Ornithology Rocks!

The identification, explanation and comparison of the avian motifs at Flat Rock, Wollombi, and the wider Sydney region.

The soft Hawkesbury sandstone of the greater Sydney Basin is home to numerous engraved rock art sites and painted rock shelters created by the Aboriginal people of the area. The engravings, also known as petroglyphs, feature a variety of recognizable subjects, from humans, animals, and Ancestral Beings/Cultural Heroes, mostly in the simple figurative style (McDonald, 2008). This report focuses specifically on the bird motifs, a number of which are present at the Flat Rock study site, located near Finchley Trig, Wollombi. Some possible identification of these avian motifs is suggested along with explanations for their presence. These figures are also placed in context with similar avian petroglyphs in the wider Sydney region. The emu motifs and the importance of this bird to the Aboriginal people are examined in more detail, including the occurrence of ‘emu-women’ anthropomorphs. This report concludes by looking at other possible bird engravings that can be found in the greater Sydney region.

The site at Flat Rock can be divided into two parts; a large expanse with a number of male human/Cultural Heroes and a very distinctive ‘emu-woman’ present and a smaller area that contains some birds, a crouching man and an anthropomorph all in close proximity (Figure 1). This corresponds to the description provided by Needham (1981), but is at some variance with that provided by Goddard (1937), who doesn’t mention the second area or the first anthropomorph. It is possible they were covered by soil or vegetation that has since cleared, as may happen after a bushfire. Conversely, the account by Goddard (1937) mentions two emu near the first set of figures (Figure 2). These were not observed by the Natural History Illustration (NHIL) participants or mentioned in Needham (1981) and may have since been covered by vegetation. It is unlikely these are the two larger birds seen in the
second site, despite a similar orientation, as two additional engravings clearly lie between them.

There are three distinct bird engravings at the second site (Figure 3). Comparisons of the bird engravings with known species and other engravings suggest there is an unmistakable emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*), a possible brush turkey (*Alectura lathami*), and a purple swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). The later engraving could equally be a small emu (Sydney Rock Art 2017), although the Wollombi town sign suggests where local preference lies (Figure 4). A number of ‘swamphen’ have been identified by websites on local petroglyphs (Sydney Rock Art 2017), but there is nothing to say any of them are more convincing claim to that identification (Figure 5). The brush turkey is not a common motif, but does occur at a couple of other places with a reasonable degree of similarity (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990; Gordon et al., 1993). One of these has been decorated inside, which is not a common feature of animal motifs and may be from a different tribe (Figure 6).

There are a number of emu footprints present at the site, although not as many as observed by Needham (1981), and some may have eroded over time. These prints may indicate direction of travel or the specific track to follow when hunting. It has been suggested the arrow like foot of the brush turkey provides a directional marker to the clan’s country (Gordon et al., 1993). This directional aspect is speculation only and has been applied to the hands of the nearby figures as well. Some engravings may relate to totem animals of the local people, although there has been a tendency in the past to ascribe this to any animal/bird engraving; see Elkin (1949) and McCarthy (1959) for example. The only known totem in the area is of the flying fox and there are no obvious engravings of this animal except for some suggestive traits in that tribe’s human figures (Needham, 1981). One possible interpretation of these carvings is that they were a guide to the food that could be sourced from the area, but they could also be part of an ‘increase’ ceremony designed to yield a better harvest, recollections of a hunt or signifying a women’s area known to exist nearby (Greg Blyton pers comm). Such interpretations will only ever be
Figure 1: A panoramic view of the second part of the Flat Rock site, Wollombi.

Figure 2: A comparison of site maps between Goddard (1937) top and Needham (1981) below. There are more engravings in the latter, including the entire second site, but the two emus seen in Goddard (1973) are missing.

Figures 4&5: The sign at Wollombi township featuring a swamp-hen. The engraving on the right is a possible swamp-hen from Flynn Road, Central Coast.

Figure 3: The avian motifs at Flat Rock, Wollombi - the lower one may be a swamp-hen (P. porphyrio).

Figure 6: Another brush turkey engraving, also from the Wollombi region. The infilled lines are unusual as most simple figurative petroglyphs are outlined only (Gordon et al, 1993).
educated guesses at best though. The fact recorded petroglyphs present at a site can alter through natural processes over a few decades should sound a clear warning against interpreting a site based solely on what is visible at any given time.

