C. G. Jung’s Concept of the Archetypes and Aboriginal Rock Art

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1. **Introduction**

We are very fortunate here in south-eastern Australia to live in the midst of an extremely rich trove of Aboriginal rock engravings and paintings. There are, for example, three major rock painting sites in Namadgi National Park a drive of 90 minutes or so from the centre of Canberra. There are many more sites, at least 2,000- mostly engravings, in the Sydney metropolitan area. Many of these sites are not at all difficult to reach. Most of them are in national parks, public parks or nature reserves.

One Sydney Aboriginal engraving, for example, portraying a large shark with a much smaller fish in its stomach (Photo 1), is at Mackenzies Point directly beside the footpath running from Bondi Beach to Bronte Beach and beyond. I’ve outlined the photographic image in white ink to make it easier to see (Photo 2).

Two things are noteworthy about this shark engraving. First, there is the belt across the shark’s middle. Such a belt, made of human hair, was an important part of Aboriginal ceremonial regalia. These belts often appear in Aboriginal rock paintings and engravings around the waists or midsections of human, spirit and animal figures.

Second, the image of a large fish, like the shark in this engraving, swallowing a smaller fish or fishes, a stingray, a man or a woman is found in several other Aboriginal rock engravings in the Sydney region. Although I don’t know what story, if any, these engravings illustrate, their imagery is certainly not alone in world mythology. To take only two examples, there is the Biblical tale of Jonah being swallowed by a large fish and the representation in Hindu iconography of the god Vishnu’s emerging from the mouth of his incarnation as a huge fish.

The Bondi to Bronte footpath is surely one of the most heavily-used walking tracks in Australia. Nevertheless, most of the passers-by seem completely oblivious to the shark engraving. This is not surprising as there is no sign drawing attention to the site and the engraving itself is not obvious and is easy to miss (Photo 3).

The way that the shark and fish engraving is ignored illustrates the general lack of interest that Aboriginal rock art seems to have for most people in our part of Australia. One might say that there would be more interest if there were more publicity given to the sites and if their locations were made more widely known. Recent history, however, shows that there is an unfortunate consequence to providing more awareness of the sites and clear directions on how to reach them. In the final decades of the last century and into the first years of the new millennium quite a few Aboriginal rock art sites were signposted on roads and clearly marked on maps like the Sydway *Greater Sydney & Blue Mountains Street Directory* of 2002. Although this made the sites more accessible, the result was sometimes disastrous. Just how disastrous can be seen from what happened to the Bull Cave site in a pocket of remnant bushland in Campbelltown’s Kentlyn suburb.

Bull Cave (Photo 4)[[1]](#footnote-1) is situated at what was evidently a meeting place for three Aboriginal groups- the Dharawal, Dharug and Gundungurra. Members of these and earlier groups left extensive paintings in the cave, among which were large drawings in charcoal and red pigment of two bovines- a bull and, probably, a cow. In 1971 when Bull Cave- named after those drawings- was first scientifically investigated, the style of the bovine drawings was identified as definitely Aboriginal. The drawings were also considered to be older than the 1820s when European settlement, including a vicious massacre, dispersed the Aboriginal population in the area. So how did there come to be drawings in Bull Cave of a bull and a cow, animals unknown in Australia before 1788?

In June 1788 one bull, five cows and a bull calf, all brought from South Africa on the First Fleet, escaped from their paddock on what is now the Sydney Domain and disappeared into the bush. Seven years later in the region where Campbelltown was later established two convicts came across a herd of wild cattle, descendants of those escaped beasts. Meanwhile, an Aboriginal person had been so impressed by these exotic animals that he or she produced a portrait of two of them on the wall of the already existing art site at Bull Cave.

Because it included the only known Aboriginal painting of cattle just after they were first brought to Australia, the Bull Cave artwork was recognised by the scientists who recorded it as being of outstanding importance. Tragically, and I don’t use that term lightly, soon after it was recorded the art in the cave was extensively damaged by vandals. In 1982 the National Parks and Wildlife Service tried to prevent further vandalism by covering the entrance to the cave with a protective metal fence. Sadly, this did not stop further graffiti from being spray-painted over the Aboriginal art (Photo 5). Although it is claimed that the bull image remains visible, when I visited the site in 2017 I could see in the midst of the graffiti only a few Aboriginal hand stencils in red and white. There remained to my eyes no trace of either the bull or the cow.

