avoidance. It also provides us with the most detailed interpretation of the site and an explanation of the distinctive patterning on the figure of Bunjil which led some commentators to consider the image was European. Unfortunately Mathew does not identify his Lake Tyers source, other than she is 'a woman from the Wimmera'. Bunyips are mythical creatures of Aboriginal folklore that were believed to be large amphibious creatures that lived



Figure 1. Bunjils Shelter, photograph Peter John Clark 29/12/2013.

in swamps, billabongs and creeks, and lay in wait to devour animals and humans who ventured too close to them (for more information see Holden and Holden 2001).

The excerpt reveals a detailed origin story that explains that the painting is a commemoration of an event at which Bunjil was killed by Bunyip and cut into pieces. Bunjil was then put back together, piece by piece, by some birds and restored to life, and the painting was made in the Black Range to commemorate the event. From a theological perspective it is evocative of ontological dualism represented by the clash between good and evil; and has core elements such as the death of Bunjil, his return to life and eventual transcendence into the heavens as a star. However, this interpretation needs to tread carefully as the story may have been contaminated by the contact situation where the dominant story was the Christian story. It is possible that the Aboriginal woman who spoke with Rev. Mathew was reframing the Aboriginal narrative for his ears and demonstrating the likeness of the ethical content of an Aboriginal legend to Christian values. It is also possible that Mathew may have embellished the narrative.

The transcription presented here is taken verbatim from the digital copy of the newspaper article — not the optical character recognition text that accompanies it. The article has the words ‘ancient here’; this is possibly a miss-publication of ‘ancient hero’.

Around the name of Bunjil (literally eaglehawk), a good deal of mythology has accumulated in Victoria. Bunjil is the name of one of the phratryes, or exogamous classes, the other being, Wa, the crow. But Bunjil was also an ancient here, regarded by some as the father of the first man, and finally he was translated

to the sky, where he now appears as a star, either Femalhaut or Altair [Mathew means *Fomalhaut*, the brightest star in the constellation *Piscis Austrinus*. *Altair* is the brightest star in the constellation *Aquila*]. We must not expect consistency in aboriginal or any other mythology, and preliminary to what follows it should be explained that no love is lost between a man and his mother-in-law. These relatives are not allowed to speak to each other, or even to look at each other. If a son-in-law looked at his mother-in-law he would turn grey.

A woman from the Wimmera told me this interesting story about an episode in which Bunjil and Bunyip figure, and which happened in the far back time when people were in the form of birds.

Bunjil, with his wife and two sons were one day at the top of a precipitous cliff on the Grampians. He caught his family in his arms, and jumped down with them safely. He was pretending to do the same with his mother-in-law, who was also there, but he dropped her and she was severely hurt. In this condition she was abandoned. Recovering somewhat, she bound up her broken limbs, and made her way to the Little Wimmera [Mt William Creek] where the other natives were camped. Then Bunyip came along and wanted to take her. She said to him that if he would leave her alone, she would send him her son-in-law instead. He consented, so she dragged the river, and made a nest at the river side, like that of a kangaroo rat. Bunyip hid his head in this. By and by her grandchildren came and proposed to catch Bunyip. She would not let them but told them to send their father, Bunjil. When he came he wanted to spear Bunyip, but she said: “Don’t spear it, catch it!” So he caught hold of Bunyip, and Bunyip caught hold of him and rent him in two. A big tree, where the river cannot be bottomed, still marks the spot [presumably Mokepilly waterhole in Mt William Creek].



Figure 2. Bunjils Shelter, photograph Peter John Clark 29/12/2013.

Bunjil's body was separated into fragments, and the birds came and tried to gather them together. One little bird used a small rainbow by way of a net, but it proved to be too small. Another bird used a bigger rainbow, and gathered up the pieces. Then they were spread out on a possum rug, and they gradually drew together, until Bunjil was whole and alive again. The other birds, namely, the natives of that age, were afraid that he might jump into the river again, so they caught him, and took him to the camp. As a memorial of this episode there is at a certain place a cave with a figure of Bunjil and two dogs. A native once told Dr. A.W. Howitt that there was a figure of Bunjil and his dog painted in a cave behind a large rock near Stawell (V.) (Mathew 1925).

