

PAINTED ABORIGINAL ROCK SHELTER ON MOUNT PORCUPINE, NE. VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Aboriginal painted figures and their rock shelter environment on Mt Porcupine, NE. Victoria, are described. The site is the fourth so far discovered in this area of the State. Generally the figures conform in style with Aboriginal paintings in the Grampians area of Victoria and with those in W. New South Wales. Two painted hand silhouettes about twice life size are probably unique in Australia.

Introduction

In 1968 Mr T. Boyce of Wodonga reported to the National Museum of Victoria the existence of a rock shelter containing Aboriginal paintings which had been known to him for a number of years. The site, on Mt Porcupine near Thologolong Station in the Upper Murray Valley, was investigated and recorded by the author and D. A. Casey, Honorary Associate in Anthropology at the National Museum of Victoria.

Location

Mt Porcupine consists of granite and, as the name suggests, is somewhat hump-shaped in outline. Its N. spur is skirted by the Murray Valley Highway about 60 miles (96.5 km) E. of Wodonga. Looking due W. from the 61 mile (98.1 km) post the shelter is clearly visible as a horizontal ledge of rock rather more than halfway up the spur. It is 121 m above the level of the road and commands a magnificent view to the east along the river valley. The land to the east, at the foot of the mountain, has been cleared and is used for grazing but the mountain itself is thickly timbered with a variety of eucalypts and Prickly Tea Tree (*L. juniperium*). There are also occasional Casuarinas and a scattering of Red Cypress Pines (*C. endlicheri*). The trees are 'scrubby' and shallow-rooted on account of the steepness of the hillside and the rocky shallow soil.

Rock Outcrop and Shelter

The rock shelter is part of a massive outcrop of fine-grained granite. An almost vertical rock face runs for 67 m in a N-S. direction and rises to a maximum height of 11 m. The more or less flat top of the outcrop disappears into the slope of the hill about 11 m back from the vertical face.

Falls of rock from the face of the outcrop created the shelter. Overhanging rock now provides protection over an area 17 m by 1.5 to 5 m, although what may be called the shelter proper is only 11 m in width by an average of 2.4 m in depth. The floor is a partly moss-covered ledge of rock which slopes towards the front of the shelter. It carries no occupation deposit and there is no other evidence of human occupation. At the S. end a huge slice of fallen rock forms a wall which leads for some distance into a funnel-shaped cavity in the outcrop. The back (W.) wall of the shelter on which most of the paintings appear rises almost vertically