Bull Cave shows that, while Aboriginal rock art should be brought to public notice, it must be guarded from those who would destroy it. In harmony with the opinion of most Aboriginal groups consulted, officialdom’s answer to the paradoxical need both to advertise and protect rock art is to excise the majority of sites from public awareness while drawing attention to a selected few sites. This simultaneous concealing and select revealing can be seen in the A.C.T. in the Aboriginal rock art policy of Namadgi National Park and the Ngambri people associated with it. At Yankee Hat Mountain in the Park (Photo 6) there is an impressive Aboriginal painting under the overhang of a massive boulder (Photo 7). Although this site is currently closed due to the severe bushfire in the area last summer, in normal years the public is encouraged to visit the site. On the other hand, public access to the other two major art sites in the Park is discouraged by the removal of official references to the sites and the obliteration of the pathways to them. Visits to these sites are not forbidden but are made very difficult. Only those who are prepared to do sustained research in the relevant academic literature together with a willingness to undertake serious bush-bashing will be able to find them.

Environmental and heritage authorities in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia follow the same rock art policy as the A.C.T. The Northern Territory and Queensland also follow this policy as well as putting rock art in those places where it is a part of a living tradition under the custodianship of recognised Aboriginal communities. Tasmania both follows a concealment policy and gives control of rock art sites to Aboriginal groups. I am very doubtful about Western Australia where mining companies seem to be able to do as they like with rock art sites.

I personally agree whole-heartedly with the policy of concealing and selectively revealing art sites and of giving control over them to Aboriginal groups where relevant. Two of the sites which I’m discussing today, one of which is Bull Cave, are not marked. The others are open to visitors, well-signposted and easy to reach after a short walk.

**II. Interpretation**

Once one arrives at an Aboriginal rock art site, whether one with paintings or one with engravings, three questions naturally arise:

1. How old are they?
2. What do they mean?
3. What relevance do they have for contemporary life?

As far as age is concerned, it is very difficult to date Aboriginal rock art unless there is documentation of use. For example, the archaeologist Josephine Flood, then with the Australian Heritage Commission, conducted an excavation at the base of the Yankee Hat rock art site in Namadgi National Park. According to radiocarbon dating of charcoal found at the lowest level of her excavation, settlement at the Yankee Hat site dated back some 700 years[[2]](#footnote-2). The radiocarbon dating, of course, gives only the date of oldest occupation of the site. It says nothing about the age of the paintings there. This brings up another problem with dating an Aboriginal art site. All evidence, drawing from practices where rock art is a living tradition, is that rock paintings and engravings played a role in initiations and other ceremonies. They were, therefore, periodically renewed, added to and changed. This makes dating difficult. Many specialists in Aboriginal rock art have tried to cope with this by arriving at an estimated date through the identification of overlying images, alterations in paints and pigments and changes in style.

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one rock art site in south-eastern Australia that can be more or less precisely dated. That is the rock engraving protected by orange plastic fencing behind a historical Aboriginal mission church and manse at the corner of Adina and Elaroo Avenues in the Sydney suburb of La Perouse (Photo 8). The engraving depicts a front-facing man, with a boomerang in his left hand, about to hurl his spear from his raised right hand (Photos 9 and10) at a kangaroo with its head turned toward the man (Photos 11 and 12).

According to the memories of eye-witnesses, this engraving was produced in 1931. Furthermore, probably uniquely in our part of Australia, the names of the engravers are known. They were Burt Tambar, Bob Simms and Jack Simms- all members of the La Perouse Aboriginal community. Despite some probably European influences- like the way the kangaroo’s head is turned back, the engraving is undeniably Aboriginal. Its theme is found in pre-European Aboriginal engravings and it was made in the traditional manner of pecking out and then filling in the outline of an image with a sharp stone.

Moving on to the question of meaning, the significance of Aboriginal rock art is clear in those regions where it forms a part of a living tradition. However, since most Aboriginal cultures tend to give layers of meaning to things like rock art that have intense spiritual power, it is most unlikely that a man or woman in that culture will reveal any higher level meaning to a person not properly initiated. A possible example of such layered significance is provided by the 1931 La Perouse engraving. The inspiration behind the engraving is given, again on the basis of memory, as being “connected with the [expected] opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in March 1932”.[[3]](#footnote-3) While this may have been a superficial meaning of the engraving, it is at least conceivable that the three engravers were motivated by a more traditional significance. Given the time and place, those concerned may have thought it best to leave this significance unstated.

