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# MUDGEGONGA-2 AND THE ROCK ART OF NORTH-EAST VICTORIA

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**Abstract.** Mudgegonga, an area in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range, houses the most elaborate rock art complex yet recorded in north-east Victoria and its central site, Mudgegonga-2, is one of the most decorated in the State. Although small in number, these sites are of paramount importance to the local Aboriginal people in whose lands they occur. Detailed recording of the art of Mudgegonga-2 has provided a key to interpreting the rock art within the site complex and also the rock art elsewhere in the north-east Victorian rock art region. Using these results and other recent detailed recordings, a re-evaluation of the region's rock art is presented.

## Introduction

Fourteen rock art sites have been recorded in north-east Victoria (Figure 1). These occur within five distinct clusters and as one singular site. The most complex of the art sites is Mudgegonga-2, which is also the only art shelter in the region to have been excavated. A preliminary summary of the region's art was presented nearly twenty years ago (Gunn 1984, 1987a), but since that time several new sites have been located and detailed recordings of others have been undertaken for management assessments. Focusing on the Mudgegonga-2 site, stylistic and temporal patterns have been isolated and formed the basis for assessing the other sites in the Mudgegonga complex, and then interpreting the rock art within the broader region.

All of the sites are within the community area of the Bangerang Cultural Centre Co-operative Ltd, Shepparton, although the custodianship of the Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, at Wodonga, is also acknowledged. These communities, with the assistance of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (the State authority for Aboriginal sites) and Parks Victoria (land managers on whose land most of the sites occur), have actively participated in the recent development of management and conservation plans for their art sites. Rock art sites are one of the most conspicuous site types for the promotion of their cultural heritage and, while promoting public development at one particular site (Yeddonba, near Beechworth), others are used for their own guided tours and community education programs. The communities see these sites as containing the distinct products of their past and also as standing as symbols of their continuing cultural heritage.

The rock art sites in the region all occur on granite boulders or bedrock outcrops in foothills along the northern fringe of the Great Dividing Range, from Beechworth north-eastwards to the Murray River (Figure 1). Sites have been reported from the adjacent area of New South Wales (N.S.W.) but these have not been recorded in sufficient detail to be incorporated into this discussion. The site complex near Euroa in central Victoria (Gunn 1983a, Gunn and Thorn 2002), although having some features and art attributes in common with these sites, lies more than 100 km to the south-west and is spatially outside the north-east Victorian region.

## The Mudgegonga site complex

The Mudgegonga site complex contains the largest concentration of rock art in the region and will be discussed at length as, in its archaeological and geographical context, it provides a key to understanding the other sites in the region. The complex lies ten kilometres north-east of the town of Myrtleford (Figure 1), on the fringe of a low, forested range and adjacent to a broad and fertile valley-flat that now supports small-acreage sheep, dairy and tobacco farms. The valley consists of scree and alluvium fill. The eastern range that houses the art complex consists of granite hills and mountains with outcrops of gneissic granodiorite (Leggo and Beavis 1973). The regional weather pattern includes hot, dry summers and cold, wet winters. January is the hottest month (av. 31ºC, max. 43ºC) and July the coldest (av. 17ºC, min. –5ºC) (Met Bureau Web-page for Myrtleford). The area has an annual average rainfall of 900 mm, with most falling in the months of July–August, although heavy thunderstorms are not uncommon over the summer months. Winter frosts are common and snow falls annually on the higher peaks but only rarely at the lower altitudes of the art sites.

Barwidgee Creek, adjacent to the site complex, is a permanent stream and, while many of its tributary streams are dry in late summer–autumn, several of these contain permanent waterholes. One such waterhole occurs in the

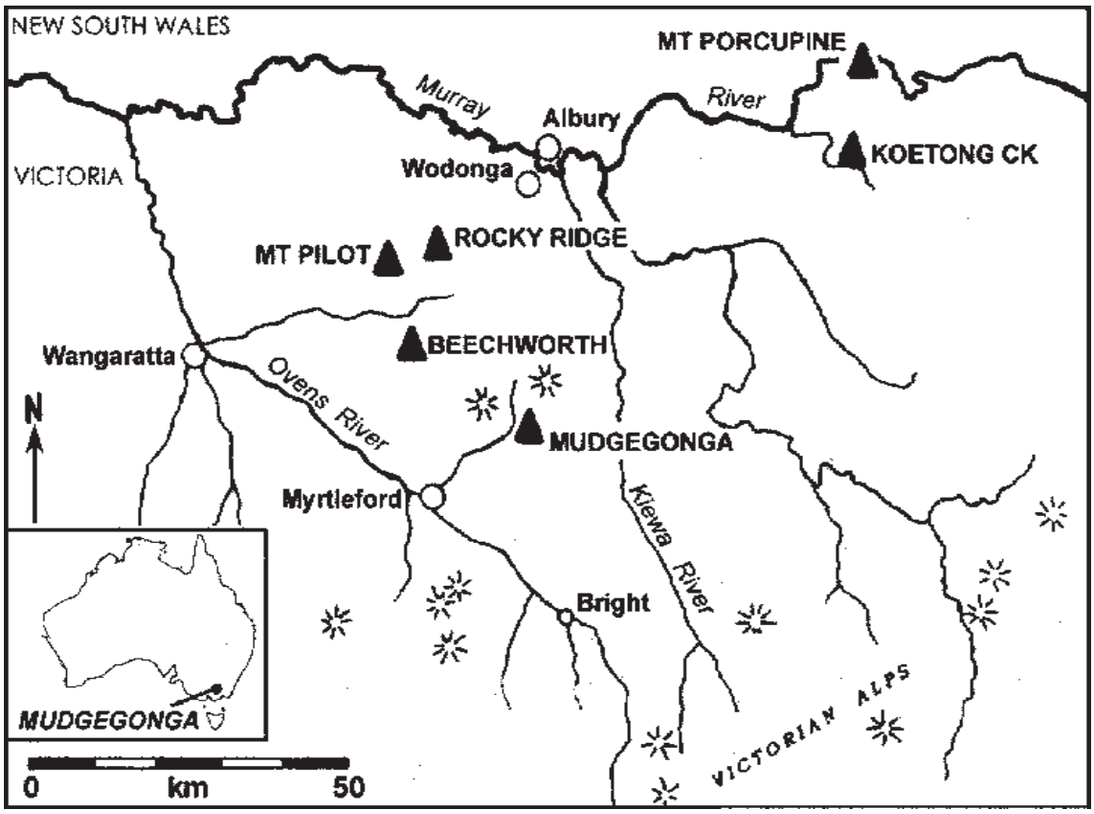


***Figure 1.*** *Location of recorded rock art complexes in north-east Victoria.*

creek-bed, 100 m upstream from Mudgegonga-2 (M2), the major site of the complex. The creek catchment behind the site forms a large, 'hidden' basin and is a distinctive feature of the area that would have been a suitable location for the performance of ceremonies (cf. Mathews 1904: 307–22, 322–8). The area around the complex would have been lush for the hunter-gatherer as, within a short distance, it incorporated the resources of alpine peaks, timbered ranges and valleys, streams and rivers, and to the north the large alluvial flats and floodplains of the Murray River. These environments supported a wide range of terrestrial and riverine vegetal and animal foods, affording an annual pattern of staggered resource abundance.

