

## CHALAWONG: A HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW

*Marisa D. Giorgi* \*

### SUMMARY

The Chalawong petroglyph art site is in the territory of the Jagara people of Southeast Queensland, Australia. Chalawong is significant because it is the only known petroglyph site in the region. It consists of a dense panel of over 12 Square meters of non-figurative motifs engraved on the rear wall of a sandstone overhang. The site has datable occupational deposits of up to 4000 yrs. and was still being used by the local population until the 1840's. Chalawong was on an important route to Gummingurru (an important initiation ground) and the Bunya nut festival grounds with groups often as far as 450 kilometers apart coming together. The site is indicative of the complex spiritual life in the region. It is also strategically located at an important node in the network of social and economical ties that characterized Aboriginal life in Southeast Queensland. This site has suffered from a lack of scholarly recognition, challenges regarding interpretational techniques and the site's current role in the indigenous social landscape. Chalawong still has regional, artistic and cultural significance archaeologically and in a contemporary setting.

### RIASSUNTO

Il sito con incisioni rupestri di Chalawong si trova nel territorio del popolo Jagara del sud-est del Queensland, in Australia. Chalawong è significativo perché è l'unico sito conosciuto di arte rupestre della regione. È costituito da un pannello di oltre 12 mq densamente istoriato con motivi non figurativi incisi sulla parete posteriore di una sporgenza di arenaria. Il sito ha giacimenti con livelli d'uso databili fino a 4000 anni fa, ed è stato frequentato dalla popolazione locale fino al 1840 circa. Chalawong si trovava su un percorso importante per Gummingurru (un importante luogo di iniziazione) ed era il luogo del festa delle noci Bunya con gruppi che si ritrovavano spesso provenienti da località distanti fino a 450 km. Il sito è indicativo della complessa vita spirituale nella regione. Inoltre, è situato strategicamente in un nodo importante nella rete di legami sociali ed economici che hanno caratterizzato la vita degli aborigeni nel sud-est del Queensland. Questo sito ha sofferto di una mancanza di riconoscimento accademico, dovuto a dispute sulle tecniche interpretative e al ruolo attuale del sito nel paesaggio sociale indigeno. Dal punto di vista archeologico e della sua collocazione in un ambito contemporaneo, Chalawong ha tuttora rilevanza regionale, artistica e culturale.

### INTRODUCTION

Chalawong is significant and unique as it is the only known rock shelter with engraved petroglyphs in Southeast Queensland (an area almost the size of Sicily). Importantly it also represents a continuity of rock art use with datable excavated deposits that illustrate changes over time. Furthermore, this site has historical

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\* Queensland Museum - PO Box 3300 - South Brisbane BC, Queensland 4101 - Australia. Email: marisa.giorgi@qm.qld.gov.au.

Marisa Giorgi has been involved in Archaeological site work in a range of settings including the Pandora shipwreck and Valcamonica. Her research interests include contemporary indigenous interaction with rock art sites and issues surrounding repatriation of displaced petroglyphs to indigenous communities.



*Fig. 1 - Chalawong art panel frontal view taken in the 80s (photo by Queensland Museum)*

importance as it represents the first archaeological excavation in Queensland<sup>1</sup>.

Culturally the Chalawong petroglyph art site is in the territory of the Yuggera and Jagera people of Southeast Queensland, Australia. Previously known as Rocky Scrub Creek shelter and Gatton Shelter, Chalawong is the local term for a Currawong bird. It is situated in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range near Rocky Scrub Creek and beside a recently paved road. It sits approximately 35 km south of Gatton which is a large rural town.

Archaeologically speaking, the site has rich occupational deposits as attested by a general scatter of stone artefacts, bone, shell, ochre and charcoal. The occupation base is estimated to be approximately 4000 years BP. The continuity of occupation and related archaeological evidence increases the significance of the site. As Morwood states, "The valley was still being used by the local population in the 1840's, during the early European settlement period" (MORWOOD 1984, p. 100).

