Classification of a newly discovered "Floating" figure into the Time-line of Australian Bradshaw Rock Art.

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Fig. 1. Floating Bradshaw from Abstract Classic Period: Found almost completely hidden by foliage and shadows of a tree in front and completely inaccessible on a suspended rock wall 10m above a tributary of the Roe R., not far from location of the original mural published by J. Bradshaw.
The striking depiction (Fig. 1) was almost completely hidden because of its inaccessible location, 10 m above the ground on a suspended panel obscured by a tree. The tree was growing on a promontory that permitted a view of the depiction across a chasm of 2-3 m, but not direct access. The artist(s) must have built a frame on a rock cliff to carry out the painting. While there are examples of floating rock art depictions that have been interpreted as real swimming, such as those described by Laslo Almasy at Gelf Kebir, the details of headdress, clothes and accoutrements, as well as the acute ascending angle of pose, are not consistent with such an interpretation in this case. Instead, we think that it is self-evident that the artist has depicted an abstract image, related to out-of-body experience in trance. This interpretation is consistent with detailed documentation of similar trance visualisations in San rock art (Lewis-Williams, 2011) and in 17 similar examples of floating images in around 686 examples of Bradshaw rock art (L.Scott-Virtue). The main depiction is also accompanied by a miniature in the same style and colouring, which we interpret as a case of micropsia, that commonly accompanies examples of trance visualisations in Bradshaw rock art (Pettigrew 2010).

Direct physical dates based on both the available radioisotopic methods fail for Bradshaw art: 1. Radiocarbon estimates fail because this art contains organic material which is still taking up atmospheric C14 (Pettigrew et al. 2010). 2. U-series dating has also been unable to provide dates from mineral skins over Bradshaw art in contrast to success in estimating the age of Palaeolithic art in the limestone caves of Europe (Pike et al 2013) and Sulawesi (Aubert et al. 2014), where a calcite skin over the art has favourable chemistry for U-series estimations. In contrast, Bradshaw art is always on quartzite so that mineral skins are rare, and generally have chemistry that is inimical to radio-uranium dating.

Apart from the present lack of isotopic data, a pervasive problem with dating of Bradshaw art is the wide sweep of possible styles that lead to uncertainty about a particular sample chosen from anywhere within a possible 10-70 Ka range, without a knowledge of the temporal sequence. We have addressed this problem using superposition study of hundreds of overlapping depictions that have enabled us to assemble a time line, or sequence of styles (Fig. 2). These have then been constrained
by biological inferences: a. from thermoluminescence of quartz grains in wasp nests (Roberts et al. 1997); b. from extinct megafauna (Akerman and Willing 2009); c. from phylogenetic reconstruction of DNA sequence of fungi in the biofilm (Pettigrew 2014); d. from DNA sequence reconstructions of baobabs that were probably transported from Africa to Australia by the Bradshaw culture (Pettigrew and Vickers 2014).

These constrain the Floating figure to the archaic, Abstract, phase of the Classic epoch, at ~50-60 ka, surprising antiquity given its clarity, but consistent with a replicating biofilm and geochemical processes.

Fig. 2: Bradshaw Time Line, based on superposition studies by L. Scott-Virtue (in prep.): Tentative indirect dates are linked to the progression of styles using inference from four different biological studies:
Realistic Classic Style: Recently discovered; rare; narrow NW distribution; striking muscle definition, simple headdresses, gender differentiation.
Abstract Classic Style: Often identified as “Tassel Bradshaws”, these prototypical Bradshaws often have abstract alterations such as hindlimb attenuation, floating, micropsia, lines of light, etc.
Boabs: molecular genetics show that arrival was 72 Ka, likely transported from Africa by the Bradshaw culture. Biofilm genetics: limited by lack of present knowledge of the mutation rate of the black fungus in the art, phylogenetic reconstructions indicate that the fungus has been in the art for 30-70 ka (Pettigrew 2014). Megafauna Extinction: Thylacoleo and Palorchestes are depicted, live, in art which must therefore therefore be at least 46.5 ka., based on Roberts' use of interior samples from teeth to avoid contamination of bone crevices by recent material. (Roberts et al 2001).

Note: Mike Donaldson and Maurice O’Connor discovered the figure around the same time: see p.68, Donaldson (2013).

References:


Pettigrew JD 2014 Through a glass darkly: Inferring the Palaeolithic mind. ASSC18

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