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OBIRI — A ROCK ART GALLERY IN ARNHEM LAND, NORTH AUSTRALIA

The Obiri rock is situated on the left bank of the East Alligator River about one kilometre North of Cahill's Crossing. It is composed of several large rocks, four of which have art galleries with a wealth of paintings. These stone blocks have a majestic air, for they are sandstone residuals which rise abruptly out of extensive alluvial plains surrounding them. I have numbered these stone blocks I.—IV.

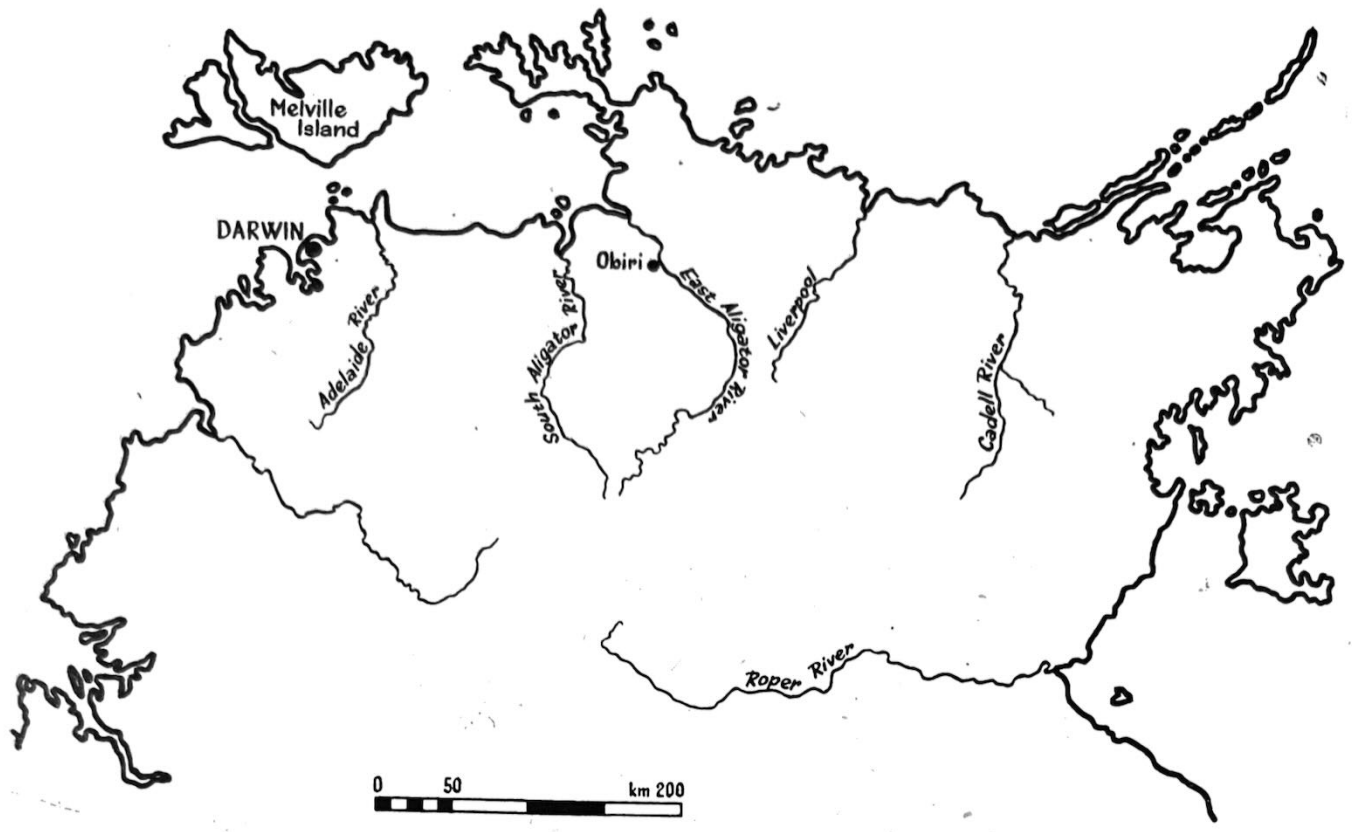
OBIRI I.

On rock number 1 there are two main rock art galleries and a large number of isolated paintings. The largest of the galleries is on the vertical face of a stone bench about two metres high and over forty metres long. It is situated below a huge, deep, spacious overhang about 10 metres above the alluvial plane, from which it is separated by a large cone of rock debris, in many places with large boulders, on which there are also many paintings. Unfortunately a shortage of time prevented me from carrying out a detailed documentation of all these paintings which they call for.

I had to confine myself to the most important.

In the main gallery there are chiefly polychrome paintings of fish, kangaroos, tortoise — in the developed X-ray style. The following are examples of these (see fig 20):

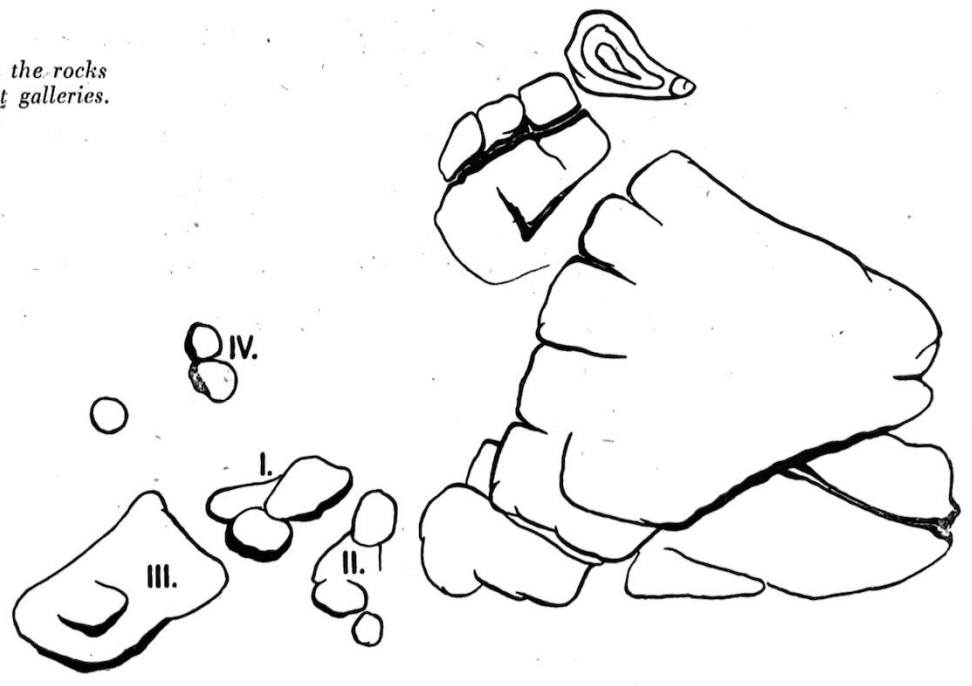
1. An 80 cm polychrome X-ray painting of a wal-laby. It is a decorative example of the final form of the X-ray style. The spine and the body division are presented, together with the shading of individual pieces of muscle, but the entrails are shown only as stylised wavy lines.
2. A 60 cm painting of a tortoise, head down. The digestive tract is shown as a wavy line. The neck is long and the head turned to one side.
3. A 40 cm long painting of a freshwater fish with spine and with individual strips of meat well represented.
4. A 70 cm long painting of a saratoga with characteristic fins. The entrails are also shown in detail.
5. Above the kangaroo painting (*No. 1*), higher up the rock face, is a small white figure of a man with hands at the side, which is supposed to indicate that he has his hands in his pockets. This is a character indicating a white man.
6. Next there is a large painting of a barramundi in perfect X-ray style. It is painted in dark red on a white background, which has, however, already peeled off, so that the natural reddish colour of the rock stands out in its place.
7. Next is the painting of the tortoise (*No. 2*) and above it a small white painting of a white man.
8. Another white painting, of a mamandi evil spirit head down, with legs turned back.
9. Higher up the rock is the painting of a saratoga (*No. 4*) and still higher above it the remains (tail) of an X-ray painting of a barramundi.
10. Further along this gallery is a large painting of a barramundi. This perfect painting is on a yellowish background in dark red.
11. Between paintings 10 and 9 is a simple, small red figure of a white man with one hand raised and the other in his pocket.
12. A saratoga fish painted head down. Perfect X-ray painting.
13. Above this is a horizontal red painting of a hand enclosed in a red line (compare Red Lily Lagoon, Jelínek, 1978).



MAP 1.

The Obiri locality in Arnhem Land, North Australia.

MAP 2.
*The Obiri locality with the rocks
 I—IV with the rock art galleries.*



14. A similar left hand diagonally placed on the vertical rock. It is also enclosed in a red line.
15. An X-ray painting of a tortoise whose fore parts and head are covered by the following painting.
16. A white, decoratively touched-up stencil of a forearm.
17. A large, somewhat faded X-ray painting of a barramundi.
18. Next to it, again on the upper part of the rock, is a simple white painting of a characteristic figure of a white man smoking a pipe with his hands in the pockets. The double outline on the body, arms and legs indicates clothes.
19. A characteristic figure of a white man.
20. A smaller painting of a kangaroo in perfect X-ray style.
21. A large X-ray painting of a turtle, head down on the rock face.
22. A smaller X-ray painting of a fish (a bream).
23. A larger X-ray painting of a barramundi with the head broken off.
24. Another large X-ray painting of a barramundi.

On the boulders below the large gallery there are many paintings, of which only a few will be mentioned here. While the paintings in the main gallery are almost exclusively in the X-ray style both of animals and people, we find different styles here (fig. 21).

25. A red painting on a yellow background, of a fish (bream? mullet?) in X-ray style.
26. Next to the latter, on the same vertical face of a stone bench, is a linear X-ray painting of a large barramundi.
27. Across the painting of a barramundi (No. 26) is a red painting of a large goana, also in X-ray style. Details of the entrails are poorly visible, but the overall shape of the painting, the claws on the feet and the forked tongue are clearly visible.
28. On the same rock face there is a red painting of a large fish.
The internal details are not visible.
29. A red painting of two forearms placed symmetrically opposite each other. The left arm is more simply ornamented, while the right is heavily decorated (cf. Nangalore, Jelínek 1977, Cannon Hill Jelínek 1978).
30. A simple yellow silhouette of a large fish, probably a barramundi. Internal details of the X-ray style are not visible.
31. A red line painting, size 50 cm, unfortunately badly preserved. Probably supernatural, mythological being (cf. Obiri II, No. 3).
32. A red linear painting of a small four-legged creature (bandicoot?). Not in the X-ray style.
33. A red silhouette of a four-legged creature (bandicoot?); Paintings No. 32 & 33 probably belong to the archaic style.
34. A red linear painting of a female figure whose trunk is composed of a series of diamond shapes. The head, arms and breasts are clearly dis-

cernable, but there are no legs (cf. painting No. 100, Bala Uru, Jelínek 1978, another painting from Cadell River, painting No. 11, Obiri IV, No. 34, Obiri III, similar painting in gallery besides Inagurdurwil) (40 cm).

On another boulder below the main gallery (I), there are:

35. A red female figure, thin at the waist, and with the lower parts of the body exaggeratedly widened. The thighs are striped lengthwise. This is a comparatively faded red painting belonging to the archaic style (cf. Cannon Hill, Gallery V, fig. 1, Jelínek 1978). The size is 40 cm (fig. 19).
36. Across the trunk of the latter figure is painted a slim snake-like figure with two legs, trunk and head. It is not possible to decide whether this painting is over or under the previous one, i.e. whether it is older or younger.
37. Next to these figures is a small, poorly preserved red painting in the archaic style. It is a simple, static female figure.
38. Some other badly preserved archaic paintings can be seen.

On a large boulder below the main gallery but in a different place there is another group of paintings which again belong to the X-ray style (fig. 1, 2):

39. The most outstanding painting, painted over the others, is a 115 cm long rifle striped lengthwise. According to the decoration and the internal divisions it apparently belongs to the X-ray style.
40. Next to the rifle is an X-ray painting of a tortoise. Most of the body, the internal details, and one rear leg are visible. The remainder is covered by neighbouring, later paintings. The head and neck are covered with the rifle painting (No. 39).
41. Below the tortoise painting (No. 40) is a large painting of a fish, obviously a barramundi, with its head broken off. The painting now seems to be white, but closer inspection reveals the remains of internal details in X-ray style.
42. Beside the tortoise (No. 40) is a white, lengthwise striped rectangle whose meaning is unknown. It covers the fish painting (No. 41), and is therefore later.
43. Still further to one side is a poorly preserved X-ray painting of a fish probably a barramundi. It is depicted head down.
44. To the right of the rifle (No. 39) is another X-ray style fish (probably a barramundi). The head has not been preserved.
45. A poorly preserved X-ray painting of a barramundi in faded red on a white background.
46. Near to it is another X-ray painting of a smaller fish with a forked tail-fin. This painting is comparatively clear and well preserved, size 50 cm.
47. Lower down this wall is a smaller, white, slim human figure. Both arms are thread-like and are painted on one side of the body, on whose



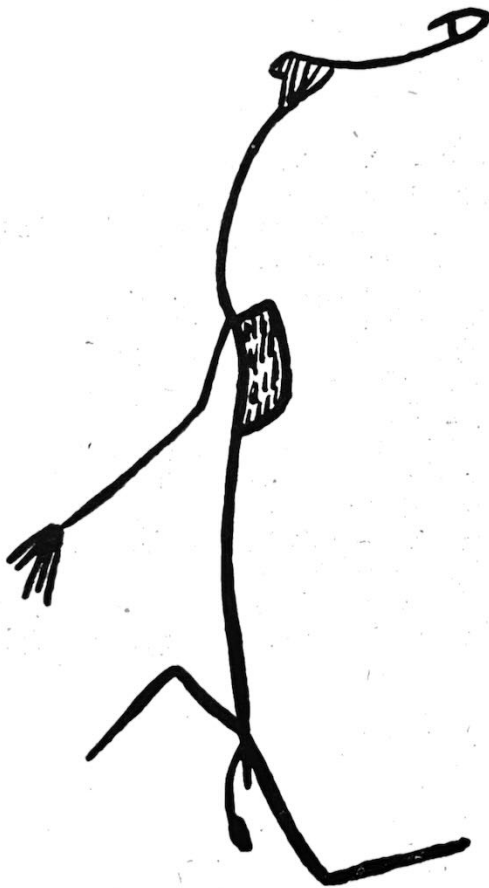
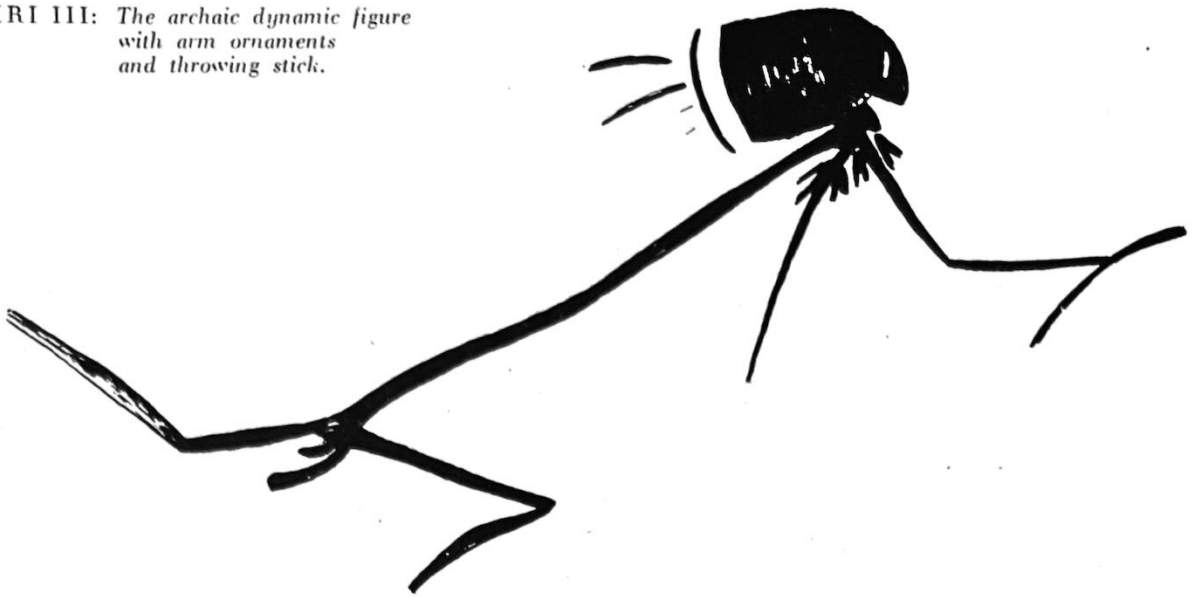
16. OBIRI III: A group of archaic small dynamic figures. Exceptionally they are painted in white. They are overpainted by two transversal red lines belonging to a later (late archaic style) red painting.

