

MYTHS ABOUT ROCK ART

Robert G. Bednarik

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
GORDON HOUSE
276 BANBURY ROAD
OXFORD OX2 7ED

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 474 5
ISBN 978 1 78491 475 2 (e-Pdf)

© Archaeopress and Robert G. Bednarik 2016

Cover illustration: The meaning of rock art cannot be established by the cultural outsider: this composition depicts the babies of the rock python. Mandangarri Site, Kimberley, Australia.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

Printed in England by Short Run Press, Exeter

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

Contents

A Little Epistemology	1
Introduction	1
Epistemology of archaeology	7
Setting the scene	11
Animals and Pareidolia	13
Tales of dragons	13
Identifying zoomorphs	20
Archaeological Folklores about Dating	37
The bulls and horses of Iberia	37
The Palaeolithic obsession	44
Myths about rock art age	53
Archaeological excavation	53
Iconographic identification	54
Stylistic sequences	55
Use of analytical methods	61
Axiomatic Confusions	64
Misidentification of non-anthropic rock markings	64
‘Explanations’ of cupules	78
Other mistaken interpretations	86
Misidentifications by combining motifs	86
Invented rock art sequences	89
The Venus figurines	92
Sensationalist Myths and Fringe Legends	97
Sensationalist claims	97
The writing on the wall	103
Seeing things: pareidolia	110
Reaching for stars and gods	114
The importance of being Palaeolithic	121
Rock Art Fairy Tales	129
About shamanism and rock art	129

Myths about mythologies	132
Neuropathologies and rock art	134
Autism.....	134
Asperger’s syndrome	136
Schizophrenia.....	137
Bipolar disorder	139
Brain disorders in human evolution	141
Sinister myths about rock art.....	142
Generic Issues	152
Effects of fakes, misconceptions and falsities	152
Neuroscience and ‘identifications’ in rock art interpretation.....	155
The myths are here to stay.....	160
Conclusion	163
References.....	167
Index	213

Chapter 1

A Little Epistemology

Introduction

Numerous conferences or symposia have been held about the myths supposedly depicted in the rock art of the world, when in fact there is very limited credible ethnographic information available to that effect and most of these scholarly pronouncements are themselves little more than myths. Globally, very little is actually known about the mythologies that may have been externalised in the world's rock art, and authentic information is limited to a very few geographical regions, most notably to Australia. It is particularly instructive to note that the rock art researchers of that continent are much more reluctant to interpret rock art than their international colleagues, and to invent meanings for it. There is obviously a lesson in this contradiction: the message that perhaps the archaeologists and rock art interpreters of the rest of the world would be well advised to consider the reasons for this Australian reluctance.

If one were to write a book about the myths to which rock art can *credibly* be attributed, it would be a rather slim volume. By contrast, the ethnographic study of the creators of the *myths about rock art*, describing themselves as rock art researchers, would provide a vastly more fertile area of research, and one that has been afforded no concerted attention at all until now. The present book is intended to fill this void, and in doing so impress on the reader the need to exercise restraint in the interpretation of the manifestations of early world views.

It is self-evident that the urge to interpret rock art is universal. The most pervasive human reaction to rock art, irrespective of the age, ethnicity or conditioning (academic, social, cognitive, religious, political etc.) of the beholder, is to try to figure out what it depicts and what it means (Bednarik 2013a). The neuroscience of this process has not been adequately explored, and is in any case never considered by those doing the interpreting, who implicitly feel that they have the authority to create authentic understandings of the rock artist's intention. It is never made explicit how the interpreter thinks he or she may have acquired this ability — for instance what part of archaeological training would equip him or her to make these determinations, or why a palaeontologist should be assumed to possess any special aptitude to establish which species a pre-Historic artist intended to depict. These exclusive faculties are taken for granted without evidence, despite the rational stance that they are entirely imagined. The experiment conducted by Professor Macintosh, the only 'blind test' ever undertaken of the proposition that a cultural outsider is able to determine what is depicted in rock art, established

unambiguously that outsiders of the culture that produced the rock art are incapable of establishing what a motif means or depicts. Moreover, these guesses are in any case not testable, hence not scientific.

