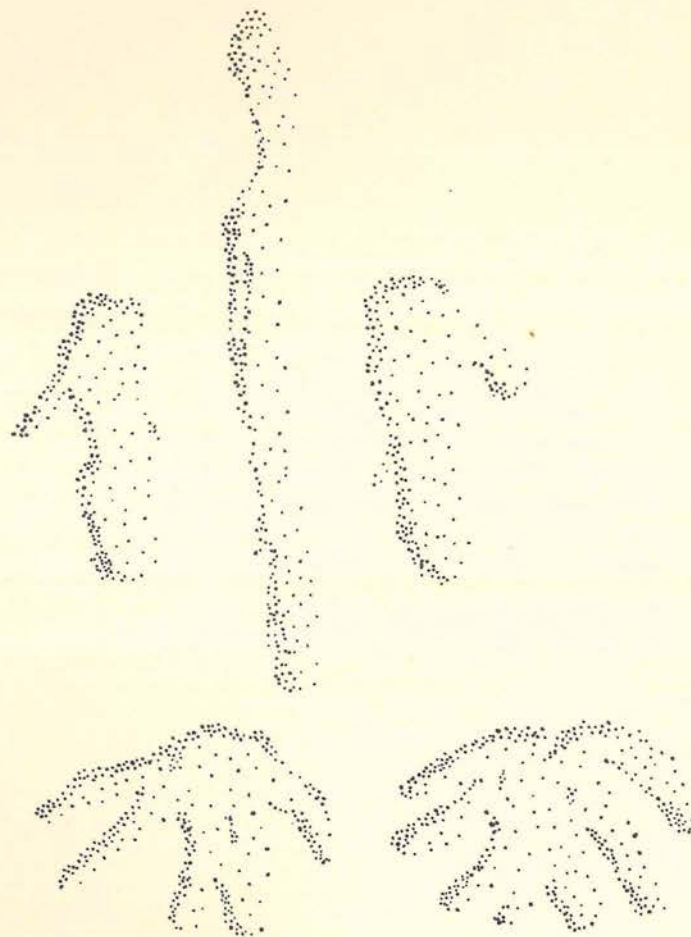
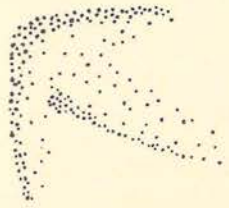


Notes on the Recognition of ABORIGINAL SITES



ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT





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Heritage Matters

NOTES ON THE RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINAL SITES

There are various types of Aboriginal sites. These notes have been prepared as a guide to the recognition of those which are most easily recognisable.

An Aboriginal site is defined in the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*, under Section 5 as:

- '(a) any place of importance and significance where persons of Aboriginal descent have, or appear to have, left any object, natural or artificial, used for, or made or adapted for use for, any purpose connected with the traditional cultural life of the Aboriginal people, past or present;*
- (b) any sacred, ritual or ceremonial site, which is of importance and special significance to persons of Aboriginal descent;*
- (c) any place which, in the opinion of the Committee, is or was associated with the Aboriginal people and which is of historical, anthropological, archaeological or ethnographical interest and should be preserved because of its importance and significance to the cultural heritage of the State;*
- (d) any place where objects to which this Act applies are traditionally stored, or to which, under the provisions of this Act, such objects have been taken or removed.'*

In accordance with Section 15:

'Any person who has knowledge of the existence of any thing in the nature of Aboriginal burial grounds, symbols or objects of sacred, ritual or ceremonial significance, cave or rock paintings or engravings, stone structures or arranged stones, carved trees, or of any other place or thing to which this Act applies or to which this Act might apply shall report its existence to the Registrar, or to a police officer, unless he has reasonable cause to believe the existence of the thing or place in question to be already known to the Registrar.'

Disturbance of any site is an offence under Section 17:

'A person who -

- (a) excavates, destroys, damages, conceals or in any way alters any Aboriginal site; or*
- (b) in any way alters, damages, removes, destroys, conceals, or who deals with in a manner not sanctioned by relevant custom, or assumes the possession, custody or control of, any object on or under an Aboriginal site,*

commits an offence unless he is acting with the authorization of the Registrar under section 16 or the consent of the Minister under section 18.'

