

ANCIENT ART GALLERIES

on the Central Coast

Rock art is the oldest surviving human art form, and Aboriginal tools used in making petroglyphs (rock engravings) have been dated from 50,000 years ago. In our region, rock engravings are much more prolific than rock paintings, no doubt because they endure longer than charcoal, gypsum clay and ochre art in our climate.





A European interpretation of this engraving of Bulgandry man is of a man wearing a head-dress and holding a boomerang in his left hand. At his waist he carries a woomera (spear thrower). However the Darkinjung people know this motif as the story of Baiami, the creator. His extended arms reach for the sun. From his head come the sun's rays. In his right hand he holds the moon, in his left the morning star. His belt is symbolic of the umbilical cord that connects a mother to her child, as well as symbolising the connection between the spiritual and the physical worlds.

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PREVIOUS PAGE Daramulum (first eagle) is associated with Baiame the creator and his emu-wife. Indentations around him may represent star groups. The motif represents Baiame on earth during ceremonies and his raised arm is a dance pose.

BELOW Mundoes are the footprints that Baiami, the creator made and show where he walked. The five-toed footprints represent 'man'. A three-toed emu style footprint represents 'woman' and would indicate that the area is a woman's site.



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There are more Aboriginal heritage sites around the Central Coast than most of us could guess, particularly in our national parks and state forests. In fact, the region has one of the highest densities of Aboriginal art sites in the Sydney basin, and they include rock and cave art, marriage ceremony sites, espaliering of branches to signpost women's sites, tree carvings, stone arrangements, birthing sites, middens and axe-grinding sites.

The engravings by the original inhabitants of the Central Coast – the Darkinjung people, as well as the Awaba people to the north – depict wildlife, human figures and *mundoes* (human footprints) but can also contain images of sacred spiritual beings and ancestral heroes. In the southern end of the region, there is one mystical, human-like figure with multiple bulbous 'heads' that is one of only four such recorded figures in the entire greater Sydney basin.

Telling stories

Rock art is the 'literature' of Aboriginal culture, passing on stories of ancestors and connections to places where people gathered, and where traditions and law were handed down. The art can also convey practical information on fishing and hunting sites. Many engraving sites are found on exposed rock platforms, often overlooking valleys or waterways, and with motifs that point in the direction of another site. Axe grinding grooves are usually found close to a water source, such as at the top of a waterfall, where the water was necessary to cool the heat generated by the friction of rubbing stone-on-stone.

Locations

There are only a couple of signposted sites in our region – notably Bulgandry Aboriginal Place in Kariong (a communal gathering site) and the Mooney Mooney Aboriginal Place. The State Government has declared a number of additional sites of special significance as official ‘Aboriginal Places’: Warre Warren Aboriginal Place (a communal site in McPherson State Forest), Howe Aboriginal Place (a ceremonial site at Somersby), Calga Aboriginal Place (at Peats Ridge), and Mt Yengo Aboriginal Place (a communal site in Yengo National Park).

Although bushwalkers readily come across Aboriginal heritage sites, we have intentionally not provided other specific locations to avoid them being ‘loved to death’. A few very special and culturally significant sites also remain off limits or accessible only with an Aboriginal guide.

The natural effect of weathering has worn away engravings, but even more damage is done from foot traffic as people walk over the carvings without thinking of the harm they do. Mountain bikes and heavy machinery have also critically damaged sandstone engravings. ▶▶

RIGHT An anthropomorphic man, one of only four similar engravings in the greater Sydney basin. He wears a multi-headed, bulbous head-dress. He is a spirit figure that interacted with Aboriginal ancestors to become shape-shifters and different creatures of the land.