- white background close inspection reveals internal design showing that it is in X-ray style.
48. Next to this is a painting of a European axe in white with red lines showing details. This too is an X-ray style painting.
 49. The remains of an X-ray painting of a fish, across whose body and head lies the butt of the rifle (No. 39).
 50. The rear part of the body of a goana. An X-ray painting painted over the rifle.
 51. Higher up the wall is a poorly preserved X-ray painting of a fish.
 52. On one side at the same height is an X-ray painting of a goana, faded, but still quite well visible. The head is very faded. The length of the painting is 100 cm.
 53. The highest in this group of paintings is a horizontally placed snake about 150 cm long. A central line preserved in the painting indicates X-ray style. The head of the snake can unfortunately no longer be discerned.

To the north of the main gallery there is an ancient dark-red and vermilion painting on the vertical rock-face where a stone block has broken off. It is quite common to find two red colours even

- elsewhere, but it can be clearly seen here that the dark-red with a carmine shade, at times looking almost black, is older. The question is whether a different sort of colouring matter was used in the most ancient times, or whether a change has been brought about in the course of time by oxidation (fig. 42).
53. The largest, and apparently the oldest painting is a large kangaroo. The size is 215 cm and the colour dark-red. Other vermilion paintings are superimposed on it. The body, legs and tail are filled in with short strikes. The ears are low, pointed and hairy. The head is separated from the body by several lines representing the oldest characters of the archaic X-ray style.
 - 54, 55. Two small animals in the same colour. The hairy tail may indicate a rock kangaroo or a native cat. Both paintings are approximately of the same size, 35 cm (cf. similar paintings, No. 32 and 33, on the boulders below the large gallery, No. 1).
 56. An indistinct, small painting of two other animals in dark-red.
 57. A simple dark-red painting of a bird, and a larger, worn picture of another animal in the same colour.

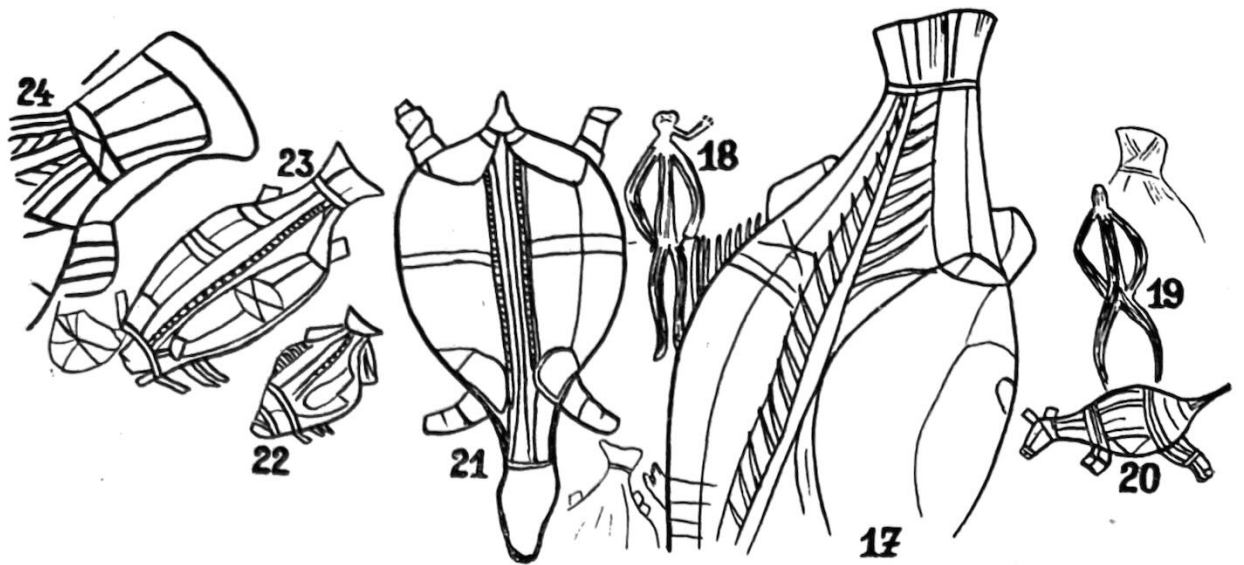
17. OBIRI III: *The archaic dynamic figure with arm ornaments and throwing stick.*



18. OBIRI I: *Dynamic figure of a spearman painted in the archaic style. In the raised right hand he holds a womera.* ▲



19. OBIRI I: *Archaic female figure (No. 35).* ►



20. A situation of a group of paintings in the main gallery Obiri I.

58. A 90 cm large bird, either a bush-turkey or a goose, painted in vermillion over an earlier kangaroo painting (53).
59. A painting of a thread-like anthropomorphic figure with arms stretched out on one side of the body, and with an elongated trunk ending in lines indicating hairs. Parallel to the trunk are several other lines.
60. A 95 cm large painting similar to No. 59 but more clearly visible. The head can be seen distinctly, together with lines which come out of it and run parallel to the slim trunk ending in something like a hairy tail. The arms are also well preserved. Two pouch-shapes protrude from the side of the body, with two small animals in them. Their fore- and hind legs are of the same length and they have kangaroo-like heads, and on their spines there are picked-up hairs or spines, like those of an echidna. There is no doubt that the whole painting represents a supernatural mythological being.
- 61, 62. Peculiar geometrical shapes with lengthwise lines. The meaning is as yet unknown (cf. Bala Uru Gallery, Jelínek 1978).
63. An interesting, small red (vermillion) painting of a kangaroo, size c. 50 cm. It is perfectly executed. The picture is well preserved and reveals characters of the primitive X-ray style.

To the south, i. e. on the opposite side of the large main gallery, on the vertical face of a stone block, are rather simple paintings of freshwater catfish (65, 66) and some sort of animal, probably

a bandicoot (67), in white silhouette with red outline. The head of the animal is mouse-like, the body eggshaped, with internal red hatching (fig. 8). In the same direction, but round the other side of the rock with the main gallery I, there are scattered archaic red figures (on the south-east side).

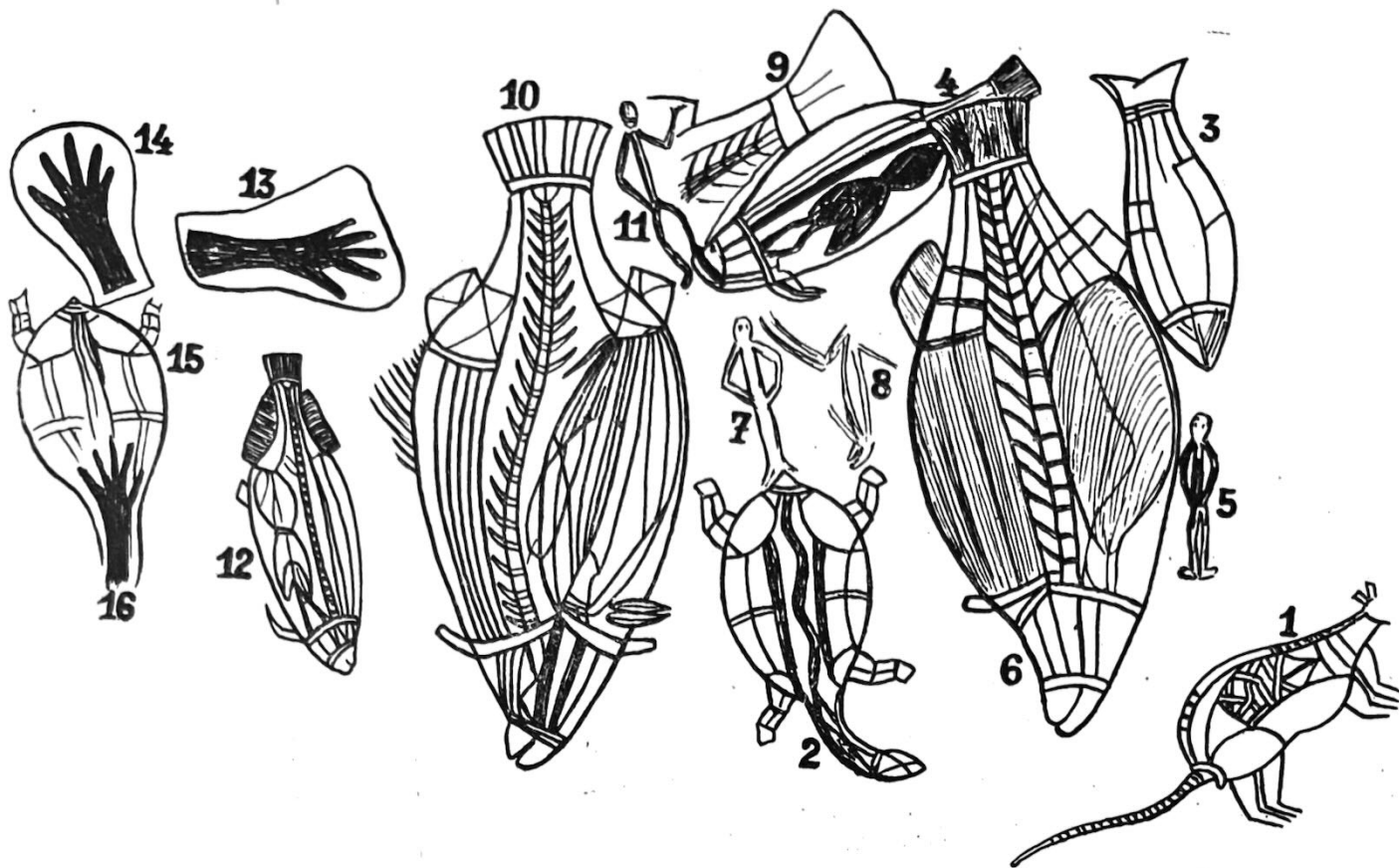
The best preserved painting is a running figure of a man holding a womera in his raised hand (68). The painting is perfect, with details of the womera, fingers, head and sexual organs well visible. The size is 50 cm. This shows that this type of archaic dynamic figure falls within the period when the womera was already known (fig. 18).

On the north-west side of this large rock (I) with the main gallery is another rich gallery, but the lack of time prevented me from studying it.

OBIRI II.

To the south-east of rock I is rock II with further paintings on the vertical walls, not far above the ground.

1. An 80 cm large yellow painting of a tortoise with a snake-like, curved neck is situated vertically on the rock face. The internal details in the X-ray style — muscles and gullet — are painted in red (fig. 6).
2. A 12 cm large spearman in red. The figure has a thread-like body and limbs; the wrists and ankles are indicated by transversal lines and long growth or ornaments hang from the elbows. Around the neck is a net dilly-bag, on the head



are three lines indicating hair. There are large male sexual organs. The spearman holds a womera in the right hand and three spears with a single line of barbs and a fan in the left one.

3. A 70 cm large red painting of a figure with a round body and head and thread-like outstretched arms and thin legs without feet. The face is divided by two diagonal lines (cf. No. 31, below the main gallery of Obiri I). It is considerably less preserved than painting No. 2.
4. A red painting of a fish, size 40 cm, with faint traces of the X-ray style.
5. Above this are several strongly stylised human figures holding each other by hands. They are painted in red.
- 6, 7. Two red fish with traces of the X-ray style. They are, like No. 4, poorly preserved.
8. A yellow fish with red outline.
9. The remains of a white, indistinct X-ray painting, probably a fish. The white colour has flaked off the rock, and so, though the painting is badly preserved, it is not necessarily old.
10. A red painting of a sea catfish with the characters of the X-ray style. Size 50 cm, poorly preserved.

On the same rock, but further to one side, are three other red paintings.

11. A 40 cm large well designed kangaroo, standing on its hind legs. It is painted in silhouette. Neither on this nor on the next two paintings are there any traces of the X-ray style. Their style

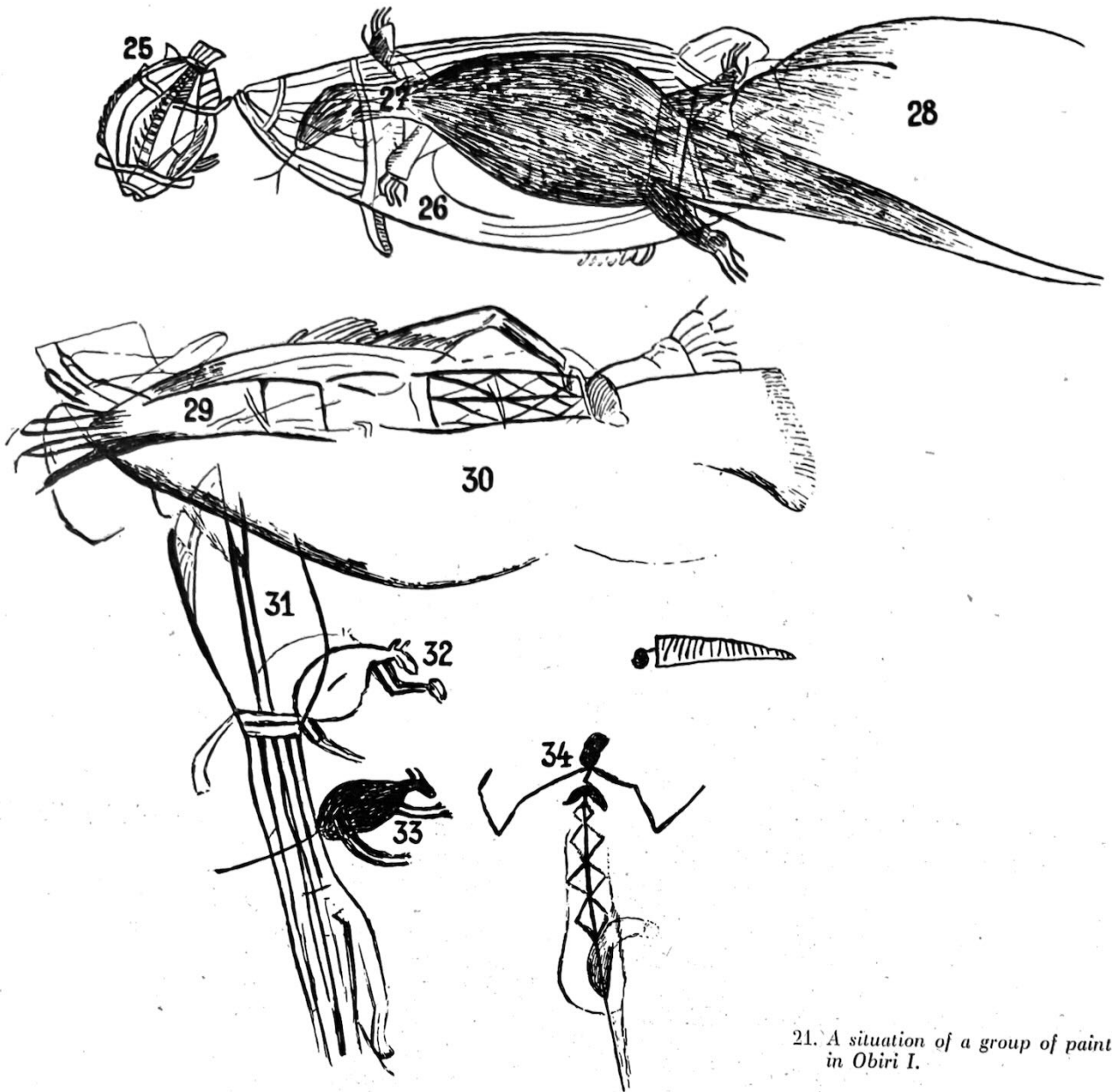
can be compared to kangaroo painting No. 54, 55 from Obiri I (fig. 42).

12. A human figure with raised, three-fingered hands and simple legs. The head measuring some 20 cm is crescent-shaped and is in the horizontal position (fig. 25).
13. A poorly preserved red painting of an animal probably of a bandicoot.

OBIRI III.

To the west is another large rock which I called Obiri III. On the east side there is a slight rocky slope with several steps, giving access to the upper part of the rock. There are several boulders or mushroom-shaped rocks with quite a lot of archaic red paintings (fig. 26).