When looking for the meaning of Aboriginal rock art sites in south-eastern Australia it is important to keep in mind the fact that Aboriginal culture in this area has seen drastic suppression and dislocation. In the words of an Aboriginal elder quoted on a sign at Yeddonba Aboriginal Cultural Site in Chiltern-Mt. Pilot National Park near Beechworth in north-eastern Victoria (Photo 13): “These rocks have heard voices over thousands of years. Sometimes in the past our ancestors visited here and chose to paint on the rocks. We are not sure exactly why they made paintings here. Knowledge about this site was disrupted by settlers and the gold rush. We believe the paintings were made to teach people about the culture. They are important to our community because they remind us that our people were here a long time ago.”

With regard to the question of the relevance of Aboriginal rock art for contemporary life, it seems to me that there are four main answers to the question. First, for anyone who is associated with an Aboriginal group the art is part of the ongoing development of that group’s cultural life. Several times, while visiting an Aboriginal rock art site, I’ve noticed the remains of small fires. Are these signs of the performance of a ceremony or just the residue of a picnic. It is impossible to say.

Second, there is the humanistic relevance of rock engravings and paintings. In addition to whatever religious or cultural contexts they may have had, many of these works illustrate the daily lives of their creators and so have a direct relation to our own lives. For instance, there is the engraving of a man and a woman at the carefully prepared for public viewing Basin Track site on West Head in Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park (Photo 14). The male figure has a headdress or hairdo. He holds a boomerang in his left hand, like the man in the La Perouse site, and a fish (not visible in my photograph) in his upraised right hand; at his right armpit is a dilly bag and what may be a fishing line. To his left is the female figure with her coolamon ready to hold gathered roots and berries. What could be more relevant to human life in any age than going fishing and doing the shopping- whether in the bush or a super market. Through this engraving the modern viewer can feel a human identity with these figures from the past. The figure lying on its back below the man and woman seems to belong to an unrelated set of engravings. This figure is wearing a belt like the shark at Mackenzies Point.

Third is the artistic relevance of Aboriginal rock art. Outside south-eastern Australia near Laura in Queensland about half way up the Cape York Peninsula, there is a remarkable series of rock art galleries in the care of a local Aboriginal organisation. One of these galleries (Photo 15) features a series of male and female spirit figures known as Quinkan. They qualify as fine art by any standard.

I find the fourth answer to the question of the relevance of Aboriginal rock art in Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of the archetype. There are three quotes from Jung’s work which are especially apt for the contemporary relevance of rock engravings and paintings in terms of the archetypes:

On page 161 of Volume 9, Part I of his Collected Works, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Routledge, London:1990 [1959]), Jung says: “[T]he archetype is always an image belonging to the whole human race and not merely to the individual…”

That is to say, an archetype is universal.

And, from page 160 of the same volume: “For the archetype is an element of our psychic structure and thus a vital and necessary component in our psychic economy. It represents or personifies certain instinctive data of the dark, primitive psyche, the real but invisible roots of consciousness.”

In other words, an archetype stems from the roots of every person’s individual consciousness.

And, finally, from page 179 of that volume: “[The archetype] has a potential existence only, and when it takes shape in matter, it is no longer what it was. It persists throughout the ages and requires interpreting ever anew. The archetypes are the imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually.”

So an archetype has no definite meaning but must be constantly reinterpreted through time.

I take Jung’s description of the archetype to indicate that the modern observer of Aboriginal rock paintings or engravings can see and feel in them archetypes that have a fresh and immediate impact on that observer’s psyche.

Before applying Jung’s concept of the archetype to a work of Aboriginal rock art, it will be useful to find archetypes in something more familiar like a painting in European-Australian tradition.