Macintosh was a distinguished professor of anatomy who recorded and 'identified' numerous painted biomorphs (having the shapes of living creatures) of Beswick Cave in the Northern Territory of Australia (Macintosh 1952). Over two decades later he discovered that the authentic meaning of the rock art was still known to a highly initiated Djauan, Lamderod, whom he took to the site and asked him to explain the rock art imagery of 81 figures in detail, in order to test his own expert interpretations. In doing this he demonstrated that he was a true scientist, testing his own propositions that had through the unusual circumstance become available for testing. He conceded (Macintosh 1977) that he had failed to diagnose correctly the individual painted items in 90% of the site's vast inventory, and he stated that "the mental code of the artists' schematisation cannot be cracked without keys provided by highly initiated informants". For instance Macintosh discovered that anthropomorphs (human-like figures) he had thought were males actually depicted females. One 'female human' was a *gen-gen* or water lizard, a 'kangaroo' depicted a stone-country possum, while other figures were entirely undecipherable to an alien, but easily explained by Lamderod. A 'marsupial head' was in fact a Rainbow Serpent. Macintosh also discovered that images had more than one meaning: a sacred interpretation not accessible to females, who were given an alternative, simpler meaning. Elements in different parts of the rockshelter portrayed aspects of the same myth, presenting "a most involved fusion of several myths, rituals and concepts" (Macintosh 1977: 192). At Tandandjal Cave, a second site in the area 19 km away, Macintosh (1951) also benefitted greatly from the interpretations of a Ngalgbun songman and ritualist, and arrived at the same conclusion. A 10% success rate in identifying images correctly is no better than a random result, suggesting that even the most highly trained cultural outsider has little chance of interpreting even the formal attributes of rock art motifs correctly.

And yet it is even more difficult, far more difficult, to comprehend the depicted narrative, the intended relationships of motifs to each other, or to other aspects of the site. The point is well illustrated in further examples, such as the following provided by Mountford (1976). He is the only Australian researcher who witnessed the production of cupules, which are small depressions of spherical-dome shape hammered into rock that usually occur in groups (Bednarik 2007a). In 1940 he observed a ritual of making cupules on a large boulder near Nantaguna springs, also in the Northern Territory. The boulder is the totemic body of Tukulili, the cockatoo-woman (Figure 1), bearing in a recess around sixteen horizontal cupules. They are the result of *pulkarin* rituals conducted to cause

the pink cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) to lay more eggs. This is accomplished through the mineral powder rising into the air as the cupules are pounded. The dust represents the *kuranita* of the rock and, as it is thus released, it fertilises the female cockatoos. *Kuranita* (life essence) can rise like a mist into the air from any ‘increase site’, impregnating a specific plant, animal or natural force the site is associated with, through its release by an appropriate ceremony. It then increases the supply or strength of that entity, which can range from a plague of head lice to bring down on one’s enemies to the supply of an edible tree gum.

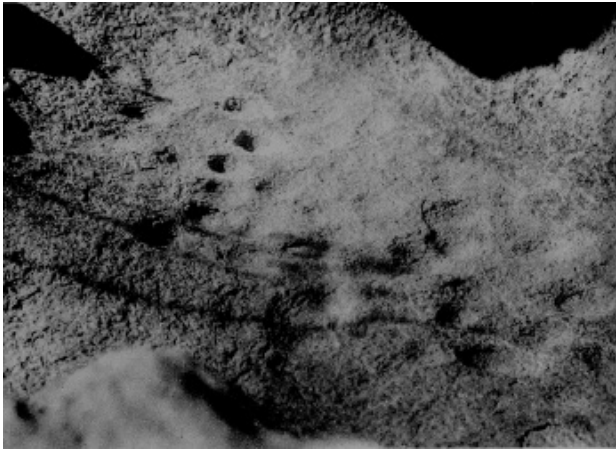


FIGURE 1. THE TUKALILI INCREASE SITE NEAR NANTAGUNA SPRINGS, NORTHERN TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA. THE PRECISE EMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CUPULES HAS BEEN RECORDED (1940 PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES P. MOUNTFORD).