1. A 110 cm long red figure of a female spirit. The arms and legs are more like claws, and a long, branching, tail-like shape protrudes from the crotch. The head is small, oval. The breasts show that the figure is a female. Above the head and along one side are four circles with three lines coming out of them, like tracks or small hand prints.
2. Near the head of this comparatively clear figure (No. 1) there is another red, considerably less clear figure of (probably) a fish. Looking at the horizontal ceiling surface as a whole, we can see that the paintings here are of two types, or, more accurately, of two chronological layers. The clearer, better visible ones are 1, 3, 5, 7,



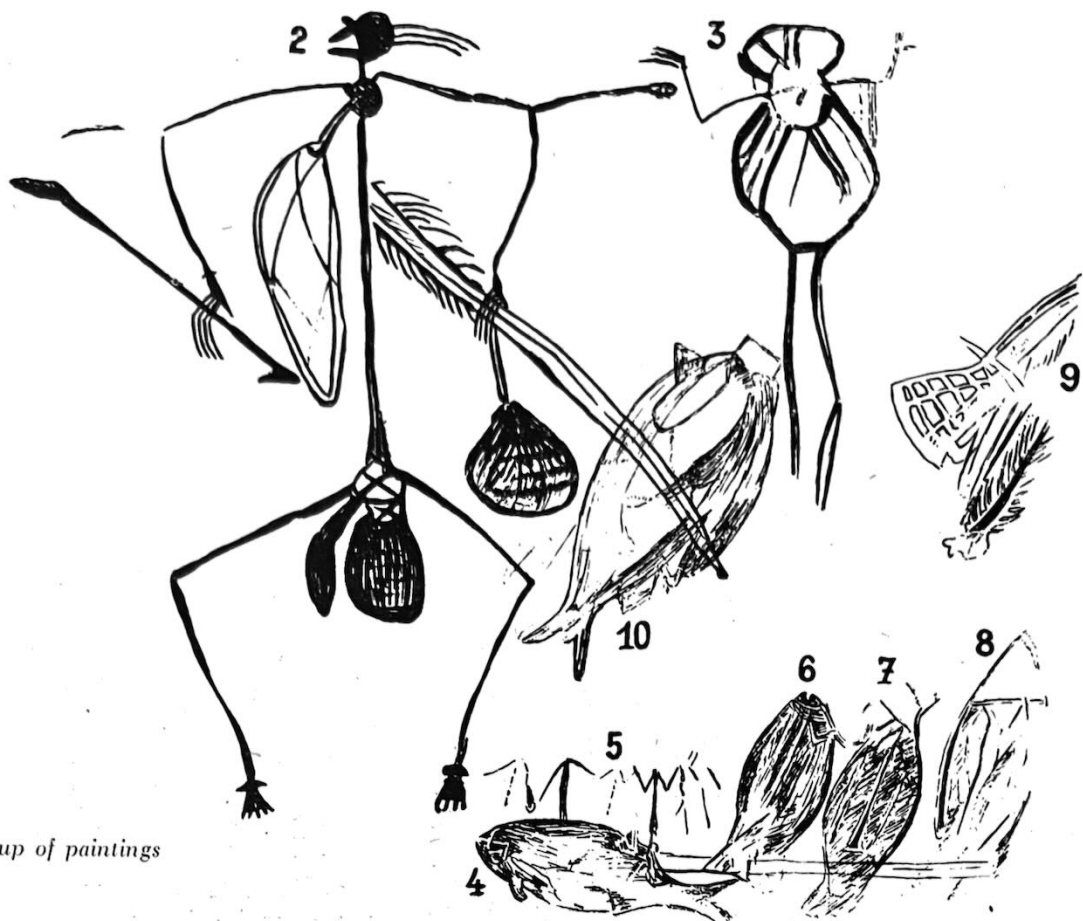
21. A situation of a group of paintings in Obiri I.

8, 9, 10, 11, the older, poorly visible ones are 2, 4, 6, 12. This painting (No. 2) therefore belongs to the second group. The tail is forked and seven fins are attached to the body. The trunk is striped lengthwise. The length of the picture is approximately 60 cm.

3. A 100 cm long clearly visible figure with lengthwise striped trunk, round head and open jaws, and with short, horizontally bent legs. There is again a long branching tail from the crotch. Between the arms and the figure of a fish (2) there is again a painting of a track with three lines. The tail of No. 3 is painted across an older (4) figure, faded, possibly two figures, of which five bent legs can be seen.
5. A 70 cm long figure with a large fan-shaped head ornament, with short outgrowths to the side (cf. No. 11 in this gallery). The body is

spindly, striped lengthwise, with bent legs, turned slightly to one side.

6. A poorly visible, older painting of similar spirit figure. The limbs, bent upwards, and elongated body with a peculiar unnaturally shaped crown of the head, ornamented with a short fan-shape, can be discerned.
- 7, 8, 9, 10. Simple paintings of freshwater catfish, size 50–57 cm. The first is clearly painted across an older, red painting. In the tail areas of the other three the rock is weathered and the paint is not preserved. Another red painting partly covers the last catfish:
11. This painting has been better preserved. The arms and legs are bent upwards and two peculiar growths protrude from the side of the head. The head and trunk are lengthwise striped. It can be seen that this figure was painted over



22. A situation of a group of paintings in Obiri II.

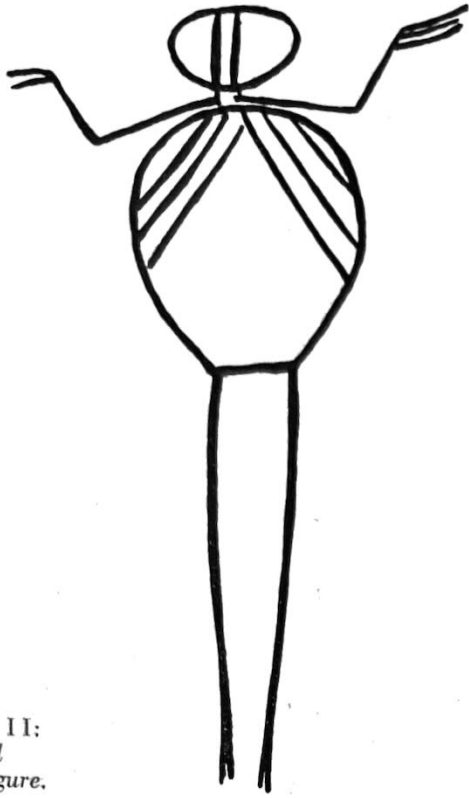
another, white, unfortunately completely indecipherable picture. The head and trunk measure 50 cm.

12. A poorly visible, long red painting of unknown significance.
13. A 95 cm anthropomorphic figure. The head and chest form one oval, striped lengthwise, with a short fan-shaped ornament of the crown, or possibly hair. The arms are thread-like and there are small protrusions at the armpits which probably indicate breasts. The lower part of the body, completely in red, finishes in a branching "tail".
14. A 120 cm high female figure with arms raised and legs in an unnatural position. The limbs are wider at the knees and elbows. The round head and long trunk are striped lengthwise. Hairs are indicated at the crotch. There are short thin growths from the side of the head and on the trunk at the armpits there are breasts (cf. Inagadurwil gallery or this gallery, Nos. 11, 5, 13, 1). There are older red paintings of fish on both sides of this figure, with forked tails (bream? mullet?). The lower part of the body of No. 14 is painted over one of them. It is impossible to be sure whether the fish bears characters of the X-ray style or not (fig. 11).
On the whole we can say that the paintings

described here give the impression of being virtually mere daubs, and they can be seen to have been painted quickly, without great care.

Low down on the rear wall of a mushroom-shaped rock, just above ground-level, is a group of red dynamic figures — (15, 16, 17, 18). None of them has a head, and it is quite possible that they were painted with the heads in a different, less resistant colour, which has not been preserved (cf. Old Woman's Dreaming gallery or Cannon Hill, Jelinek 1978). The end of the trunk of painting No. 16 gives some indication of this fact. The arms of all the figures are painted as two sharply bent parallel lines. All figures seem to have been the work of one artist and are of approximately the same age. The trunk is bent over to a greater or lesser degree. The sexual organs can be seen on the better-preserved figures. No. 16 is 30 cm in size (fig. 29).

Another painting worth mentioning, higher up the rock slope, is a series of six red flying foxes (19). Only the rear part of the body and the legs are preserved. The front parts and heads are gone. These flying foxes are striped lengthwise, and the characteristically bent legs have a span of 23 to 30 cm. Above these legs is a red line on the rock, with two shorter, parallel lines running from it at more or less regular intervals. In two places 65 cm apart there are beak-shaped objects in dark-red



23. OBIRI II:
A stylized
archaic figure.

paint, the significance of which, like that of the line itself, is unknown. Although the painting is well sheltered it is poorly preserved, showing that it is very old. Mountford (1954) misinterpreted this painting as "possibly a pubic apron". Unfortunately he has recognized only a part of the painting (fig. 28).

On a mushroom-shaped rock on this side of Obiri III, on the horizontal ceiling surface, is a small painting of three fish. The largest of them measures 35 cm. The whole fish was first painted in white, then half of it was touched-up in red colour, which has blackened somewhat, probably through oxidation. The largest fish has a white head, turned somewhat to one side (20). The second fish (21) is somewhat smaller, but is painted exactly as the first one. The only difference is that the first fish's spine is painted as a simple X-ray character. The third and smallest fish, completely in red is No. 22. It can be seen that the artist painted the fins faithfully and exactly (cf. paintings 2 & 12 in the first locality of Obiri III). The three fish together form an interesting composition and are an important documentation of the use of white paint in the archaic style. The perfection and the small dimensions indicate this style, as does the third, red fish, and the proximity of a group of dynamic figures in a similar state of preservation (see below). The manner of using the two colours and their superimposition in both these paintings are unique. The rear parts of the body and the tail fins are striped lengthwise, and have a different red colour to the body. They are darker (fig. 9).

A group of dynamic archaic figures on the same ceiling is important from several points of view (fig. 10).

Thematically they represent human figures, separate limbs, two fish and an unknown object. The human figures are thread-like and in various positions. The most interesting is a 25 cm high spearman (23). The position of the trunk, hands and legs is conventional. The painting is well preserved. Some sort of round bobble hangs from the inclined head, and there is a peculiar shape on the back, whose purpose is difficult to explain. It is important that this spearman is throwing his spear with the help of a womera. According to all indications (style, superposition, analogy), these paintings belong to the group of the oldest paintings in the area. But the womera is usually unknown among the oldest paintings of the interior as a whole. Two crouching figures enclosed in egg-shaped lines are also interesting, one of them is red and the other red and white (24, 25). Also of interest is a painting of four isolated limbs (26) and several small signs (various red dots, double dots, etc.), some of which at least represent tracks. The two fish are painted in simple red lines. They are of the same type, and both are about 20 cm in size (27, 28).

The unknown object is made up of two parts, one of which is finely criss-crossed and the other irregularly divided (29).

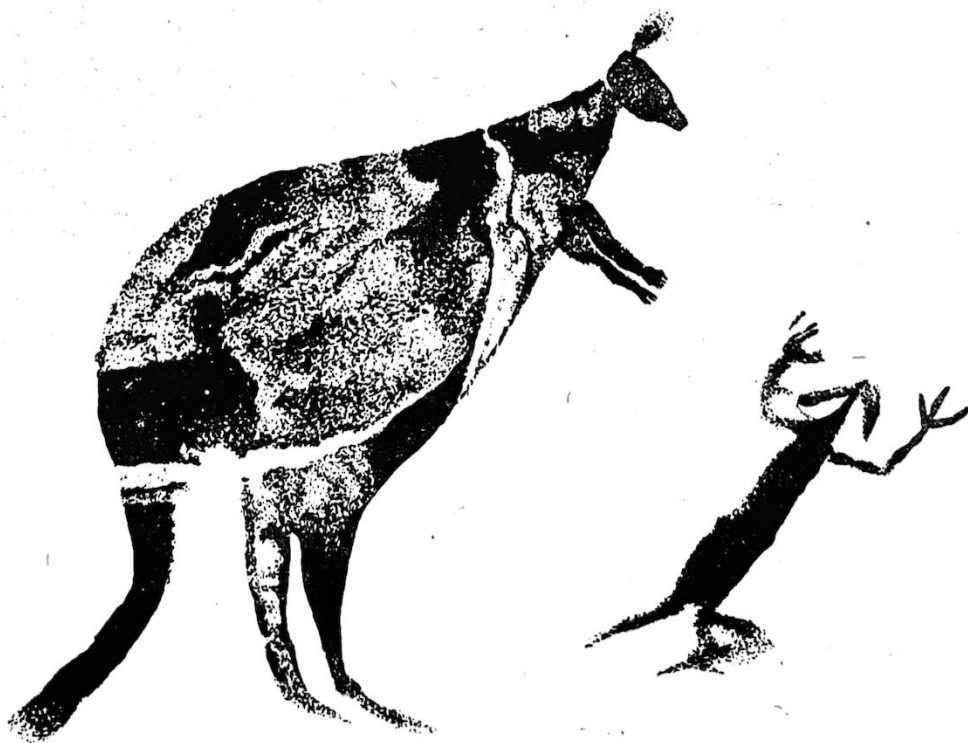
Chronologically the spearman with the womera is important if only because figures of this type are most often painted without any kind of object. It is also unusual for the details preserved. This is due to the smoothness and sheltered position of the surface on which these miniatures are painted. Some of the figures have no head, probably because they were painted in a different, less resistant colour.

The last of this group of paintings on the Obiri III rock slope is a group of yellow and red dynamic figures, with a painting of a snake and a bird (bush turkey) and a vertical row of arched lines. The snake (30) and the bird (31) are painted in red without traces of the X-ray style. The human figures (32) are further examples of yellow paint in connection with dynamic figures. The individual lines are interesting — probably spears, and in the case of the short lines with a round end, stone axes. The small blobs and triple lines (see previous scene with dynamic archaic figures) cannot be satisfactorily explained for the time being. The neighbouring painting of a bush turkey is 28 cm in size. This allows an estimate to be made of the size in individual figures. The last painting which is documented on this slope is 68 cm long, a vertically placed row of simple red arcs, so placed in relation to each other that pairs of arcs are next to each other with the smaller of the two opening upwards (like stylized raised arms) and the larger downwards (like bowed legs) (33). The meaning of this undoubtedly heavily stylized painting is unknown (fig. 27).

24. OBIRI II:
*A late archaic figure
of a spearman.*



25. OBIRI II:
*An archaic painting
of a kangaroo and spirit
figure with characteristic head.*



Continuing up this north-east rock slope we reach an extensive mushroom-shaped overhang, the ceiling and vertical walls of which bear many paintings. Many of them are unfortunately either entirely or to a large degree indecipherable. I called this gallery Obiri III, Mushroom Rock 1.

Let me describe here some of the more important and more distinct paintings:

Group 1 — on the oblique vertical wall (fig. 31).

34. A red painting of a female figure, simple, thread-like, with breasts and a tripple zigzag line on one side of the body (cf. Bala Uru, No. 11. Obiri IV — upper gallery, No. 34 Obiri I — boulders below the main gallery).
35. Below this is a red painting of a rifle. The butt is striped lengthwise.
36. A red painting of a white man. A contour-line along the trunk depicts clothes. Both hands are pointing towards the weapon. The whole figure, and especially the legs, are very slim.
37. A horizontal painting of a large rifle, painted in simple red lines.

Paintings 35, 36 and 37 are "European Contact" paintings. They are painted over all the other pictures, and, similarly as in the other galleries, they belong to the latest layer of paintings. The connection with the X-ray style is shown by the division of the rifles, or even by the striping of the butts, and in the case of the man the depiction of dress and the body within the dress. It is interesting that only red is used for these late paintings.

38. A poorly visible, slim male figure painted over by one of the rifles (35) and a white man (36). Both arms are in front of the body holding a dilly bag. A branching feature protruding from the head (spine) indicates that this is a supernatural being. This figure apparently forms, together with the following female figure, an erotic scene.
39. A red, poorly visible, lying female figure, with her legs somewhat stretched apart. It is interesting that the woman in this erotic scene is lying supine.
40. An outline painting of a rifle, painted accurately in red.
41. An unintelligible, long, half-light and half-dark red object.

It is comparatively well preserved and overlaid by paintings No. 35, 36 & 37.

42. One of the rifles (37) lies across an older X-ray painting of a barramundi with its head broken off.
43. Next to this is another fish painting in the X-ray style.
44. High up the wall is another X-ray painting, of a freshwater catfish.
45. An X-ray painting of another fish, with a forked tail.

46. Next to this is the head and part of the body of an X-ray snake. The spine is indicated by red dots on a white background.