Such a painting, hanging in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, is “Mrs. Adolphus Sceales with Black Jimmie on Merrang Station” done in 1856 by Robert Dowling (1827-1886) (Photo 16). At first sight, the painting is just the depiction of a 19th century land-owning woman Mrs. Adolphus Sceales- Jane Sceales- clad in the black mourning attire of her recent widowhood. She has chosen to have included in her portrait scene her Aboriginal groom Jimmie and her two horses and two dogs. The artist Robert Dowling has, however, hinted at something deeper in giving his painting a background of rather surreal clouds, trees and buildings. This background sets the stage for the perceptive viewer to find a more archetypal meaning in the picture. Might not Jane Scaeles, gazing from the right side of the painting into the distance beyond Jimmie, be an archetypal woman? Could Jimmie, staring into the distance beyond us the observers, be an archetypal man? Could the pair of them even be in Jungian terms anima and animus? Are the horses, one held reined in by Jane and the other by Jimmie, also archetypes? And what of the dogs, one directing its attention toward Jane and the other looking away from her toward Jimmie. Are they not also archetypal? They are if they are at the roots of the observer’s consciousness.

I find an excellent example of the archetypal content of Aboriginal rock art in a painting found in a grotto within a gigantic boulder at Bunjil’s Cave Heritage Site near Stawell in south-western Victoria (Photo 17). This painting portrays Bunjil, the primary ancestral spirit of several Aboriginal groups in western Victoria (Photo 18). He is seated cross-legged with his hands on his hips. He has a belt around his waist like the Basin Track figure and the Mackenzies Point shark. His body is painted with designs. With him at his left side is a large dingo facing toward him and a small dingo turned away from him. No other rock art representation of Bunjil is known.

According to A.W. Howitt, who collected and recorded first-hand information about Aboriginal customs and beliefs in south-eastern Australia in the period of initial European contact, Bunjil taught his people the arts of life including the correct way to choose a marriage partner. His son is the rainbow and he himself became a star in the sky- Fomalhaut in the constellation Piscis Austrinus in the opinion of some groups and Altair in the constellation Aquila in the legends of others.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The meaning of Bunjil’s name gives a further insight to his character. By the mid decades of the twentieth century, the Aboriginal languages of Victoria were said to be entirely extinct. The well-known linguist Dr. Luise Hercus, who was my friend and colleague at the Australian National University for many years, refused to believe this. She sought out elderly Aboriginal people in Victoria who still remembered their traditional language, sometimes fairly completely but often only in fragments. Many of them had not spoken their language since childhood. In 1969 Luise’s two volume work *The Languages of Victoria: A Late Survey* was published by The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. If Luise had not done that research and produced that book we would today have very little knowledge of the indigenous languages of the state of Victoria. According to Luise’s findings in the Wembawemba language of north-central Victoria *bandjil* means ‘Murray cod’, in the speech of the Madimadi who live in the western Murray valley in New South Wales and Victoria *bandil* is a ‘huge Murray cod’ and in Woiwuru, spoken to the north of Melbourne *bundjil* is an ‘eagle-hawk’ or wedge-tailed eagle. In A.W. Howitt’s book there is the further information that an expert or learned man could be called ‘bunjil’. So the spirit called Banjil was an awe-inspiring being.

No doubt, whoever painted Bunjil and the two dingoes was referring to a myth or story which is now lost. But to me, ignorant of that myth, the location of the painting in a cave evokes an archetypal message in which the Bunjil figure is an archetypal human being- either male or female as there is no representation of any sexual characteristic- accompanied by two archetypal dogs. Reminiscent of the Dowling painting, one dog is looking toward the human figure and the other is looking away. The myth may be gone but the archetypes behind it remain.

Howitt was the first to mention the painting of Bunjil in Bunjil’s Cave in these words: “[O]ne of the Mukjarawaint said that at one time there was a figure of Bunjil and his dog painted in a small cave behind a large rock in the Black Range near Stawell, but I have not seen it, nor have I heard of any one having seen it.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The subsequent history of the Bunjil’s Cave painting provides an example of the vicissitudes undergone by Aboriginal rock art in Australia[[6]](#footnote-6).

Historians and anthropologists in Victoria were intrigued by Howitt’s reference to the Bunjil painting, but all efforts to locate it were unsuccessful. Then, in 1957, researchers discovered that Bunjil’s Cave was quite well-known to people living in the Stawell area. As children, some of them said they had played in the cave and were fascinated by the painting. They thought it was the work of an itinerant swagman. Furthermore, they said that, as children, they had touched up the painting but stressed that they did not alter the design.

Talk about “touching up” naturally aroused suspicions and great controversy about the authenticity of the Bunjil’s Cave painting erupted among specialists in Victoria. As a result, in 1979 Bunjil’s Cave was removed from the Victoria Archaeological Survey site register. One of the key issues in the controversy was the fact that Howitt had said that there was only one dog in the painting whereas in the actual painting there are two dogs.