This is one of very few ethnographic explanations of cupules (Bednarik 2008) and the only one available from Australia. What it illustrates is the general impotence of archaeology in explaining archaeological phenomena. Without the recorded ethnographic observation, an archaeologist could not even in a lifetime’s search expect to formulate the correct, authentic explanation for the surviving phenomenon. All proper interpretations of the residue that archaeologists chose to call ‘archaeological remains’ are just as remote and unfathomable as is the correct interpretation of the cupules at Tukulili’s site, but this applies most particularly to ideological aspects of such remains.

Another example of the incredible complexity of the correct (emic or originally authentic) explanation of rock art is presented by Doring with Nyawarra (2014) in his magnificent account of the deep meanings of Kimberley rock art in north-western Australia. For over half a century anthropologists had argued that the Gwion rock paintings of the region are an extinct art form about which contemporary Aborigines had no knowledge. The Gwion tradition (formerly called Bradshaw figures) is in fact so sacred to its owners that they chose to plead ignorance about it when interviewed, when in truth it is the very foundation of their Wunan law, the moral and legal code by which they have lived for millennia.

What eventually forced them to release snippets of this ancient knowledge was the requirement, by Australian law, to demonstrate their connection to the land if they wanted to secure native title to it. Doring has been instrumental in negating the prevailing academic view that the Kimberley tribes possess no knowledge of the meaning of Gwion rock art, providing glimpses of its cultural intricacies and historical connotations. For instance he ascertained the identities of three concrete personages involved in the establishment of Wunan law (Wodoi, Jungun and especially the artist-visionary Wibalma), he located the site where Wunan law was founded (the stone table at Dududu.ngarri), and discovered that the Aborigines possess historical knowledge of the period before tribal boundaries were established by Wunan law (the seventeen tribes were named after birds). Above all, Doring's account shows that the information blithely reported by anthropologists can be evasive, or amount to a simplistic version considered suitable for ignorant foreigners.

I have encountered similar experiences on various occasions. In the Pilbara of Western Australia, especially near the Dampier Archipelago, I have worked with many octogenarians who at the time (in the 1960s) were the very last people in the region who had been born and initiated in a traditional tribal setting during the 19th century, and thus possessed impeccable cultural knowledge (the destruction of traditional cultures was particularly swift in the wake of the Dampier massacres of 1868, which had involved the genocide of an entire tribe, teaching the Pilbara tribes how ruthless the colonisers could be). A great deal of what these elders, the region's last of the 'men of high degree' (Elkin 1945), taught me cannot be published; it was often made clear to me that this was restricted knowledge (Bednarik 2006a). Much of this referred to the deeper meanings of petroglyph motifs or the significance of specific sites. About one third of the rock art is sacred, and correct information is only available to certain people, most often initiated males. Like Macintosh and several ethnographers, such as Professor A. P. Elkin, I also found that within one explanation of meaning there may be others, and the one provided to a questioner would be commensurate with his perceived level of understanding.

A generic relevant consideration is that the communication between the informants and the recorder is always by means of translation. Even where the interviewer speaks the language of the people being studied, he or she is usually not very proficient in their language. He certainly has little or no linguistic access to those aspects of the culture that are avoided, or indeed taboo. Because he has an inadequate understanding of these limitations, his interpretation of what he does have access to will be affected by these complications. In many cases he uses a third party, an interpreter, and what he obtains is quite literally an interpretation, and not factual information. He then interprets this interpretation in a way that makes sense in

