

# SHORT REPORTS

## An archaic face from the Woodstock Abydos Protected Reserve, northwestern Western Australia

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### Abstract

This paper discusses an archaic face motif recently recorded from the inland Pilbara region of northwestern Australia. Although these motifs are well-known from other parts of arid and semi-arid Australia, very few have been previously reported from the inland Pilbara. Located at the Lukis Granites site in the Woodstock Abydos Protected Reserve (WAPR), the archaic face forms one small part of a much larger cultural complex. Using one of Mulvaney's (2010) four classes of archaic faces recently identified from the Dampier Archipelago – the 'Concentric' style face – this find reinforces suggestions of a stylistic link between the Dampier, inland Pilbara and the Durba Hills (near the Canning Stock Route) areas. Building on recent observations of other shared graphic styles we highlight the potential of the inland Pilbara, and more specifically the WAPR, to contribute to our understanding of social networks and interregional interaction in both the Pilbara and further afield. We conclude by highlighting the importance of this motif in the context of arguing for better protection of the WAPR archaeological landscape.

### Introduction

The Woodstock Abydos Protected Reserve (WAPR) in the inland Pilbara, Western Australia, is well-known as an extremely rich archaeological landscape, with a highly visible and stylistically distinctive suite of engravings. Despite archaeological sites from the WAPR being visited and recorded on numerous occasions since the 1930s (e.g. Fox 1939; McSwain 1986:54; Petri and Schulz 1951; Wright 1968a), knowledge about the rock art from this region remains fragmentary. Until now, most researchers have focused their attention on the distinctive and culturally-sensitive 'Woodstock' figures (e.g. Bednarik 2002; Maynard 1979; McNickle 1985; Mountford 1965; Worms 1954; Wright 1968a) with little focus on other components of the WAPR rock art assemblage.

Working in collaboration with the Palyku Native Title Working Group (traditional owners of the southern portion of the WAPR), a new phase of archaeological research into the cultural history of the region began in 2010. Initial projects are aimed at small-scale rock art recording ventures in an attempt to explore stylistic patterning across space. This paper focuses on the June 2011 recording of the first engraved archaic face motif from the WAPR at the Lukis Granites site. Building on recent analyses and discussion about these distinctive motifs from the

Dampier Archipelago, the Lukis Granites example is examined in the context of stylistic variability, distribution and links with other archaic faces from outside the Pilbara.

### Identifying and Analysing Archaic Faces

Engraved archaic faces are known from several locations across the arid and semi-arid zones, with some examples also recorded from tropical areas in the Northern Territory (NT). These have been described and published by various researchers since the late 1960s (e.g. David *et al.* 1992; Dix 1977; Edwards 1968; McDonald 2005; Mulvaney 2010; Ross and Smith 2009; Wright 1973); however, only five examples have been documented from the inland Pilbara: two at Nunyerry Gorge south of the WAPR in the Chichester Ranges (Bindon 1978); one at Palm Springs near Tom Price (Mulvaney 2006); and two near Gundimer Spring north of Paraburdoo (Vermeij 1976) (Figure 1). Two faces are also known from a coastal site within the hills adjacent to Karratha (Ken Mulvaney pers. comm. 2011).

The style of the eyes is regarded as the major feature of archaic faces. Mulvaney (2010:248) noted that 'the key diagnostic feature for a "face" is that the eyes must comprise at least two elements, most common is a central dot, accentuated by an unpecked area demarcated by a circle, concentric rings or pecked area'. In addition, he noted 'the face is made by a composition of removed lines, removed areas and untouched areas' (Mulvaney 2010:248). Several other stylistic traits that may make up the motif include the nose, mouth, hair/headress, pear/heart-shaped head, head enclosed by an outline and an associated body (e.g. David *et al.* 1992:71; McDonald 2005:131). There is a general consensus among most researchers that their distinctive style indicates they are part of a shared graphic tradition extending across the arid and semi-arid zone (e.g. McDonald 2005). Furthermore, their heavily weathered appearance has led some researchers to assume a Pleistocene antiquity (25,000-10,000 BP; e.g. McDonald 2005:130), although David *et al.* (1992) proposed a mid- to late Holocene date at Jalijbang 2 in the NT. Attempts to directly date archaic faces have thus far been unsuccessful (Ross and Smith 2009:68).