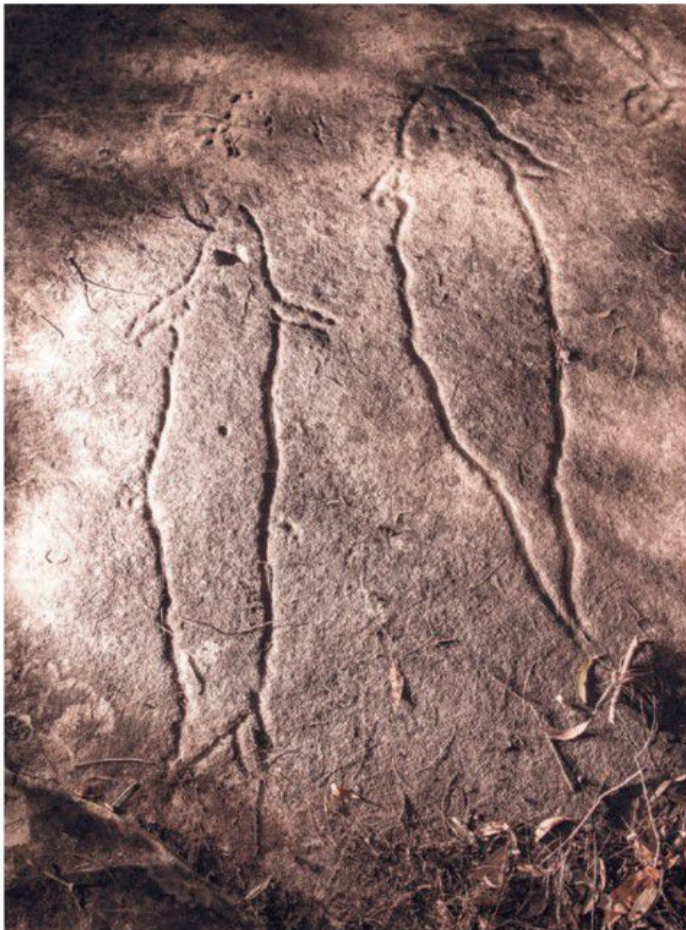
BOTTOM RIGHT Woman and kangaroo. The woman’s raised arms are a sign for men to go no further for beyond this point is a women’s site.

BELOW Eel and fish, probably a flathead.

You would never walk on top of ancient artefacts in a museum so please respect the engravings for future generations. Sadly, archaeologists estimate that by 2060, without a greater respect for rock engravings, there will be little or nothing remaining visible in the natural environment of the engravings that we may take for granted today.



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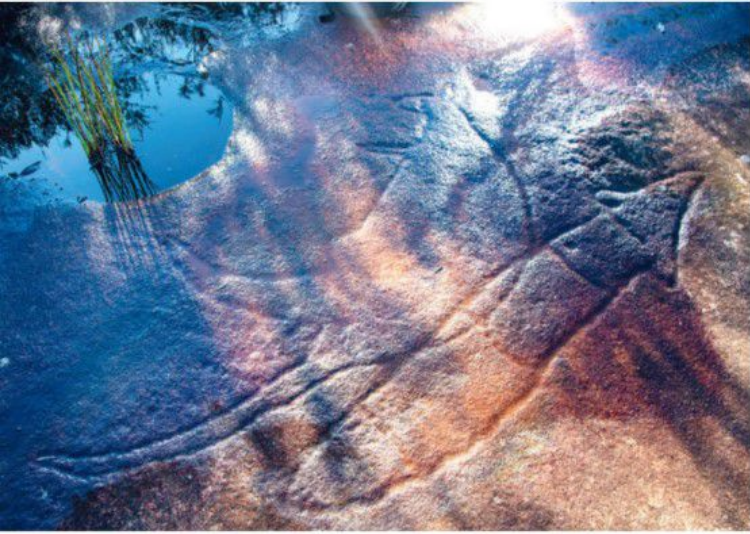
The artistic process

Engravings were often started with a series of pittings in the rock that were then connected by grooving lines between the pits to form motifs. If you look closely, those pitted markings are still visible and can indicate authentic Aboriginal engravings. Sharp, narrow and more angular lines are more likely to indicate fake engravings made with modern tools. (And don't be fooled by thin stripes on an older engraving of a dingo to make it into a Tasmanian Tiger!) ▶▶



