Pundawar Manbur

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The art sequence of a major Kwini rock art site in the Kimberley, northern Australia

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Augustine Unghangho, Senior Traditional Owner of Pundawar Manbur, at the site in 2023.
(Photograph by Mark Jones, Copyright Balanggarra Aboriginal Corporation).

Ian Waina, Delegated Traditional Owner, who oversaw fieldwork at Pundawar Manbur.
Photograph courtesy of Sven Ouzman, 2017.

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Cover: The *manbur* (kangaroo) motif from Pundawar Manbur. (Photograph by Robert Gunn).

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Chapter 1
Introduction

PUNDAWAR MANBUR ROCK SHELTER

Pundawar Manbur is one of the largest painted rock shelters in the Drysdale River valley of the Kimberley, Western Australia. It contains more than 600 rock paintings, engravings and other rock markings and a complex series of overlapping styles of rock art. It is a cultural jewel of Kwini Country, within the lands of the Balanggarra Native Title determination. This monograph presents the first detailed recording and analysis of the site and its art.

Like many Kimberley rock art sites, Pundawar Manbur is not simply an occupation site as conventionally defined. While it has a generous overhang that provides shelter, the floor is covered with large slabs of outwardly slanting rock that fell from the ceiling as part of the shelter formation process. These slabs provide comfortable and shaded seating, but seem to make the shelter unsuitable as a sleeping place. Whether there are deep stratified occupational deposits underneath these slanting surface slabs is presently unknown, but it is clear that some kind of archaeological deposit is present beneath, as evident from the fine sediments on the floor in the narrow gap between the back wall and inner edges of the fallen slabs. As we explore in more detail in Chapter 4, for at least the past *c*. 12,000 years and possibly considerably longer – as determined by confirmed radiocarbon ages for some (yet not the oldest) of the rock art styles found at the site (Finch *et al*. 2020, 2021) – the basic material structure of the site, its overhang and boulder-strewn floor, seems not to have changed to any great extent over long periods of time.

While in an area considered extremely remote for researchers today, for local people in the past the site would have been relatively accessible, just a short scramble up a steep slope from an open valley. It is, and probably always was, clearly visible from the flat valley floor slightly below. Today, the valley contains a seasonal stream that fills during the wetter months and that feeds into Planigale Creek onto the Drysdale River some 4km downstream. Perhaps during wetter climatic phases, such as between c. 10,000–5000 years ago (e.g. Field *et al*. 2017), this stream would have flowed more frequently, but today the small valley probably remains much as it would have appeared for most or all of the period that people knew the rock shelter.

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL VIEW

Pundawar Manbur is the type of site that rock art researchers love: a huge panorama of rock art spread out along a nice, clean vertical rock shelter wall. There are ample contemplation, photography and note-taking spaces directly in front of the panel, and these are nicely raised to allow close observation and meticulous recording of the art. There are many aspects of the rock art here that make it interesting for research: the condition of the art is broadly excellent and there is a large range of painting styles and techniques present, including styles from all the major identified periods within the Kimberley art sequence. There are many figures in superposition, and many also in carefully targeted patterns of superimposition (Gunn *et al*. 2022; see Chapter 3), making for a rich story of sequential engagements potentially going back many thousands of years. There is much figurative art, including images from the earliest purported phase of Kimberley art, the Irregular Infill Animal Period, but there are also stencils and other markings. There is evidence of additive reuse – some of the figures have been repainted. There is also fascinating evidence of subtractive reuse, some of the images showing signs of having been 'battered' and/or scratched, that is, directly engaged with subsequent to their painting. In Chapters 5 to 25, we explore these curious details. But, this monograph is not only about the rock art; it is a monograph about a special Kwini *place*.

For the majority of archaeologists who do not specialise in rock art, the site would be of limited interest. It would probably be deemed to have 'low archaeological potential' – meaning that it has minimal excavation potential – and they would stop, take some catchy photographs and then walk on by, looking for a site with greater excavation potential. Pundawar Manbur would risk consignment to a footnote in a field journal, or be just a pretty picture in a book about another site or on the regional archaeology. This other site, one with deep stratified occupational deposits, would then capture and arouse archaeological interests. This other site would receive months, if not years, of scientific attention and through subsequent publication would become famous and would dominate the archaeological narrative of this landscape. Our monograph is unusual in Australian archaeology because it does not focus on an excavated site; it focuses solely on Pundawar Manbur and gives it the attention it deserves. In this sense it is more akin to the long-standing monographic tradition of French rock art sites, with their detailed illustrated inventories and expositions of the structure of the art in their landscape settings (e.g. Lorblanchet 2010).