White is the predominant colour in all the fish paintings (42, 43, 44, 45), for the fine internal hatching, which is unusual. The colour was originally different and has turned white over the years due to oxidation.

A group of red paintings belonging to the archaic style. It is unfortunately indecipherable (48). In many places the paint has peeled off the rock surface. There seem to have been two dark red figures, and near them some sort of branches with flowers or leaves indicated by red dots. The painting is strongly reminiscent of the first, second and third groups of archaic paintings from the Great Gallery at Upper Cadell River (Jelínek 1978). The whole painting is situated on the vertical wall (fig. 48).

There is a large yellow X-ray fish painting partly covering an archaic, small red painting of an Aboriginal boat with seven standing figures (49), with an oar painted between the first and second men (fig. 14). The figures are thread-like, the oar measures 11.5 cm. There is a further, very indistinct, similar group of paintings (50) painted over by the yellow body of the fish (cf. Old Woman's Dreaming, Jelínek 1978).

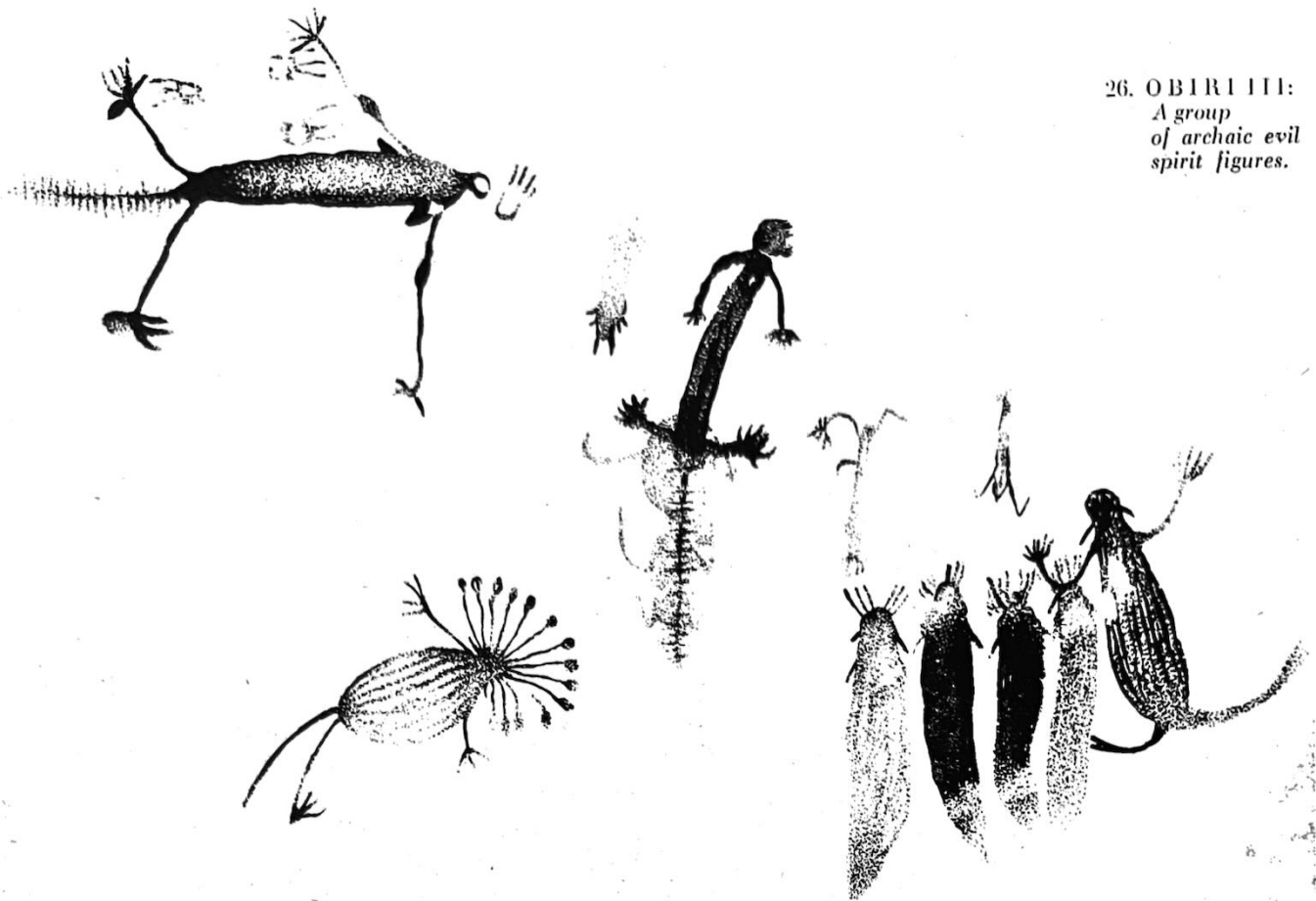
Worth mentioning is a 50 cm dark-red, archaic, dynamic figure of a running man, with a boomerang in one hand (51). On the upper parts of both arms are bobble-like ornaments. The head carries a high hairstyle. The male sex is clearly visible. There is simple wavy line below the painting. Its meaning is unknown (fig. 17).

In front of this painting is a silhouette of a bird, probably a bush-turkey, in red (52). The head is unfortunately not preserved.

There are three yellow, thread-like mamandi on the ceiling (53, 54, 55) (fig. 32):

53. A female figure (35 cm) with legs bent upwards along the trunk. A long tongue protrudes from the mouth.
54. Another female figure with long outstretched tongue and long hair. Both arms are stretched out in front of the body, parallel. The legs are in a crouching position.
55. The third yellow female figure, painted head down. The legs are also bent back along the trunk, and a long tongue protrudes from the mouth.
56. An X-ray painting of a freshwater catfish, perfectly executed.
57. This catfish partly covers another X-ray painting of a fish, perhaps a sea catfish.
- 58, 59, 60. Three simple paintings of white men with their hands in their pockets. The central figure is smoking a pipe.

There are more paintings on the ceiling, worth mentioning is an archer fish, a red and white static



female figure, a group of small red figures, and a large fish (fig. 45).

61. The archer fish is in dark-red and is spitting water at a small insect. The entire scene measures 46 cm. The insect has six fore and six rear legs. It is probable that there are some X-ray style characters inside the body of the archer fish. According to the style, colour, topic and size, there is no doubt that this is an archaic painting.
62. Further along from this last painting is a 40 cm high static female figure. It is completely white (apparently from secondary oxidation) with the inner parts of the arms, legs and breasts dark red. There is spiky hair on her head.
63. There is an interesting group of small red figures with round heads. They are 5–14 cm in size, standing or crouching, some have ornaments with round ends dangling from their heads. There are several unclear daubs surrounding these figures in the same colour — I was unable to find an explanation for it.
64. The last painting I noted was a 70 cm X-ray saratoga, which is interesting because, while the head has been well preserved in red and carmine, the lower part of the body and the tail fin have weathered and are completely white, so that only a faint contour remains. This is

a good example of weathering and of change in colour.

Alongside the first mushroom-shaped rock there is another, on whose ceiling there is again a wealth of paintings. There are others on the vertical walls as well (fig. 50).

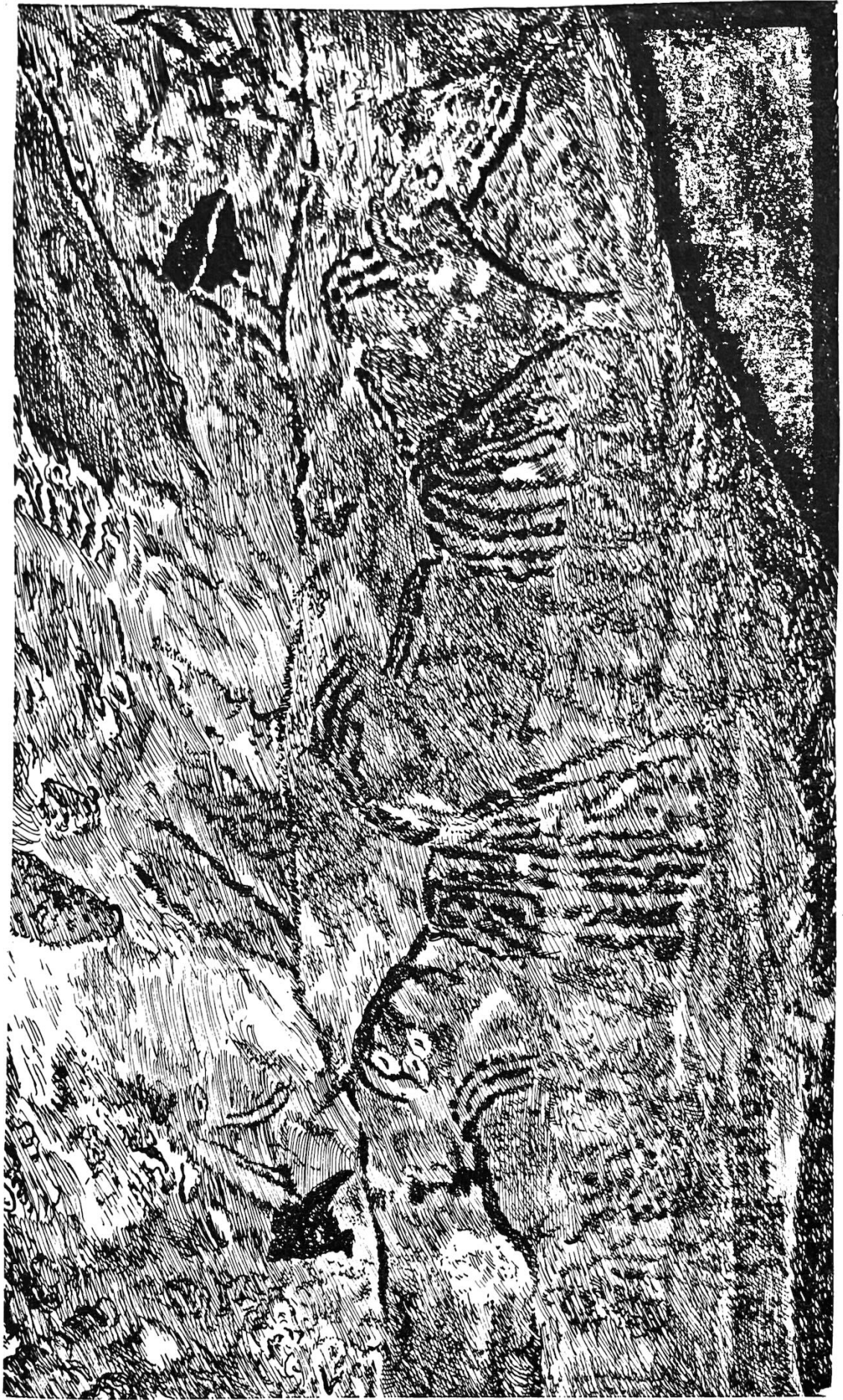
Group 1:

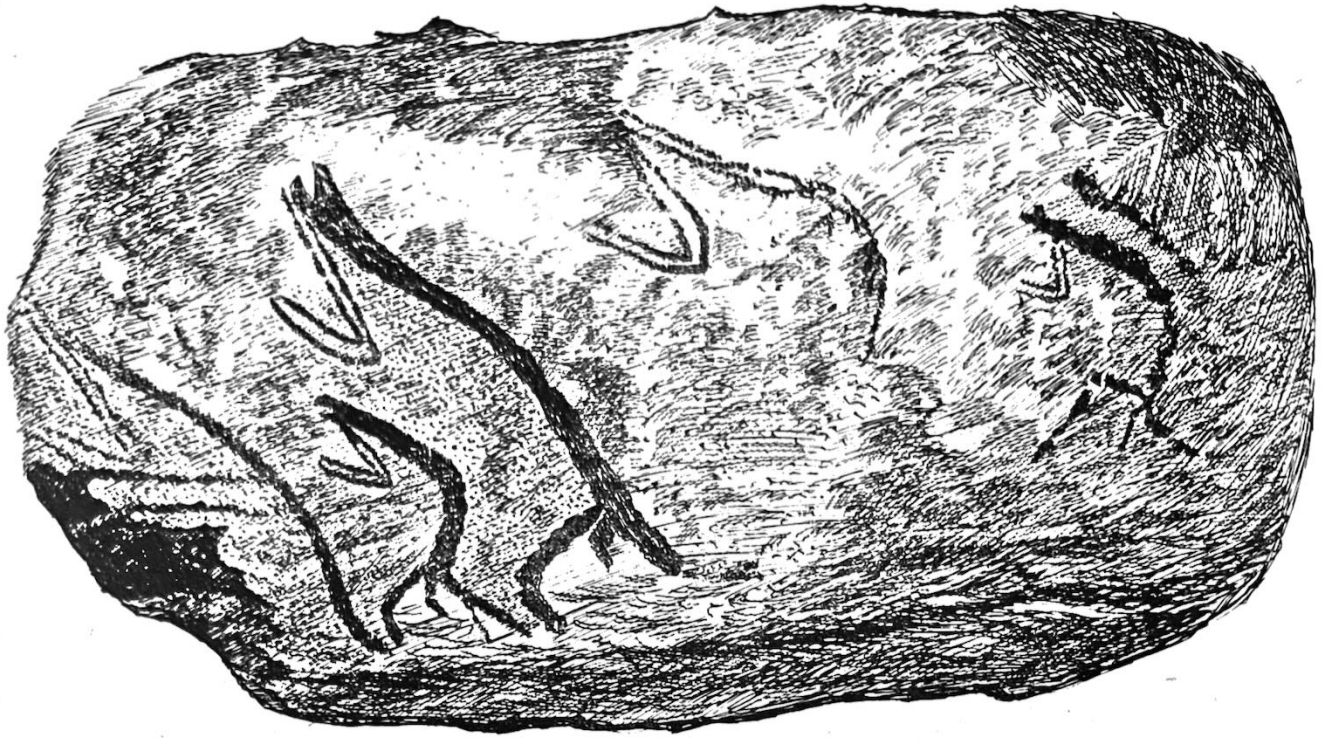
65. A 230 cm red figure of a spirit man (Namarakbia) holding four fish (mullet?) with forked tails on a string in his left hand. The large figure is red with several transversal lines at the waist. Both thread-like arms are raised. The fish on the string are simple, with X-ray style characters.
66. Higher up the wall is an incomplete archaic painting — apparently a kangaroo — in dark-red.
67. This is an interesting dark-red painting. A fish tail and part of a fish body can be seen.
68. A yellow X-ray painting of a sea catfish.
69. Another yellow X-ray painting of a barramundi with its head broken off.
70. Near the tail-fin of the fish (No. 69) there is a 45 cm red painting of a gar fish. The inner part of the body is empty.
71. Next to this is a red silhouette of a fish 25 cm in size.



27. OBIRI III: A group of dynamic human figures with the early archaic painting of a bird (bush turkey?) and a snake.

28. OBIRI III: A weathered painting of several head down hanging flying foxes. Archaic style.





29. OBIRI III: Six dynamic figures without heads. Most probably they were painted with another, less resistant colour.

72. Higher up the ceiling is a long painting of a thick yellow snake. There are rows of eggs in the rear part of the body.
73. About half way down the snake's body is the head of a white striped barramundi in X-ray style; it is painted over the snake. The white paint has already fallen off to some extent.
74. Next to the barramundi (73) is a pale-yellow finely hatched painting of an ibis. The painting measuring 80 cm is very decorative (fig. 51).
75. Between the tail fins of fish (No. 73) and fish No. 67 there is a smaller fish partly covered with 73. It is in the same X-ray style as No. 73.
76. Between the snake painting (72) and the bird (74) is a smaller, pale-red, lengthwise striped fish.
77. A painting of a small white snake with red eggs inside the body.
78. A 35 cm long fish perfectly painted in X-ray style but without internal hatching. The tail-fin is characteristically forked.
79. A 100 cm long fishing spear with three prongs and barbs.
80. A large spear with a simple point with barbs. The point is separated from the spear itself by a bobble-like ornament.
81. A red line, above which is a row of small figures leaning forward and appearing to rest their hands on the ground. This seems to be some sort of ritual. Their height is about 5 cm. The length of the whole line is 80 cm (fig. 47).
82. A red silhouette of a fish.

83. Next to it is a further, later, white-striped X-ray fish painting.

On the vertical rock face it is worth mentioning a simple 25 cm yellow painting of a vulva (84), bordered with red line and reddened inside (cf. vulva paintings from Inagurdurwil and from Bala Uru Jelínek 1978) (fig. 49).

If we walk round this mushroom-shaped rock a little to the south-west we shall find a 75 cm red four-legged animal (85) with a curved tail on the vertical rock face (cf. E. Brandl, 1974, painting from Cadell River No. 45). The animal's head is unfortunately badly weathered.