One of the major reasons for the continuity of use is due to Rocky Scrub Creek gorge forming a natural access route between the areas of the Darling Downs and the Lockyer valley. This facilitated access by Aboriginal groups from the coast to the Bunya Mountains, especially for the culturally significant triennial Bunya nut festival. As such, Chalawong was most likely used as a temporary shelter for this purpose, amongst other uses<sup>2</sup>.

1 This was performed by Tyron in 1884 (TYRON 1884, p. 52).

2 Bones from reptiles and perch point towards summer use without precluding winter use (MORWOOD 1984, p. 107)



*Fig. 2 - Frontal view of the Chalawong shelter. The access structure covered by vegetation was constructed by local government based on conservation recommendations. There is little evidence of site maintenance (photo by Giorgi)*

#### DESIGN, SYMBOLS AND MEANING

The beautiful and dense petroglyph panel that constitutes Chalawong is engraved on the rear wall of a sandstone overhang. Consisting of over 12 square meters of non-figurative motifs, which are mainly drilled, pecked and or abraded inverted U's, arcs, circles, ovals, holes or corpules, lines and so-called tally marks and bird tracks' (FLOOD 1999, p. 50). Apart from macropod tracks such as kangaroo and wallaby tracks the composition also boasts two hundred and sixty eight drilled holes singularly or integrated into larger designs. The majority of these drilled holes on the panel are situated on the lower section.

Interestingly there are some similarities between engravings and the designs used in body painting or scarring by Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland, as noted by Flood (FLOOD 1999, p. 150). Other designs, based on parallel image interpretation, could also be interpreted as totems, vulvas and rain. Non-figurative motives from rock art are repeated in ceremonial body art, as many such Aboriginal images are a form of communication and not exclusively used on walls but have transferable meanings and presence beyond the static surface. Whilst this is the case, the geometric style, crucially has an extra level of interpretation only for initiated people. This being the case, Chalawong like the majority of existing rock art in Australia has a continuity of culture that has many levels of understanding. In other words, the interpretation is dependent on the level of initiation of the viewer as to how much knowledge they are taught by the initiated.

The meaning and symbology of the site is also related to its location. This location, near a small water source is integral to the site's usage as a temporary

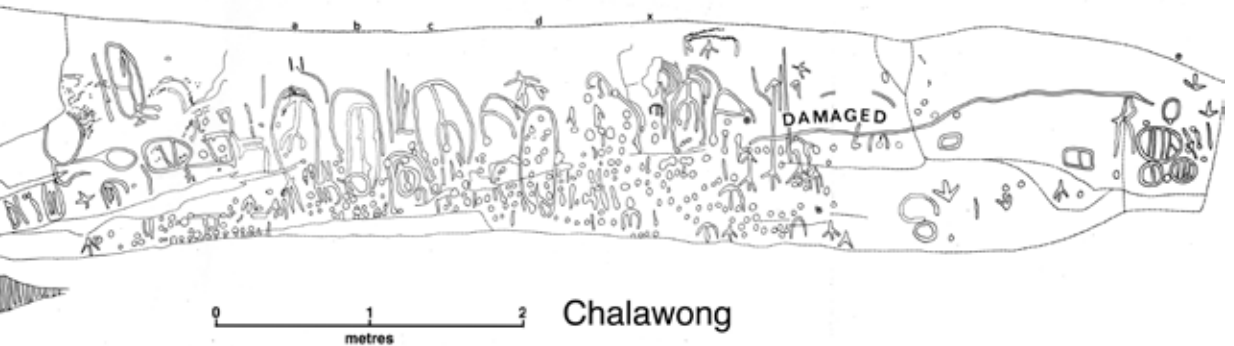


Fig. 3 - Chalawong art panel tracing (edited and updated by Giorgi from the original by Michael Quinnell)

