

DESERT MASTERS:
the mysterious rock art
of the Kimberley.

By Janet Hawley

The Gwion rock art found across Western Australia's vast Kimberley region is not only beautiful and mysterious, it also holds vital clues to humanity's distant past. Janet Hawley joins those digging to understand more about these ancient wonders.

THE HELICOPTER SKIPS ACROSS THE KIMBERLEY WILDERNESS until we spot a tent below a craggy cliff face, where 12 archaeologists and scientists have spent the past five weeks searching for magnificent buried treasure. Among the archaeologists is Professor Mike Morwood, who became known as "the Flores hobbit man" after leading the team that discovered the ancient one-metre-tall human species *Homo floresiensis* on the Indonesian island of Flores in 2003.

Morwood looks like an archaeologist from Hollywood central casting as he emerges from the tent flap: wild green eyes under cave-like brows, sun-beaten face swathed in a beard resembling clipped spinifex. He brushes ants off his sweat-streaked shirt to greet the visitor, then directs me to follow him and archaeologist June Ross, clambering up giant boulders towards a cavernous sandstone overhang, curtained with trailing vegetation.

We edge inside this silent stone theatre and behold a large, hauntingly beautiful figurative painting on a vertical rock face. Slim, elegant people are finely portrayed in deep red pigment, elaborately adorned with ceremonial headdresses, armlets, bangles and sashes, everyone poised as if in the midst of a trance-like dance.

This is the treasure that's lured the scientists here, the mysterious Bradshaw, or Gwion, rock art, sophisticated paintings thought to be at least 17,000 years old, perhaps more than 25,000 years old. (As a marker, the famed Egyptian hieroglyphs are a mere 5000 years old.)

No one knows who painted these little-known Gwions – some small, others up to five metres long and three metres high – which lie deliberately hidden in inaccessible rock shelters in the vast Kimberley atop Western Australia. "There's probably hundreds of thousands of Gwion paintings, if we could ever find them all," says Morwood.

What is known, he explains, "is that before the Last Glacial Maximum, people with developed aesthetic skills came to the Kimberley and painted this highly distinctive rock art. At the height of the Last Glacial Maximum, 18,000 to 20,000 years ago, conditions became so harsh and arid that the majority of the population left the Kimberley, which was largely abandoned for the next 8000 to 10,000 years." The Gwion artists disappeared, leaving their magnificent paintings, but barely another trace of their existence. Gwion rock art ceased, as suddenly as it had begun.

At first glimpse, the Gwions appeared so different from the Wandjina rock art – a more abstract style painted in the past 3500 years and directly related to living Aboriginal culture – that a controversial theory arose: the Gwions were painted by a "mystery race". While Morwood disagrees with the theory, he and his team are keen to find out who these ancient rock-art Matisses were and what became of them.

So the scientists have been digging and sieving for five weeks, in the first part of a three-year project, to discover long-sought-after answers. The buried treasure they're seeking is not jewel-laden tombs, but clues that might lie in

Photography Peter Eve



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sash Gwion figures frequently seem in ceremonial mode and float in a trance-like state.

Abrupt change is evident in the following era of “elegant action” figures. Stripped of all adornments, bar headdresses, people are portrayed running, leaping, busily gathering with dillybags, hunting kangaroos. Society has become more vigilant in order to survive, as the climate grows colder and aridity increases.

At the same time, the “clothes peg” figures begin. The once celebratory sash and tassel figures are now transformed into linear soldier-like clothes-peg figures, practical bodies hunting with bundles of spears, armed with spear throwers and boomerangs. Aggressive groups are shown in battle, presumably fighting over rapidly diminishing resources and last vestiges of favourable territory.

These are the last scenes we have of the Gwion world. And as in all Gwions, the figures are beautifully painted, the compositions finely balanced.

The Gwion Ross and I ponder is from the sash era. Like climate-change sceptics, the figures seem blissfully unaware of the approaching ice age.

A major hurdle in understanding the Gwions is the lack of accurate dates. Ross explains that to date a Gwion painting using radiocarbon dating, the paint needs to contain organic material, such as animal fat, plant material or blood. No such samples have yet been identified.