his own linguistic and cognitive framework. Moreover, extant traditional cultures do not permit outsiders access to all aspects of their metaphysical world. For instance, students of the oldest surviving culture on earth, that of the Australian Aborigines, have found to their surprise that the knowledge bestowed on them is deliberately limited in several directions. Not only in the sexual sense, because of the strict gender divisions in cultural knowledge (there are restrictions according to the gender of both informant and interviewer), but there are also explanations within explanations, in the fashion of Russian dolls: upon opening one, there is always another one inside. Thus I have found that the same informant used a different, more elaborate explanation for a phenomenon many years after he had given me a simpler one. When questioned about that, he would say, “but twenty years ago you didn’t know much” (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. TRADITIONAL CUSTODIAN MONTY HALE, SENIOR ELDER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ABYDOS PETROGLYPH COMPLEX IN THE PILBARA, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, WITH THE AUTHOR.

In effect the explanations given to ethnographers are commensurate with a researcher’s perceived competence or ‘status’. For instance, a rock art motif may have several meanings, beginning from a very simple level. This is rather like an explanation a contemporary urban Western parent would give to his or her small child. Once it had grown up, a more advanced explanation is considered appropriate, and so on. In many indigenous or tribal societies around the world, knowledge is of restricted access, secret or sacred in nature, with different levels of severity. In societies such as the Australian Aboriginal people, serious breaches of sacred matters were traditionally punishable by death, and are often seen as more serious crimes than murder, for instance. It is therefore inconceivable that information at the level of sacred knowledge would be passed on to uninitiated alien researchers, simply to satisfy their strange curiosity. In effect all published ethnographic evidence of such metaphysical knowledge of any tribal people is of the type given to people of poor understanding of the society in question. It

should be obvious that this mechanism would have contributed to a simplification of ethnographic accounts: not only did the informants regularly observe the restrictions of tribal laws; they would have often felt obliged to simplify interpretations for untutored outsiders. There are times, in my experience and that of others, when they are forced to deceive their questioners, in order to protect sacred knowledge. Ethnographers, often naively unaware of these factors, base their professional reputation and standing on their findings, and they may not be willing to admit these severe limitations inherent in their accounts.

Therefore in indigenous societies the separation of religious and profane matters is not remotely as clear as it is in modern urban societies. Since native societies possess various levels of restrictions on metaphysical knowledge we must accept that these also affect the nature of the information which *can* be provided to uninitiated outsiders, such as researchers. This applies to many aspects of indigenous cultures, and that includes the ultimate meaning of rock art motifs, the subject of this book. Before considering so-called ethnographic information as it is found in the anthropological literature it needs to be established how reliable it might be: how close was the researcher to the community in question, and over how many decades did he work with its members? Much of such information was collected for the purpose of personal advancement within academia, and for that reason alone it may be unreliable or at least culturally trivial. In my experience a researcher who delves deeply into the ontogeny of an indigenous community is likely to shed his ambitions along the way, over the decades, and by the time he attains a comprehensive understanding of a belief system he has lost his desire to boast with his knowledge. He has realised that to expose the deeper intricacies of an elaborate ontology to the glare of 'rationality' is to inaugurate its destruction. As one Aboriginal elder once said to me, it took him 80 years to "become" an Aboriginal; why would he tell some visitor from a university all he knew?

Since Professor Macintosh's clarification was published in 1977, Australian rock art researchers have adopted the convention of always placing their 'determinations' of motif meanings in quotation marks, a practice which their colleagues in the rest of the world have not yet espoused. This is of particular significance when it is remembered that Australia is the only country where *comprehensive* knowledge about the meaning of rock art has remained available to the present time. The onus is on those who choose to interpret rock art to demonstrate what special ability they possess to do so correctly, and why anyone should take their contentions seriously.

In this volume we will review and analyse some of the mythologies rock art interpreters have created. This is such a rich source of information illustrating the flaws of the humanities that it is hard to believe that no book has ever been

written to analyse them. This vast topic amounts to virtually millions of false claims presented in the published literature, over the past two centuries. It is this veritable mother-lode of published scholarly mistakes that will be explored here.