Mt Buffalo, 25 km to the south, was one of the seasonal foci of the migrating Bogong moths that came to the cooler peaks of the southern Alps in their millions to aestivate over summer (Flood 1980: 61–7). These moths were exploited by both local and distant Aboriginal groups who feasted almost exclusively on them for several months each year (Massola 1966: 74; Flood 1980). Towards the end of December gatherings, numbering more than 500 people in good years, would assemble below the mountains for preliminary rites prior to their ascent (Helms 1895, quoted in Flood 1980). It was usual at such times to conduct religious ceremonies, to trade and to affirm social ties (cf. Tindale 1974; Flood 1980).

*Aboriginal affiliations*

Howitt (1904: 78) stated that the country from Mt Pilot to Cooma and Queanbeyan, and including Mudgegonga and most if not all of the region's rock art sites, was that of the Walgal people. Their country was to the north of that of the montane Yaitmatang people. Subsequent researchers (Tindale 1974; Horton 1994) have allocated different names to these people. However, it is apparent that their traditional associations, whatever their name, were with the people of the high country to the south-east and north-east, whose country included the upper portion of the Murray River east from Albury (Hercus 1969).

Flood (1980: 71–3) reports that there was a loose 'confederacy' of the highland tribes from the Australian Alps (south-east N.S.W., A.C.T. and north-east Victoria). These groups had a commonality in the seasonal exploitation of the Bogong moth at which time they gathered together for prolonged periods. These groups would also assist each other in skirmishing with the Kurnai groups of Gippsland to the south of the Alps and the plains' people downstream from Albury, with whom they were at enmity. Key places, such as the Mudgegonga complex, would doubtless have been known to and used by these visiting groups as well as by the members of the local clan.

At the time of contact, Mathews (1904: 306) found a common *Wonggoa* or *Wongupka* initiation ceremony to exist amongst the groups of north-east and central Victoria. Unlike the more publicised earth-bound religions of the greater part of Australia, the fertile lands of south-eastern Australia were host to groups that believed in a sky-dwelling All-father (Eliade 1973), whose aspect was more human than animal (Howitt 1904). This area includes all of the rock art sites discussed here and reinforces the above findings that, at least at and immediately prior to the contact period, all of these sites were within a

common cultural block. Hence, if the art can be assumed to date from this period of cultural homogeneity, as well it might, any differences exhibited by the art are unlikely to result from local cultural variations and are more likely to have arisen from either broad functional differences or the individual personality of the painters (cf. Clegg 1977). Aboriginal culture throughout Australia was essentially conservative (though not static) and did not encourage individuality to the extent of contemporary Western culture (Maddock 1974: 110–11). Consequently, the individual personality of the artists is unlikely to have been a factor and significant differences in the art at different sites is most probably due to differences in site functions.

With the onset of the European invasion into this region in the 1830s, a period of intense conflict ensued. The local Aborigines caused the abandonment of the original Tarrawingee run, immediately west of Beechworth, in 1835 (Robinson 1973: 2). Their resistance to the settlers prevented the colonisation of the north-east until 1843, when they were overwhelmed by a large movement of 'Overlan-ders' from the Murrumbidgee area, the first of which settled at Myrtleford, 15 km south-west of Mudgegonga. The problem of the local Aborigines was 'resolved' by 'unspecified means'. The Beechworth gold rush in 1852 brought large numbers of miners into the area, and few areas of the north-east Victorian region would have escaped the effects of prospecting. After 1853 it is unlikely that any Aborigines would have been able or permitted to continue their traditional lifestyle, due to their reduced numbers, restricted access to hunting lands, and the dislocation of the remaining survivors.

*Previous investigations*

The first rock art site located in the region was the Koetong Creek-1 site, recorded by the Museum of Victoria in 1936 and 1950 (Tugby 1953; Mitchell 1954). This was followed by the recording of the Yeddonba site at Mt Pilot eight years later (Massola 1960). The first rock art site at Mudgegonga (Mudgegonga-1 or M1) was recorded in 1966 (Massola 1966; 1969). Subsequent site recordings included Mt Porcupine-1 (West 1970; Gunn 1981), Mt Pilot-2 (Gunn 1981, 1983b; Gunn and Thorn 2000; Thorn 2001), Rocky Ridge 1, 2 and 3 (Sale and Hall 1983), Koetong Creek-2 (Gunn 1981; Gunn and Thorn 1998), and Mudgegonga-3, 4 and 5 (Gunn 1987b, 1987c). A further small site, 'Woolshed', has recently been located near Beechworth but this has yet to be recorded in detail (Aboriginal Affairs Victoria files).

Mudgegonga-2 (M2) was apparently brought to the attention of the Victoria Archaeological Survey (VAS) in 1975, leading to the recording of its art and excavation of its floor deposits (AAV files; Coutts 1978; Perham 1985). The art was re-recorded in 1980 (Gunn 1981) and then recorded in detail in 1981 (Gunn 1987b). The deposits consisted of

> [a] rich faunal assemblage and a predominantly quartz lithic industry. There is over one metre of deposit divided between two major stratigraphic zones. Recognisable stone tools include backed blades (geometric and Bondi points), thumbnail scrapers and bipolar flakes.
>
> SUA-809: 690 ± 100 BP
> SUA-810: 3445 ± 130 BP (Coutts 1978: 4):

No significant changes occurred in the stone-working technology (stone type and artefact types) over the duration of the site's recorded use (Perham 1985). No ochre was recovered from the excavation. From a cursory examination of the VAS excavation material, Caroline Bird noted that the oldest date from site M2 did not record the earliest occupation of the site (pers. comm. 1998; cf. Bird et al. 1998). No other rock art sites in north-east Victoria have been excavated and only one other site (M5) contains any significant depth of deposit. The other shelters, both at Mudgegonga and elsewhere in the region, contain only shallow soils over bedrock.

Massola (1966) considered that the art at M1 had little in common with the previously recorded sites in Victoria and suggested that it was artistically more closely related to the art of the Cobar Plains region of N.S.W., 400 km to the north-west (cf. McCarthy 1976). Flood (1980: 142–3) noted that, compared to similar granite areas in northern N.S.W., there was a dearth of rock art sites in the southern highlands of N.S.W. and north-east Victoria. She also concluded that this block was 'isolated from the main artistic developments of Australia, and that the few art sites which do exist are probably young, and have closer affinities with the art of central N.S.W. than with the eastern coast' (Flood 1980: 143). Other recent studies (e.g. Chudliegh 1981; Pianta 1983; Pavlidis 1998; Gunn et al. 1999) have offered little additional archaeological data or interpretative theory.

| SITE | Archaeological site type |
|---|---|
| M1 | Art & occupation shelter |
| M2 | Art & occupation shelter |
| M3 | Art & occupation shelter |
| M4 | Art & occupation shelter |
| M5 | Art & occupation shelter |
| M6 | Occupation shelter |
| M7 | Open scatter |
| M8 | Open scatter |
| M9 | Scarred tree |

***Table 1.*** *Archaeological sites within the Mudgegonga art site complex.*

*The Mudgegonga archaeological site complex*

The complex consists of nine archaeological sites (Table 1), all of which are within easy walking distance of one another. The five art sites all occur along the lower, western slopes of the range. Four (M1, 2, 3 and 4) are adjacent to creek-line waterholes. M2 is adjacent to the largest, most reliable of these and is the more decorated of the shelters, and has the greatest accumulation of floor deposits (Figures 2–4). M5, while not on a watercourse, is within 200 m of Barwidgee Creek and also contains a substantial floor deposit. A scarred tree and surface artefact scatter occur adjacent to M2. Another artefact scatter and associated occupation shelter lie adjacent to art site M3. M2, which lies adjacent to the largest waterhole along the range, is therefore the occupational, artistic and geographical centre of an extensive site complex that contains a range of archaeological site types.