Presently, there is only one published scientific date to establish Gwions’ age – 17,400 years old – recorded in 1995 after a fossilised wasp’s nest covering a Gwion figure was dated. “This determined a minimum age of 17,400 years from the time the wasp built its nest, so the pictures could be much older,” explains Ross.

Ross and Morwood are excited about a new chance discovery they will investigate in next year’s dig, which should lead to breakthrough dates and perhaps surprises. A ranger led them to a shelter where a section of a sash Gwion painting had fractured and fallen, face down, onto the sandy floor thousands of years earlier. In the scar exposed by the fall, clothes-peg Gwions have been painted.

Says Ross, “We’ll have to work in darkness, jack up the fallen slab to retrieve sand beneath it, and the OSL [optically stimulated luminescence] date from the sand will give us a minimum age for the fallen sash Gwions, and a maximum age for the replacement clothes-peg figures.” (OSL dating



determines the last time quartz grains that constitute sand were exposed to light.)

At day’s end, covered in sweat, dirt, green-ant bites and rashes from flesh-cutting plants, the team returns to camp. Robin is trying to make something appetising with lentils and tinned tomatoes when whoops of glee come from the Kandimal men up river, who’ve caught a crocodile and later cook their delicacy, sharing with anyone willing to try.

CECELIA MYERS, THE ONE-TIME GEELONG Grammar schoolgirl who sat entranced with her mother listening to Walsh, is now 30, with an impressive headful of Gwion-style dreadlocks, and lives on Theda. For Cecelia, like her mother, the Kimberley became the pulse of life.

At university she completed degrees in archaeology and zoology, with a master’s in biological anthropology on hand stencils in rock art. From her student days on, she has conducted flora and fauna surveys on Theda and Doongan, and worked with Walsh, Butch Maher and field assistants to understand Gwion rock art.

Butch flies us off to Theda, landing near the iconic painting Walsh called the Rosetta Stone. We meet Cecelia, who explains the art. “This panel is late-Gwion period, showing a big group of people on the move, legs striding out running, men bearing weapons, women carrying digging sticks and dillybags. It’s so different from the tassel and sash Gwions where everyone is in fancy dress doing ceremonies. Something is clearly going on to cause this abrupt change in their daily lives.

“Grahame thought what he called elegant-action figures and clothes-peg figures overlapped, but had

“**Everything we do is aimed at informing the conservation and management of this priceless world heritage.**”

Drawing conclusions: (above) Kimberley Foundation Australia chairman Maria Myers at Doongan Station in the Kimberley, in front of a Wandjina-style rock-art painting of a crocodile.

no evidence. Then he found this panel with three clothes-peg figures deliberately painted into the scene with the elegant-action figures, showing the transition – so it was a sort-of Rosetta Stone.”

Back at Doongan, Maria Myers squats under a massive overhang to show geologist Jim Ross a spectacular Wandjina crocodile painting, then some dramatic Wandjina faces – round, white faces with big, black eyes, no mouths, and red arch-shaped headdresses. (The Wandjina is a spiritual figure, the rain-maker that brings life to earth.)

KFA is also now focusing on Wandjina art, which used to be regularly repainted and restored, a practice that is dying out. The thick ochres, especially the white pigment used in Wandjina paintings, sit on the surface of the rock and will eventually fade and crumble away. So, unlike the long-surviving Gwions, where the red pigment used permeates the rock, many Wandjinas are likely to disappear, leaving little trace.

Myers and Jim Ross spark ideas for future KFA projects. Ideally, they’d like to map all rock art in the Kimberley, a massive task, but identifying epicentres of different stylistic periods could help piece together the jigsaw of the distant past.

Sam Lovell is keen to see more training for indigenous people to become qualified tour guides in their own areas. Tour companies and the boats that travel the Kimberley coast are increasingly being asked to take people to see Gwion paintings.

“Everything we do is aimed at informing the conservation and management of this priceless world heritage,” Maria Myers emphasises.