Only three attempts to analyse the stylistic variability associated with archaic faces have been undertaken. David *et al.*'s (1992) multivariate analysis of stylistic traits of 21 faces identified region-specific, or geographical clustering of stylistic groupings, rather than broad-scale patterning. McDonald's simple cluster analysis of 19 stylistic traits (see McDonald 2005:131 for details of style variables identified) from 39 faces revealed that geographical clustering appears only 'when we consider the development of the face into full body figures and/or other associations'. She further noted that:

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... faces are a common and shared theme over a huge area, acting initially to connect groups over long distances. The introduction and variations in body form and infill and headdress style over time serve to signify a development of local identity and territoriality. (McDonald 2005:134)

The most detailed analysis of faces by far is that by Mulvaney (2010), who identified stylistic patterning across 117 archaic faces, 81 of which occur in the Dampier Archipelago. He described and outlined the distribution patterns of four main style groups: 1) Area; 2) Basic; 3) Concentric; and, 4) Line (see Mulvaney 2010:249-252 for further details). However, comparisons with his four main style groups and faces from elsewhere on the continent revealed only 'tentative' links, which led him to state that while,

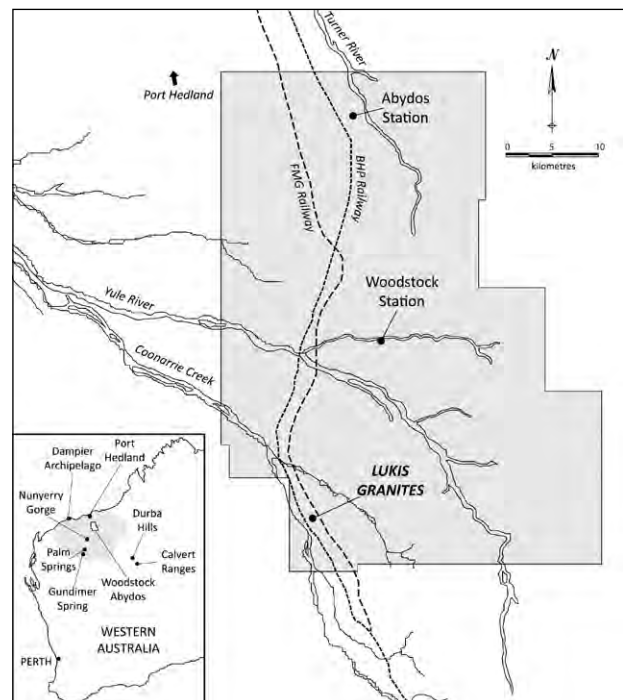
... the graphic design of the eye, with central pit and surrounding emphasis, is consistent in defining these petroglyphs ... I cannot conclude that this provides sufficient evidence to confirm the existence of a single artistic tradition or culture bloc. (Mulvaney 2010:278; see also below)

The identification of four major style categories for archaic faces is crucial in trying to determine links or chains of connection between motifs across space. With the inland Pilbara region situated approximately 250 km from the Dampier Archipelago, the potential for this area to elucidate more about the nature of shared graphic styles is high. Furthermore, with the inland Pilbara region located between the Dampier Archipelago, coastal plains and the Western Desert, there is also potential to learn more about the region's role in linking the Pilbara with the surrounding arid and semi-arid zones.

### Woodstock Abydos Protected Reserve

The WAPR comprises a total of 1544 km<sup>2</sup> and is situated approximately 140 km south of Port Hedland, between the Roebourne plains in the north and the Chichester Range in the south (Figure 1). The area consists of a low-lying Achaean granitic plain with intermittent extrusions of conical granitic boulder piles (up to 30 m in height, formed through differential erosion of the bedrock), granitic domes (exposures) and subparallel intrusive dolerite dykes – rock art is generally found only on the two granitic rock forms. The Yule and Turner Rivers are the primary watercourses, draining the northern flank of the Chichester Range. Both have dendritic drainage patterns stretching across extensive flat plains and, though ephemeral, experience large volumes of water flow after cyclonic rains (Thorne and Trendall 2001).

Established in the early 1880s as sheep and cattle pastoral holdings, Woodstock and Abydos Stations were eventually foreclosed in 1945 following declining stock numbers (McSwain 1986; O'Connor 1987; Wright 1981). After a 30 year period (1946-1976) as a government research station, the Woodstock and Abydos leases were vested in the Trustees of the Western Australian Museum as Reserves for the 'Preservation of Aboriginal Cultural Material and Historic Buildings and Grazing'. Wright (1981:101) noted this designation was due largely to their extensive rock art sites which 'attracted both national and



**Figure 1** Map of Woodstock Abydos Protected Reserve, northwestern Western Australia (inset: shaded area indicates the Pilbara rock art region).

international interest'. This was followed by their being declared a 'protected area' under section 19 of the *Aboriginal Heritage Act* 1972 (WA) in May 1979, and in October 1980 being added to the Register of the National Estate pursuant to the since repealed *Australian Heritage Commission Act* 1975 (Cth) (see Wright 1981). Despite this protected status, Aboriginal heritage on the WAPR faces ongoing threats from expanding mining operations (e.g. Morgan *et al.* 2006).

