

Between destruction and protection: the case of the Australian rock art sites

Entre la destrucción y la protección: el caso del arte rupestre australiano

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Abstract

Abstract: Can heritage be practiced and thought outside the binary of exaltation vs. denigration? To answer this question posed by the editors, this paper will analyse the destruction and protection of Indigenous heritage sites in Australia, where the destruction of significant cultural heritage sites, mainly Indigenous heritage sites, is the result of biased and outdated practice of cultural heritage that divides Indigenous heritage (prior 1788) from Australian heritage (after 1788). This rift has caused an immense damage to Indigenous heritage around the country as it shows how in Australia heritage is practiced and thought outside the dualism of celebration versus destruction. In this paper, I will show how the destruction of Indigenous rock art sites has been a constant in the 20th and 21st century and how this destruction has been framed in media as a result of vandalism. By arguing that this framing is perpetuating the dualism of celebration versus destruction, I suggest that we can move out of this binary by considering the concept of iconoclasm to go beyond this dualism.

Keywords

Rock art; Australia; destruction; heritage; iconoclasm.

Resumen

Resumen en castellano: ¿Puede el patrimonio ser practicado y pensado fuera del binario de exaltación versus denigración? Para contestar esta pregunta sugerida por los editores, este artículo analizará la destrucción y la protección de sitios patrimoniales indígenas en Australia, en los cuales la destrucción significativa de sitios culturales, en su mayoría indígenas, es el resultado de prácticas obsoletas que continúan dividiendo entre patrimonio indígena (todo aquél que date antes de 1788) y patrimonio australiano (todo aquél que date después de 1788). Esta división ha causado un enorme daño al patrimonio indígena alrededor del continente australiano, y demuestra cómo en Australia, el patrimonio es practicado y pensado fuera del dualismo de celebración versus destrucción. En este artículo, demuestro cómo la destrucción de sitios indígenas es una constante desde el siglo pasado, y cómo esta destrucción ha sido informada en los medios como resultado de un vandalismo. Al argumentar que caracterizar esta destrucción como vandalismo solo perpetúa el dualismo de celebración versus destrucción, sugiero que nos podemos mover fuera de este binario al considerar el concepto de iconoclasia como posible solución.

Palabras clave

Arte rupestre; Australia; destrucción; iconoclasia; patrimonio.

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Australia and its rock art

Australia has more rock art (over 100,000 sites) than any other country in the world, and contains the world's largest site: Murujuga (in Western Australia), with over million petroglyphs (motifs abraded or pecked onto the rocks). Australian Indigenous rock art is both an asset for the spiritual needs of the Australian Indigenous people who still maintain customary links to it, and for archaeologists who study it as a document of Australia's past. While it is impossible to put a price on rock art, it is a critical component of Australia's \$41.3 billion per year tourism industry.¹ Rock art has a clear national benefit, particularly to the scientific, education and tourism sectors. Australian rock art is also one of the most significant features of Australian archaeology and a field where Australian and international scientists have established world-leading skills in its interpretation and dating. Their work has been priceless in determining the cultural value of this particular form of art, mapping the different styles of rock art that exists in Australia, as well as dating an activity that goes back to 40,000 years ago and continues into the present in the form of Indigenous contemporary art. Their work has been critical in demonstrating the connection between the Indigenous people of Australia and the affective ways in which their heritage is an intrinsic part of their identity. Although there have been repeated calls to create a national register to have a better picture of the rock art in Australia, to date, no such register exists. Similarly, no analysis exists on how and why rock art is destroyed in Australia.

While rock art sites are intrinsically and extrinsically significant for both Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, the former are deeply connected to them in different ways, some which cannot be explained in "heritage" or Western terms. Most Australian Indigenous cultures recognize the value of rock art as part of their history and as sites where initiation (or increase) rituals occurs, therefore they are highly significant. Some sites are also important because it is said that the ancestors left their mark and the guidelines of the Law before they left the physical world. In many occasions, these ancestors realized heroic feats and the sites commemorates such acts. Given the vast array of sites it is impossible to pinpoint each site to a single value that could tell us why the site is significant, or not.