The Rock Art Monograph

In Europe, French and Spanish caves containing rock art have long been considered of sufficient significance to warrant their own dedicated monographs (e.g. Capitan *et al.* 1910, 1924; Cartailhac and Breuil 1906; Fritz *et al.* 2009; Lorblanchet 2001, along with many others). Australia has not had the same tradition, even though Australian rock art is no less significant, with the notable exception being with the major input of a French archaeologist (Coutts and Lorblanchet 1982). Detailed recordings of Australian First Peoples' (Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders) rock art sites mostly exist as unpublished, and occasionally restricted, reports or theses (e.g. Gunn *et al.* 1997; McDonald 1997; Officer 1991; Rosenfeld 1990). While no recording can ever be 'complete' or fulfill the objectives of all later researchers (cf. Rosenfeld 1977), few published records of Australian rock art sites have attempted to present illustrations and analysis of every visible rock art image within a site. Most published records are in black and white, and they rarely identify all images and place them in a chronological sequence, as is presented here (e.g. Coutts and Lorblanchet 1982; Gunn 1981, 1983, 2006a; Macintosh 1951, 1952; McCarthy 1976, 1983; Morwood 1978; Rosenfeld and Smith 2002; Sim 1969). In recent years, with the greater use of colour illustrations, published recordings have become steadily more comprehensive (e.g. Brady 2010; Roberts *et al.* 2024). The recordings from individual sites, however, have generally been published within wider thematic analyses or regional studies, a major direction being the recording of rock art jointly with Aboriginal Traditional Owners (Cole *et al.* 2024; McDonald 2020; McDonald and Veth 2012; McDonald *et al.* 2018; Roberts *et al.* 2014; li-Yanyuwa [Yanyuwa Elders] *et al.* 2023). Unlike thematic recordings, site monographs focus on a singular place that was of specific value to people who used or continue to use the place. The only comparable Australian example to our archaeologically data-rich recording of Pundawar Manbur, is that of the Jawoyn site of Nawarla Gabarnmang in Arnhem Land, some 600km to the east (Gunn 2018). Utilising similar techniques to those employed here, the Nawarla Gabarnmang site monograph illustrated and analysed 1391 rock art motifs from multiple layers on 41 separate art panels within the shelter.

In Australia, the value of detailed recordings for site management, Aboriginal community archives and research, is generally acknowledged (McCarthy 1972; Edwards 1975; Flood *et al.* 1989; Gale and Jacobs 1987; Rosenfeld *et al.* 1984), but the fundamental rationale for recording is seldom identified (Pearson and Sullivan 1999; Rosenfeld 1977). According to the Victorian Government's First Peoples – State Relations (2024), the recording of rock art is important for three reasons:

1. Rock art is one of the few traces of pre-colonial Aboriginal society that does not directly relate to the society's economic needs.
2. It gives a valuable glimpse of the aesthetics, psychology and spirituality of the artists and their cultures.
3. Rock art places are particularly valuable as important links with the Old Ancestors and their ancestral practices for descendent communities today.

In some instances, at the instruction of communities or at the request of management authorities, site recordings remain intentionally unpublished in order to protect culturally restricted information or to conceal the site for conservation management reasons. For some, and possibly many sites, however, detailed recordings have been allowed to be published by local First Nations communities and their representative organisations. Such recordings can then make primary data available for future community, management and research purposes.

It is therefore curious that there are so few examples of rock art monographs in Australia and, conversely, so many in Europe. The difference is perhaps in the number of sites. Whereas around 400 caves contain rock art in Europe, more than 100,000 rock shelters and open sites contain rock art in Australia (Taçon 2016: 245). Clearly, it would not be feasible for each Australian rock art site to be given its own monograph in a timely manner, but we imagine a series where a representative sample of larger sites, or groups of sites, from all the major art regions in Australia are afforded this treatment. We hope to set such an agenda of detailed published rock art recordings of individual sites with Pundawar Manbur. The reason is that it is only with such detailed recordings that the specific key features of the rock art, and their patterns of superposition, that evidence-based spatial and chronological patterns can emerge using formal methods and, where cultural knowledge for individual sites and regions is at hand from First Nations communities, that such patterning in informed knowledge can also be worked out relative to image formal details (as the latter can be directly archaeologically investigated).

We follow the format of European rock art monographs, introducing the site and its context and then working systematically, left to right facing the wall, through the various panels of rock art images at the site. The chapters in Part A detail sections of the large, complex 'Art Panel A', while the chapters in Part B systematically consider the surrounding art, panel by panel. We describe and illustrate each, before considering the multiple layers or clusters of superpositions within Part C. We analyse and interpret each layer, so as to produce an overall stylistic sequence for the rock art at Pundawar Manbur. We use the latest approaches to panel recording and art sequencing and we report on a systematic attempt to place the stylistic sequence within a chronological framework using a combination of absolute and relative dating techniques. A major aim is to make this information available for research now and into the future, and to set the first detailed site-scale study to test the established and widely accepted relative chronology for Kimberley rock art (see Chapter 2).