| SITE | Structure | Form | Length (m) | Depth (m) | Height (m) | Orientation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M1 | Bedrock | Undercut ledge | 4 | 3 | 2 | 335 |
| M2 | Tor | Inclined face | 8 | 3 | 3 | 60 |
| M3 | Tor | Inclined face | 3 | 3 | 2 | 65 |
| M4 | Bedrock | Inclined face | 5 | 2 | 8 | 331 |
| M5 | Bedrock | Inclined face | 8 | 4 | 8 | 270 |

***Table 2.*** *Mudgegonga art shelter attributes.*

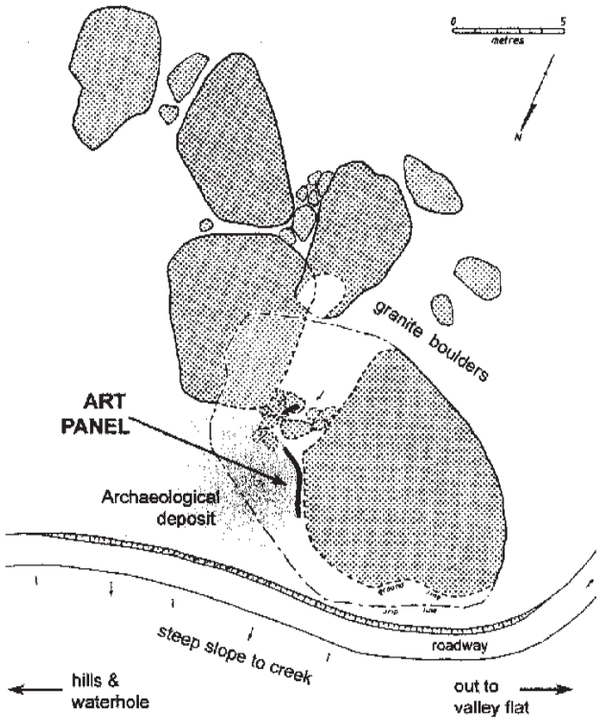


***Figure 2.*** *Plan of the Mudgegonga-2 shelter showing its art panel and archaeological deposit.*

All five art sites are within granite rockshelters. Two (M2 and 3) are within tor clusters, while the other three are on bedrock outcrops. The rock art shelters range from small to medium in size (Table 2) and have no consistent orientation despite their common location on the western side of the range. This apparently random orientation appears to be a feature of rockshelters in granite outcrops and contrasts with the more patterned orientation of shelters within sandstone outcrops (cf. Gunn 1987a). Despite the proliferation of boulders and broken outcrops in the Mudgegonga area, other protected panels suitable for the preservation of rock art are not numerous.

All five art shelters contained paintings, stone artefacts and some (albeit mostly shallow) depth of floor deposit (Table 3). This suggests that these shelters were used for activities additional to the production of artwork. The stone artefacts on the shelter floors were made almost exclusively from quartz and are consistent with those recovered from the M2 excavation and the surface scatters elsewhere in the region (Coutts 1978: 4). No contact-period artefacts or contact motifs have been recognised at these sites.

*The rock art of Mudgegonga-2 (M2)*

The artwork of M2 consists of some 477 individual marks, most of which are in a poor to very poor condition (Figures 3 and 4). Heavy dust accumulation, the effects of water-wash and salt deposition have made many of the motifs difficult to discern. Nevertheless, the impression that the site contains an unusually high number of motifs remains apparent. The artwork within M2 provides a sequence from which the art of the smaller, satellite sites can be interpreted and hence this site will be discussed in greatest detail.

The artwork at M2 was produced as paintings (84%) and drawings (16%). Most of the paintings were done in red (69% of the total), while smaller numbers were done in white (14%) or yellow (1%) pigments. All of the drawings were produced with black charcoal (16%). All motifs are monochrome and clusters of single colour motifs appear to represent discrete chronological events indicating that each artist used only one colour at the one sitting. Consequently, colour is seen as a key to the panel's chronological sequence.

Thirteen broad motif types were interpreted from 107 motifs (Table 4). The remaining 58 motifs were too fragmented to interpret. It was clear that the 217 stroke, 56 bar, and 59 dot motifs were mostly painted as 'composed sets' rather than the product of aggregating individual units. Hence rather than seeing them as many small, individual 'stroke/bar/dot' motifs (as was done previously; Gunn 1987b) they are now interpreted as consisting of individual and aggregate motifs (stroke/bar/dot 'sets') and consequently their proportional representation is reduced considerably from that reported in the previous study. The bars and strokes are also seen as functional variations on the same motif (see discussion in Gunn 1987b: 14) and are therefore aggregated together for this study.

| Site | No. of paintings | No. of drawings | Floor deposit | No. of surface stone artefacts |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| M1 | 31 | | Small | <10 |
| M2 | 401 | 76 | Large | >20 |
| M3 | 11 | | Small | <10 |
| M4 | 15 | | Small | <10 |
| M5 | 48 | | Medium | >20 |

***Table 3.*** *Mudgegonga art shelter contents.*

***Figure 3.*** *The Mudgegonga-2 art panel (1981 photograph) showing poor condition of the artwork.*

There were 23 'human figure' motifs on the panel and these formed its most outstanding visual component. While this is due in part to the poor preservation and essentially geometric nature of the other motifs, it is also partly due to their placement across the panel at around chest height and our cognitive preference to relate to humanoid figures. Eight of the figures are associated pairs: one pair being apparently contemporary, the others associated through superimposition. Three of the drawn figures appear to represent a family group (father, mother and child; Figure 5). The figure interpreted as a female is the only clearly sexed figure of over 500 anthropomorphs recorded in Victorian rock art to date. Most of these figures are either lacking sexual attributes or wear covering


***Figure 4.*** *The Mudgegonga-2 art panel (1981 tracing).*

corroboree skirts, which is also worn by the (interpreted) female figure here (cf. the drawings of nineteenth century Aboriginal artists William Barak and Tommy McCrae in Cooper 1981).

The human figure schema is based on an elongated, upright and static, stick-figure with little elaboration other than the conventional corroboree skirt (Figure 5). The figures have their arms depicted either clearly upraised or hanging by their sides. Figures with flexed arms are more common among the last art phase of white paintings. The degree of variation suggests that, while a common schema was expected, there were no formal rules governing adornment or attitude. Three figures stand out, however, for their additional details:

- a very solid-bodied figure in red with a rayed 'headdress',
- the small drawn 'father' figure who has two horn-like projections on his head and 'tassels' from his elbows and knees, and
- the drawn 'mother' figure with pendulous breasts.

The attributes of all three figures are unique in Victorian rock art, although other simple types of headdresses do occur elsewhere in north-east and central Victoria (see below and Gunn 1983a).

All of the human figures, with the exception of the two tall linear drawings, have similar body proportions with thin body widths (about two-thirds to three-quarters naturalistic proportions) and short arms (about half to one-third natural proportions). Comparison by colour showed that the red figures had shorter limbs than the yellow figures and fatter bodies than the white figures; nevertheless, as mentioned, the overall schema showed no significant variation.