In Australia, rock art nowadays has acquired a particular cultural power as a symbol of Indigenous culture. Rock art is displayed to symbolize not only Indigenous history, but also memory and landscape. This is true to all sacred images because they make the invisible, visible. In investing rock art with symbolic value, rock art becomes a mediator between the destruction and the protection that the Australian government affords to its status both as a cultural and economic commodity.

At a national level, Australian Indigenous rock art is recognized as culturally significant in the form of national heritage. Many states and territories also recognize the value of these sites by protecting them. The Australian National Heritage List (NHL), managed by the Australian Government and which includes all the natural, historic and Indigenous places of outstanding significance to Australia, currently lists 28 rock sites (out of a total of 118 heritage sites) that are featured in the list because they are sites where rock art is present or because the rock art makes the site significant.² While the number is quite low in terms of inclusion of rock art in the NHL, the number also reflects a lack of interest in protecting and recognizing Indigenous rock art sites, given that there are over 100,000 sites in Australia. Clearly, there is a will to protect culturally significant rock art sites in Australia. In fact, one site, Kakadu National Park located in the Northern Territory is also included in the UNESCO World Heritage list (WHL) (inscribed in 1981). However, Kakadu remains, to date, the only Australian rock art site inscribed in the WHL. Another site inscribed onto this list, the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (inscribed in 1987), also contains some rock art sites, but it is not the only reason why the site is particularly significant for the Indigenous people of Australia.

1 Tourism Research Australia, <https://www.tra.gov.au>, 2019.

2 <https://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national-heritage-list>.

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Rock art destruction in Australia

Despite (or perhaps due to) the symbolic value of rock art, each year a number of sites are damaged or destroyed by different means, both human and non-human. This phenomenon is not new. Australia's settler colonialism has left a legacy of destruction of Indigenous rock art that resonates in the present in the form of mining-related activities, development, tourism, graffiti, vandalism and a lack of conservation strategy.³ The extent of this destruction, however, is not known, though Taçon has argued that in fifty years, half of Australia's rock art could disappear. While Rock Art Destruction (RAD) is widely recognised as a problem, the reasons behind this destruction are not well understood. This is partly because destructions are mostly carried out anonymously, leaving the agents and motivations open to conjecture. Not knowing the scale, nature, agents and rationales contributes to the difficulty of developing an adequate national strategy to protect the rock art while engaging in sensible conversations with Australian Indigenous communities who are deeply connected to it. A second correlated issue is the tendency to name RAD in Australia as vandalism—understood as deliberate acts of destruction by thoughtless individuals—in public and official discourses. While perpetrators are rarely identified, these discourses often disregard Indigenous views on destruction and use the figure of the vandal to assuage responsibility for the act, significantly undermining efforts to interpret RAD as a political act rooted in Australia's colonial values. Furthermore, the media often represents these destructions as if all incidents were somehow connected and underpinned by the same motivation, failing to recognise the role that deeply-ingrained colonial values play in these destructions.

Archaeologists have been framing the problem of RAD in Australia from a false starting point—the trope of vandalism—to explain the destruction caused by humans.⁴ While the term is useful to make sense of a deliberate act of thoughtless destruction, the question we should be asking is Why they said it is an act of vandalism? and not Why is this destruction vandalism? The interest to study and analyze RAD is not so much in the intentions of the agents—a task which may be futile in the end because it is impossible to collect such data—but how these destructions have been, and may be, interpreted. As Rambelli and Reinders assert: “What makes a moment of destruction meaningful does not lie in the essential nature of the object, not precisely in the “authorial intention” of the agent, but in the discourse that surrounds the object before and after it breaks.”⁵

Official and public discourses in Australia have also perpetuated the vandalism interpretation which has created problems for the protection of rock art. Vandalism not only reinforces negative attitudes towards Indigenous art but also sentiments of guilt assuaged by the figure of the anonymous vandal that have survived unquestioned to this day. Past and current destructions of rock art in Australia cannot be interpreted without first acknowledging that they are a direct consequence of colonial and racist attitudes from the 19th century that emphasised the primitiveness and child-like material culture of Australian Indigenous people in order to discredit its aesthetic value.⁶ Even in the 1960s, when most legislation to protect Indigenous heritage came into being in Australia, RAD was linked to tourism, vandalism and development.⁷ At the same time, there was a failure to recognise the influence of settler colonialism strategies in these practices. The 1960s was also the time when rock art precincts in various parts of Australia were zoned to be used by extractive industries. The destruction was then interpreted against the backdrop of modernisation and progress, resonating with colonial discourses that emphasised the stagnation of Indigenous culture.⁸