shelter against the elements on route to the Bunya nut festival. In addition to this usage related to the festival period the site's role and meaning was transferable. As such it recorded animal prints and pits, which could be interpreted as ceremonial or recording initiation or births, and marking or recording local totems. These interrelated and transferable meanings are in accordance with general Aboriginal beliefs which view all life – human animal bird and fish – as part of a fluid interconnected system, one vast network of relationships, which can be traced to the Great Spirit Ancestors of the Dreamtime. The majority of art seems to be an integration and reinforcement of these concepts for the community and Chalawong is no different. Even though this is the case, severe cultural and time disruption makes it difficult to glean a concrete scientific understanding. This cultural and time disruption also makes it very difficult to understand the site via Memoryscapes<sup>3</sup> or oral histories. Such techniques can add to our understanding of a site but in this case are not able to be recorded. Similarly the same can be said for the concept of preunderstanding (DAVID 2002). Preunderstanding relates to interpretations based on parallel cultural context of similar sites in the area. In this case there are no similar sites in the area to form such an interpretation. However, in keeping with Aboriginal beliefs the site still retains meaning within the current Indigenous community they attempt to reconnect and recreate narratives to reinforce identity and cultural links that are embedded in Chalawong.

Thus, Aboriginal connection to this site continues to be reestablished in a different contemporary context despite the lack of oral history. Such reestablishment relates to the aim that “archaeological documentation of heritage places must integrate a flexible model of representation to show change as an authentic expression of culture and to show that changing cultures create heritage as they go along” (Ross *et al.* 2013, p. 222). Innovative recording techniques have been

<sup>3</sup> “Memoryscapes” is a contemporary term used to describe the process of building on a location's cultural meaning by utilising known cultural context of similar locations to integrate the location's context into the current cultural constellation construct (Ross *et al.* 2013, vol. 76).



*Fig. 4 - Chalawong close up of geometric design and drill marks. In this photograph there are visible traces of paint used to highlight the engravings. This was applied prior to 1964 and removed in 1969 during restoration work (photo by Queensland Museum)*



*Fig. 5 - Chalawong panel, taken from inside the overhang. These images no longer display the traces of paint visible in the previous photographs (photo by Giorgi)*



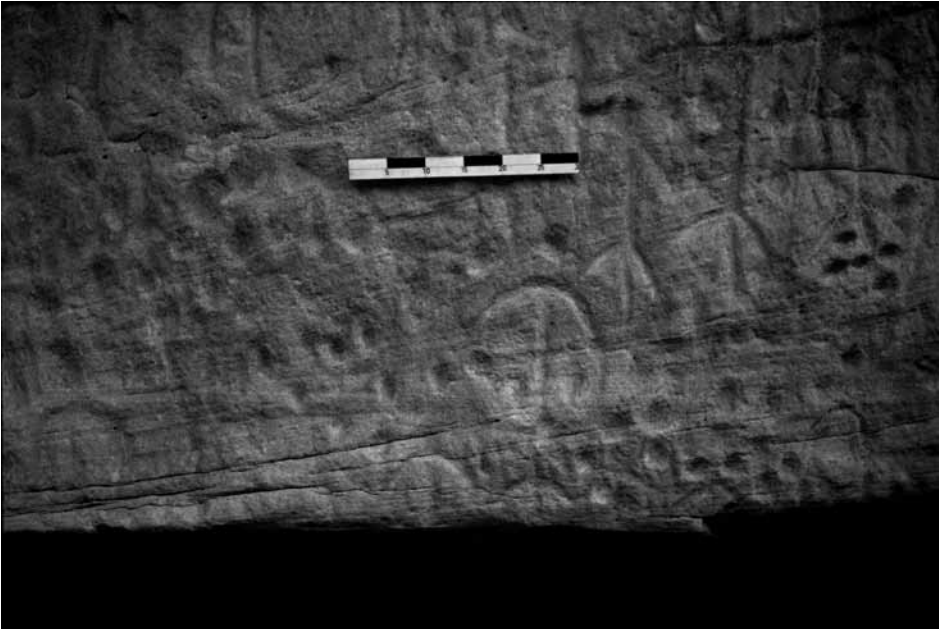
*Fig. 6 - Chalawong side geometric image far right hand of panel. These images no longer display the traces of the paint visible in the previous photographs (photo by Giorgi)*

attempted to conserve the site in a cultural context in a web of associated focal points by the Prezi map as a “digital mapping strategy recording the cultural and geographic features” (JAYDEN *et al.* 2013, p. 233) of the area. Such maneuvers help engender contemporary indigenous meanings of the site reinforcing community connection to Chalawong.