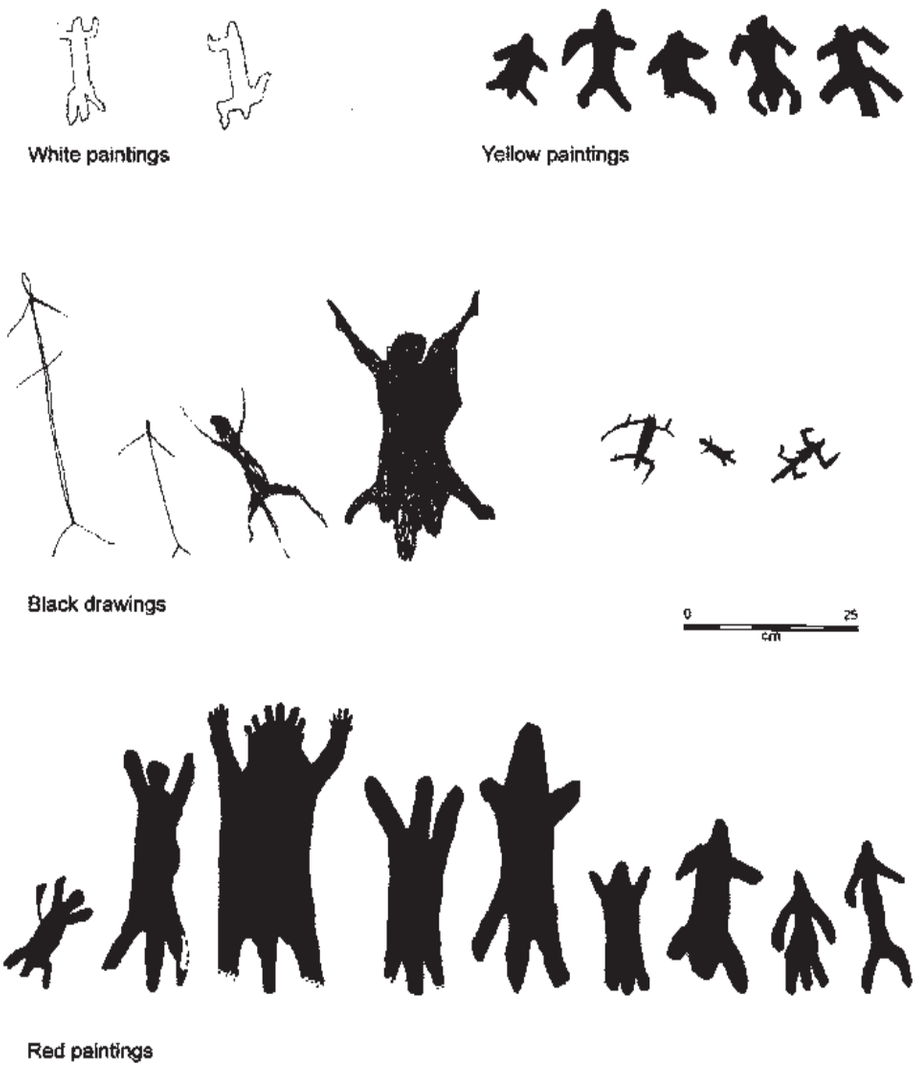


***Figure 5.*** *The 'human figure' motifs from Mudgegonga-2.*

| MOTIF TYPE | White paint | Yellow paint | Black draw | Red paint | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Complex design | | | | 2 | **2** |
| Dot set | 1 | | | 4 | **5** |
| Dot | | | | 1 | **1** |
| Bar/stroke set | 1 | | | 4 | **5** |
| Bar | | | | 1 | **1** |
| Simple design | 1 | | 16 | 14 | **31** |
| Line | 1 | | 24 | 6 | **31** |
| Area | | | 2 | | **2** |
| Implement | 1 | | 1 | | **2** |
| 'Human' figure | 2 | 5 | 7 | 9 | **23** |
| 'Roo track' | | | | 1 | **1** |
| Animal | | | | 2 | **2** |
| Foot | | | | 1 | **1** |
| **TOTAL** | **7** | **5** | **50** | **45** | **107** |
| fragments | 1 | 0 | 26 | 31 | **58** |

***Table 4.*** *M2 motif types by colour.*

| ART PHASE | AGE | CHARACTERISTICS | M1 | M2 | M5 | M3 | M4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Phase 4 | Latest | White paintings | X | X | | | |
| Phase 3 | | Yellow paintings | | X | | | |
| Phase 2 | | Black drawings | | X | | | |
| Phase 1a | | Red paintings | X | X | X | X | X |
| Phase 1b | Earliest | 'Old' red fragments | | X | X | | |

***Table 5.*** *Art phase occurrences at Mudgegonga.*

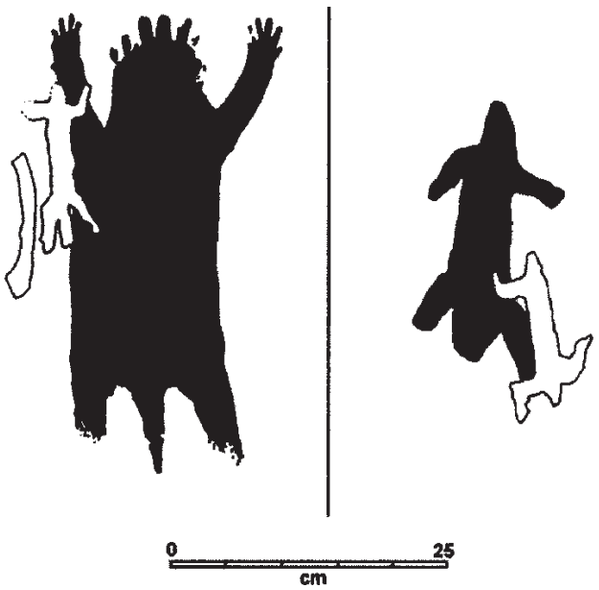


***Figure 6.*** *Two examples of sympathetic superimpositioning.*

| Motif type | Phase 1a/b | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'Human figures' % | 20 | 14 | 100 | 8 |
| n = | 9 | 7 | 5 | 2 |

***Table 6.*** *M2 'human figure' frequencies by phase.*

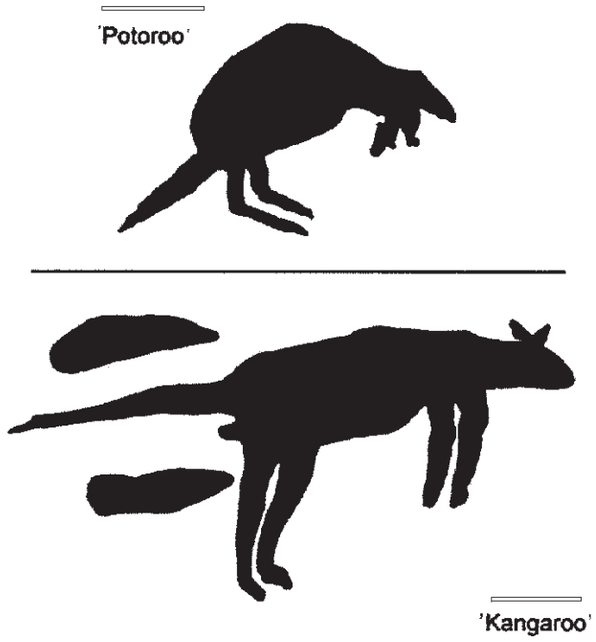


***Figure 7.*** *The 'macropod' motifs from Mudgegonga-2.*

The two white human figures appear to be the product of the one artist and painted at the one sitting, as they are both of similar style and preservation. Both are also superimposed off-centre over earlier red human figures suggesting that the later motif was reinforcing rather than negating the statement of the earlier artist (Figure 6). Two other examples of this 'sympathetic' superimpositioning occur with two of the charcoal figures also placed off-centre over earlier red figures (Gunn 1987b: 155). Such deliberate patterning in superimposition is very uncommon elsewhere in Victorian rock art.