### Lukis Granites

Located in the southwestern corner of the WAPR, the Lukis Granites are situated between two major rail corridors: the BHP Billiton Iron Ore (BHP) Mount Newman railway line (completed 1969) 100 m to the west, and the Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) Cloudbreak-Port Hedland railway line (completed 2008) 1 km to the east (Figure 1). The site is on the low-lying granitic plateau situated between two seasonal tributaries of the Yule River; the largest and closest of these, Coonarric Creek, is located 200 m west of the site. The vegetation is predominantly hummock grassland dominated by spinifex (*Triodia pungens* and *T. wiseana*), with occasional shrubs of *Acacia* spp. (including *A. pyrifolia*) and *Grevillea* spp. (including *G. pyramidalis*).

The site was first documented by Wright (1968b) during his survey of inland rock art sites along the Upper Yule in 1964, prior to any industrial development. He noted that, owing to its remoteness, 'I thought that it would be safe from general discovery for a considerable time' (Wright 1968a:3). Unfortunately that was not the case, with the site subsequently being damaged during construction of the BHP railway (see Wright 1968b:3-4).

The site comprises engravings, grinding patches, a gnamma hole and a variably dense stone artefact scatter extending over an area of some 600 m (N-S) by 400 m (E-W). Site features occur on and around a series of granite pavements and discrete boulder piles



**Figure 2** (left) The Lukis Granites archaic face (photograph by Liam Brady, reproduced courtesy of the Palyku Native Title Working Group); (right) digital tracing of the archaic face (courtesy Ken Mulvaney).

at the base of a single, elongated, granite boulder-strewn hill. Most of the cultural features at the site occur to the south and west of the hill. To the east and north the topography is more rugged, with rocky outcrops of quartz-rich gneiss and exfoliating granite. Survey of these areas identified few engravings or other cultural features.

The engravings are located predominately near the southern end of the hill, though there are some smaller concentrations at the northwestern end. The engraved boulders exhibit varying degrees of exfoliation, with many engravings affected by this and other weathering processes. Several individual motifs also occur on the flat granite pavements west of the hill, some of which were damaged by the BHP rail access track. Although Wright reproduced some motifs and several of the complex panels in his monograph and subsequent publications (e.g. Wright 1968a, 1973, 1977), no mention was made of an engraved face. The site has been visited on several occasions since Wright's initial visit – mainly during heritage surveys conducted by mining companies – although none of these have reported the presence of an archaic face. A more in-depth description of the cultural features, including the rock art inventory from Lukis Granites, will be presented in a forthcoming paper.

### *The Archaic Face*

The archaic face is situated on a small, inconspicuous rock measuring 55 x 35 x 20 cm at the northern end of the site, near the hill base and away from the large concentrations of easily visible engravings. The positioning and size of the engraved rock is unlike many other archaic faces, which tend to be located on large, highly visible panels ensuring they could be seen from a distance (see Ross and Smith 2009:68–69). The face was discovered on our final day at the site, with the late afternoon shadows increasing the visibility of the image, making it easier to identify its form. Owing to time constraints, the image was recorded only with sketches and digital photographs; a tracing was produced by Ken Mulvaney during a subsequent visit which involved daylight and night recording (Figure 2).

The deeply pecked face features dot eyes enclosed by a concentric circle. The lines used to form the concentric circle extend below the eyes into a pattern of parallel, U-shaped lines. Five short horizontal lines connect the innermost U-shaped lines. A vertical line extends from the base of the inner-most U-shape and forms a linear design at the bottom of the panel. A small outlined circle is positioned on the right side of the panel, while an upward-angled line is positioned on either side at the base of the U-shapes. A line above the left eye extends across the top of the face and down the right-hand side. There is no indication of a nose, mouth or any other obvious facial features.

The motif is heavily weathered and patinated, with very minimal colour contrast, which suggests it is of considerable antiquity. A small section of the upper portion of the rock has exfoliated – it is unknown whether additional motif elements (e.g. headdress/hair) were lost as a result, although it appears unlikely.