One recent visitor was the internationally acclaimed British sculptor Antony Gormley, whose own haunting use of the figure to explore the human experience has enthralled millions.

Gormley, still spellbound by the Gwions, emailed from his UK studio this accolade for the mysterious, ancient rock artists: “Whatever the date, the lithe alertness of those tuning-fork figures, in stillness and in motion, from so many hands, speaks so clearly of human awareness, human beauty and the central experience of making and seeing art.

“The bare evidence, with the skulls and ossuaries of this as a message across time of our being in space without need of wall, road, clothing, plumbing, any other buttress to being – art as an expression of life, and as the accompaniment of death, under the bright, inquiring Australian sun.” **GW**



Rock stars: two Kandimal Aboriginal men, Gavin (at left) and Gregory Goonack, accompany Mike Morwood and June Ross at the site of a Gwion sash-period rock painting in the Mitchell River National Park, WA.

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a fallen piece of rock or a fossilised wasps' nest. "A lot of people might think it's more exciting digging up a gold goblet in Greece or Turkey than digging up a piece of ochre in Australia, but I don't see it that way," declares rock-art specialist June Ross, joint leader of this expedition with Morwood.

This huge gallery of Gwion rock art across the Kimberley may yield more important answers. "These paintings could help us resolve some of the really big questions in world archaeology," Morwood stresses. "Especially those critical debates on the timing, route and pace that modern humans dispersed out of Africa, and then travelled via Asia and Indonesia to reach Australia. How did earlier people respond to major changes in climate? How often did they move to and from neighbouring countries?"

This quest for knowledge has seduced a vivid trail of impassioned followers. Gwion art written history only begins in 1891, when pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw became the first European to discover this stylish rock art, which became popularly known as the Bradshaws. Bradshaw enthusiastically recorded: "One might think himself viewing the painted walls of an Egyptian temple."

Due to the remoteness of the 420,000-square-kilometre Kimberley, the art was left largely undisturbed, unresearched and unrecorded. In the serendipitous way history often unfolds, in 1977 a maverick bush genius from Queensland, Grahame Walsh, began a 30-year campaign to comb the Kimberley for Bradshaw rock art. He fastidiously photographed, sketched and documented his extensive lay field research, identified some 300 recurring motifs in the paintings and sought to unlock a code to interpret meanings.

Walsh, who died in 2007, was a mercurial charmer who lived on tinned tuna, rice, condensed milk and pills, and had huge respect for Aboriginal culture. He constantly questioned Aboriginal elders, but maintained the elders told him they knew nothing about Bradshaw paintings; they were done by "different people to us". Walsh heard stories that indigenous people believed the paintings were made by the *gwion gwion*, a long-beaked bird that pecks at rock faces to catch insects and sometimes



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Wonder walls: (top) the Gwion rock painting from the "elegant action" period that Grahame Walsh compared to the Rosetta Stone; (above) Wandjina-style rock paintings, showing large faces, big black eyes and arched headdresses.

draws blood. Many Aboriginal people today, however, claim to relate strongly to Gwion paintings.

Walsh became absorbed with the notion that Bradshaw art was strikingly different from the archaic rock art that preceded it – that is, bold, irregularly infilled animal outlines that appeared after the Kimberley was first settled 50,000 to 55,000 years ago. Bradshaw art was also markedly different from the definitely Aboriginal Wandjina rock art that followed later, from 3500 years ago.

So Walsh proposed his controversial hypothesis: instead of Australia being continuously settled for 50,000 to 55,000 years by ancestors of contemporary Aborigines, Walsh suggested that waves of populations arrived. And one of these waves could have been people from a different ethnic identity, who created the Bradshaws.

ACADEMIC ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS, while acknowledging the immense value of Walsh's field work, largely shot his "pre-Aboriginal civilisation" theory down. Many cited similarities with the dynamic Mimi rock art in Arnhem Land, and with Aboriginal ceremonial dress still worn in some regions today. Yet Walsh, who loved to brawl with academics, was invited to lecture to such august bodies as the Royal Geographical Society in London, and was awarded a doctorate of letters

by the University of Melbourne and a PhD by Griffith University in Queensland. Fascinated followers of the Bradshaws multiplied.