Mother-in-law avoidance

The Bunjil story is interesting as it has an avoidance relationship as a central element of its narrative — in this instance the mutual avoidance of a mother-in-law and her son-in-law. Generally avoidance relationships concern people of the opposite sex who have a kin relationship with one another, and as a sign of respect, the avoidance serves to prevent or minimise undesirable events arising, especially between people with whom marital or sexual relations are prohibited.

Smyth, in his ethnography, noted that it was the 'firm belief of the Aborigines that if a man to whom a female is betrothed sees or is seen by the mother of the girl, some disaster will happen to him, or that evil spirits will afflict him' (Smyth 1878 V.1: 95). Smyth was unable to explain the origin of this custom, though he suggested it may have emerged to prevent any possible sexual interaction between the son-in-law and mother-in-law. William Buckley noted that should a girl's mother see her proposed husband 'it will cause her hair

to turn grey immediately' (Buckley in Smyth 1878 V.1: 96). Assistant Protector Edward Stone Parker was told that the reason for this custom was 'that if they saw or heard each other, they would become prematurely old and die' (Parker in Smyth 1878 V.1: 96).

James Dawson, in his ethnography of the Aboriginal people of the western district of Victoria, also discussed the rules of avoidance in his chapter on the laws of marriage. He explained that when an intended son-in-law and his intended's mother and her aunts speak in each other's presence they use a dialect that the Djabwurrung called 'wiltkill ang iitch' meaning 'turn tongue' (Dawson 1881: 29). Although the mother-in-law is not permitted to speak directly to her son-in-law, she is able to express her approval of what he says by clapping her hands. He never refers to his intended mother-in-law by her name, instead referring to her as 'gnullum gurrk'. When she is referring to her intended son-in-law, she calls him 'gnalluun joek' (Dawson 1881: 29).

Smyth noted that the custom persisted at Aboriginal stations in Victoria in the 1860s and 1870s, such as Coranderrk. This was confirmed by the Rev. Robert Hamilton who noted of a double wedding at Coranderrk Aboriginal station in February 1865 that some of the Goulburn (Daungwurrung) Aboriginal people were standing outside the schoolroom listening to the proceedings.

These would not enter, not because they disapproved of the marriage, but simply because they were under the spell of a native superstition. They belonged chiefly to the unsettled Goulburn tribe. They came only on a temporary visit, to see their friends, to be present at the marriage, and, after a short stay, to return to the Goulburn. Some of these, then, were under that

heathen charm, whereby the mother of a girl who has been promised in marriage by the father dare not see the intended son-in-law, and he cannot look on his prospective mother-in-law. Both must shun each other's presence for fear of some sudden calamity. Hence the reason why some of these wandering blacks dared not appear at the wedding (Hamilton 1865).

Conclusion

The interpretive history of Bunjils Shelter has been characterised by doubts surrounding the provenance and authenticity of the paintings. Although the identity of Bunjil, the central figure at the site, was known and attested, little was known about the particular rock art site. This paper has sought to bring together three distinct entities — the rockshelter in the Black Range near Stawell that has an image of a large anthropomorph wearing what appears to be a coat or jerkin with a double row of buttons down the front, accompanied by two small dogs; Howitt's 1880/1881 source notes on which his 1904 discussion of the Bunjil site is based; and the narrative account told to Mathew at Lake Tyers in 1924 about Bunjil and his wife and his problems with her matrilineal kin that result in the retribution they arrange with the help of a Creation Being called Bunyip for disregarding conventional behaviour.

According to the information given to John Mathew the rock art site is commemorative — it recalls an event at which Bunjil was killed by Bunyip and cut into pieces and that through the intervention of birds he was pieced together and returned to life. Intrinsic to the story is avoidance relationships and it is tempting to speculate that the painting also served to reinforce the need for proper relationships within and between families. The re-assembling of Bunjil is capable of explaining the patterning on the figure of Bunjil at the rockshelter that has led some to consider it to be a European coat. The Bunjil story also gives a prominence to the place of the Bunyip in Djabwurrung society and reinforces the dread with which it was regarded. The Mathew story augments our interpretation of Bunjils Shelter and offers a new perspective that is worthy of consideration. Nevertheless, as anecdotal evidence the newspaper account needs to be interpreted with caution as it may be a story of a story, and liable to distortion, embellishment and sheer invention.

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