Twenty-seven of the 31 simple designs recorded (16 black, 14 red and 1 white) fell into three prime types: grids (3 black), vertical loops (6 red) and multi-branched apexes (13 black, 4 red, 1 white). All are simple constructions involving a limited array of basic elements. The two complex designs extend the basic forms of the simple designs but with an increase in scale and the number of graphic units in combination.

Red profile silhouettes of two animal motifs were recorded: a large, 64 cm painting of a macropod (most likely an Eastern grey kangaroo) and a small, 16 cm 'potoroo' (Figure 7). These were 'identified' by comparison of the motifs with the silhouettes of the known macropod fauna from the area (see Gunn 1987b: 16). The 'kangaroo' has 'tracks' on either side of its tail. This seems to be a visual play on the representation of a kangaroo punting, whereby the tail drag mark passes between the two tracks of the hind feet. In nature, punting marks are commonly seen in areas where kangaroos have been feeding (see Triggs 1984: 32). Such representations, in the form of a line between two 'tick' tracks, are a common motif in the paintings and petroglyphs of the semi-arid regions of Australia (pers. obs.) but are rare in the better watered areas where animal tracks are less apparent on the ground.

The motifs at M2 range in size from 1 cm to 94 cm in length, with a mean of 14 cm and a median of 9 cm (n = 411). The human figures range from 7 cm to 43 cm with a median of 18 cm. These sizes are slightly larger than what is found in the State's major rock art region at Gariwerd, 300 km to the west (Gunn 1987a).

M2 contains 65 instances of superimpositioning in 15 individual sequences. This number far exceeds that of any other site in Victoria, as elsewhere superimpositioning tends to be uncommon and restricted to two or three instances in those sites where it does occur (Gunn 1987a). The common pattern derived from these individual sequences gives the following overall art phases for the site:

**WHITE: phase 4**

| Motif type | SITE | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | No | % |
| Dot set | | 1 | | | | 1 | 3 |
| Bar set | 2 | 1 | | | | 3 | 9 |
| Crescent | 1 | | | | | 1 | 3 |
| Line | 5 | 1 | | | | 6 | 18 |
| Simple design | | 1 | | | | 1 | 3 |
| 'Human figure' | 14 | 2 | | | | 16 | 48 |
| Material object | | 1 | | | | 1 | 3 |
| 'Emu track' | 3 | | | | | 3 | 9 |
| 'Bird track' | 1 | | | | | 1 | 3 |
| **TOTAL** | **26** | **7** | **0** | **0** | **0** | **33** | |
| Fragments | | 1 | | | | 1 | |

**RED: phases 1a & 1b**

| Motif Type | SITE | | | | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | No | % |
| Dot | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Dot set | | 4 | | | | 4 | 6 |
| Bar | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Bar set | | 4 | | | | 4 | 6 |
| Line | 1 | 6 | | 1 | | 8 | 11 |
| Circle | | | | | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Simple design | | 14 | | 1 | 7 | 22 | 31 |
| Complex design | | 2 | | | | 2 | 3 |
| 'Human' figure | 4 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 24 | 33 |
| 'Roo track' | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Animal | | 2 | | | | 2 | 3 |
| Foot | | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| **TOTAL** | **5** | **45** | **1** | **5** | **16** | **72** | |
| Fragments | 1 | 31 | 10 | 10 | 32 | 84 | |

**BLACK & YELLOW (at M2 only): phases 2 and 3**

| Motif type | Black drawing | Yellow painting |
|---|---|---|
| Line | 24 | |
| Area | 2 | |
| Simple design | 16 | |
| 'Human' figure | 7 | 5 |
| Material object | 1 | |
| **TOTAL** | **50** | **5** |
| Fragments | 26 | 0 |

***Table 7.*** *Mudgegonga: motif type frequencies by colour and site.*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Phase 4 | **White paintings** | Most recent phase |
| Phase 3 | **Yellow paintings** | |
| Phase 2 | **Black drawings** | |
| Phase 1b | **Red paintings** | |
| Phase 1a | **Red fragments** | Earliest surviving phase |

The paintings of the earliest phase (1a) consist only of red fragments and, while these do not appear to be significantly different from the distinctive motifs of the later red phase (1b), they seem to be distinct enough to warrant separation into a distinct sub-phase.

Each phase has its own peculiarities of colour, technique, form (solid replaced by linear), size (larger to smaller) or motif types (decrease in geometric types). However, while most of these are seen as relatively minor variations to the overall repertoire, the change of scale, from large panel compositions (the bars and designs) to small groups and individual figures, is considered significant. Such a reduction in scale over time is also apparent in the rock art of the Grampians in western Victoria (Gunn 1987a). This change of scale is interpreted as reflecting a change in the function of the art, and hence the site, from a public, audience orientated display to a more private statement. To date, however, it is only speculation that