Epistemology of archaeology

For well over a century, ever since prehistorians grudgingly accepted the Pleistocene age of the Altamira cave art in Spain (Cartailhac 1902), after first ruining the life of its discoverer, Don Marcelino Santiago Tomás Sanz de Sautuola (1831–1888), rock art has been subjected to interpretation by archaeologists (Bednarik 2013b). Throughout this time, archaeologists, art historians and others have treated rock art as art, essentially in the sense of modern Western perception of what art is. And yet, the producers of the world's rock art, from traditional or indigenous societies, have no concept of art in the Western sense, and the art-like productions of their societies, in some cases tens of millennia old, do not constitute art as we perceive it. They are not commodities, they have no 'art histories', their makers were not professional artists, and they cannot be simplistically understood by alien commentators. Indeed, their makers referred to different constructs of reality as we shall soon discover.

The main reason for the widespread belief among archaeologists to be able to understand palaeoart production, even to communicate with the palaeoartist (e.g. Mithen 1998), appears to be the purported naturalism of some of the Franco-Cantabrian cave art in south-western Europe. While it is true that some rock art traditions, such as those of the San of southern Africa, some of the pastoralists of the Sahara, or the Gwion palaeoartists of the Australian Kimberley present high levels of realism in their imagery, the Final Pleistocene palaeoart of Europe is particularly remote conceptually. The self-deception practised by archaeologists is easily explained. If adequate clues are detected in a motif to invite its 'identification', it is considered to be figurative or iconographic, and it is then interpreted on that basis. Clearly the process is greatly expedited by high realism in depiction, but it still reflects the values, mental constructs and visual responses of the *beholder* rather than the *producer* of the rock art motif. This is then a subjective procedure that can only tell us about the cognition, perception and mental world of the former; it tells us absolutely nothing about the mute maker of the object, his or her worldview or beliefs.

But the key to understanding the epistemological flaw in the process of 'identifying' the intent of rock artists is that the world's rock art was typically produced by illiterate people, whose brains differed significantly from those of literates in how they were organised, interconnected and integrated (Helvenston 2013). Those of non-literates operate largely through 'magical thinking', whereas

the operation by cause and effect reasoning is acquired ontologically. On the basis of neuroscientific considerations, the most reliable modern interpreters of rock art should be expected to be infants, followed by illiterates. The least qualified are modern academic sophisticates, such as archaeologists or palaeontologists, who are not only literate but have in their life time (ontogenically) undergone massive conditioning (Bednarik 2011a, 2012a, 2013c). The plasticity of the human brain facilitates its modification by ontogenic experience. Neuroscience has unambiguously demonstrated that cultural activity modifies the chemistry and structure of the brain through affecting the flow of neurotransmitters and hormones (Smail 2007) and even the quantity of grey matter (Maguire et al. 2000; Draganski et al. 2004; Malafouris 2008). In short, a modern brain is not a suitable medium to communicate with the brain of a rock artist.

Moreover, most rock art traditions of the world are far from naturalistic in the modern Western sense, but appear to be highly stylised, schematised or conventionalised. Depending on the degree to which such cultural treatment departs from ultimately Eurocentric conventions, meaning tends to be inaccessible to the cultural outsider, including and especially the modern scholar. The belief that there is an iconographic cut-off point up to which representational intent can be determined by the investigator is a falsity, besides being untestable and thus unscientific; it derives from purported authority and ethnocentric perception. The meaning of rock art for which an emic (authentic in the world view of the rock art producer) explanation is lacking is simply not accessible to the alien investigator.

Although this is already clear from purely rational considerations, we have sound empirical verification of this fundamental precept in the form of the above-mentioned blind test conducted by Macintosh. If a distinguished professor of anatomy can concede that he failed abysmally in correctly identifying most of the painted biomorphs of Beswick and Tandandjal Caves, the prospects of mere archaeologists, lacking his relevant proficiency, of correctly determining what has been depicted in rock art appear to be very slim indeed. But even if they did have that expertise, they would face yet another hurdle: how could they possibly present their explanations as falsifiable propositions, which is essential for them to be scientific propositions?