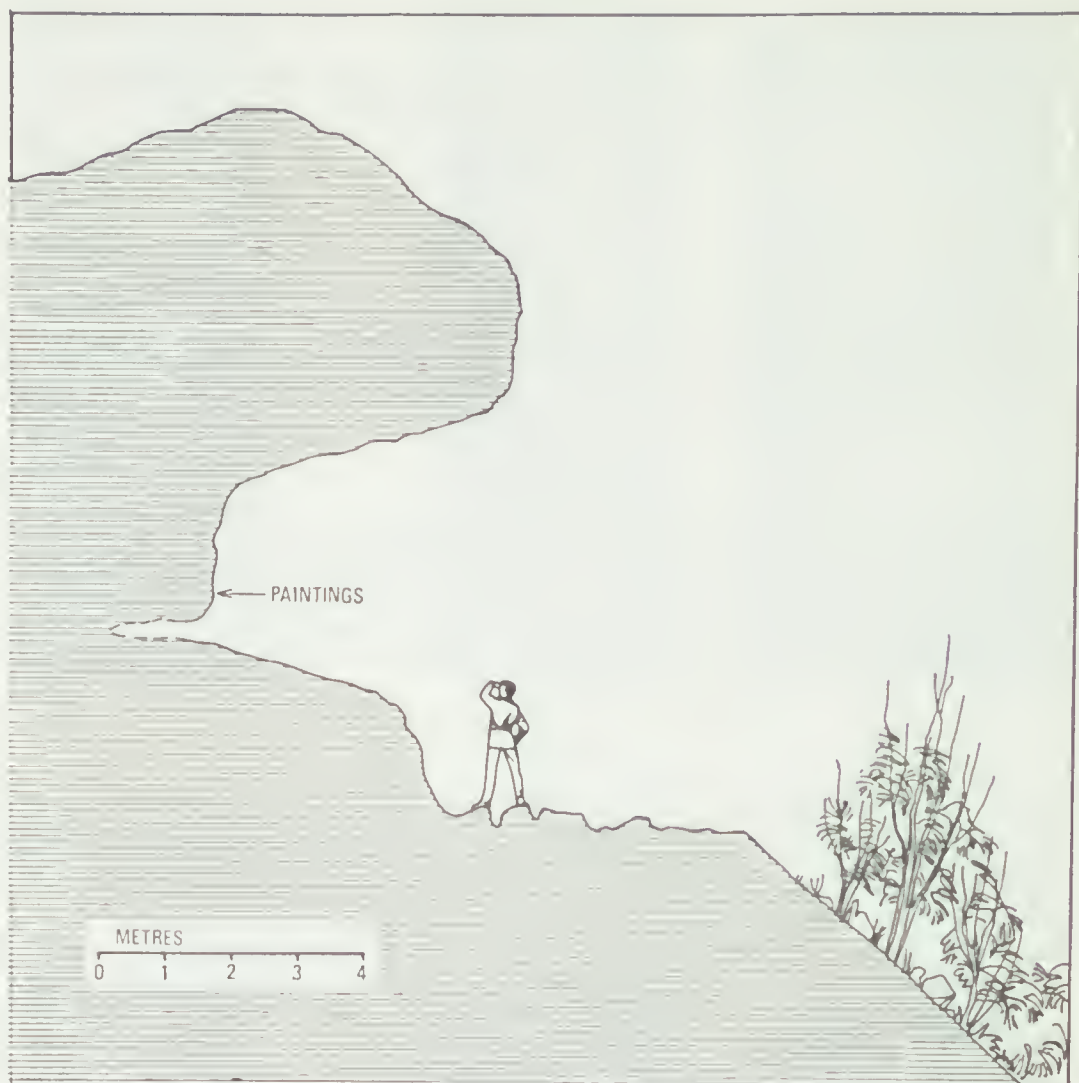


FIG. 1. Profile of Aboriginal painted rock shelter, Mt. Porcupine, Victoria.

for 3.9 m but then arches overhead and becomes vertical again. Where water runs down this elevated and exposed perpendicular face there is a blackish stain which contrasts sharply with the buff-coloured protected rock beneath. Swallows and wasps have availed themselves of this shelter, scores of mud nests being attached to the ceiling.

Painted Figures

The paintings (Fig. 2 and Plate 5) are on the most protected inner wall of the shelter. The rock is grey to pinkish-grey and has a smooth texture suitable for painting. There are nine figures on the wall scattered over an area 4 m by 1½ m. They are all in red ochre and vary considerably in density and clarity. All of the