To date, RAD is assumed to be perpetrated by vandals, but this means it could have been done by anyone, regardless of whether the act was performed

3 Paul Taçon, “Australian rock art is threatened by a lack of conservation”, *The Conversation*, 2014.

4 John Mulvaney, “Human factors in the deterioration and destruction of antiquities and their remedy”, in Frederick McCarthy, ed., *Aboriginal antiquities in Australia. Their nature and preservation* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970), 115-120; Robert Edwards, ed., *The preservation of Australia's Aboriginal heritage* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975); Melissa Marshall and Paul Taçon, “Past and present, traditional and scientific: the conservation and management of rock art sites in Australia”, in Timothy Darvill and António Pedro Batarida Fernandes, eds., *Open-air rock art conservation and management: state of the art and future perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 214-228; Neville Agnew, Janette Deacon, Nicholas Hall, Terry Little, Sharon Sullivan, and Paul Taçon, *Rock art: A cultural treasure at risk*. Getty Conservation Institute. *Rock art: A cultural treasure at risk* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2015).

5 Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia. A History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 179.

6 Ian McNiven and Lynnette Russell, *Appropriated pasts. Indigenous peoples and the colonial culture of archaeology* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005); Susan Lowish, “Setting the scene: early writing on Australian Aboriginal art”, *Journal of Art Historiography* 4 (2011): 1-12.

7 Michael Davis, *Writing heritage: The depiction of Indigenous heritage in European-Australian writings* (Kew, Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2007), 267.

8 José Antonio González Zarandona, *Murujuga – Rock Art, heritage and landscape iconoclasm* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

by a tourist, a mining company or an archaeologist. The term vandal excludes responsibility for the act and places motivation in an anonymous figure. However, evidence collected from Murujuga (Western Australia) suggests that destruction of Indigenous heritage is not merely the result of thoughtless vandalism, but that clear perpetrators and intentions are present—the result of deeply ingrained colonial values concerning Indigenous people and their cultural practices.⁹ With renewed interest in iconoclasm scholarship,¹⁰ the recognition that rock art plays a crucial element in the construction of Australian Indigenous identity and land rights,¹¹ and the emergence of analyses more conducive to study such acts of destruction,¹² now is the right time to argue that the destruction of rock art is inherently connected with the construction of modern Australia. The destruction should, and can, be framed between the exaltation that rock art sites elicit in official and public discourses as part of the identity and history of the country, and the destruction that this type of heritage experiences as a result of the factors mentioned above.

To frame such destruction, it is necessary to move beyond the current conceptualisation of RAD as vandalism. As an example, in the first document that was specifically created to address the protection of Indigenous heritage in Australia, the *Aboriginal Heritage Act Western Australia 1972*, section 62, it is stated that a person cannot be charged with destroying an Indigenous site if the defendant proves he or she did not know and could not reasonably be expected to have known that the site was an Indigenous site. The Act is currently under review due to its inefficacy to stop the destruction of Indigenous heritage. Likewise, although it has been reviewed and amended several times in the last decades, in reality, it does not afford protection to Indigenous heritage and in fact, it circumvents punishment to those who destroy heritage. In other words, the 1972 Act allows people to destroy heritage sites by playing an innocent role, reminiscent of settler colonial strategies. Vandalism, however, is an intentional act. As scholarship on settler innocence has convincingly argued, the notion only serves to provide relief from “feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege”.¹³ The fact that Indigenous rock art in Australia is valued, but not protected,¹⁴ is a reminder that strategies like the Western Australian Aboriginal Heritage Act are deeply embedded in public and official discourse, perpetuating the notion that RAD is a case of innocent vandalism, while stripping responsibility from the action of the past and present settlers. The relationship between colonialism and rock art destruction has not been adequately addressed,¹⁵ let alone interpreted as a demonstration that colonialism was not innocent. By framing RAD as iconoclasm, it is possible to enable a better understanding of how these strategies operate on a discursive level.

