The Archaeology of Mootwingee, Western New South Wales

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(Figs. 1-9) (Plates XIX-XXVII) Manuscript received 20.9.61

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

The rock engravings in the main gallery, and the paintings in the " Big Cave ", have been described briefly, and some of the main carvings and paintings illustrated, by Pulleine (1926), Riddell (1928), Barrett (1929 and 1943), Davidson (1936), Black (1943 and 1949), and McCarthy (1957 and 1958). Pulleine's claim (op. cit. 80) that he recorded all of the motifs at Mootwingee is far from being the case. These papers indicated that Mootwingee was an important comparative site on the eastern extremity of the full intaglio pecking technique, and a complete recording was therefore decided upon.

CURRENT WORK

One of us (F. D. McC.) assumes total responsibility for the sections on " Pecking Methods, Patination and Antiquity, and Affinities of Paintings and Engravings."

One of us (N. W. G. M.) assumes total responsibility for the map and topographical descriptions and for the sections on " Dingo Rock and Mythology of Mootwingee according to George Dutton ".

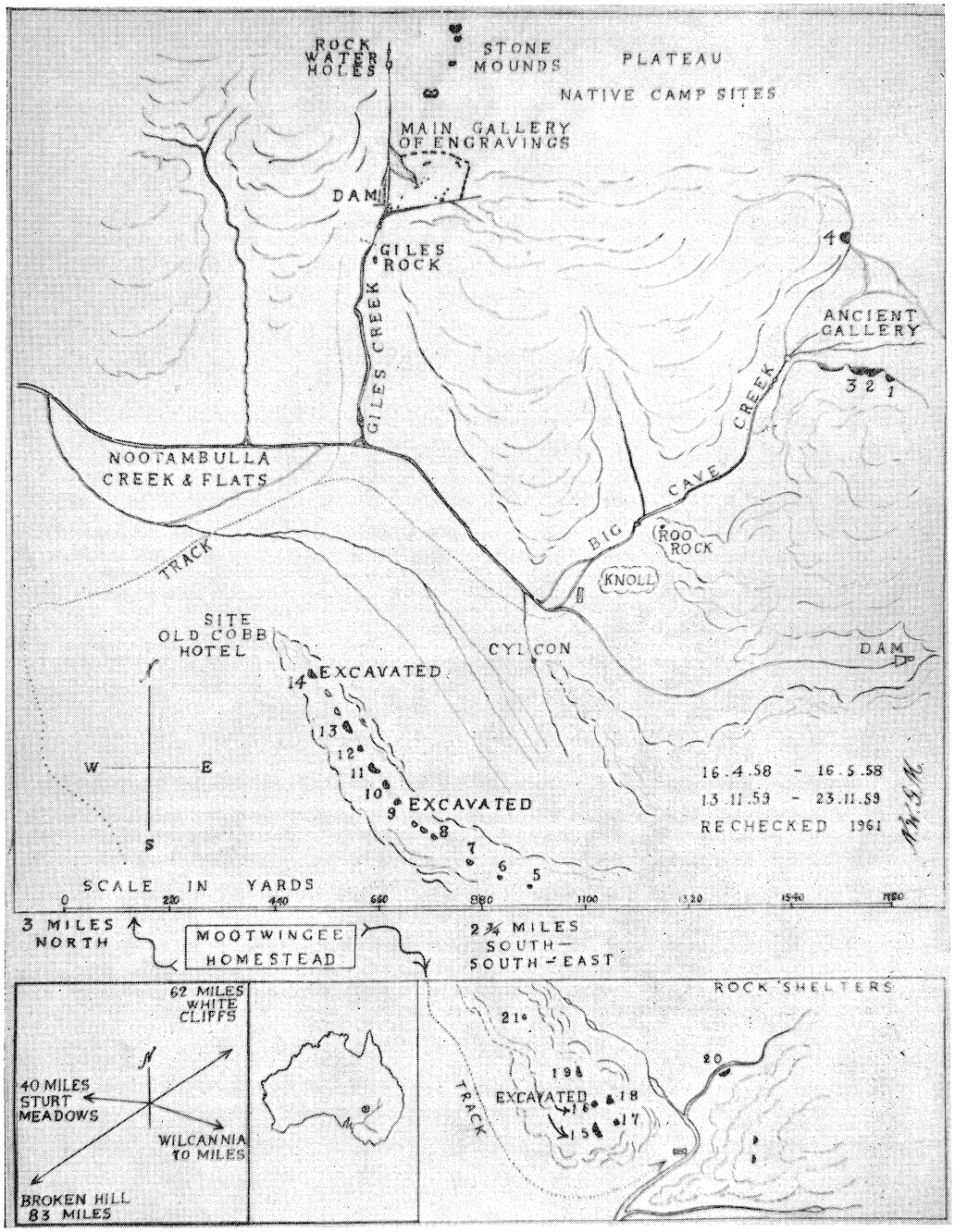
The remainder of the paper, the first draft of which was prepared by F. D. McC., is dual.

HISTORY

It is probable that Wright, the third in command of the Burke and Wills party, who was added to the expedition at Menindee because of his wide knowledge of the country to the north, was the first white man to see the strange markings on the rocks. The route of the expedition passed Mutwongee (as Wills recorded the name originally) on October 16th, 1860, and although Wills mentioned the existence of permanent water there he did not refer to the engravings. Ernest Giles used the valley in which the carvings are situated as a regular camping place, and left inscriptions (discovered by Mr. A. Morris in 1921 on a tributary of Nootambulla Creek) recording his visits in July, 1861, and August and September, 1863. Dow (1937) accepted the probable authenticity of Giles' inscriptions. Howitt's relief party followed the same track in 1861, and it was thereafter used by all travellers to the north from Menindee and the Darling until pastoral development of the Broken Hill district began in 1866.