For further information see our *Heritage Matters* brochures or contact the Registrar of Aboriginal Sites.

All Aboriginal sites can be separated into two broad but overlapping divisions.

ETHNOGRAPHIC SITES

Ethnographic sites are those for which first-hand Aboriginal comment is or has been available. Examples are, a place for current ritual, the camping place of a past generation, the source of yams or of pigment for painting – which are recalled today or were documented in conjunction with the people in the past.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Sites usually contain physical evidence of their occupation, e.g. tool-making, seed grinding, cooking, painting, engraving or numerous other activities. These are archaeological sites and are often found near existing or former water sources. They generally occur in the open but are also found in rockshelters or caves.

More specific categories within these divisions are :-

Ceremonial Sites

At some sites the ground has been modified for ceremonial purposes in some way e.g. by the removal of surface pebbles, or the modelling of the soil, or the placement of standing stones. In other places there is no noticeable alteration of the ground surface and Aboriginal people familiar with the site must be consulted concerning its location.

Mythological Sites

The Aboriginal world view strongly links people to the land through their mythology, therefore many sites have mythological associations. The majority of these sites contain archaeological evidence. However, some have no man-made features which enable them to be recognised. Such sites are often natural features linked to the Aboriginal account of the formation of the world and can only be identified by Aboriginal people who are familiar with the associated traditions.

Repository/Cache

It was the custom to store ceremonial objects in niches and other secluded places. The removal of objects from these places, or any other interference is not permitted.

Skeletal Material/Burial

In the north of the State it was formerly the custom to place the bones of the dead on a ledge in a cave after certain mourning rituals were completed. The bones were wrapped in sheets of bark and the skull placed beside them. In some parts of the State platforms were built in trees to accommodate a corpse during complex rituals following death. In other parts of Western Australia the dead were buried, the burial position varying according to the customs of the particular area and time. Natural erosion or mechanical earthmoving equipment occasionally expose these burial sites.

Man-made Structures (e.g. stone arrangements)

If one or more stones are found aligned, partly buried or wedged into a position which is not likely to be the result of natural forces, then it is probable that the place is an Aboriginal site.

There are several different types of man-made stone arrangements, ranging from cairns or piles of stones to more elaborate designs. Some examples include: heaps or alignments of stones arranged for ceremonial purposes; elongated rock fragments erected as markers to signify special areas; low weirs to trap fish; low walls or pits to provide a hide or shelter for a hunter.



Man-made Structures (e.g. Habitation)

Aboriginal people sheltered in uncomplicated ephemeral structures, generally made of branches and sometimes tussocks of grass. These sites are rarely preserved for more than one occupation period.

Occasionally rocks were pushed aside or used to stabilise or support other building materials. When these rock patterns are located they provide evidence for former habitation sites.