Australian iconoclasm

Iconoclasm is dialogical because it destroys and creates. Iconoclasm is a political tool deployed by the state to exterminate “traditional, superstitious and idolatrous” communities and rituals,¹⁶ and a critical tool to examine the discourses that underpin established beliefs.¹⁷ In applying iconoclasm as the latter, one could investigate the extent to which public and official discourses are informed by settler colonial strategies, in order to ascertain the destruction of rock art as inherently connected with the construction of a modern Australia, by erasing the traditional communities and rituals. By incorporating iconoclasm theory, it is possible to augment existing interpretative frameworks, thus revealing the complexity of iconoclasm in relation to rock art and by implication opening up a more sophisticated response towards the binary of exaltation/celebration and denigration/protection. Brubaker posits that the study of iconoclasm requires both an understanding of the debates around the destruction and protection of

9 José Antonio González Zarandona, “The destruction of heritage: Rock art in the Burrup Peninsula”, *The International Journal of the Humanities* 9 (2011): 325-342; José Antonio González Zarandona, “Towards a theory of landscape iconoclasm”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 25 (2015): 461-475.

10 Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine iconoclasm* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012); Richard Clay, *Iconoclasm in revolutionary Paris: The transformation of signs*. (Oxford: Voltaire Found 2012); James Noyes, *The politics of iconoclasm. Religion, violence and the culture of image-breaking in Christianity and Islam* (New York, I. B. Tauris, 2013).

11 Robert Layton, “Rock art, identity, and indigeneity”, in Jo McDonald and Peter Veth, eds., *A companion to rock art* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 439-454.

12 Trinidad Rico, *Constructing destruction: Heritage narratives in the Tsunami City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

13 Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012), 10.

14 José Antonio González Zarandona, “Heritage as a cultural measure in a postcolonial setting”, in Lachlan MacDowall, Marnie Badham, Emma Blomkamp and Kim Dunphy, eds., *Making culture count. The politics of cultural measurement* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 173-190.

15 Robert Layton, *Australian rock art. A new synthesis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 245.

16 Noyes, *The politics of iconoclasm*, 1.

17 W. J. T., *What Do Pictures Want? The lives and loves of images* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 8-9.

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images at a discursive level, as much as the destruction practices on the ground.¹⁸ Examining these debates in Australia provides an opportunity to evaluate responses to Indigenous images, as they have not been examined before in light of the destruction of rock art. Also, these debates reflect the work of authorities that negotiated the working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and, implicitly, archaeologists, regarding the protection of rock art. By critically examining these debates, one could reveal the contradictions present in the discourses. While on the one hand, iconoclasm seeks to erase images, ideas and people, on the other hand, iconoclasm also provides a method of critical reading “against the establishment” to uncover those contradictions present in discourse. In applying iconoclasm as a political tool, one could interpret RAD as a case of landscape iconoclasm by incorporating Indigenous cosmologies and rock art ontologies into the discussion, following my successful methodology as applied to Murujuga.¹⁹ Belting argues that images are formed by three elements: picture, medium and body. Belting’s theory provides an intellectual framework from which destruction of Indigenous rock art can be interpreted, as rock art is not only composed of an image but also the bodies of the ancestors represented that form the picture (the petroglyph and the rock).²⁰ The fact that Indigenous rock art in Australia is valued, but not protected, is a reminder that Indigenous cosmologies pertaining to rock art are dismissed since colonial times as myths and folklore.

Unfortunately, this is not the time or the space to produce such study, as a massive amount of archival data would need to be revisited. However, the notion of settler innocence as a strategy to evade responsibility for the destruction of Australian Indigenous heritage has not yet been applied to interpret RAD as a case of iconoclasm in Australia, and it may be the starting point for future research in this area.