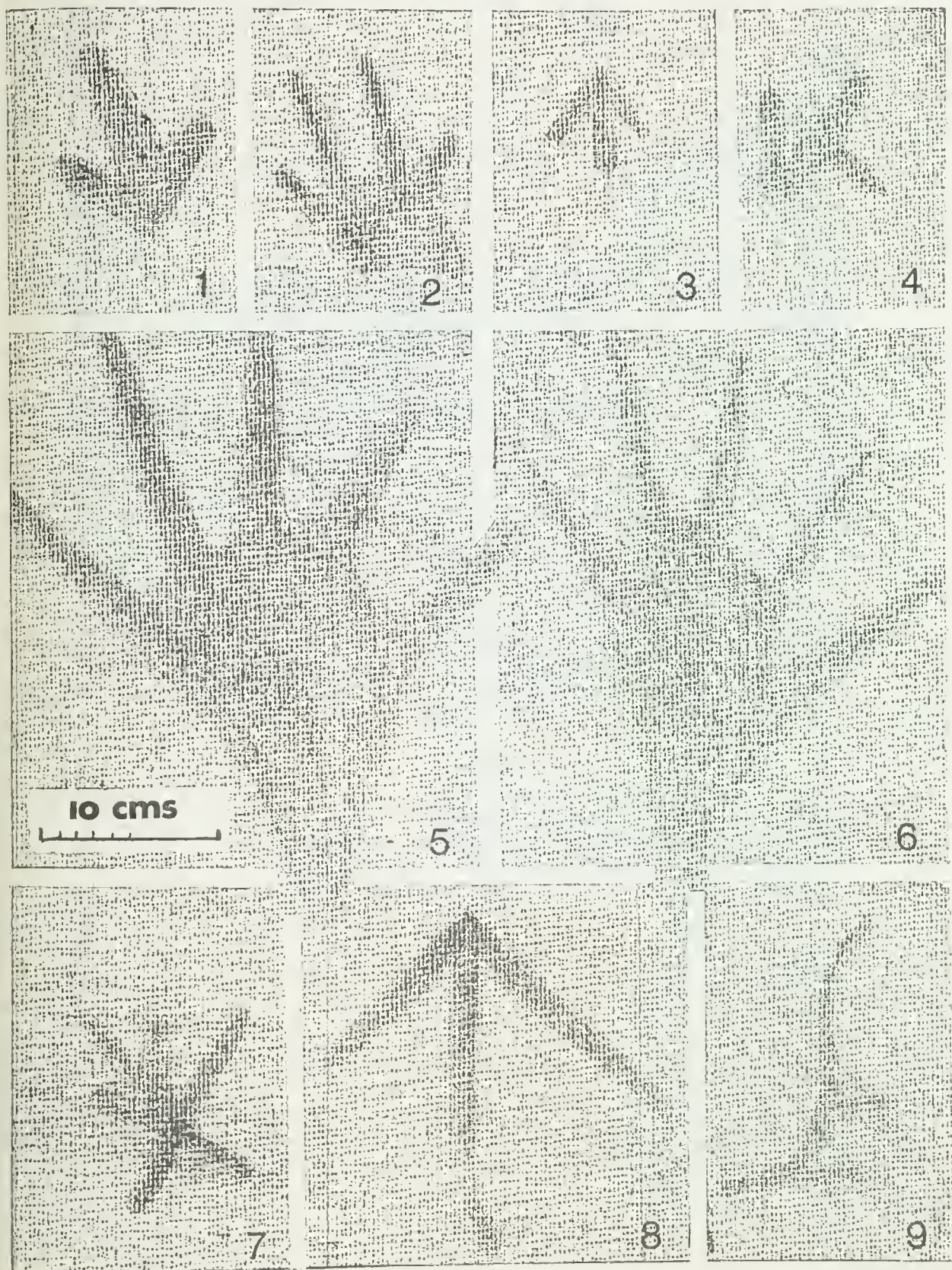


FIG. 2.

figures could have been painted comfortably from a squatting or standing position.

S. of the shelter on the almost vertical rock face there are three other painted areas. At these places the figures are linear marks ranging from 5 to 12.7 cm in length and from 0.6 to 1.3 cm in thickness. They are very faded because of the exposed position. Two strokes 1.8 m above ground level can be seen 11.2 m S. of the shelter. There is a single line 0.9 m above ground level 17.3 m further S. while 0.7 m further S. again there are four 'tally' marks 0.6 m above the ground.

Of the figures within the shelter, No. 1 is a well-drawn and clear representation of an emu's footprint. A few centimetres below and to the left (S.) there is a similar but more faded 'footprint' which has had two lines in the form of a cross superimposed on it. The superimposed lines are denser in colour than the 'footprint'. No. 4 may also represent an emu's footprint but is so faded as to make any interpretation difficult. The most striking figures are Nos. 5 and 6 which are large paintings of a pair of human hands. These are well drawn with the thumbs adjacent to each other as if the palms were being pressed against the granite. At their bases the red ochre blends with the pinkish orthoclase mineral in the rock but there is sufficient clarity to enable the viewer to see that each base tapers to a 'V'. A third figure which may represent a smaller painted hand is No. 2 but any interpretation must be tentative. No. 9 is an indeterminate 'S' shaped figure. The remaining shapes (Nos. 3 and 8) are large and small 'arrow heads' or 'bird footprints'. These may, in fact, represent bird prints and similar figures in the Mudgegonga rock shelter near Myrtleford, NE. Victoria, have been so interpreted (Massola 1966) but one cannot be sure. A number of the white ochred 'bird prints' at Mudgegonga have rudimentary 'heads' and may be stylized paintings of human figures. Although the two 'bird prints' in the Mt Porcupine shelter do not have 'heads' they are oriented similarly ('arrow points' upwards) to the Mudgegonga figures which I suggest may represent humans. Further they are in reverse orientation to the unmistakable 'emu prints' at Mt Porcupine. This inconsistency in orientation would be of little significance if some kind of composition could be detected. With the possible exception of the two hand silhouettes which may have been painted in relationship to each other, there is no apparent composition. But if Nos. 3 and 8 are stylized human figures the absence of a forking in the vertical central line to represent legs is somewhat unusual.

Discussion

The painted shelter on Mt Porcupine is the fourth so far reported in NE. Victoria. Tugby (1953) and later Mitchell (1954) published accounts of the same site in the Conic Range near Darbyshire, and Massola (1960, 1966) wrote of one near Beechworth and another near Mudgegonga.

With the exception of the Beechworth shelter in which there are two large outline figures, the art style in the four reported sites is similar. The motifs are either linear paintings ('bird prints', human stick figures, indeterminate geometries) or silhouettes ('hands', 'human figures' and a 'wallaby' or 'kangaroo'). Generally the figures are small, and resemble in style the Aboriginal paintings in the Grampians of W. Victoria and in W. New South Wales.

The large 'hand' paintings at Mt Porcupine which are about twice life size seem to reveal an element of composition. The 'hands' may have been drawn in relation to each other. They are side by side with a distance of 2 cm separating the two thumbs. Human hand motifs in Aboriginal art are common but they usually appear as negative stencils as for instance in the so-called Cave of Hands in the Grampians. Such stencils are produced by holding the hand against the rock and blowing pigment from the mouth onto and around it. Less frequently,

positive impressions are made by pressing a freshly ochred hand onto the rock surface. There are no examples of this in Victoria. Giant painted hand silhouettes such as Nos. 5 and 6 do not, to my knowledge, occur anywhere else in Australia.

Acknowledgements

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Explanation of Plate 5

Upper—Painting of an emu's footprint, Mt Porcupine rock shelter.

Lower—Painting of a human hand, same site.