On the south-east side we find an extensive scene of spearmen, published by Mountford (1964). There are altogether seven of them, and were apparently painted by the same artist, approximately at the same period (86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92) (fig. 52). They form a single scene. The paintings are detailed and clearly visible and it is obvious that they have been repaired or rather touched-up from earlier, similar figures. The painting of the spear of the second spearman has been replaced, as have the hand of the first spearman and the spear, and the legs and head of the third one. All figures have womerars of the same type, which confirms their contemporaneity. They are not human, but super natural beings, spirits. This is clearly shown in the painting of their heads. Nor is the scene a regular one. According to the position of the figures we can see that they were in groups of

twos or threes. The age of this painting is not great and Edwards even published two photographs (Edwards, 1973) taken in the same year, revealing that between the two photographs there was some touching up of the painting. The whole painting and its composition is analogical to similar composition from Inagurdurwil, which is known to be later than some X-ray paintings, and later than the first contact of the Aborigines with European civilization. Both scenes, from Inagurdurwil and Obiri III, are so similar in style, composition and preservation, that they could have been painted by one and the same artist. There is a great sense of the variability of movements. It is also possible to follow in detail the shape of the pouches carried by hunters on their backs, and of the spears. All the spears in the scene are of the large type used for hunting large animals or for fighting.

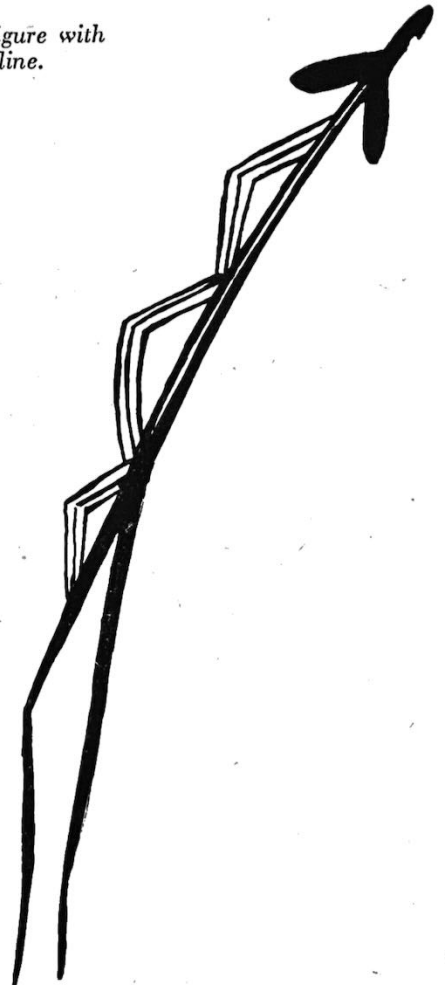
Across the central part of the painting of the white spearmen there are two red Namarakain female spirit figures (93, 94), holding a string between the hands, by means of which they move — fly (cf. similar painting in Bala Uru, Jelínek 1978). The fine shading inside their slim bodies and limbs and the way of painting the heads shows a clear connection with the X-ray style. These two figures are later than the seven spearmen, even though the time difference need not, according to the state of preservation of the two paintings, be very great. A close inspection of the rock-face reveals, however, a series of the other paintings which are older than the spearmen, painted over them. Most outstanding is a large, lengthwise striped white oval object, coloured at both ends — it is on the right-hand side of the rock-face (95). It is most probably a Murayian. According to the state of preservation this painting is not much older than the spearmen. This is not the case with some of the other older paintings. On the left-hand side of the scene we can see a yellow painting of a snake (96). Its tail, clearly distinguished from the body, is filled with diamond ornaments, the spine is indicated by a dotted line, and the rear part of the body is filled with red eggs. It runs beneath three spearmen and has its head near the breasts of the first Namarakain figure. Beneath the womera of the first spearman are the remains of a white fish painting (97), older than the spearman, but younger than the snake. Round about the head and arms of the second spearman we can see two smaller fish (98, 99) and beneath them the older remains of a large catfish (100). The square head and the whiskers can clearly be seen. It seems unlikely that both these older paintings were in X-ray style. Beneath the arms and the upper part of the body of the third spearman are the poorly visible remains of a large X-ray painting of an echidna (101). It is older than the yellow X-ray fish. In conclusion it is necessary to mention a perfect X-ray painting of a turtle (102) which has been completely preserved next to the seventh spearman. For purposes of comparison I would add that the length of the turtle is 65 cm.

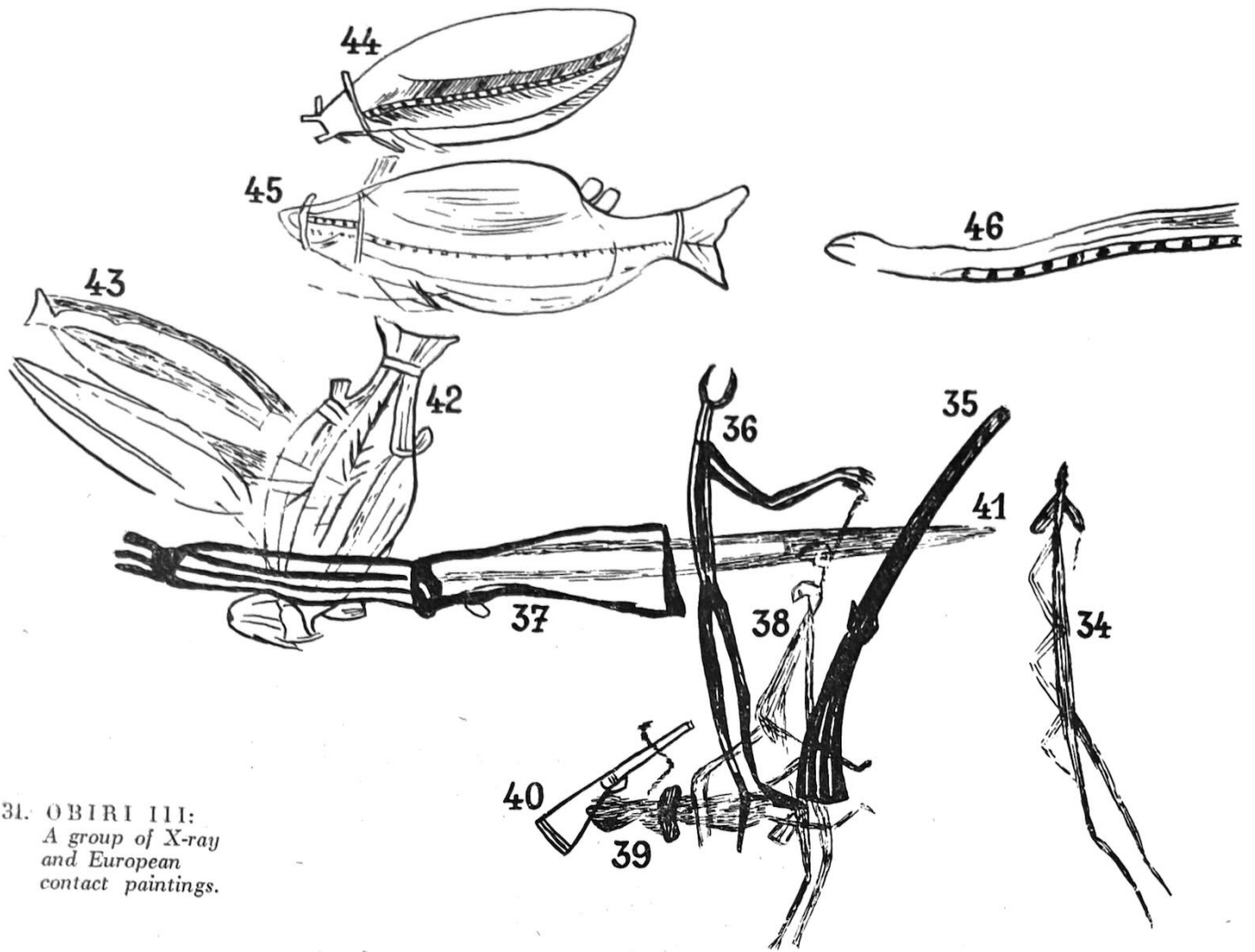
On the east side of the same rock formation, on the ceiling surface there are the following paintings (fig. 16):

103. A thread-like red figure with claw-like hands. They are placed by the side. The head is like a kangaroo's. This painting superimposes a group of small, white, dynamic figures (104 to 111). Most of them are running or dancing one female figure is painted crouching with legs widely spread (104). This position of the figure and the picture of her vulva indicate that the painting has some sort of erotic significance. Another figure (105) is a female shown in a static frontal pose (cf. similar painting from Inagurdurwil). There are seven of these figures in all, showing that dynamic figures may be painted in white as well as in red and yellow. In rare cases they may also be relatively young, contemporary with the developed X-ray style. This situation is shown by this painting, where the arms of two of the figures are painted over the tail of an X-ray fish.
112. A yellow catfish in simple X-ray style. Over it, and therefore younger, is a 25 cm red statistic female figure in frontal view (113). On both sides of the body, running down from the breasts there are wavy lines (cf. No.

30. OBIRI III:

A stylized
female spirit figure with
tripled zigzag line.





31. OBIRI III:
A group of X-ray
and European
contact paintings.

34, Obiri I; No. 11, Obiri IV; and No. 34, Obiri III). Still higher up the rock face in the same colour is a similarly preserved figure (114).

115. A 60 cm high simple red figure with outstretched arms and indifferent sex. The left hand is touching or holding a large oval object like a shield, spotted all over. Of course it is not clear whether the paintings of the figure and of the object belong to each other. The painting of the "shield" has a slightly different shade of colour (fig. 13).

116. An interesting 60 cm high red dynamic figure. It is relatively faint, but quite clearly visible figure of a spirit with an oval head inclined in the manner of other dynamic figures (cf. Obiri I, 68, Obiri III, 22). But unlike these the head of this figure is irregularly hairy and there are three peculiar growths in the facial region. Both arms occupy positions similar to those of other dynamic figures but, unlike them, they are thickened, especially one, of them looking rather like a sleeve with fingers coming out of it. The head is decorated with a characteristic hair style (cf. No. 68, Obiri I,

fig. No. 23, Obiri III). The thickened trunk has threadlike legs at the bottom and a fantastic shape in between them, apparently representing unnatural sex. It is undoubtedly a mythological being, a spirit. Mountford drew it the wrong way (1956, fig. 49 H), upside down, with the legs in the air, and inaccurately.

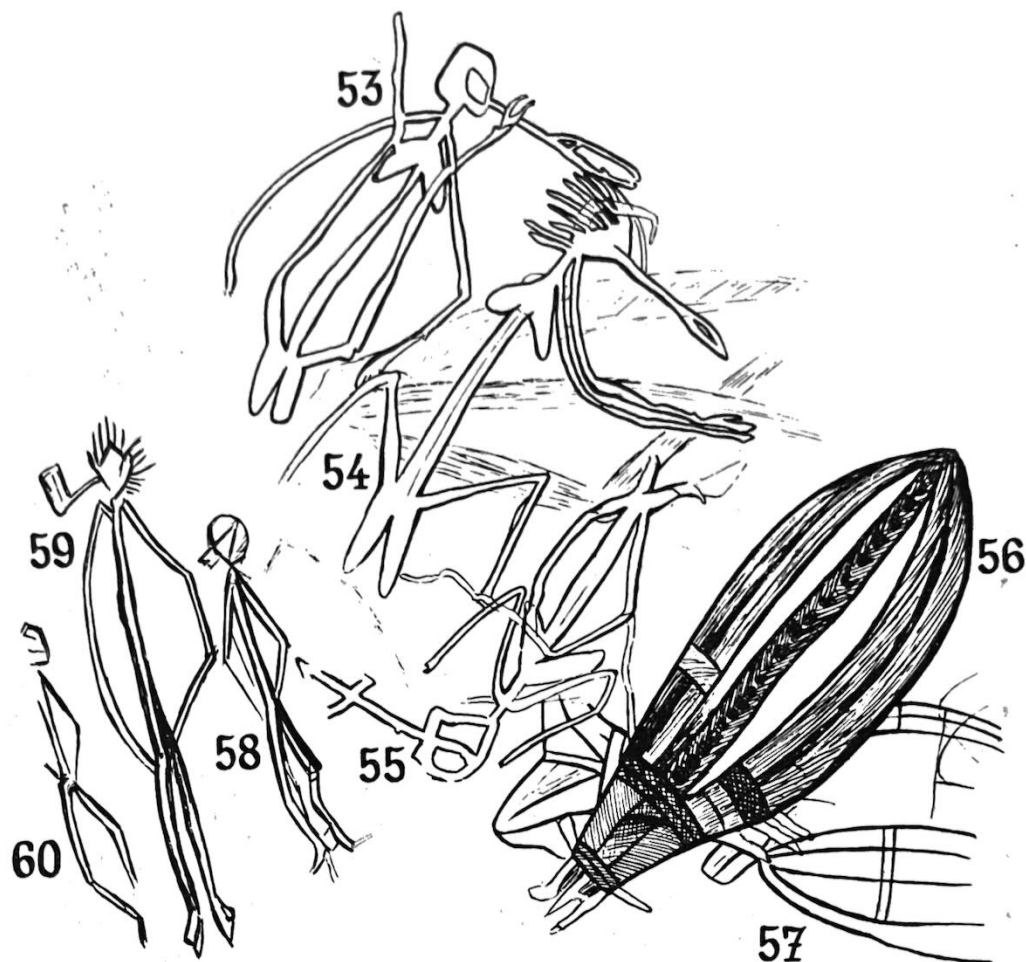
If we go up to the highest part of Obiri III, this relatively extensive rock formation we find, between two large boulders a large flat piece of stone resting on three other stones, forming a sort of table, surrounded by several boulders serving as seats. It has been impossible to find out their purpose and age — in may, of course, be a comparatively recent construction.

On descending to the level of the alluvial plain, on the south-west side of Obiri III, we find an extensive rock face, overhanging in places, suitable as a dwelling place. There is a great deal of sedimentation here, and the place would certainly warrant a full archaeological investigation.

On the rock wall are many old, illegible paintings, with a few which will be properly described: the most important is a 240 cm long

32. OBIRI 111:

A group of X-ray paintings. Left are three figures of european men (the middle one with a pipe). Upper right are three yellow mamandi figures.



yellow arch with red outlines (117) — it is a water snake, and this place is used by the Aborigines to ensure the increase of water snakes (viz. Moun t- f o r d 1965, p. 214).

I shall mention two of the human figures (118, 119) — they are dark-red dynamic figures 20 and 27 cm in size. The smaller is leaning forward and holds a large boomerang. There are two larger figures in light vermilion. The first (120) has had the lower part of his body rubbed out. On the linear trunk there are three places with round ornaments, similar ornaments can be seen at the elbows. Instead of fingers there are claws, the head is crescent-shaped and has spiky hairs. The second figure (121) measures 57 cm and is in running position. Its trunk is S-shaped with a small arm in front of it. Its head is like a kangaroo's and has spines in the rear.

The painting of a 45 cm long lizard has a heart-shaped head (122). Its body is striped. A yellow and red painting of a snake (123) measures 220 cm. There is a central wavy line in the body, a backbone and eggs. The upper part of the snakes body lies across a red fish, where the remains of X-ray body details can be seen. Similarly the remains of

white X-ray details can be seen in two smaller, red fish nearby.

OBIRI IV.

To the north of the rock Obiri I is a smaller isolated outcrop, Obiri IV. There are rock paintings on it in three places: the highest one is almost at the top, beneath a small overhang on the horizontal ceiling surface and on the sides of boulders immediately below the overhang; the second is in the central part of the rock, and the lowest one is almost on the level of the alluvial plain, or slightly above it, where the overhanging rock forms a deep cave, with its ceiling full of paintings.

At the highest location there is a group of red and yellow paintings on the horizontal ceiling surface.

1. An outstanding, thread-like red figure of a man, with his legs stretched apart and a large net pouch around his neck. There is a yellow line accross the right arm, which does not seem to belong to the painting firstly because it is inexact, but mainly because the colour is dif-

- ferent. In the middle of the trunk — at the waist — there are four transversal lines. The sexual organ is relatively big. The whole figure is 97 cm in size (fig. 41).
2. A red silhouette (90 cm) of a fish with interesting fins.
 3. Covering most of the previous fish is a yellow painting of a somewhat smaller fish in simple X-ray style. It has a characteristic deeply forked tail.
 4. Near the two previous fish (2 and 3) is a static red human figure whose legs are superimposed by the red fish (2). The painting is rather faded and measures 85 cm. The large round head, bordered all around with short hairs is interesting. The two eyes at the centre of the head are irregularly geometrical (fig. 38).
 5. No. 4 is painted across two parallel spears with a single row of barbs.
 6. There are two further thread-like figures here with slightly outstretched arms also superimposed by No. 4.