Two women who fell under the spell of Walsh and the Bradshaws are Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and her dynamic younger friend, the very private Melbourne lawyer/pastoralist/philanthropist Maria Myers. Myers first heard Walsh lecture 15 years ago at her then 15-year-old daughter's school, Geelong Grammar.

"Like Dame Elisabeth, it hit me how little is known about Australia's history before 1788," says Myers. "These paintings could unearth vital new knowledge about our largely vanished history, and the origins of the first Australians."

In 1996, Dame Elisabeth bought the financially strapped Walsh two new outback quad bikes; Myers bought Walsh a new Toyota, and both helicoptered in to meet him on rock-art expeditions. They also funded the publication of Walsh's 2000 magnum opus, *Bradshaw Art of the Kimberley*.

To facilitate continuing research, in 2001, Dunkeld Pastoral Company, run by Myers and her husband, barrister/businessman/philanthropist Allan Myers, bought two pastoral leases in the Kimberley – Doongan and Theda (totalling 610,000 hectares) – which Walsh had nominated as land rich in Gwion sites.

Maria Myers also became a driving force in harnessing growing interest in the Kimberley's heritage and set up the current Kimberley Foundation Australia (KFA) in late 2006, with a salaried CEO and an unpaid board of influential directors, plus a strong scientific advisory council headed by senior geologist Dr Jim Ross (no relation to June Ross). It continually consults with Aboriginal communities and seeks their involvement. KFA director Sam Lovell, one of the early leaders in indigenous-run tourism, says, "My people are becoming a lot more interested to hear what scientists and archaeologists can discover."

The elusive Gwions had become the catalyst to kick-start extensive research into the wider Kimberley story – "this vast, little-researched historical, cultural and environmental treasure trove", according to Maria Myers, now KFA chairman.

In the noble tradition of philanthropy funding exploration, private donations got KFA up and running, and continue as KFA expands. KFA set about initiating and part-funding nine multidisciplinary scientific-research projects in the Kimberley (to a total of \$965,000), looking back through 55,000 years at rock art, artefacts, climate, flora and fauna, and the origin, distribution and linguistics of the population. Additional grants from the federal government's Australian Research Council brought two projects' budgets up to \$1 million.

I JOIN MIKE MORWOOD AND HIS TEAM CAMPING upstream from the Mitchell Falls, carrying my swag and food rations. Their frugal camp is on a rock slab, where all sleep in the open in swags or in tiny tents. As everything has to arrive or leave by helicopter, the personal limit is one plate, one mug and two changes of clothes, all washed daily with their bodies in the Mitchell River. There's only dried and tinned food, but all appear in robust spirits.

Gaffer-tape strips on shirts, pants and boots seem to be de rigueur, to mend rips in clothes and boots from razor-sharp foliage and rocks. Indeed on day two, while scaling a quartzite quarry once a source of stone for axes and spear heads, I shear the sole right off one of my leather trekking boots and have to gaffer-wrap it back together so it resembles an Egyptian mummy.

Robin Maher, wife of helicopter pilot Butch



Nobody yet knows how or why the Gwions suddenly began.

Digging up the past: (top) ancient Aboriginal artefacts found at the excavation site (right).



Maher, is the ever-resourceful camp cook, valiantly doing her best with her collection of billys on the log fire. Tonight she's created dinner using tinned tuna, rice, dried mushrooms and packet soup. She's even made a chocolate damper in a camp oven for dessert.

An enormous full moon hangs in the night sky, the stars as bright as searchlights. A shadow slides across the moon face and someone remembers it's an eclipse. Nature provides a grand, theatrical backdrop as Morwood explains humanity's trek out of Africa to this very place.

"Modern humans evolved in Africa 200,000 years ago and expanded out of Africa 70,000 years ago," he says. "They travelled via Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, and island-hopped to Australia, the obvious beachheads being Arnhem Land and the Kimberley, arriving 50,000 to 55,000 years ago. It's safe to assume it was a series of staggered arrivals, and people lived in different countries en route, experiencing different skills and cultures. It was also a forwards and backwards movement, with waves of people coming and going."