Further investigations, including pigment tests, caused Bunjil’s Cave to be reinstated to the Victoria Archaeological Survey site register in 1983. In 1984 the figure of Bunjil appeared on an Australia Post stamp.

Later, upon examination of Howitt’s hand-written field notes, it was discovered that he had said about the cave**:** “Bunjil is painted in it and a little dog in each side.” The reference to only one dog in Howitt’s published account is a mistake. The statement about the position of the dogs is also wrong but understandable given that neither Howitt nor the Mukjarawaint man, identified in Howitt’s notes as John Connolly, had personally visited Bunjil’s Cave.

Unfortunately, over the years Bunjil’s Cave was defaced by painted graffiti including racist comments. The graffiti have been removed, but in some cases by over-painting in black paint which has also covered a faint human figure drawn in red ochre on the side of the boulder outside the cave. The cave and its art are now protected by a sturdy metal fence.

I’d like to close my talk with another archetypal figure in a work of Aboriginal rock art. This is a rock engraving off the America Bay Track in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Like the Bull Cave site which I mentioned earlier, the way to this engraving site is unmarked. The engraving matches mythological descriptions of Daramulan, a primary ancestral spirit commonly found over

quite a large part of New South Wales (Photo 19 and outlined in Photo 20). According to these descriptions, Daramulan, whose wife is an emu, has an emu-shaped back and only one leg. In an 1873 article William Ridley writes that in the Kamilaroi language, spoken over an extensive region of north-east New South Wales, the word for ‘thigh’ is *durra* and the word for ‘one’ is *māl* so that Daramulan, taking *–an* as a grammatical suffix, would mean ‘one-thighed’.[[7]](#footnote-7) In further information about him given by Howitt,[[8]](#footnote-8) Daramulan had a role similar to Bunjil’s and gave the laws by which his people live. Like Bunjil, it is said that Daramulan is a star, in his case Alpha Crucis in the Southern Cross. The rest of the Southern Cross constellation is the head of Daramulan’s emu wife. In addition to the America Bay Track portrayal, several other rock engravings of Daramulan in the Sydney area are known.

In the photograph, Daramulan’s head with his open, beak-like mouth is to the bottom of the photo and his single leg is to the top. On the back of his head is a horn- or feather-like projection. Further down his body is an arm with a hand and fingers. His back is rounded like an emu’s. Further down is a belt, linking him with the painting of Bunjil, the Basin Track figure and the Mackenzies Point shark. Below the belt is what may be a bladder connected to his penis. At his ankle is an ankle band and below that the single foot. Below the foot is a crescent-shaped object. This object may be what Ridley called a “sacred wand” known as Dhūrumbūlum by groups on the Namoi and Barwon Rivers in north-central New South Wales.[[9]](#footnote-9) This Dhūrumbūlum may well be the bullroarer associated with Daramulan by many Aboriginal groups.

While it may seem very strange that Daramulan has only one leg, one-leggedness is a feature found in other traditions. For instance, the Hindu deity Shiva is sometimes depicted as having only a single leg.

I think that if Jung had seen this image it would have made a very strong impression on him as an archetype. It certainly makes that impression on me.

**III. Further Reading:**

There are three books which I would recommend to anyone interested in Aboriginal rock art:

For general information about Aboriginal culture at European contact:

A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra:1996 [1904]).

For information about Aboriginal rock art in all parts of Australia:

Josephine Flood, *The Riches of Ancient Australia* (University of Queensland, St. Lucia:1990).

For information both about Aboriginal cultural life and rock art in the Sydney region:

Val Attenbrow, *Sydney’s Aboriginal Past: Investigating the archaeological and historical records* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney:2010).

1. For information about Bull Cave see: <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5063573> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Josephine Flood, *The Riches of Ancient Australia* (University of Queensland, St. Lucia:1990), p. 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “La Perouse mission Church”, p. 5 <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5061399> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra:1996 [1904]), pages 489ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Howitt, *Native Tribes*, page 491. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The history of the painting at Bunjil’s Cave is related on pages 246-263 of *Cage of Ghosts* by Jon Rhodes (Darkwood, N.S.W.:2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. William Ridley, “Australian Languages and Traditions” in *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 2 (1873), pages 285, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, pages 494ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William Ridley, “Australian Languages and Traditions”, page 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)