

The Painted Landscape: Dating Aboriginal Rock Art in Australia's Kimberley Region

Paleoproterozoic sandstones of the vast Kimberley region in northwestern Australia contain one of the greatest concentrations of indigenous rock art in the world, with innumerable sites showing figurative and engraved art of exceptional richness and beauty. Importantly, the rock paintings can be grouped into a series of different styles which are superimposed upon one another in a regular sequence representing a progression through time. So far, however, the significance of this remarkable rock art record to the broader narrative of human and environmental history has been severely constrained by the difficulty of dating the rock art, the pigments of which are mostly devoid of datable constituents. Nevertheless, bracketing ages can be obtained by dating natural materials and processes that can be associated with the rock art, and four independent dating methods have now been successfully adapted to this purpose. This project is now developing a deep time framework in which to better understand the art and the people who have lived in this remote landscape from the Pleistocene to the present day.

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Andy Gleadow is an Emeritus Professor in Earth Sciences at the University of Melbourne. He has worked extensively on the development of fission track thermochronology and other methods for understanding the thermal and tectonic evolution of the continental crust in many parts of the world. He has published widely on these methods and their application to continental extension tectonics, basin analysis and landscape evolution. He has also worked on dating hominin fossil sites in East Africa and most recently on dating Aboriginal rock art in Australia. He has been Head of the Schools of Earth Sciences at both Melbourne and La Trobe Universities, and has been President of the Geological Society of Australia and served on the Council of the Australian Academy of Science, amongst many other national and academic roles. His work has been recognised by numerous Awards, Medals and Fellowships.