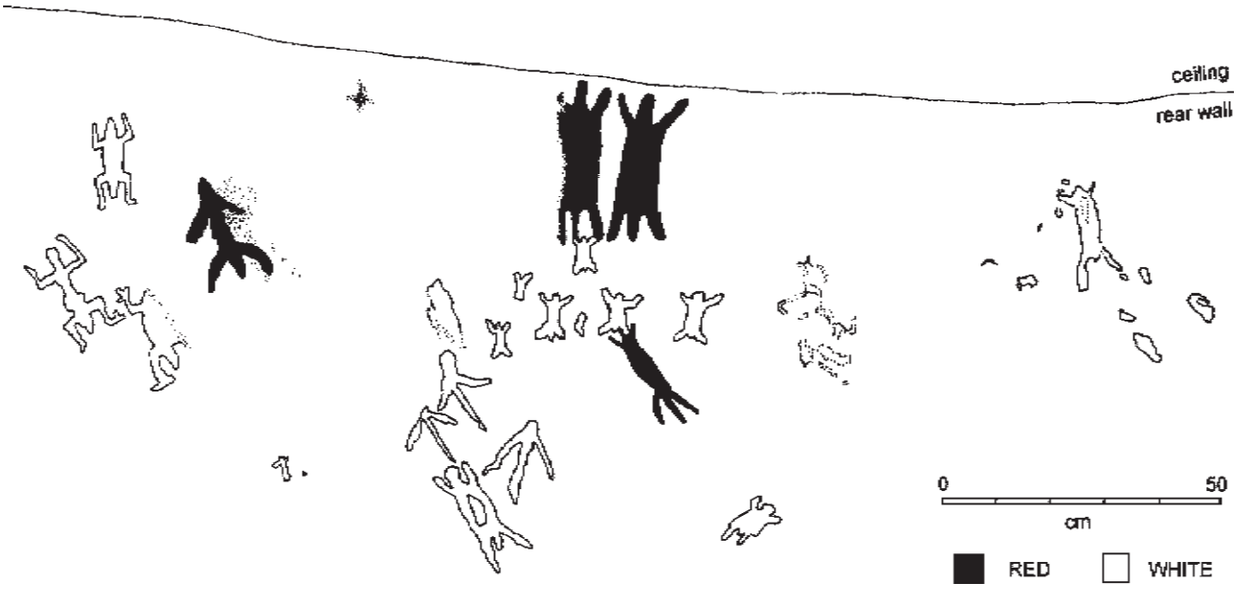


***Figure 8.*** *The Mudgegonga-1 art panel (1981 and 2000 tracing).*

limits this time period to the past 3000 years. Also, the time periods represented by each phase are not seen as equal. For example, the yellow paintings (phase 3) are all seen to be the work of one individual at one sitting. In contrast, the red paintings (phase 1a) consist of at least seven events, and probably many more, each separated by a time span long enough to produce a tonal difference between the underlying and overlapping pigments.

Overall the art at Mudgegonga-2 conforms to a pattern of small, simple paintings and while the variety of motif types here is unusually high, the site fits comfortably into the broader unified tradition that encompasses most of south-eastern Australia's rock art (Gunn 1984).

**Other Mudgegonga art sites**

White stick figures and 'bird tracks' dominate the artwork of M1 (Figure 8), with just four red simple anthropomorphous figures occurring. Each of these red figures has a similar form to the surrounding white figures. However, from differences in preservation, the red figures appear to be the older and presumably provided the template for the later white figures. This indicates that at least two phases of art occurred here: white paintings (M2 phase 4) preceded by red paintings (M2 phase 1). This pattern parallels that observed at M2. The schema of the figures, involving simple stick (linear) or solid-bodied (solid + linear) forms, is consistent with that used at M2.

At M3, 4 and 5, the artwork is limited to red paintings dominated by stick and solid-bodied figures (anthropo-morphs) and a small number of geometric elements (bars, circles and curved lines) (Figure 9). These motifs all have parallels in the phase 4 and phase 5 art at M2. M5 contains at least four sequences of painting within these two phases.

Together the five Mudgegonga art sites contain some 271 motifs, with M2 containing the highest number (165) and greatest range of art attributes. M2 also contains examples of all of the motifs present in the surrounding four satellite sites. The artwork of these smaller sites is related to particular art phases at M2 while the variation in motif types and numbers across the five sites is interpreted as reflecting the greater concentration of occupation and art production at M2. At a finer level, however, there are distinct differences in the art of the various sites, suggesting a further disparity between the larger and smaller sites. Of note is the predominance of bar/stroke motifs and linear designs at M2 and their almost total absence in the peripheral sites.

Despite the numerical prevalence of simple geometric elements, visually it is the anthropomorph motifs that are the most outstanding at each shelter (Table 8). This gives the art at Mudgegonga, as elsewhere in Victoria, a more anthropocentric character than is suggested by the statistics (Table 9).

| SITE | Visually outstanding motifs |
|---|---|
| M1 | 'Human' figures, 'bird tracks' |
| M2 | Linear design; 'human' figures; bars |
| M3 | Anthropomorph |
| M4 | 'Human' figures |
| M5 | 'Lizard'; 'human' figures |

***Table 8.*** *Mudgegonga: visually outstanding motifs per site.*

| GRAPHIC CLASS | PHASE % | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1a/b | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Geometric | 62 | 84 | | 36 |
| Naturalistic | 37 | 16 | 100 | 51 |
| 'Tracks' | 1? | | | 12 |
| n = | 72 | 50 | 5 | 33 |

***Table 9.*** *Mudgegonga: graphic class percentages per phase.*

**Art and activities at Mudgegonga**

The major art site (M2) of the complex contains 165 motifs, which is the highest number of any site in north-


***Figure 9.*** *The Mudgegonga-5 art panel (all red paintings) (drawn from photograph).*

east Victoria. Like its counterpart in the Grampians, the Billimina shelter with over 1000 motifs, a very large array of bar motifs and a very extensive deposit area (Coutts and Lorblanchet 1982), M2 also has the largest occupation deposit in its region. Hence, M2 is seen as the focus of shelter occupation in the complex. Presumably, as in other areas of Australia, rockshelters in Victoria, with or without rock art, were not preferred occupation sites, but were primarily used as retreats during inclement weather. The principal area of occupation at the Mudgegonga complex was most likely to have been on the open creek flats adjacent to the M2 shelter. What other events occurred at the M2 shelter is unknown; however, on the basis of the ethnography it is unlikely that this site would have been the focus of large-scale rituals. These ceremonies tended to be held in elevated, out of the way localities (Mathews 1904; Flood 1980). An explanation for the presence of figures wearing ritual paraphernalia at M2 but not at the other Mudgegonga sites may be that this site was used *en route* to or from such ritual events, when the minds of the occupants were still preoccupied with happenings of the event (cf. Mountford 1938). Similarly, the proposed change in function at the site, discussed below and as indicated by the art sequence, is interpreted in light of religious significance. The earlier extensive composition is likely to have made an imposing panel and its most likely function was that of instruction of a particular local Dreaming to a select small group (cf. Spencer and Gillen 1899; Flood 1997: 311; and pers. obs.). For unknown reasons, the site then lost this function and the subsequent artwork that was added as the earlier artwork deteriorated was of a more generally illustrative nature.

The art at the M2 site differs from that at the surrounding four other sites in the complex principally through its significantly higher number of motifs and its greater range of colours, techniques and motif types. Superficially, these smaller satellite sites seem too different to M2 to permit comparison. However, comparing the art of these smaller sites with individual phases at M2 suggests that while art was produced at M2 at various times during its occupation, that at the satellite sites was restricted to particular periods. On the assumption that satellite sites were used when greater numbers of people congregated in the area, it appears that the site complex as a whole was more popular during its earlier art phases. This is consistent with the proposition that the:

- earlier, large and visually impacting art was closely related to a ritual period, when people congregated at the site before moving to the ritual area (some kilometres or more away), and
- later, apparently more prosaic art reflects a period of more casual visits (though the art may still depict religious characters, paraphernalia or concepts).

Such a pattern might be visible in the archaeological record of the M2 deposits if they were to be reassessed in this light.