On the vertical rock face there are several other figures:

7. A red figure with the right arm raised and holding a medium-sized pouch. Another hangs around its neck. The left arm is bent at the elbow and painted across the body, holding some sort of a long, indistinct implement. The legs are slightly spread. A long ornament hangs from the second head.
8. Over the trunk of the previous figure (7) are painted two thread-like figures, one of them holding a pair of short sticks in its hand.
9. A little further on there are two small but perfectly painted figures. They both apparently represent supernatural beings. The upper one has hands which are almost like a bat's wings. The trunk is obliquely striped. It is painted over a third, static red figure of a man. The lower figure is somewhat smaller. Both main figures were either thread-like figures added to a thicker painting, or arose as a result of touching up the original painting.
10. A thread-like running male figure measuring 35 cm.
11. A 25 cm high simple dark red figure with no arms. A horizontal line across the round head indicates a stick pushed through the nasal septum. Close to the figure there is an irregular zigzag line painted without care (cf. Obiri III, 34, Obiri I, 34, Bala Uru 100).

The vertical surface of the rock beneath the overhangs bears several more paintings (fig. 37):

12. A vermilion silhouette (80 cm) of a saratoga. It is painted over:
13. A dark-red painting of a mullet, roughly the same size. The two fish can be distinguished by their fins.

14. Over it is a white silhouette of a tortoise with long, slightly bent neck and an indistinct painting of another fish. These paintings are relatively poorly preserved.
15. Lower down the rock face is another red saratoga, but already with X-ray style characters (the forked tail fin, the spine). To one side on the same rock there are two more indistinct red fish.
16. Two older, thread-like static figures and one running thread-like figure superimposed by No. 15.

If we descend to the central part of the Obiri IV rock formation we find the following paintings:

A group of small red figures (fig. 53):

17. The oldest in this group is apparently a dark-red painting of some sort of oval, which perhaps originally represented the body of a fish.
18. A vermilion painting of a long human figure painted over the preceding oval, with rather short legs and a long trunk like a snake (cf. Obiri III, Nos. 15, 16, 17, 18), ending in a head which has been obliterated. The arms have not been preserved.
19. A similar, 34 cm thread-like figure with long trunk and both thread-like arms stretched out in front of the body. An oval head-dress hanging from the head. On both sides of it there are peculiar crescent-shaped hatched objects of unknown significance. Further to one side is an indistinct, apparently incomplete painting of a lying female figure.
21. Lower down the rock there is clear painting of a small, long, four-legged animal (perhaps a native cat?).
22. To the extreme right there is a further slim thread-like figure with a long trunk, drawn diagonally. It is interesting to note the large hanging hairstyle similar to No. 19, which is also found among the oldest dynamic figures (see Kolondjorluk gallery IV, VII, Nangalore, Cadell River, Jelinek 1978).

There is also a group of one female and three male figures and a large red figure.

23. A 25 cm thread-like figure with an S-shaped body. The sex is not indicated. A peculiar ornament like some sort of ribbon hangs from the head.
- 24, 25, 26. Three similar male figures with curved bodies. Both hands point in all cases to the opposite side from the male sexual organ, i.e. behind the body.
27. Slightly below these figures is a large red painting of a figure with round head, at the centre of which there are irregularly geometrical eyes (see No. 4, top of Obiri IV). There are two peculiar ornaments, at the back of the head. Instead of arms there are only blunt stumps. From the right one leads a simple red line. The trunk is a simple oval running into two slightly spread legs.

28. Further to the side is a dark-red, thin dynamic figure with an oval head (size 25 cm).
29. A 60 cm long dark-red figure of a man with his legs stretched apart and about to throw a spear with the help of a womera. The head is large in comparison with the body and runs into a striking beak-shaped mouth. Along the left forearm there is a thin fish a forked tail. It undoubtedly belongs to the painting of the human figure, though its significance is not clear. It is not a womera, though the size would be appropriate, since the womera is in the right hand and its tooth can clearly be seen. This is the late archaic painting style from the period when the womera was already known (fig. 35).
30. A 50 cm long dark-red archaic painting of a water bird with curved beak and long wader's legs. It is apparently an ibis. The head and beak are spotted and the rear part of the body striped (fig. 34).

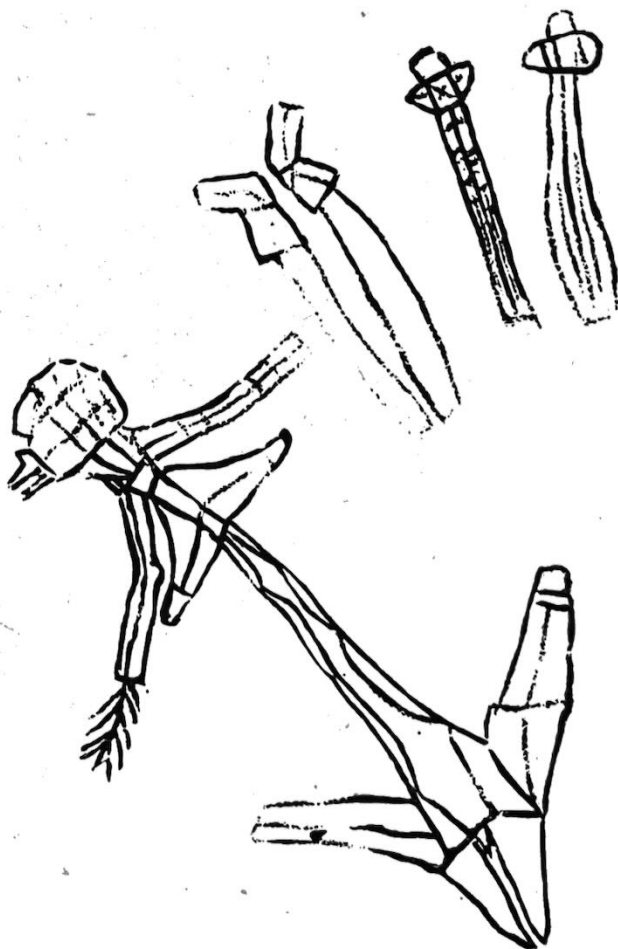


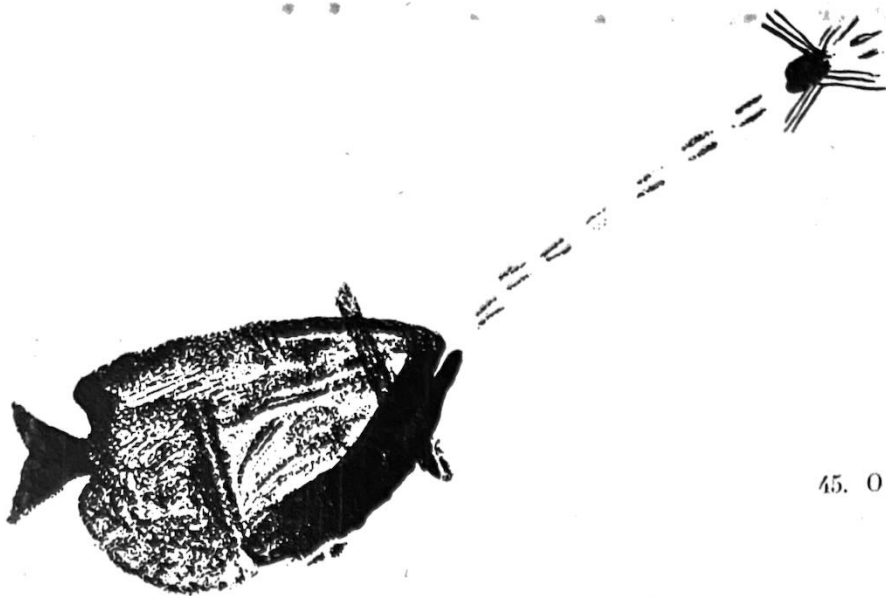
43. OBIRI III: Detail of three yellow mamandi figures. Compare with misinterpreted picture in Mountford 1956 (Pl. 46, E).

If we now descend to the lowest gallery, we find the following paintings on the ceiling of a low cave:

31. An 80 cm long vermilion-red lizard with a bird's head. The characters of the simple X-ray style can be seen in the transversal division of the body (neck, chest, tail), in the central line and in the painting of entrails. The head is hatched with the X-ray style technique and ends in a beak. The front legs are missing. The hind legs and tail are those of a lizard. This interesting painting of a half-lizard, half-bird is apparently a mythological being (fig. 39).
32. Another interesting painting is a male evil-spirit figure. Here too, the head ends in a beak-shape. At the mouth, the crown of the head, at one elbow, sexual organs and both knees there are branched "spines". The hands are claw-like the trunk is unnaturally bent, and large sexual organs are attached to it. The whole body and the forearms are decorated with zigzag lines, apparently in connection with magic and with the idea of evil forces. The figure is 75 cm in size, it has been well preserved, and even though it is in vermilion colour it is apparent that it is not very old (compared with the state of preservation of the neighbouring figures) (fig. 15).
33. A 55 cm high female figure in red on a white background. This fact, together with the way it is shaded, makes this X-ray style, even though no entrails are shown. The arms are white and arched alongside the body; the ends of the lengthwise striped legs are black.
34. Next to the preceding painting is a yellow bar-ramundi with the head broken off. It is about the same size as No. 33. Unfortunately the painting is not well preserved, but nevertheless we can see that there were X-ray details within the body.
35. Painted over this last picture is a later, smaller, lengthwise striped freshwater catfish in red on

44. OBIRI III: A female sorcery figure. Compare with misinterpreted picture in Mountford 1956 (Pl. 46, A).





45. OBIRI III: *Archaic painting (dark red) of an "archer fish" spitting on an insect. In the fish body we can see traces of X-ray style.*

white, whose spine and overall style indicate X-ray. The use of colour and the style are strongly reminiscent of No. 33, with which seems to be contemporary.

THE ENVIRONMENT TODAY AND IN THE PAST

In order to comprehend the Obiri paintings it is necessary to outline the characteristics of the geographical environment and of the sites themselves.

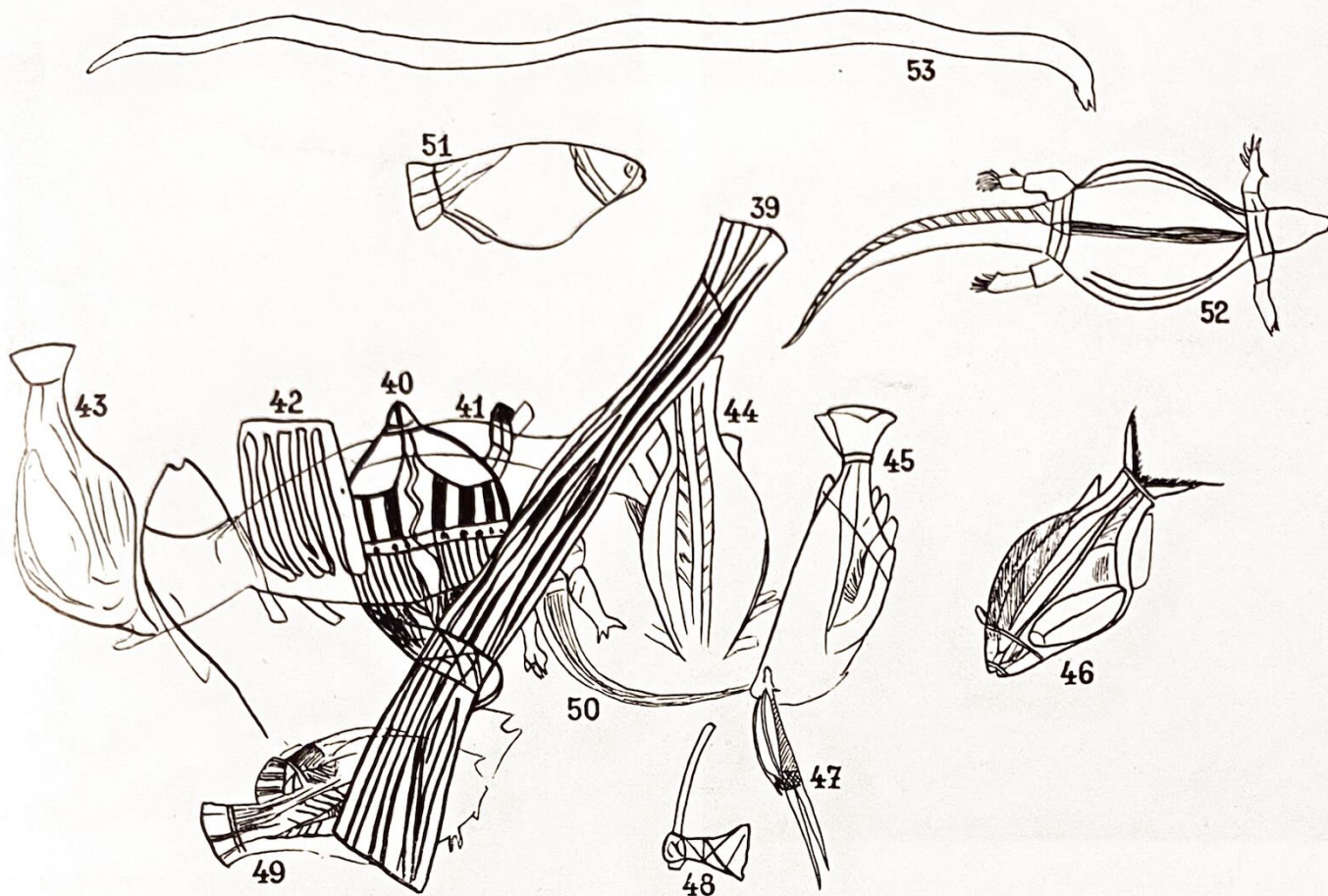
The Obiri stone blocks are the outcrop of the rock plateau. They are situated in the alluvial plain of the East Alligator River, belonging geologically to the Arnhem Land rock plateau, whose northern edge is about 5 km south of Obiri. Thus people living here had their homes on flat plains stretching as far as the coast, about 100 km north of here. The Alligator River, which has sufficient water flow all the year round, is under the influence of the tides in the riverbed changing the direction of its flow in regular intervals. This makes it possible for some sea animals which tolerate fresh water to come this far, indeed some live permanently in the local lagoons (sea crocodile, shark, ray, various fish). In the Pleistocene, of course, when North Australia was joined to New Guinea, Obiri was well inland, a long way (some 200 km to the south-east) from the coast. To the north the land stretched as far as New Guinea, for the sea level was approximately 120 m lower than today. The recent local fauna, similarly as in that period, is richer than that of the rocky interior. Even though the kangaroo, and other typical animals of the interior were not so numerous here as in the Escarpment, they did live here in quite large numbers. In addition there were inexhaustible resources of fish here, and of other water animals, not to mention birds. Honey

also, so sought after by the Aborigines, was here in plenty. In the period after contact the Indonesian buffalo bred here, but the Aborigines hunt it only rarely, since they have plenty of other game. The climatic regime of alternate dry and rainy seasons means that the East Alligator River overflows its banks in the rainy season and floods the surrounding plain, which causes the high ground and the rock formations to stand out like islands. The Aborigines and the land animals find refuge there. Some Aborigines (a minority) retreat to the edge of the rocky Escarpment and spend the rainy season there.

The Obiri rocks are 40–50 m high. Particularly in Obiri I, III and IV they form overhangs, niches and caves, all of them used for rock painting. Some of them are almost on the level of the alluvial plain (e.g. the bottom cave of Obiri IV), others are right at the top of these bizarre rock formations (Obiri III, IV). Paintings were made on almost any rock surface suitable for the purpose. They are most often horizontal or on sheltered vertical surfaces. In an isolated case in Obiri III, I found, beneath the second mushroom-shaped rock at the top of the cliff, a painting of a fish on the rock floor, protected by the overhang. Its preservation here on the floor is, of course, exceptional.

Archaeological and ethnological information indicates that only a few places, the comparatively low ones, were regularly used by the Aborigines as dwelling places. Thus, e.g., Obiri III, on the south-west wall, where the sediments are deep enough to make archaeological investigation possible. Surface finds indicate that the place was inhabited in the past. Another place is the bottom cave at Obiri IV, whose ceiling is heavily blackened by numerous ancient fires.