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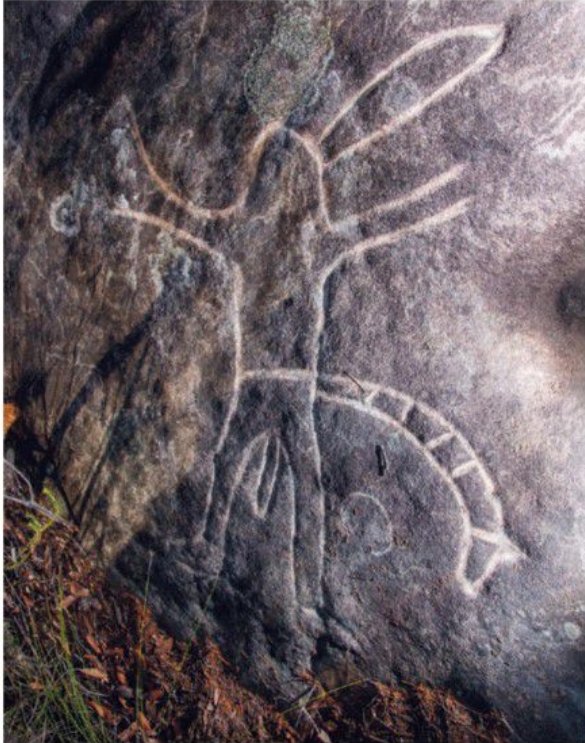
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Kangaroo and eel; The Rainbow Serpent representing creation; A marine creature, possibly a wobbegong; A man with head-dress, anklets, and a ceremonial belt of life. At waist level is possibly a large eel. The outstretched arms signify the man is part of an initiation ceremony.

Motifs

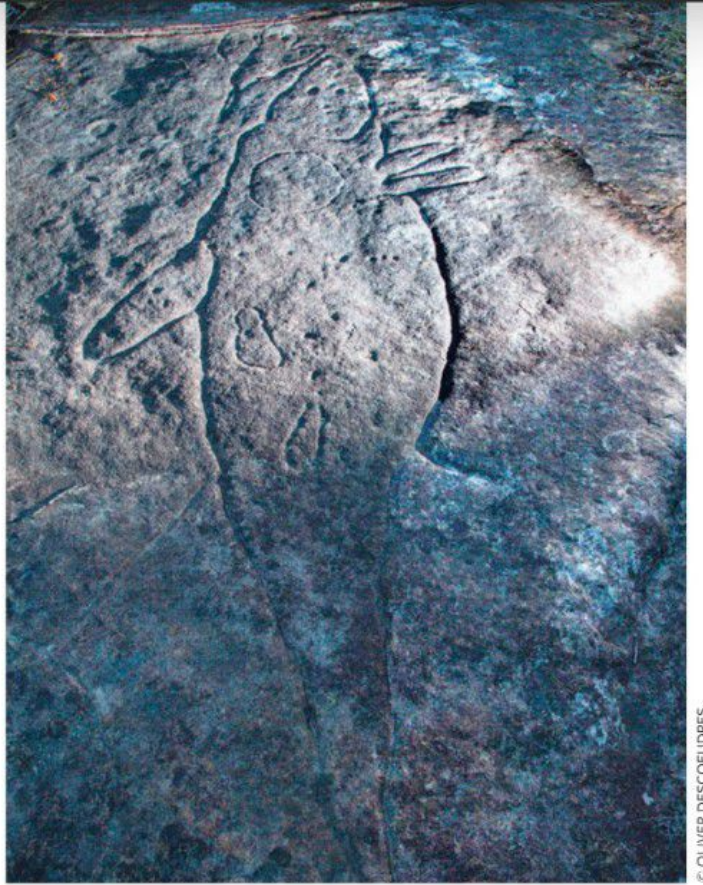
Animal motifs often represented the type of food that could be hunted in a particular area, or they depicted local totems. Interestingly, animals are often depicted in profile, whereas humans are usually shown face on. Some human forms have eyes, others don't, which may indicate whether they are shown from the front or back. Some depict half-animal, half-human forms representing the spiritual links between man and nature. The size of a motif is usually indicative of its importance at a site.