Discussion

The binary of destruction and protection is no clearer than in the example of Australia where some sites are recognized as culturally significant but at the same time other sites are destroyed. This dualism co-exists because while on the one hand sites are destroyed, the explanation or the reason for this destruction is subordinated to vandalism—a problematic strategy that, as I have shown, continues to disseminate colonial values regarding the aesthetic and cultural value of Indigenous cultures. This strategy is also problematic because vandalism does not allow for a critical interpretation of the destruction to be deployed, and as such, the dualism is never resolved. On the other hand, the dualism also co-exists because while some sites are protected, authorities cannot be blamed if other sites are destroyed given the vast array of sites and the lack of money (vision, planning) that would be required to protect every single rock art site. Also problematic is the fact that some sites are located in private lands where the government cannot intervene. In the same vein, many sites which are located within Aboriginal lands cannot be accessed unless the community gives its permission.

Iconoclasm is a human activity that it is part of its history. We may never be able to eradicate such practice.²¹ The case of Australia is illustrative because it shows that iconoclasm is a legal activity if performed by any company working in the extraction industries, or not sanctioned by the relevant authorities, using documents like the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972 to justify the destruction. Also, if the action is motivated by racism (by a single person or a group) the destruction is not labelled iconoclasm, but vandalism. While destruction seems to be “chaos, and therefore inherently un-orderable”, it

18 Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine iconoclasm*.

19 González Zarandona, *Murujuga – Rock art, heritage and landscape iconoclasm*.

20 Hans Belting, *An anthropology of images: Picture, medium, body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

21 cf. Rambelli and Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia. A History*, 204.

“can be shown to follow cultural patterns, and certainly the interpretations (both by the perpetrators and the victims) of destructive acts can make sense. Those acts, as well as the damaged residue, can be made meaningful in terms of conventional discourses and attitudes. In this sense, at least, destruction, far from being the negation of cultural meaning, is a form of cultural activity.”²²

I argue that iconoclasm is the tool that allows us to go beyond the dualism of exaltation and denigration, between protection and destruction, because iconoclasm does not erase only images but also ideas that the images symbolize. In the case of Australia, rock art’s symbolic value may take different forms, but generally speaking they are all related to Indigenous history and identity. Even those rock art images which are not destroyed, the fact that they are not really protected means they are denigrated, while at the same time, official ideology in Australia protects and celebrates Indigenous culture, even if the same culture that produced the art is denigrated. This cultural pattern in Australia cannot be traced following a line because, as I have shown, destruction and protection of cultural heritage alternate intermittently—the changes in the meanings of rock art are not so simple. They are perceived in different ways and they go through different stages. To Rambelli and Reinders, this would amount to a semioclasm, the destruction of meaning, whereby protection and destruction can coexist because semioclasm is “one of the fundamental mechanisms for the creation and preservation of social and cultural orders”.²³ The dualism between exaltation/denigration and protection/destruction is possible in Australia because the destruction of material culture (the rock art) and its meaning is essential to create and transform the consciousness of non-Indigenous people, so that they accept the destruction and denigration of Indigenous heritage and participate in it. But they also accept the exaltation and protection of this same heritage and participate in it. Otherwise, the guilt, the injustice and exploitation would be too much to bear.

The interplay between destruction and preservation in Australia is played out every day when some sites are destroyed while others are protected but no real pattern emerges so we may understand the logic behind each destruction or protection. This form of cultural activity—destroying some sites while protecting others—is an activity that asserts the commitment that the Australian government has towards the protection of Indigenous heritage, and in the process, celebrating it, while also showing the commitment towards the companies that destroy Indigenous heritage, by not punish them.²⁴ The construction of modern Australia was only possible because Indigenous cultures were destroyed while the new culture was protected. Heritage sites and objects, just like architectural buildings, artefacts and art, go through different phases of significance and irrelevance. In the case of the Australian Indigenous rock art sites, their meanings are suspended between destruction and protection, at least since 1788, when Australia was invaded by the British.

22 Rambelli and Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia. A History*, 171.

23 Rambelli and Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia. A History*, 207.

24 See the latest example in a series of destruction of Indigenous heritage in Australia: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/13/gobsmacked-how-to-stop-a-disaster-like-juukan-gorge-happening-again>.