The remaining places, particularly those on a higher level, are suitable for resting, but not for permanent habitation.

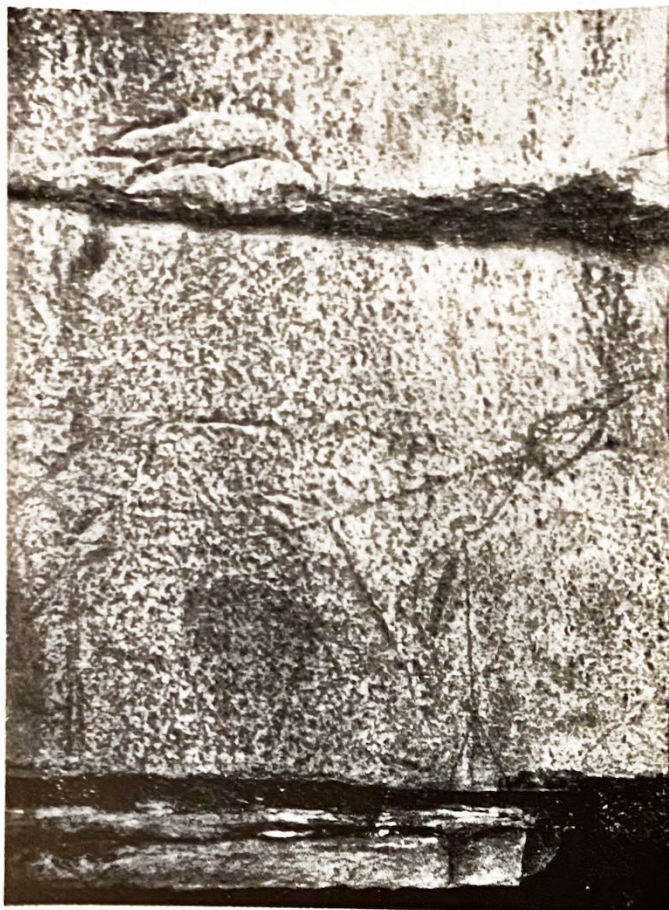


1. OBIRI I: A group of paintings mostly in X-ray style. Outstanding are an X-ray painting of a gun, painted over the other X-ray painting and above a painting of an axe of European type.

2. OBIRI I: A photograph of the paintings of fig. 1.

3. OBIRI I: A group of archaic red paintings. On the left side there are two quadrupeds (one in full colour and one in outline) and a greater anthropomorph outline painting. In the middle is female figure with the rhomboid body ornament. Right up is a simple red womera painting (compare fig. 21).





4. OBIRI I: Simple red line painting of a spearman. Late archaic style. Interesting is the broad type of womera and an other object in the other hand (compare fig. 46).

6. OBIRI II: A yellow and red X-ray painting of a tortoise.



5. OBIRI I: A characteristic red female figure of the archaic style (compare fig. 19).

7. OBIRI II: A characteristic red spirit figure of a spearman. On the right side there is another stylised red spirit figure (compare fig. 22).





8. OBIRI I: An X-ray figure of a quadruped and of a fish.



9. OBIRI III: An early archaic painting of three fish painted in red and white. In the largest painting there are characters of primitive X-ray style.

10. OBIRI III: Archaic style red human figures and a fish. The figure in the middle is a spearman using womera. In this early period the womera was already known to the aboriginal hunters.

11. OBIRI III: A detail of an early archaic red painting of a spirit figure and of two fish.





12. OBIRI IV: *Highly stylized human figure with a zigzag line which means an evil force.*

14. OBIRI III: *Part of the painting of a small boat with standing human figures; the second person is holding an oar.*



13. OBIRI III: *A simple red painting of a human figure and of an oval object. It is not clear if both paintings are contemporary and if they belong together.*

15. OBIRI IV: *An evil spirit figure (evil magic) with numerous zigzag lines and with "spines" in vital body places.*



33. OBIRI IV: *Three yellow and red X-ray style fish paintings.*



34. OBIRI IV: *A red archaic ibis painting with primitive X-ray style characters.*



35. OBIRI IV: *A spirit spearman holding in the right hand a womera and in the left hand a fish like object.*





36. OBIRI IV: Group (dance?) of four men. The shape of the body reminds the archaic dynamic style figures (cf. fig. 55).



37. OBIRI IV: A group of paintings in different styles. The latest is an X-ray fish painting over an older red fish painting.



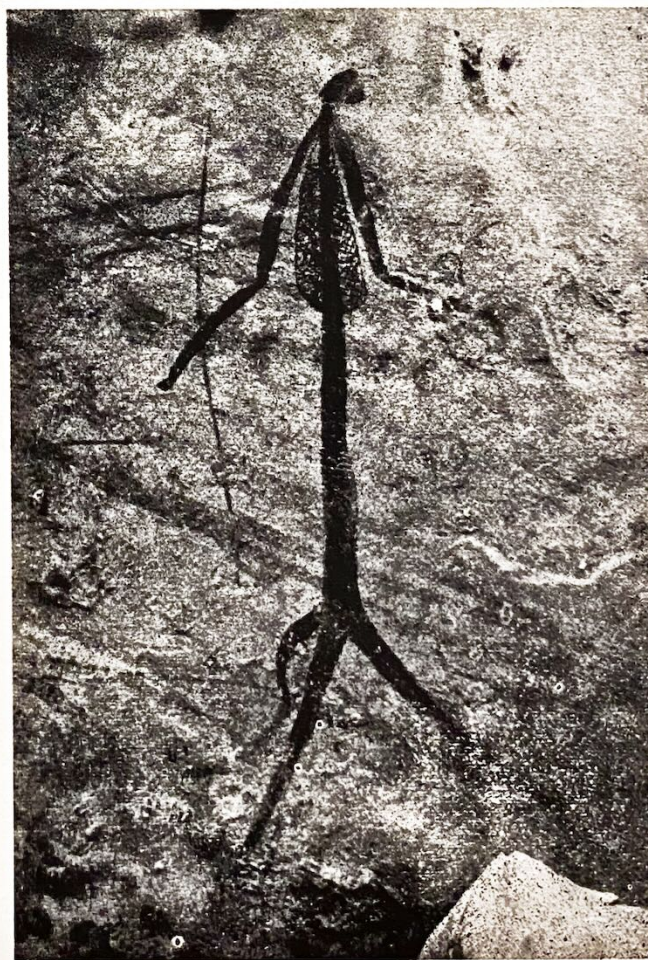
38. OBIRI IV: A group of human and animal figures situated near the top of the rock.



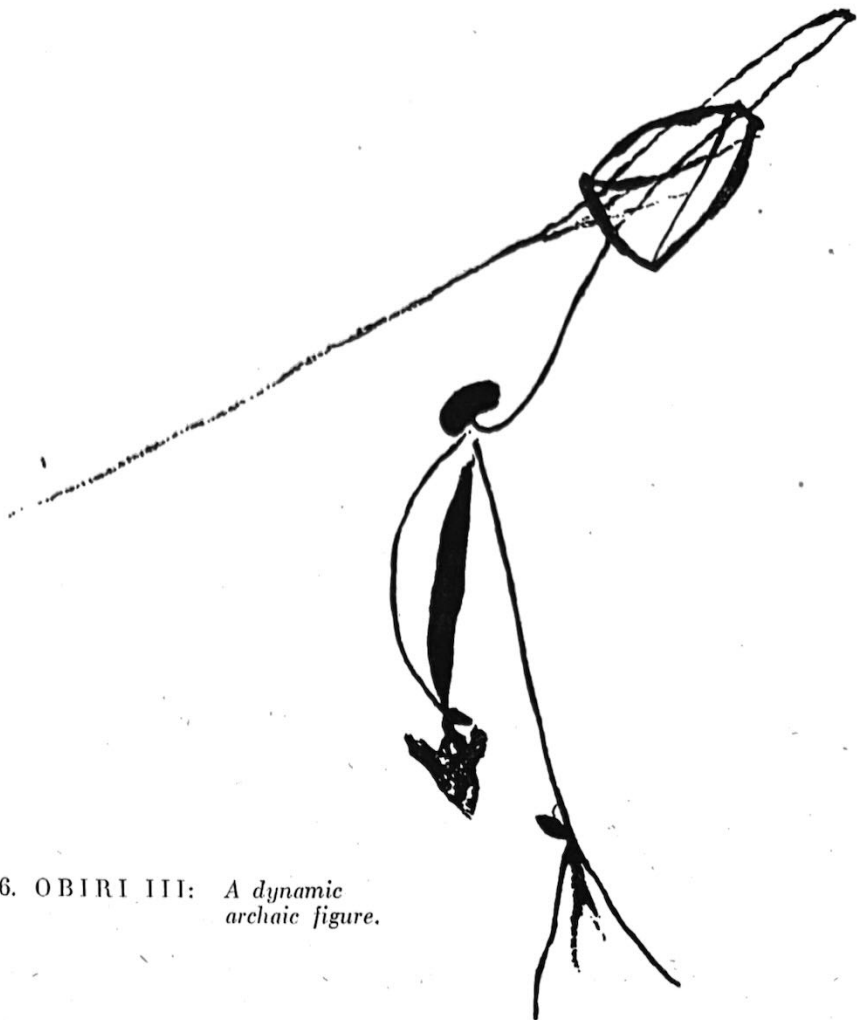
39. OBIRI IV: *Mythological animal, half lizard-half bird painted in X-ray style.* ▲



40. OBIRI IV: *A weathered, red archaic style painting.* ▲



41. OBIRI IV: *A late archaic human figure (male) with a dilly-bag.* ▶



46. OBIRI III: *A dynamic archaic figure.*

TECHNIQUE — LOCATION

Most paintings are situated within the arm's length. In spite of this fact some of them, though not many, are in places which are difficult to access or completely inaccessible. Thus the ceiling of the second mushroom-shaped overhang at the top of Obiri III is about three metres high and the paintings there could not have been realized without the help of some sort of construction. In Obiri I too, there are several archaic-type paintings on the ceiling of the main gallery some 15 m above the ground. These paintings must have been difficult to realize even with the help of a construction. Perhaps once there stood a tall tree enabling the access to places where these paintings are situated. In any case it indicates an attempt to find the most inaccessible places for the paintings, many of which are today unfortunately undecipherable. In some cases, especially a picture of a saratoga at Obiri III (*No. 64*) these paintings are evidence of a change in colouring brought about by oxidation. The red colour here has clearly changed to white. This fact is in keeping with the experience from other localities (Inagurdirwil, Mt. Brockman, Cadell River). The only pigments used were the classical ones, i.e. various shades of red ochre, orange, vermilion, and

carmine, sometimes so dark (in some of the ancient paintings) that it is almost black. Yellow and white are also common, black is rare.

STYLE

The main gallery in Obiri I attracts our attention thanks to the fact that we find there almost exclusively X-ray paintings, belonging to the complex X-ray art, i.e. to the final or most developed stage of the X-ray style. The paintings are situated on a 40 m long vertical surface of a stone bench beneath a high and deep overhang. They are mostly pictures of fish, most of them barramundi. They are extensively detailed according to the anatomy, with fine shading, or merely decorated without the anatomical preciseness. The whole rock surface is so full of these paintings that if there were any older paintings here, they have completely disappeared beneath the coating of newer, X-ray paintings.

There is another stylistic complex of paintings on the south-east side of Obiri III, where there are various small overhangs and cliffs at the top of the rocks, all with red paintings in the archaic style. These are sometimes of the oldest type, but the womera was already known — which is a typical feature of the younger period of the archaic dy-

amic style. Similar paintings can occasionally be found in various places elsewhere in Obiri (e.g. in Obiri I, near the main gallery, in Obiri III on the first mushroom, in Gallery IV in the upper and middle locations).

Our most important archaic paintings are situated at Obiri I. These are dark red pictures, 54 to 58, of kangaroo and four-legged creatures similar to kangaroo. They are analogous to the oldest paintings in Kolondjorluk, (Gallery VI, III, V). The static archaic style (human figures) can be found variously in different galleries. In Obiri I there are Nos. 31, 32, 33, 36, 37, 53-64, in Obiri II Nos. 3-12, 13, in Obiri III Nos. 49, 50, 52, 81, 103, 115, in Obiri IV e.g., 4, 6, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 27, 29.

We therefore distinguish a total of three styles of archaic paintings. The oldest are those before the time of the introduction of the womera (kangaroos and spearmen, some fish) then comes the dynamic paintings with womera, and then the static style. The dividing line between these styles cannot be precisely defined. There are smooth transitions between them. We find that the dynamic figures with womera were painted in red and occasionally also in yellow and white. Among the Obiri III paintings we find the use of yellow paint in No. 32 (small dynamic figures); small dots and double short lines are characteristic here. The same signs can be found among the dynamic figures on a cliff not far away (fig. 10). Some of the archaic figures here are depicted in crouching position surrounded by a red or white oval line. There are also three small red fish among these paintings (fig. 9). The interesting thing about them is that they are painted in white and red. The white is painted on red background, giving a double chromatic effect; besides pure white we have white on red background which looks almost black at places. These examples clearly indicate the use of white and yellow colours in the paintings of the archaic dynamic style (with womera). There are of course also other proofs of the use of these colours at Obiri. Thus in Obiri III, Nos. 104-111, there is a group of white dynamic figures which is covered by a red figure in the archaic static style (fig. 16).

There are three types of X-ray paintings at Obiri. The first type has simple X-ray characters, such as the picturing of the body cavity, central line or joints. Very simple X-ray characters can

sometimes be found even among the static archaic figures, or indeed, very rarely, among the dynamic ones (with womera). Sometimes they even occur with the oldest figures, before the womera was known. This is shown by the pictures of fish with a spine (Nos. 20, 115, 70, 61, Obiri III). The earliest stages of the X-ray style are well illustrated by Nos. 30 & 33 from Obiri IV or 65 from Obiri III.

There are plenty of examples of the developed X-ray style with complete anatomical detail in the main gallery of Obiri I.

There is also a good example here of the third, geometrically decorated style, already without attention to exact detail in the internal anatomical structure (fig. 20/1 a kangaroo).

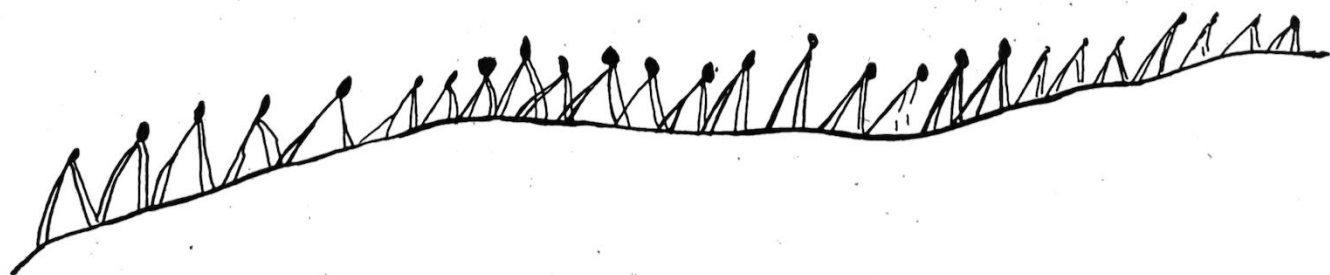
Within the X-ray style also, of course, the three types are without exact boundaries. Here too there are exceptions and the transitions are gradual.