The face can also be linked to two water sources: Coonarrie Creek located approximately 400 m to the southwest, and a gnamma hole in the middle of the site. Mulvaney (2010:257) noted that the proximity of archaic faces to water is a significant feature for most faces in the Dampier Archipelago, as the 'presence of potable water is a focusing factor for people in a region with little reliable water potential elsewhere'.

### **Discussion**

Mulvaney (2010:252) described the Concentric type from the Dampier Archipelago as a face in which '[t]he eyes are surrounded by concentric arrangement[s] of lines which often become a geometric pattern of evenly spaced lines'. Based on this description and Mulvaney's (2010:252) examples, we suggest a link between the Lukis Granites archaic face and Mulvaney's Concentric type faces of the Dampier Archipelago. However, the Lukis Granites face does not feature the same extent of concentric circles around the eyes, making it appear simpler than the more elaborate Dampier examples. Another possibility is that the Lukis Granites example may be a local

style variant of archaic faces. In her analysis of faces, McDonald (2005) concluded that more ornate body forms was evidence for more regionalised stylistic traits which could be used to distinguish between faces in the different geographic regions. We intend to test this scenario once a larger dataset is obtained from the inland Pilbara region.

A second connection can be found outside the Pilbara, with two faces recorded by Dix (1972) at Durba Hills near the Canning Stock Route (435 km southeast from Lukis Granites). Here, one face featuring concentric circle eyes, hair/headdress and an arrangement of slightly curving parallel lines extending downwards from below the eyes was recorded. Details of a second face, consisting of 'concentric elements' but lacking the linear arrangement below the eyes, were supplied to Mulvaney (2010:i, 268) in 1993. Since then McDonald has recorded 13 archaic faces (six of which have either geometric hair and body embellishments) in the Durba Hills and Calvert Ranges slightly further east (Jo McDonald pers. comm. 2012); however, it is unknown at this stage whether they conform to Mulvaney's Concentric type. Mulvaney (2010:268) recently noted the link between the Concentric type from Dampier and Dix's Durba Hills example – to this chain of stylistic connections we can now add the Lukis Granites archaic face, which creates a clearer distribution pattern of this distinctive design form.

That the Lukis Granites face is similar to those from the Dampier Archipelago is not surprising given the relatively short distance (ca 250 km) between the two areas. It is interesting to note that Mulvaney (2010:268) also identified a link between one of the Nunyerry Gorge faces and his Area type face, thus indicating another link between inland Pilbara archaic faces and those from the Dampier Archipelago. Other shared motifs between the two areas point to further links. For example, McDonald and Veth (2005:143, 2009:66) pointed out that a variant of the 'Woodstock' anthropomorph known from the Upper Yule also occurs in the Archipelago, while Mulvaney (2009) reported on distinct depictions of extinct faunal motifs – thylacines and fat-tailed macropods – found in the Archipelago and near Tom Price. McDonald and Veth (2005:150) also noted that the depictions of the distinctive climbing men motifs from the Dampier have 'an analogue in the Calvert Ranges' as an additional example of shared graphic content.

Whilst the extent of past social and cultural links/influences stretching from the coastal to inland Pilbara, and beyond to the Western Desert remains a key area for future research, rock art is providing valuable insights to the cultural history of the region. With more rock art recording in the WAPR scheduled over the coming years we hope to increase our knowledge of the style and geographical distribution of these motifs with a view to eventually building a dataset large enough to carry out further testing of stylistic variation across the entire breadth of the arid and semi-arid zone.

A final point to consider is the cultural significance of this motif in terms of heritage values in the WAPR. In the decision to award the Dampier Archipelago National Heritage Listing, archaic faces played an important role in demonstrating the exceptional cultural heritage values of the region. According to the National Heritage Database (2007) these motifs 'demonstrate the long history of contact and shared visual narratives between Aboriginal societies in the Dampier Archipelago and inland

arid Australia and are exceptional in the course of Australia's cultural history'. Furthermore, they are argued to 'have outstanding potential to yield information contributing to an understanding of the long history of connections between the coast and the Western Desert' (see also JMCHM 2009; McDonald and Veth 2005, 2009). These statements clearly highlight the importance attached to such motifs and the role they play in better understanding Australia's past, especially in the context of reinforcing chains of stylistic connections across a vast area. Given the considerable interest and urgency from WAPR traditional owners in having the WAPR better protected from further industrial development, the value of this find is amplified when placed into the broader context of its cultural heritage value at a State and National level.

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