Epistemology addresses standards or norms for justification and reasoning (including logic and probability theory), ideals of rationality, and the effects of specific philosophies (e.g. empiricism, relativism), among other things. It seeks to determine the origins and nature of 'knowledge', examining the methods used in gathering it, its validity and scope. Such a clear understanding of what is all too easily defined as knowledge is of fundamental importance in assessing the millions of false claims that have been made about rock art. As historically

and culturally situated creatures we cannot easily step outside our concepts, standards and beliefs to appraise their fit with some mind-independent reality of Kantian ‘things-in-themselves’, or some illusory ‘objective reality’. A number of philosophers and social scientists (e.g. Quine 1960; Hollis 1967; Davidson 1984) have even argued that we can only understand or interpret others if they largely agree with us about what is true, reasonable or justified. The academic endeavour has resulted in a variety of schools, the disciples of which are separated by ‘logical gaps’: “They think differently, speak a different language, live in a different world” (Polanyi 1958: 151). Or to quote Kuhn, “the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. ... Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same direction” (Kuhn 1970: 150).

Some of these branches of the academic project have chosen to operate under a collective umbrella framework, called *science*; others have developed their own various frameworks, such as the humanities. Science, today, favours a normative epistemic relativism over an over-simplified absolutism, but demands specific procedures of refutation and repeatability of experiments, and strives for refutable theories cast in terms of causes. After all, quantum theory implies that determinism fails and that objects need not always have determinate locations in space and time or determinate magnitudes (like a particular momentum or energy or spin). In all of this, the issue of testability of hypotheses is utterly paramount, involving two components: first, the logical property that is variously described as contingency, defeasibility or falsifiability (which means that counterexamples to the hypothesis are logically possible); and second, the practical feasibility of observing a reproducible series of such counterexamples if they do exist. Thus a hypothesis is testable if there is some real hope of deciding whether it is true or false of real experience.

This is the crux of the matter: any determination of what is depicted in rock art, or of any other intent on the part of its creator, can only be validated if it is made by someone of the culture or worldview sharing the reality construct of the artist. If the determination is made by anyone else its validity cannot be ascertained or refuted; it is untestable, it is unfalsifiable — hence it is not scientific. The principal epistemological characteristic of archaeology as it has been conducted until now is its inability to offer internally falsifiable propositions (Bednarik 2013b). Relativism decrees that this does not render archaeology in some way inferior; archaeology is simply an epistemic framework that has chosen to eschew the scientific demand of testability in favour of a framework operating on a different basis. However, epistemologically archaeology as it has been conducted so far differs from all other disciplines in that they all endeavour to define real entities, whereas in archaeology, particularly when dealing with early phases, there should

not even be pretence of that. Its defined entities, such as artefacts, are observer-relative or 'institutional' facts (Searle 1995). As Searle illustrates by example, an object may be made partly of wood, partly of metal, which are its 'brute facts'. Its property of being a screwdriver exists only because the person who makes or uses it represents it as such. Precisely the same applies to an object made in the Pleistocene or early Holocene; it has factual properties, and socially constructed, observer-relative properties. However, there is no evidence that the latter are shared between the ancient maker and user of the object, and its modern-day archaeologist interpreter. The term *déformation professionnelle* refers to this issue: professional training, which as a process mimics the neuropsychology of obsessive compulsive disorder (Bednarik 2011a), also results in a distortion in the way the world is perceived. Confirmation bias (Wason 1960; Evans et al. 1983) can only add to the sophistry. Observer-relative definitions, attributions and claims about the distant human past are clearly not in themselves of scientific utility; they need to be subjected to metamorphological analysis (Bednarik 1995a, 2013b), which so far has not occurred in a systematic fashion.