#### THE INTENDED RECIPIENTS

As the site was accessible and the excavated material supports the interpretation of communal use the art was evidently produced to be viewed by the general members of the community. A remote or difficult to access location with no continuity of food remains would have meant the site was for restricted use or viewing. As this was not the case, people in the local area and the people travelling to and from the Bunya nut festival viewed the art. Thus in essence local groups would have produced the art that was in turn viewed by other groups.

The meaning of the art is not known but some of the symbols can be interpreted as animal prints; others as geometric symbols and some of the lines possibly representing rain. These types of designs are referred to as ‘rain marks’ and are represented on Aboriginal bodies in the form of raised scars or cicatrices for ceremonial and decorative purposes (McCARTHY 1962, p. 17). They have been used contemporarily in the Central Australian region. This enables some possible parallel interpretations of these symbols being used as ritual art. This interpretation is given more weight as trade and ceremonial routes traversed large areas of Australia. As such there was some degree of image transferal and it is also pos-



*Fig. 7 - Chalawong close up of panel section exhibiting animal prints and drill marks. In this photograph there are visible traces of paint used to highlight the engravings. This was applied prior to 1964 and removed in 1969 during restoration work (photo by Queensland Museum)*

sible that the images were designed to reinforce cultural ties and regional reinforcement of cultural expression to both the local groups and those temporarily accessing the area.

Extending the interpretation, rock engravings are a form of symbolic behaviour and crucially 'symbolic behaviour' was not just a decorative embellishment of the system but a major means for social and economic control (MURPHY 1977 and MUNN 1973). In other words these rock engravings were akin to the multimedia tools of the time, the 'symbolic paraphernalia which could be distinctive or shared as an integral part of aboriginal society in Southeast Queensland and rock art was an integral component of this system' (MORWOOD 1984, p. 91).

The connection between the artistic message and the economic and social systems at Chalawong is strongly linked to the Bunya nut festival because it was situated on a major pathway to the festival that was held in the Bunya Mountains and the Blackall Range. The largest remaining stand of bunya pines can be seen in the Bunya Mountains National Park 240 km North West of Brisbane. The nuts are almond shaped and about 8 cm long, and grow in large cones of up to 10 kilograms in weight. The trees fruit every year, but every three years there is a particularly abundant crop of the highly nutritious nuts, which could support large gatherings such as the Bunya nut festival<sup>4</sup>. There was population movement between groups and territories, for instance groups living 450 kilometers apart

<sup>4</sup> Each tree was assigned a caretaker who was allowed to climb using vines and harvest the nuts (FLOOD 1999, p. 135). Tree holds, cut by stone axe, were not permitted but Bunya pines today show such markings, evidence perhaps of a later period when traditional law had broken down.

came together for this occasion (FLOOD 1999, p. 135). As 600 to 700 people were attracted to this festival it served a social, economic and spiritual role as food and items were traded and shared<sup>5</sup>; kinship obligations were reinforced; disputes resolved; and songs, stories and dances were swapped between groups to be taken home to their own people.

Apart from Chalawong sites associated with the Bunya nut festival also feature in the region. For instance, a large number of ceremonial grounds such as the Gumingurru stone arrangements, which was used as initiation grounds, were also on route to the triennial festival thus deepening the social significance of the interconnected sites. Such interconnectedness is indicative of the complex spiritual life in the region. As such Chalawong was strategically located at a vital node in the network of social and economical ties that characterized Aboriginal life in Southeast Queensland.