The earliest style of rock art produced in Australia is irregularly infilled outlines of animals, with rare depictions of humans. Nobody yet knows how or why the Gwions suddenly began. Was there a change in materials – from impermanent to permanent surfaces – and the earlier art vanished? (This has been the case with the recent proliferation in Aboriginal dot painting, when artists moved from transient paintings on sand to canvas.)

Or was it a cult?

AT BEDTIME, I HEAD TO MY SPOT ON THE ROCK slab. As I do, my torch picks up a long scaly tail slithering in the direction of my unrolled swag. The moon is now an eerie black ball in the sky. I do a crazed rap dance on top of the swag, then edge inside it, praying the owner of the tail has slunk off to sleep under a nice log.

Robin has the fire going at 5.30am, breakfast is at six, and soon afterwards we pack lunch provisions from a row of plastic bins. By 6.30am June Ross is leading the rock-art team through a thick maze of spiky bushes twice our height for a long, hot day at the dig site.

As we tentatively scale the steep cliff face towards more hidden Gwion paintings, Ross reassuringly remarks that she always carries a full medical kit and a personal-location beacon, so if anyone falls down a chasm, breaks a leg or worse, she can summon an emergency chopper pronto.

Mark Moore, like June Ross an archaeologist from the University of New England in northern NSW, is standing almost buried to his hat in the excavation hole. He's scooped sand frogs out this morning; yesterday a wallaby scratched the perfect striated sides. He's delighted he hasn't yet had to deal with a king brown snake. It's his

fourth hole; this one is dug in front of a huge rock shelter, which served as an art site, living place and a quartzite quarry for making tools and weapons.

Four men from the Kandiwali community, the traditional owners of the area and linkage partners in the project, are taking an active role alongside the scientists. Two PhD archaeology students sit under a nearby tent with Gregory Goonack and Joseph Karadada from Kandiwali, all sieving every trowel-load of dirt from the hole through two-millimetre mesh, hoping for a "Eureka!" moment.

Dozens of labelled plastic bags pile up, holding small artefacts, quartz flakes from shaping stone tools, pieces of ochre that could have been used for rock painting, charcoal from fires, and soil samples taken every five centimetres.

Moore has painstakingly dug the one-metre-square surface hole, using a sharpened trowel, brush and dustpan, in five-centimetre "spits", marking each layer. "We're at 150 centimetres deep now and I can speculate I'm standing on the Pleistocene era, making it 20,000 years ago – but I can't tell until it's dated," he says. In the next days he digs to 250 centimetres, then hits ground water and has to stop.

To the lay person it's just a dirt hole, "but to archaeologists' eyes it's a library of information", Moore says.

All samples are sent off for dating and analysis. Pollen in each layer of soil can reveal which plants thrived and build a chronology of changing climatic conditions. Correlating information gained from rock paintings and the excavations will build a more complete picture of the past.

It required much searching by helicopter before Morwood and Ross selected this excavation site. "There was clear evidence of human habitation in the rock shelter, and a long art sequence," explains Ross. But most importantly, immediately outside the shelter was a deep build-up of soil, where layers of sand and dust had accumulated, providing a potentially excellent dig site.

Ross edges up more colossal boulders until we reach another shelter housing a magnificent Gwion panel, almost five metres long and more than two metres high. It is an intensely intimate experience sitting on the cool rock staring at the silent figures, trying to connect with these people, imagining their way of life and the role of the artists.

The extraordinary thing today is to witness how these lissom figures appear to portray an early civilisation in Australia living through climate change – from leisurely days of abundance and rich ceremonies, to fear and fighting at the onset of the last ice age.

The earliest era of Gwion paintings, known as the "tassel" Gwions, depict halcyon days. Slender men and women are adorned with multi-strand tassels swinging from waistbands, armlets, anklets, chest-plates, bangles; all topped with headdresses featuring pompoms and plumes.

Next comes the "sash" era. Tassels are replaced with three-point sashes flaring from waistbands. Tassel and