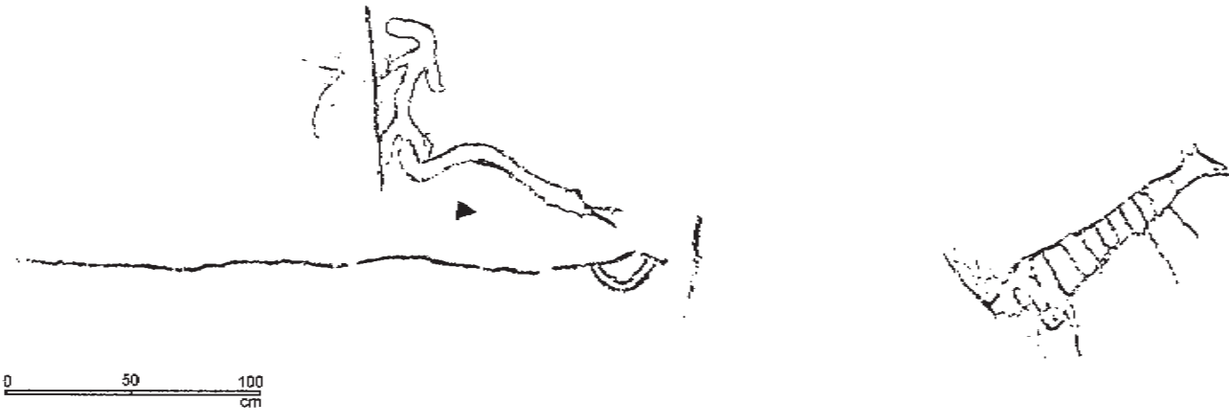


***Figure 10.*** *Yeddonba art panel. Note the 'thylacine' and large snake-like motifs (tracing).*

| COMPLEX | Site name | Site code | No. motifs/complex | % red painting/complex |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MUDGEGONGA | Mudgegonga-1 | M1 | | |
| | Mudgegonga-2 | M2 | | |
| | Mudgegonga-3 | M3 | | |
| | Mudgegonga-4 | M4 | | |
| | Mudgegonga-5 | M5 | 271 | 58 |
| MT PILOT | Yeddonba | Y1 | | |
| | Mt Pilot-2 | Y2 | 79 | 100 |
| ROCKY RIDGE | Rock Ridge-1 | R1 | | |
| | Rock Ridge-2 | R2 | | |
| | Rock Ridge-3 | R3 | 25 | 100 |
| WOOLSHED | Woolshed | WS | 1 | 100 |
| KOETONG CK | Koetong Ck-1 | K1 | | |
| | Koetong Ck-2 | K2 | 44 | 100 |
| MT PORCUPINE | Mt Porcupine-1 | PP | 15 | 100 |

***Table 10.*** *The art sites of north-east Victoria.*

**The rock art of north-eastern Victoria**

North-east Victoria contains fourteen rock art sites within six complexes (Table 10, Figure 1). Numerically, the rock art of the region is dominated by red, linear paintings of geometric elements and, to a lesser extent, anthropomorphs (Tables 12 and 13). Most of the 'human' figures (69%), in common with the other motifs, tend to be small (<10 cm) and linear in form. Despite their diminutive size, they form the most conspicuous motifs due to their ready identity, balanced graphic design and relative complexity compared to the simple geometric types, along with their tendency to occur in groups amongst less outstanding geometric elements. The 'human' figure motifs are presented in a wide range of sub-types (schemata) that are invariably variants on the 'stick figure'. Animals and animal tracks are rare, although the animals tend to be conspicuous due to their somewhat larger size, solid forms and detailed profile depiction.

Perusal of the contents of the region's rock art sites shows, however, that only one site (M2) fits comfortably into the regional pattern, doubtlessly because this site contains around two-thirds of the regions motifs and must be the dominant site in determining any numerical trends. While having an undercurrent (or background) of small red figures, tracks and simple geometrics, the other complexes tend to have one or two sites that show particular motif types and schemata (Table 11). Similarly, the distinctive 'hat'-like headdress worn by the large, thin-bodied figures at Koetong Creek-1 (Figure 12) was not found at any other site in the region, although such a design occurs at the central Victorian site of Garden Range-1, some 150 km south-west (Gunn 1983a: 201). Only a limited number of headdress shapes is illustrated at the Mudgegonga sites, and only one of these, the rayed 'headdress' at M2, is visually outstanding (Figure 5).

The large (but now difficult to see) 'kangaroo' motif at M2 (Figure 7) is paralleled by a similarly large and prominent 'thylacine' motif at the Yeddonba art site (formerly Mt Pilot-1) and a large 'pregnant' 'dingo' at Koetong Creek-1 (Figures 10 and 12). Despite the similarities of these singular large animals, the positioning and context of the three images is very different. The Mudgegonga solid-bodied 'kangaroo' is at the base of a profusely decorated panel (Figure 4), at Yeddonba the stripe-infilled 'thylacine' is a singular motif on the periphery of a very sparse motif arrangement dominated by a long, stylised 'snake' motif (Figure 10), while the 'dingo' at Koetong Creek is central to a group of distinctive 'human' figures (Figure 12). All panels, however, imply that a particular significance (such as totemic affiliation) was attributed to these animals.

| COMPLEX | SITE | TRACKS & SMALL GEOMETRICS | SMALL HUMAN FIGURES | OTHER |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| WOOLSHED | WS | | X | |
| ROCKY RIDGE | R1 | X | | |
| | R2 | X | | |
| | R3 | X | | |
| KOETONG | K1* | | | large 'humans', large 'dingo' |
| | K2 | X | | |
| MUDGEGONGA | M1 | | X | |
| | M2* | | | large bar-set, large geometrics, large 'kangaroo' |
| | M3 | X | | |
| | M4 | X | | |
| | M5 | | X | |
| MT PILOT | Y1* | | | long 'snake', large 'thylacine' |
| | Y2 | | X | |
| MT PORCUPINE | PP* | | | large hand-like designs |

* = major site

***Table 11.*** *Visually dominant motif types per site and complex.*

| MOTIF TYPES | SITE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K2 | PP | R3 | R1 | R2 | Y2 | M2 | M1 | K1 | M5 | M4 | Y1 | M3 | WS | |
| Dots | | | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | | | | | | | | 9 |
| 'Tracks' | 1 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 3 | | | | | | | 30 |
| Designs | | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 33 | | | 9 | 1 | 1 | | | 58 |
| Bars | | | 2 | | 2 | 27 | 5 | 2 | 2 | | | | | | 40 |
| Lines | | | | 1 | 1 | 22 | 31 | 6 | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | | 65 |
| 'Humans' | | | | 2 | 2 | 4 | 23 | 19 | 25 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 88 |
| 'Snakes' | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | | | 2 |
| 'Thylacine' | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| 'Emu' | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 'Kangaroo' | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| Other | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 'Dingo' | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 |
| **TOTAL** | **1** | **9** | **7** | **7** | **11** | **72** | **101** | **30** | **29** | **16** | **5** | **7** | **1** | **1** | **297** |

***Table 12.*** *Motif type numbers in north-east Victorian rock art sites (fragments excluded).*

Examination of the artwork suggests that sites tend to contain one of three groups of motifs:

- those dominated by tracks and small geometrics,
- those dominated by small human figures, and
- those not consistent with either of the above (Table 12).

Those sites dominated by 'tracks' and small geometrics tend to have lower motif numbers, while those dominated by human figures tend to have higher motif numbers. The four non-conforming sites each contain unique large motifs and have no consistency in motif numbers and hence their content is not seen to be a reflection of art quantity. With the exception of the M2 site, none of these latter sites are suitable for general occupation for more than one or two people due to their small overhangs, small floor areas or steep floors.

A ritual function has previously been proposed for the Yeddonba site (Gunn 1983b). On the basis of their markedly distinct yet different artwork and more isolated locations, it is proposed that each of these anomalous sites (Mt Porcupine, Koetong Creek-1, M2 [early phase] and Yeddonba) were local, small-scale, ritual centres. The nature of these rituals can only be guessed at but, from findings elsewhere in Australia, the revelation of local mythology to initiates is a most likely scenario (cf. Spencer and Gillen 1899; Elkin 1949; McCarthy and Macintosh 1962; Maddock 1970; Gunn 1992; Mulvaney 1996; Doring 2000; see also Clegg 1985; Merlan 1989 and Layton 1992 for broader discussions).