As the main gallery of engravings is only a furlong from Giles' inscriptions, both his party and many other white men must have seen it between 1863 and 1890, as it is right beside the rock-holes from which travellers drew water in this valley. There are no historical reports by the early explorers or subsequent travellers of natives or native ceremonies at these sites. The old coaching-days hotel, built about half a mile away, also drew water from these rock-holes which were dammed with concrete for the purpose.

The early white settlers drove the natives off their traditional country to ensure undisturbed grazing for sheep and cattle. Such an antagonistic attitude did not encourage interest in the Aborigines, and little has been recorded about the rock art and religion of the far western tribes. Dr. MacGillivray, of Broken Hill, was the first naturalist to take an interest in the Mootwingee site, to which he took Dr. Pulleine, of Adelaide, in 1935, and the latter's brief paper appeared a year later.



Text Fig. 1—Map showing total Aboriginal sites at Mootwingee Reserve described in the text.

The presence of permanent water in the numerous rock-holes (not as now despoiled by goats, sheep and horses) must have been a valuable asset to the local groups of Aborigines in the vicinity of Mootwingee. The tribe was called the Bulalli by Howitt (1904, 49), the Wilyakali by Tindale (1940, 195, map), and the Bandjigali by Beckett (1958, 92). As Bonney pointed out (1883, 2), the country in its natural state could not support a large population, being subject to periodic droughts of which he experienced three lasting from 18 to 22 months in 15 years. During these droughts, he said, the surface waterholes dried up, and the natives camped at the springs or rivers, existing on the half-starved animals which were killed without much difficulty. The country had a desert-like appearance, relieved by sundry hardy bushes and small trees which somehow held up against the extreme dryness and hot winds. Bonney (op. cit.) said the long droughts were generally broken by a fall of two or three inches of rain, followed by lighter rains, which rapidly improved the appearance of the country, the waterfowl returned in large numbers to the creeks and billabongs, and the Aborigines moved on to fresh hunting grounds. Keast (1959) has postulated that the breeding rhythms of animals are deferred until a drought is finished, and many birds migrate out of the stricken areas. After a series of good seasons, the rock-holes and pools in Nootambulla Creek contained an abundant supply of water in 1955, but since then there has been a series of dry seasons and (apart from the rock-holes dammed with concrete walls) very little water available in the natural rock-holes, and none in the creek bed in 1959.

Bonney estimated the average native population of far western New South Wales to be 100 persons to 2,000 square miles, an area that would cover the Mootwingee reserve and the surrounding country for a radius of about 20 miles. It is apparent, therefore, that the 21 caves of paintings, the main and other galleries of engravings, and the numerous camp-sites must have been the work of many generations. The 1883 census of the Aborigines Protection Board stated that there were more than 300 natives in the vicinity of Tibooburra, and probably more on outlying stations. In 1915, there were no more than 50 natives in the same area (N.S.W. Govt. Papers, 1883-1915).

Beckett (1958, 93) said that the last initiation ceremony of the Bagundji (south of the Bandjigali) was held in 1904, and the last Milia rite in 1914 ; that no Aborigines under 40 can now speak their language, and there are none living who can recall the coming of the white man. Remnants of the various tribes now live in Wilcannia, but they are also scattered from Tibooburra to Bourke and Brewarrina.

The Bandjigali (Beckett, 1958, 92) were probably " organised into inter-tribal patrilineal clans, ceremonial groups supposedly descended from a *mura* ancestor who once travelled, naming and forming the country as he went ". These clans extended across tribal boundaries into the Maliangaba, Wonggumara and Gunggadidji tribes. Some of these sacred *mura* tracks go from the White Cliffs district up to Bulloo Downs, others stretch from the Paroo to Lake Eyre. Matrilineal moieties of Eaglehawk and Crow are general in this region (Radcliffe-Brown, 1931).

GEOGRAPHY

The map (q.v.) indicates the topographical relationship of the galleries and accessory sites of rock engravings, the 21 caves which contain stencils and paintings and/or engravings, the four caves possessing floor deposits which were excavated, four stone mounds and surface sites where implements were collected on the Nootambulla Creek flats and on the plateau which bears evidence of native camp-sites. The presence of so many facets of Aboriginal activity makes the site a valuable one for correlative analysis. Each of these facets is described. An area of 18,840 acres was proclaimed Reserve 59533 for the preservation of caves at the request of the Broken Hill Field Naturalists' Club in 1927. The map shows that the Mootwingee Reserve is 83 miles north-east of Broken Hill, 62 miles south-west of White Cliffs and 40 miles almost due east from Sturt Meadows engravings. The Broken Hill-White Cliffs road passes within a mile of the western side of the Reserve. Lithgow (1961) has described the natural history of the area.

The caves and galleries occur among a series of ridges and hills which are part of an extensive dissected plateau of ancient massive sandstones, quartzites and conglomerates. The valleys are flat-floored, narrowing into gorges or canyons at their heads or into long steep slopes of rock. Large rock holes from 10 to 30 feet across have been waterworn into these slopes in the course of time, and some hold water permanently.

For descriptive purposes the creeks traversing two of these valleys have been arbitrarily named Giles Creek and Big Cave Creek, the former because of an inscription purporting to have been made by the explorer, the latter because the largest stencil cave at Mootwingee is near its headwaters.