This severe epistemological impediment to archaeological claims of knowledge is universal to all periods up to the introduction of extensive written records. For instance the tool types named and identified can only form etic or observer-relative taxonomies, they are not real or emic classifications (Clark 2009: 26). Precisely the same applies to motifs of rock art or items of portable palaeoart. Archaeologists then compound the mistake by defining specific combinations of implements as 'cultures', which begs the question why they think cultures should be characterised by tools. Obviously this is not the case today, why should it have been so in the distant past? Moreover, the people who supposedly used these fictitious cultures are then labelled as if they constituted discrete tribes, ethnic groups, language groups, nations or some other definable political or social entities. It does not seem to occur to archaeologists that, first, cultures are determined by cultural variables (art, language, mode of relating to reality etc.), and second, that assemblages of (invented) tool types express, at best, technological responses to life's challenges, i.e. they are intra-cultural variables. If one adds to this the many other epistemological shortcomings of archaeology, such as the lack of testability of its pronouncements about excavated strata (every sediment parcel can only be excavated once, therefore most claims made about it are untestable), or its responses to heretics, it becomes evident that it is conducted outside of science. It imports a great many scientific propositions from the hard sciences, but that does not make it a science any more than industry becomes a science because it uses sciences. Or as a famous archaeologist once poignantly stated, having a wooden leg does not turn someone into a tree (Clarke 1978: 465).

This is not to be seen as a critique of archaeology, which as a humanity has little choice but to operate on that basis. It is simply a clarification of its epistemology, establishing that an archaeologist has no special insights into what a rock art image depicts. Similarly, because the opinions of zoologists and palaeontologists have often been cited in support of identifications of zoomorphs (motifs providing adequate visual information to contemporary humans as resembling animal form) in rock art, it needs to be stated upfront that they are trained to recognise species or genera of animal specimens and their parts; they possess absolutely no proficiency in ascertaining which animal has been depicted in rock art. It is absurd to presume them to have such authority, when the issue, clearly, is about an alien graphic convention they cannot be expected to be familiar with or to cognitively comprehend.

Setting the scene

The above considerations, in a sense, establish the parameters for this book on the mythologies that have been created about rock art. First and foremost, they have established the incommensurability between the true meanings of rock art and the notions a modern beholder is likely to form about them. There are numerous reasons for that, but the principal ones are perhaps the following:

1. The brains of the creators of rock art and its modern viewers differ significantly, and effective communication between them is no more possible than equitable interaction *as equals* is possible between coloniser and colonised. This is clearly established by a review of the relevant neuroscience, and modern rock art beholders who ‘communicate’ with the artist or ‘know’ his intent are victims of self-deception and autosuggestion.
2. Ethnographic interpretations of rock art are of variable quality, which is determined by the individual researcher’s level of acceptance by the indigenous society concerned. Where a culture restricts access to the meaning of rock art, as appears to be often the case, published information is likely to be tainted or trivial.
3. Free-standing interpretation of rock art by a modern viewer is essentially a source of information about that person’s perception, cognition and construct of reality. In a scientific sense its only relevance is in defining these variables, and it has very little relevance to what is on the rock surface, or to aspects of the rock artist’s culture.
4. The epistemological nature of archaeology excludes it categorically from being able to tell us what a rock art motif depicts or what it means. Archaeology only creates observer-relative or etic explanations that are unfalsifiable propositions.

The separation of what might reasonably count as fact from what is evidently closer to fiction will be considered on all pages of this volume. None of the above

is to imply that the correct meaning of rock art is necessarily inaccessible and will always remain so. However, such access is contingent upon the destruction of false interpretations, because these are the first major impediment to such access. What has been said is that the methodology so far brought to bear on this subject is inadequate in such a task, the second major impediment to effective rock art study. The scientific research of rock art remains in its earliest infancy and some sections of the archaeological community have resisted its introduction. Scientific approaches to rock art have so far remained limited to a few areas, and are not well established even in those (Bednarik 2007b). Before they can be applied more systematically it is essential that the accumulated deadwood in the field of rock art research be eliminated. And before that can be done, it needs to be identified.

That, in a nutshell, is the purpose of this book.