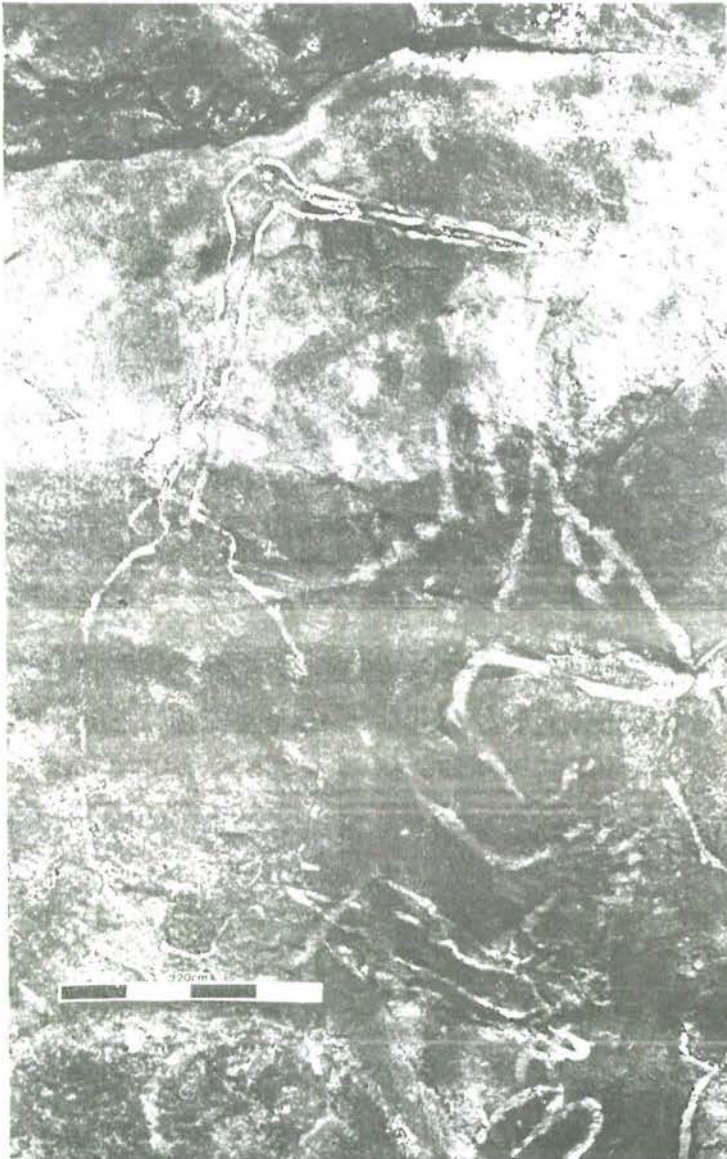
Modified Trees

Occasionally trees are located that have designs in the bark which have been incised by Aborigines. Toeholds, to assist the climber, were sometimes cut into the bark and sapwood of trees in which possums and other arboreal animals were trapped. Some tree trunks bear scars where sections of bark or wood have been removed to make dishes, shields, spearthrowers and other wooden artefacts. In some parts of the State platforms were built in trees to accommodate a corpse during complex rituals following death.



