Finger Markings from the Willandra Lakes Footprint Site, Southeastern Australia – presentation by Dr Natalie Franklin

This presentation discusses two crescent-shaped grooves made in soft clay and found amongst the largest known collection of Pleistocene human footprints in the world, in the Willandra Lakes region of southeastern Australia. The site represents the activities of a band of Aboriginal people during the last glacial maximum, between 19,000 and 23,000 years ago. Pintubi people from central Australia identified the grooves as finger markings made by children playing on the clay surface of an ephemeral soak. The markings are similar to the meandering finger flutings found elsewhere in Australia and in other parts of the world on montmilch deposits on the walls and ceilings of limestone caves. They are not only among the oldest securely dated markings of this kind in Australia, but also anywhere in the world. They are extremely rare examples of what was once probably a widespread form of marking world-wide, preserved in clay in the open air, rather than the much more usual limestone caves. This presentation highlights the remarkable continuity in the practice of making such markings over a considerable period of time, from this site through to observations that finger markings were still being made during ceremonies in the Western Desert in the 1960s.
Bio for Dr Natalie Franklin

Dr Natalie Franklin has a BA(Hons) from the University of Sydney and a PhD from La Trobe University, and is an internationally renowned rock art specialist. Dr Franklin has published widely in national and international journals and edited or authored a number of books including:


She has also been a regular contributor to the Rock Art News of the World series of volumes, and is currently editing the next volume, again with Paul Bahn and Matthias Strecker, which will be published in August.

Natalie has participated in archaeological fieldwork encompassing rock art recording in Australia, excavation of Neolithic and Chalcolithic period sites in Jordan and Turkey, and the excavation of Neanderthal skeletons in Spain.

More recently Natalie’s research has focused not only on rock art, but also on the debate surrounding the appearance of “modern human/symbolic behaviour” within the archaeological record. She has recently published several papers on this topic with Dr Phillip Habgood, with another article coming out this year in a Cambridge University press volume.

Dr Franklin has extensive experience within the cultural heritage field including developing Government policies for the assessment of archaeological significance and management plans for rock art sites. She currently works in the Environmental Sustainability Unit of the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads. She is also an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Science, the University of Queensland, and will shortly be jointly running a Flinders University rock art field recording school on the Murray River with Dr Amy Roberts.
Murujuga, the Dampier Archipelago, located on the northwest coast of Australia, is arguably the richest area in the world for petroglyphs. Consisting of an estimated one million images and spanning some 25-30,000 yrs, these display an enormous variety of subjects and styles that document the changing ecological conditions that accompanied the rising sea levels following the last ice age and the creation of the area as islands some 7,000 yrs ago. The images also reflect the cultural practices and social values of the people that produced them. This corpus of rock-art holds significance to Aboriginal traditional owners of the islands today, the Yaburara, Ngarluma and Mardudenera peoples. Over the last forty years it is an area that has also become a major industrial hub, providing for the export of iron ore, the processing and export of liquefied natural gas and other commercial plants. Through the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation they have established a team of elders to guide a group of rangers to manage and protect this area.

The pattern of superimposition and weathering, coupled with the changing motif repertoire, indicates that dramatic shifts in artistic expression were tied to changes in the dry land/marine regimes of the Dampier Archipelago. Investigation of specific motif types demonstrated that a number of graphic elements appeared in the Murujuga rock art assemblage at different times. Some of these were relatively short lived, while others were produced over extended periods which fall into five major rock art phases (artistic traditions).

In recognition of the artistic and cultural values of the Dampier Archipelago petroglyphs, in 2007 it was entered on the National Heritage register. Unfortunately there does not appear to have been much done in the way of enhancing and protecting these values; industry continues at a pace and relocation of petroglyphs is still planned. This presentation will set the context of these issues and expand on the significance of the petroglyphs, lavishly illustrated with photographs.

Bio for Dr Ken Mulvaney

Ken Mulvaney worked as an anthropologist in the Northern Territory during the 1990s with the Northern Land Council and later with the Sacred Sites Authority in Darwin. Originally trained as an archaeologist, he has participated in or supervised archaeological excavations in Australia, Africa, England and Papua New Guinea. He is currently employed by Rio Tinto as a Specialist in Cultural Heritage in Western Australia, where he is responsible for the protection and preservation of heritage sites on Rio Tinto's mining leases, including the Burrup Peninsula. He was recently awarded a PhD by the University of New England for his thesis on the Aboriginal rock art of the Burrup Peninsula.