Engravings of whales, dolphins, sharks, stingrays and fish are common close to beaches, bays and estuaries, and are often shown in amazing detail with dorsal and pectoral fins, and body markings that identify the species. Among the whales, we would expect to see humpbacks but orcas were also often depicted. Dots adjacent to a fish may represent a clutch of eggs.

Some patterns are thought to resemble the southern sky at night with stars and formations significant in Aboriginal culture. The motifs depicted are important evidence of traditional culture and a past way of life and could be hundreds, even thousands, of years old.

The content of this article has been written in collaboration with and approved by the Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council.

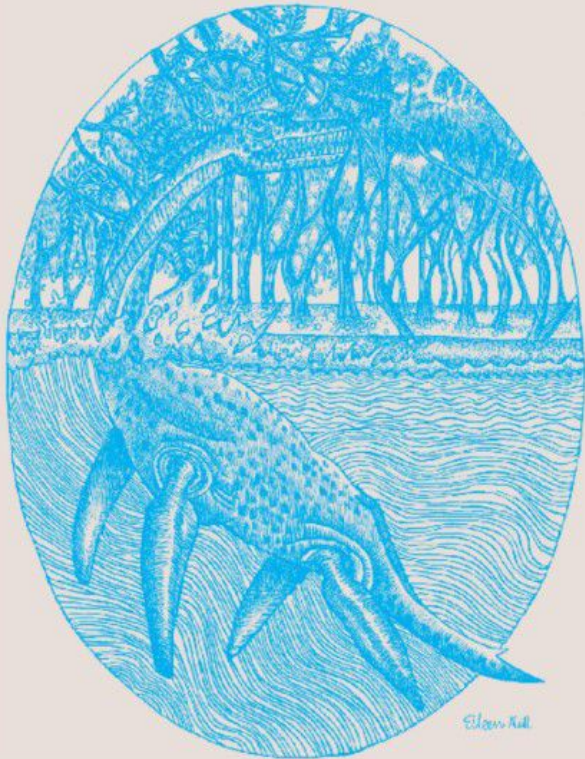
Note, some photographs have been enhanced to better show the motifs depicted.



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ABOVE A large fish with footprints on its body that come from the spirit of the animal indicating its spiritual connection to humans.

THE MOOLYEWONK OR HAWKESBURY RIVER MONSTER



Aboriginal rock engravings around 4,000 years old beside the Hawkesbury River (Deerubbin or Dyarubbin), depict a long-necked, four-flipped creature with a long tail that is thought to be an egg-laying plesiosaur – supposedly extinct 65 million years ago. European settlers in the 1880s were told of Aboriginal women and children being attacked by a giant serpent called a Moolyewonk, ‘a monster that lives in the water’. The most visible engravings of one are on a cliff at Wisemans Ferry and on sandstone cliffs in Woy Woy.

Stories are also told around Freemans Waterhole, west of Lake Macquarie (Lake Awaba), where the creature is known as a Rainbow Snake that killed Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal art depicted the creature at about seven metres in length but the plesiosaur could grow up to 24 metres. They were slow swimmers that inhabited the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean and tended to swim just below the surface. Fossils have been found in Queensland and South Australia, with possible sightings as far away as Loch Ness!

Around the Hawkesbury, there have been ‘sightings’ of the creature by anglers in 1945, by bush walkers in 1979 and, in the 1980s, there were tales of fishing boats being mysteriously overturned. The most recent sighting was in 2000. Slide marks have also been found on the riverbanks across the decades where the creature was thought to have exited or entered the water.

People who have made a study of the Moolyewonk are convinced they still exist.