Paintings

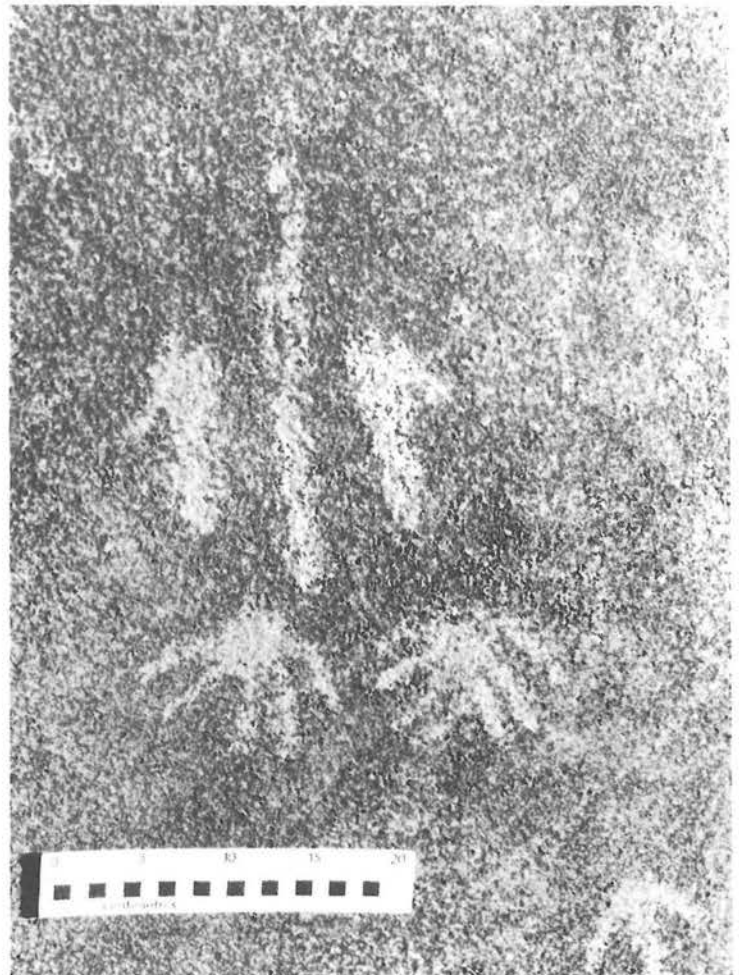
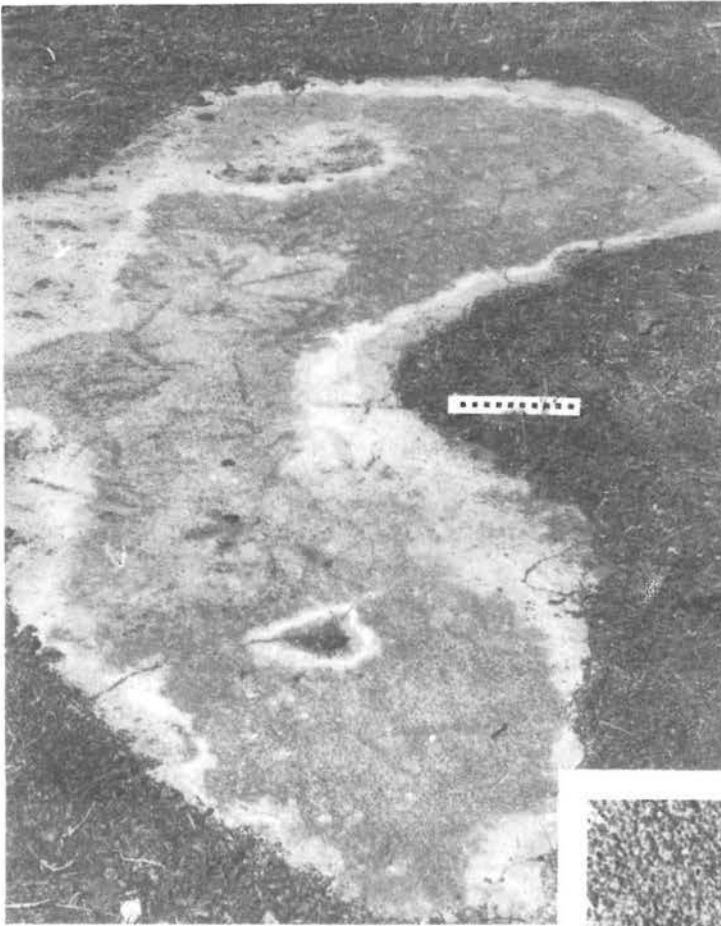
These usually occur in rockshelters, caves or other sheltered situations which offer a certain degree of protection from the weather. The best known examples in Western Australia occur in the Kimberley region, but paintings are found throughout most of the State. Several coloured pigments may have been used at a site. A range of motifs, including human, animal and geometric figures were used. Stencilling was a common painting technique used throughout the State. A negative image was created by spraying pigment over the object, such as a hand, or artefact, held against the wall.



Engravings

This term describes designs that have been carved, pecked or pounded into a rock surface. They constitute the predominant art form of the Pilbara region, but are known to occur throughout the State.

Most engravings occur in the open, but some are situated in rockshelters.



Grinding patches/grooves

Smoothed areas (usually about 25 cm x 50 cm) on horizontal rock surfaces indicate seed-grinding activity. Grooves for sharpening spears or axes also occur.



Middens

When a localised source of shellfish or other food has been exploited, the accumulated ashes, hearth stones, artefacts, shells, bones and other refuse can form mounds at times several metres high and many metres in diameter. Such middens consist of layers accumulated through time, and provide valuable scientific information when excavated. They are most common near the coast but examples on inland lake and river banks or in rockshelters are not unknown.



Quarries

When outcrops of rock suitable for the manufacture of stone tools were quarried by Aborigines, evidence of the flaking and chipping of the source material can usually be seen *in situ* and nearby. Ochre and other mineral pigments used in painting rock surfaces, and in body decoration, etc, are mined from naturally occurring seams, bands and other deposits. This activity can sometimes be recognised by the presence of wooden digging sticks or the marks made by these implements.



Artefacts (e.g. factory sites)

Pieces of rock from which artefacts could be made were often carried to camp sites or other places for final production. Such sites are usually easily recognisable because the manufacturing process produced quantities of flakes and waste material which are clearly out of context when compared with the surrounding area. All rocks found on the sand coastal plain for example, must have been transported by human agencies.