As with the M2 panel, the art at each of these other centres appears to be 'old'. It has been proposed that the painting of the 'thylacine' at Yeddonba, and hence the other similarly preserved motifs, are at least 3000 years old (Gunn 1983b; this report also presents an assessment of the 'thylacine' 'identification'). As the older red paintings at the Mudgegonga sites are in a similar state of preservation and also on stable surfaces, it is possible that these may be of similar antiquity. This age tends to be consistent with the sudden increase in the use of the M2 shelter at 3500 BP mentioned above. However, the large 'dingo' motif at Koetong Creek-1 is also of similar preservation to that at Mudgegonga and Yeddonba but, if this is a representation of a dingo as the tail suggests, this should be less than 3000 years old. To accommodate these two ages it is suggested

| MOTIF CLASS % | SITE | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K2 | PP | R3 | R1 | R2 | Y2 | M2 | M1 | K1 | M5 | M4 | YD | M3 | WS |
| 'TRACKS' | 100 | 67 | 43 | 29 | 36 | 13 | 2 | 10 | | | | | | |
| GEOMETRIC | | 33 | 57 | 43 | 45 | 81 | 74 | 27 | 56 | 43 | 40 | 10 | | |
| NATURALISTIC | | | | 29 | 18 | 7 | 25 | 63 | 44 | 57 | 60 | 90 | 100 | 100 |
| **n =** | **1** | **9** | **7** | **7** | **11** | **72** | **101** | **30** | **16** | **7** | **5** | **29** | **1** | **1** |

***Table 13.*** *North-east Victorian motif class percentages by site.*

| MOTIF CLASS % | SITE | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | K2 | PP | R3 | R1 | R2 | Y2 | M2 | M1 | K1 | M5 | M4 | YD | M3 | WS |
| Phase 4 | | | | | | | x | x | | | | | | |
| Phase 3 | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | |
| Phase 2 | | | | | | | x | | | | | | | |
| Phase 1a/b | x | X | x | x | x | X | X | x | X | x | x | X | x | x |
| **n =** | **1** | **9** | **7** | **7** | **11** | **72** | **101** | **30** | **16** | **7** | **5** | **29** | **1** | **1** |

X = high proportion, x = present

***Table 14.*** *North-east Victorian art phase representations by site.*

that the red phase 1b persisted over a period of time that saw several changes in the social landscape of north-eastern Victoria. The inclusion of the later phases 2–4 only at the M2 site suggests either that:

- while the function of M2 changed, that at the other regionally major sites did not; or alternatively
- the additional artwork at M2, beginning with phase 2 motifs, parallels the time when the other regionally major sites fell into disuse.

It is not possible at present to determine which of these possibilities occurred but, again, this should be able to be resolved with further detailed archaeological investigation.

The function of the smaller rock art sites in the region is seen as reflecting a time when the shelters were used during inclement weather. At such times paintings were probably produced in a more casual atmosphere to depict mythological or historical subjects being discussed at the time. Again, such discussion could be expected to focus on the more exceptional topics such as local mythology, ceremonies, particular exploits of people or groups (cf. Mountford 1976; Layton 1992; Gunn 1995; Mulvaney 1996).

The repertoire of north-east Victorian rock art overall consists of 58% geometrics, 32% 'naturalistic' forms and 10% 'tracks'. There is a reasonable similarity between the sites, with the art generally dominated by geometric motifs with smaller proportions of naturalistic and track types (Table 12). The smaller sites tend to contain either 'geometrics and tracks', or 'geometric and naturalistic' types. This suggests a dichotomy existed between tracks and naturalistic types that could result from either differences in function (when sites were used) or local themes (Mt Porcupine and Rocky ridge = 'tracks'; Mudgegonga, Yeddonba and Woolshed = 'humans').

The sites of north-east Victoria conform to one of Maynard's '*simple figurative styles*' (1976: 199–206) or Layton's (1992: 196) '*small silhouette*' types. While these motif-type proportions do not match the 70–90% crude-naturalistic figures and 3%–30% tracks proposed by Maynard, the overall impression of an anthropocentric-based art is clearly apparent. Also, the style of the 'human' figures (frontal, static and splayed, or simple profile), although with the notable exception of the large animated figures at Mt Pilot-2 (Figure 11), is readily consistent with Layton's 'generalised silhouettes' (1992: 198). Further, within a general pattern of similarity, the older red paintings in north-east Victoria contain a wider range of motif types than the more homogenous and more recent 'white-painting' period. This pattern of red heterogeneity moving to white homogeneity has also been observed in the Southern Tablelands of N.S.W. (K. Officer, pers. comm. 1997), and appears to be common


***Figure 11.*** *Mt Pilot-2 large human figures to the right of the main panel (tracing).*


***Figure 12.*** *Koetong Creek-1 art panel. Note the thin-bodied figures and the large, solid-bodied 'dingo' motif (drawn from photograph).*

throughout most of south-east Australia. This is of interest for elsewhere other researchers are currently emphasising the gross heterogeneity of recent Australian rock art (Maynard's 1979 '*simple figurative tradition*') as a trend consistent with 'intensification' in the late Holocene (Layton 1992; David and Chant 1995; and see Lourandos 1997). Whether or not the replacement of red pigment by white is a reflection of the impact of dislocation and disruption of the European invasion, or due to some other influences within traditional Aboriginal society, or simply a result of taphonomic processes, is not known. This compelling issue, however, cannot be developed further at this stage, as the significance of the white phase cannot be determined until it has been firmly dated.

Red paintings also represented the earliest surviving art form in the rock art of the N.S.W. Southern Tablelands (K. Officer, pers. comm. 1997). As the art of north-east Victoria shows numerous similarities to those of the Southern Tablelands, there appears to be an association between, and possibly a similar antiquity of, the two art suites. These studies suggest that the art of south-east N.S.W. is in fact unified and has many facets in common with the art of north-east Victoria, which in turn has many aspects in common with the rock art of western Victoria. The art of the Cobar region in central-western N.S.W. (McCarthy 1976; Gunn 1983c), while also containing some similarities to both north-east Victoria and south-east N.S.W., contains a much greater density of rock art. The region has many more sites per complex and motifs per site, a far broader range of types (in which apparently active rather than static human and animal figures are common) and lacks the pattern of superimpositioning of colours and techniques. Hence, in each of these areas there are pronounced local features that provide a distinctive regional and local character.

**Conclusion**

The rock art of north-east Victoria consists of an early phase of small red paintings with a core of 'simple human figures' within a broader suite of 'geometric elements and simple designs'. The phase also includes a small number of large and imposing figures at select sites across the region. At some later period red painting was replaced by charcoal drawings, and then again by paintings in white and yellow. These different phases, however, used a similar array of small motif types. The art is largely homogeneous across the region but with the greatest quantity of artwork occurring within the Mudgegonga complex in the centre of the region. Rock art production in the region appears to have declined after a peak early phase, though whether or not the use of the sites themselves was in decline prior to the European invasion is unknown. The art was found to have parallels to other sites in inland south-east New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Overall the art appears to represent a further local variation of Maynard's 'simple figurative tradition' of the late Holocene.

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