#### AN OUTLINE OF SIGNIFICANT DATES

Regionally, Chalawong is linked to a marked increase in both the number of archaeological sites in the region and in the intensity of use 4000 yrs. BP as well as the spread of new tool types, the development of labour intensive food processing, such as the large scale processing of cycad nuts, and widespread changes in the art systems. These changes in post-Pleistocene resource levels had economic, demographic and technological implications resulting in changes in the development of Aboriginal society up until the arrival of the colonial settlements.

This being the case Chalawong is therefore an example of a range of symbolic activity but also able to yield evidence for changes in the nature and intensity of economic, technological and demographic change (MORWOOD 1984, p. 88). The excavated evidence points to changes in climate as well as population pressure on Macropod (such as kangaroos and wallabies) resources resulting in a divergence to hunting arboreals such as gliders, possums and koalas. Tellingly none of the arboreal animal tracks are evident in the art at this site.

All three radiocarbon dates from charcoal support the base occupation date and other estimates<sup>6</sup>. Of the 5,826 stone artifacts recorded the majority of these are dated between 3000 and 1000 BP. Excavated evidence suggests early minor use by small groups with limited tool maintenance. Followed by more intensive use with a wider range of activities, the last 1000 yrs. showing changes in technology. There was a doubling of site usage in this later period.

Given the integrated nature of subsistence – settlement systems, there are likely to have been associated changes in other components such as group size, frequency of site occupation, duration of occupation and the inter-site distribution of activities<sup>7</sup>. These can be from socially determined elements as well as environmental causality. This influences the evidence and subsequent interpretation.

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5 Marriages were arranged, and items such as possum skin rugs, hunting nets, dilly bags, shells, necklaces and weapons were exchanged.

6 1090+- 70 BP (Beta 5897) from the upper level of artifact concentration, 3030+- 90 BP (Beta 5898) at the base of the artifact concentration and 3820 +- 120 BP (Beta 15811) immediately above the bedrock (MORWOOD 1984, p. 103)

7 LILLEY 1984, p. 27, put forward the accepted model for many groups of subsistence -settlement strategy that suggests that during winter groups aggregated near major rivers and lakes and during summer split up into smaller mobile groups along tributary streams in the foothills.



## CONCLUSION

Chalawong is the only known petroglyph site in existence in Southeast Queensland. Thus it is necessary to highlight it both in the literature and in progressive site management plans. With datable excavated cave remains Chalawong represents a continuity of rock art use. As such, the evidence indicates that patterns of change in Southeast Queensland resource structure, technology and economy and symbolic behaviour were functionally related. As illustrated, Chalawong cannot be seen as a site in isolation and is part of a network of neighbouring sites and resources in the surrounding area.

Despite its significance, Chalawong is largely forgotten by local site management strategies. This is attested to by the lack of upkeep, funding and research of this site. Though a structure was created 17 years ago to minimise the impact on the soft rock surface it has fallen into disrepair. Dust and vibrations from the trucks of a nearby mine are compromising the site's preservation as is the excessive vegetation growth which causes fire risks and possible abrasion damage. There are also human risk factors such as graffiti<sup>8</sup>. What is needed is to critically explore how the contemporary custodians can maximise their vested interest in the protection of petroglyphs and rock art in regards to identity, current cultural significance and economic interest from tourism. Thus ensuring Chalawong's continued viability as a protected site in the community.

Whilst the site is indeed under pressure, importantly it *still* has significance and meaning for the local indigenous people even though this meaning may have shifted through no continuity of cultural knowledge. This being the case, the meaning of the site often highlighted by archaeologists seems to have less relevance to the current custodians than their contemporary narratives. As such, Chalawong still has regional, artistic and cultural significance both archaeologically and to contemporary indigenous stakeholders.

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<sup>8</sup> QUINNELL 1972, p. 217, Evidence of illegal excavation activity was detected in 1969. There is also evidence of cows accessing the area (cow dung) despite the structure.

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