Emu petroglyphs are the most common bird petroglyph in the Sydney-Hawkesbury region and this reflects their cultural value to the Aboriginal people. Various motifs show them being hunted (Sydney Rock Art 2017) or with their eggs (McCarthy, 1959), another valuable food source (Figure 7). A comparative study of regional motifs from 40% of known sites separates them out from the ‘other birds’ category (MacDonald, 2008) and they consistently appear in rock art around Australia (Flood, 1990). They are not as common as other local motifs however, in the sites chosen they accounted for only 0.9% (n=76 in total), compared to all other birds at 2.1% (n=166), macropods 7% (n=543), humans 5.4% (n=422), and anthropomorphs 3.2% (n=161). Even fish occur more frequently at 11.6% (n=905), testament both to the region’s coastal location and reduced creative effort required. There is a definite correlation between the food sources of the locals and the typical motifs, although a correlation cannot be drawn between the number of engravings and actual abundance of the animal in question – greater number suggests greater significance to the artist only (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990). Interestingly enough, emus were successfully reintroduced into Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park on the strength of the emu carvings in the area (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990).

Emus also play a role in Aboriginal mythology. The story of how the emu lost its wings to the scheming of the brush turkey may be illustrated at the engravings at Devil’s Rock, Maroota, where the two occur together (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990). It has been suggested by Norris (2007) that the great Emu in the Sky, a negative constellation that matches the Coal-sack nebula, is recorded at Elvina track (Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park) in an elongated emu with its legs bent uncharacteristically behind it (Figure 8). It is certainly conceivable that the majesty of the night sky would merit recording
for younger generations, although it should be noted a similar shaped emu can be found at Faulconbridge and is suggested to be the end result of the hunting scene also portrayed at the site (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990). One of the main Cultural Heroes found in engravings is Daramulan, son of the great Creator Baiame. There is plenty of variation in the stories and engraved representation of Daramulan, but he is often portrayed with emus (Stanbury & Clegg, 1990; Tacon et al., 2006). These may be a special totem or could relate to his mother, one of Baiame’s two wives, the emu-identified Birran-gnulu (Wikipedia, 2017). This might account for the emu-women anthropomorphs that appear in this region, including Flat Rock, said to be his female ancestors (Figure 9). It should be noted however, that there is no references to Daramulan’s emu mother by name in the earliest accounts (Matthews 1895; Slater 1937) and it may be a more recent construct.

Most of the remaining avian motifs in the Sydney region are not easy to identify, many being anonymous birds in flight. Stanbury & Clegg (1990) do tentatively identify a couple of possible species, a fairy penguin at Basin Track and a lyrebird at Terrey Hills (Figure 10). The lyrebird is apparently now hard to locate, even harder to see and in the midst of tiger snake country!! (Rockin’ On 2017). Recent explorations deep in the Blue Mountains have uncovered an engraved eagle at a large site called Gallery Rock (Figure 11), which is mirrored by some paintings at the secret ‘Eagles Reach’ shelter site in the same area (Eastwood, 2014). The eagle may have significance as a totem bird, given the majesty they tend to inspire in people. A lack of representation in engravings probably reflects its low value as a food source. The Wollemi region is also home to an unusual emu engraving which has been made intaglio style where its form has been pecked out of the rock instead of engraved; a technique more common to the tribes living further west (Tacon et al., 2006). Other bird petroglyphs are recorded further afield, with curlews, bustards and owls found in Mootwingee and Euriowie in Western New South Wales (Elkin, 1949). There may well be many others that are waiting to be discovered or are known only to the original custodians of the land.
Producing a comprehensive record of these avian (and animal) motifs has all the hallmarks of an Honours project waiting for a candidate!
Figure 7 (left): Emu engravings from Devils Rock, Maroota, show an emu (and brush turkey) with their eggs (Stanbury and Clegg 1990). The engraving below is a speared emu from Flynn Track, Central Coast. (Sydney Rock Art, 2017)

Figure 8 (right): The ‘emu in the sky’ constellation and the emu engraving from Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park (Norris 2007)

Figure 9: The ‘emu-woman’ anthropomorph from Flat Rock, Wollombi. This may be associated with the Cultural Hero Daramulan and could represent his female ancestors.

Figures 10: A lyrebird from Terrey Hills region and a penguin from Basin Track (Stanbury & Clegg 1990)

Figures 11: An eagle petroglyph from the newly discovered ‘Gallery Rock’ in the Wollemi National Park (Australian Geographic 2014)
References