CHRONOLOGY

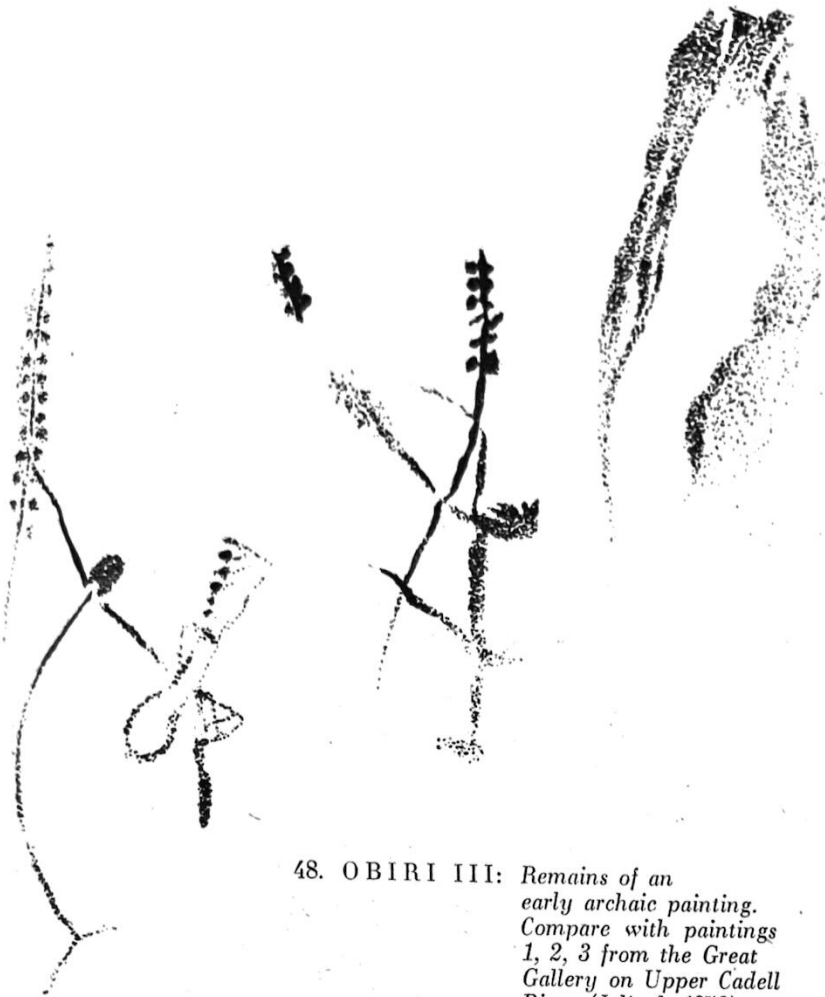
In this locality we find — as in many others — hollowed cups in the stone in some galleries. Many of them clearly show great age by the weathering and the surface patina. Sometimes even an old crack in the rock running across these holes shows that they are even older than it.

The oldest paintings (I have already mentioned the kangaroo pictures in the section on style) are comparatively rare at Obiri. If, of course, archaeological finds (White, 1968), show that the inhabitation of these places dates back further than 20,000 years, it can be supposed that a further study of the paintings of the archaic style might more accurately distinguish them: the situation in the Cadell River localities showed these to be connected to the "piri" culture. For example the chronological order of fish paintings within the archaic style is for the time being extremely difficult, though not impossible.

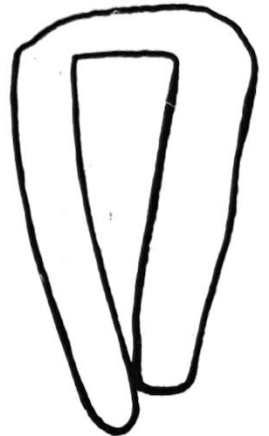
According to the hitherto finds it seems that the greatest painting activity was at the end of the dynamic archaic style, after the introduction of the womera, and than at the peak of the X-ray style, even though we find many paintings of other stylistic periods. The large scene (Nos. 86-102, Obiri III) is important for chronology and the clarification of the order of succession of individual styles. The youngest of the figures here are two Namara-



47. OBIRI III: A row of stylized human figures in a corroborree. Archaic style.



48. OBIRI III: *Remains of an early archaic painting. Compare with paintings 1, 2, 3 from the Great Gallery on Upper Cadell River (Jelinek 1978).*



49. OBIRI III: *A simple vulva painting in yellow with red outline.*

kain spirits, painted over the spearmen. It is a question of experience and of a more extensive knowledge of the paintings to understand the relation of these spearmen to the X-ray style. Paintings of thread-like spearmen continue among rock paintings right through to the developed X-ray style, and many of them are not at all old, though they preserve the archaic way of painting, often completely lacking X-ray characters. The spearmen are painted here over an older, poorly preserved, X-ray picture of a snake (No. 96) and over ancient paintings of fish (Nos. 98, 99, 100), which do not belong to the X-ray style.

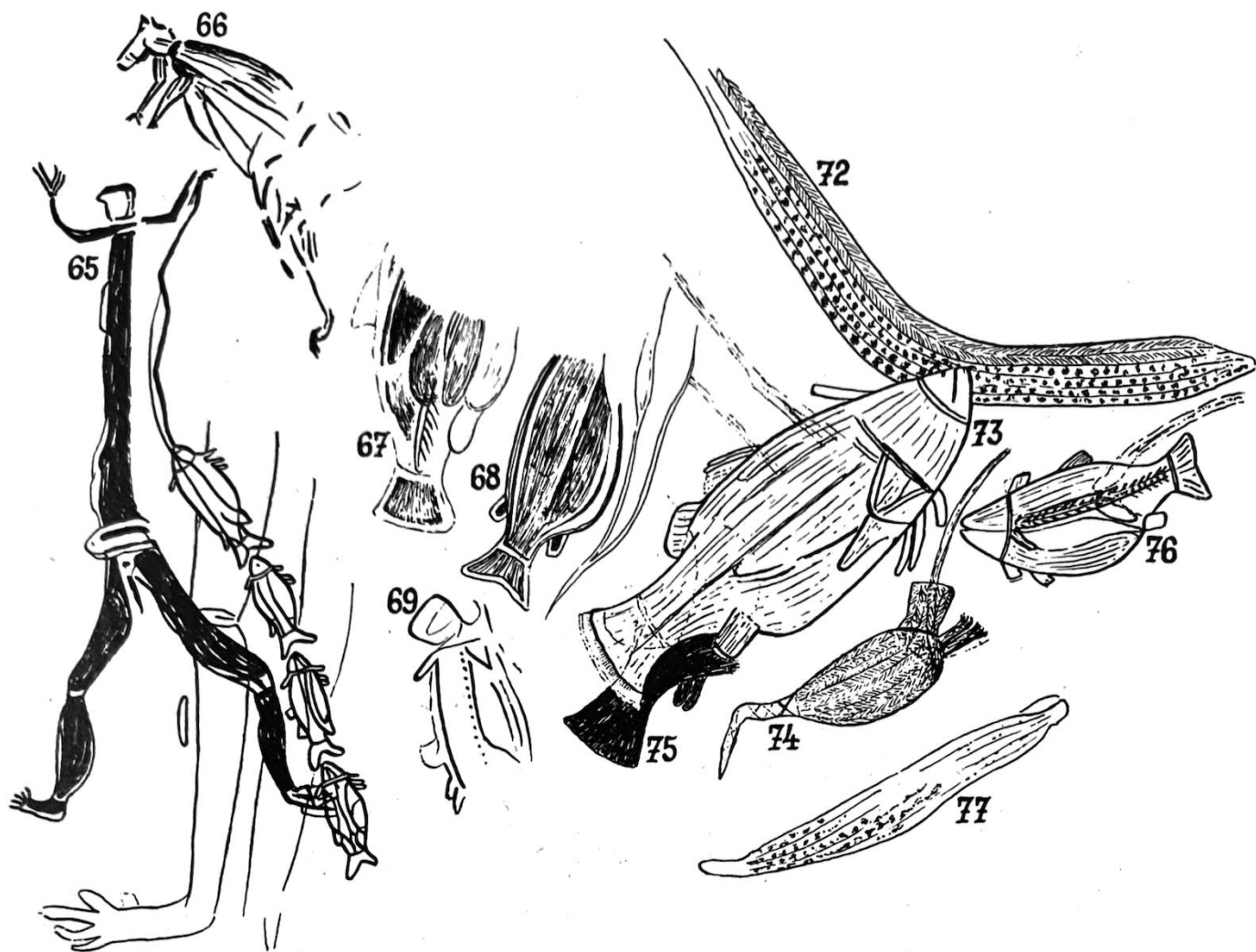
Paintings of Europeans and rifles date post quem. These are pictures from the period after contact with European civilization. There are altogether 15 here, and none of them is painted over by a younger picture. This itself shows that this is no chance coincidence and that this theme is undoubtedly the final stage of Aboriginal rock art. On the contrary paintings with European topic usually superimpose all other X-ray paintings.

THEMES

A clear majority of the archaic paintings are anthropomorphic. Of 142 archaic paintings, 85 were anthropomorphic and 57 pictured animals or other objects. Out of 96 X-ray style paintings we find 26 with an anthropomorphic and 70 with another,

usually animal topic. These figures, of course, give us some sort of information, but let us not forget that there are more X-ray style paintings in the main gallery I was unable to make a note of, and that on the other side of the Obiri I block there was a whole gallery, with X-ray paintings prevailing, and this gallery has not been recorded at all. On the whole X-ray paintings prevail over the archaic ones. The X-ray paintings have greater visual effect. They are mostly large and colourful, while the archaic ones are mostly small and monochrome. But we can clearly see the proportion of topics within these wide stylistic groups.

There are many small figures among the archaic paintings where sex is not shown at all. Where it is shown, it is mostly male. It is not exaggeratedly large, as it often happens in various sorts of X-ray pictures. The dynamic human figures with an S-shaped body, which are to be found here on the lower reaches of the East Alligator River (cf. Inagurdurwil, Old Woman's Dreaming) are already contemporary with the womera. This is shown by the paintings No. 68. Obiri I and No. 23. Obiri III. The womera is not known in Tasmania, which we know to have been separated from the Australian mainland some 12,000 years ago. The Aborigines who went there at that time did not know the womera (in South Australia). Thus evidence of a lack of knowledge of the womera in North Australia most probably gives a date older



50. OBIRI III: A group of paintings on the rock ceiling. Important for the relative chronology is the superposition of several paintings. Interesting is the painting of a big spirit figure with four fish.

than 12.000 years, and therefore the paintings in the archaic style with womera are younger than this. Some of these dynamic human figures have no heads (Obiri III, Nos. 15, 16, 17, 18). These were either painted in a different colour which has weathered away, or they were of different material, which has not been preserved (e.g. wax), or they had not been painted for some mythological or other reason.

Human figures of the archaic dynamic style are often in groups, less frequently isolated. This is perhaps also the result of the tendency to form scenes, which, however, does not achieve the degree of perfection here which we find at Red Lily Lagoon (Jelínek 1978).

The composition of the paintings in Obiri III, Nos. 20–29, includes among the human figures four individual arms painted in fine lines (in miniature). It is also worth taking note of two figures painted in a crouching position and surrounded by elliptical lines. Together with further figures, one of which is a perfectly drawn spearman, they form some sort of scene, whose significance, of course, remains a mystery to us. We can find similar

groups of several dynamic figures in Obiri III, Nos. 32, 37, 63. The paintings 49 and 50 in Obiri III show small native boats occupied by several standing figures (cf. Cahill's Crossing, Old Woman's Dreaming). On the more clearly visible painting (both superimposed by a yellow X-ray fish) one of the figures is holding an oar. In Obiri IV, Nos. 24, 25, 26, there are four S-shaped figures standing next to each other, three males and one without sex. The last has some sort of hanging ornament on the head. All of them have the arms stretched out behind the body in a striking manner. Perhaps this is a picture of a dance. The S-shaped bodies seem to point to the dynamic archaic-style tradition. At the Obiri III gallery, Nos. 104–111, we find, exceptionally, white dynamic figures. Their great age is shown (besides the style and size) by the fact that they are superimposed by the red static figure No. 103. In spite of this it is not certain whether they are contemporary with the other dynamic figures. For we know isolated examples of the dynamic style (in white) to be of even recent date, i.e. contemporary with X-ray (cf. Djerlandjal Rock).

Very interesting among these figures are No.

104 (a crouching female figure) and No. 105 (a static female figure) — both may indicate to a later date, since similar figures are for the time being unknown among the typical archaic figures. As far as isolated dynamic figures are concerned I would like to mention No. 68, Obiri I, and No. 51, Obiri III, a big figure of a running man holding a boomerang. Interesting details are the hairstyle and ornaments on the arms. Perhaps it would be interesting to mention that where these figures are in groups they are usually smaller, sometimes quite miniature. On the other hand individual figures can be up to 50 cm.

It is not impossible that the paintings of strange spirits in Obiri III (Nos. 1–14) belong chronologically to the groups of dynamic figures. These are several figures with legs bent back unnaturally (reminiscent of the later mamandi) sometimes with a peculiar tail-like growth (sex. tail) and with peculiar ornaments or growths on the head. They are associated with four paintings of freshwater catfish. These paintings give the impression of having been painted in a hurry. Here even fear may have played a role, since the artist undoubtedly wished to paint very evil and dangerous spirits.

Painting 17–22 at Obiri IV are interesting for their hairstyles; these are thread-like static figures. Such hairstyles are known in Kolondjorluk, at Deaf Adder Creek and at Nangalore among the oldest dynamic figures.

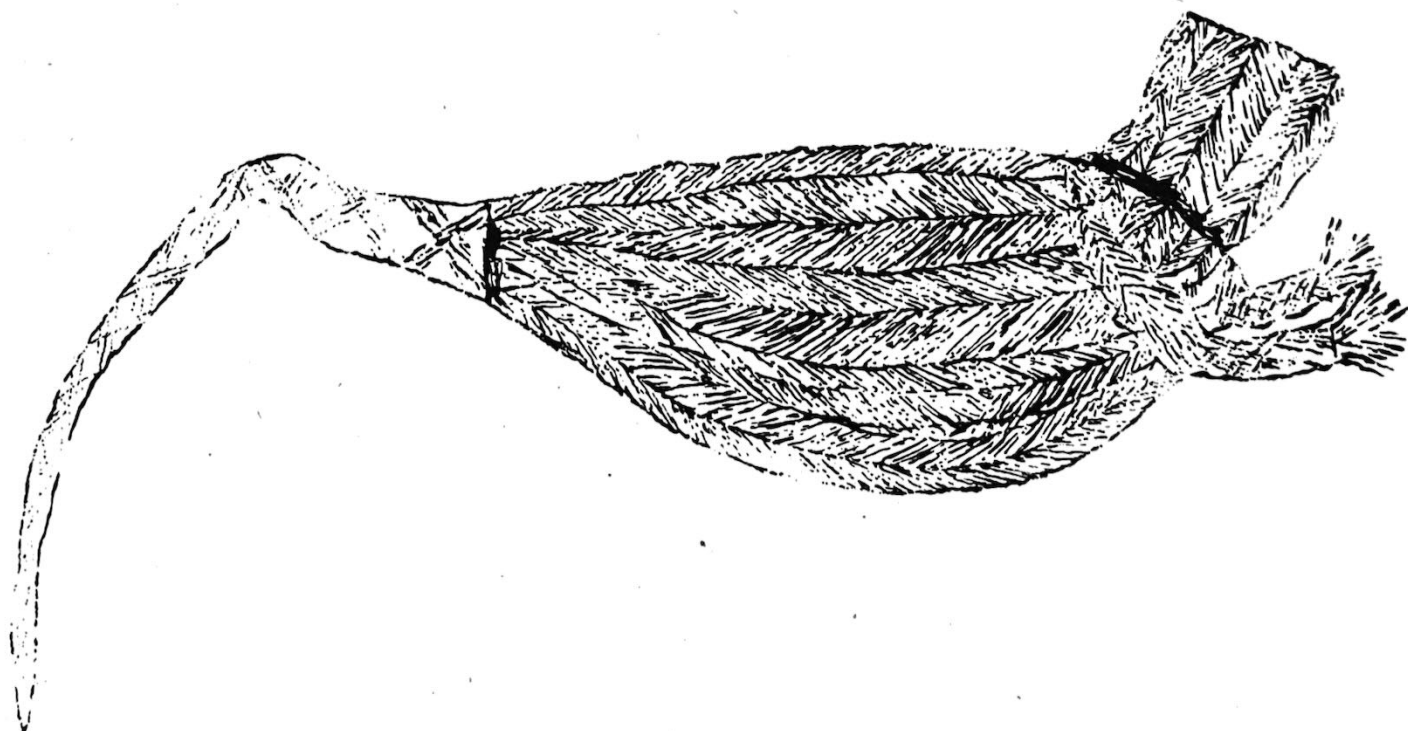
Among the static archaic figures I would draw attention to the spearmen (Obiri IV, fig. 35) with unusually large head and beak-like mouth, showing that this is a spirit and not a normal person. In one hand it holds a womera and a spear ready for throwing. In the other there is a thin fish (mean-

ing unknown). Fig. 19 from Obiri I, showing a female figure with an exceptional narrowing of the waist and a wide lower part of the trunk, has an analogy in similar figure from Cannon Hill. No. 12 in Obiri II represents a spirit with a lizard's head and raised three-fingered hands. The aborigines say of this type of lizard that it "makes milk for women". Nos. 103 and 121 have a human body and kangaroo head. A large (230 cm) figure of a male spirit holding four fish threaded on a string has a parallel in a bark painting from Oenpelli. This is of course a different spirit but the way it is carrying fish which have been caught and threaded on a string is the same.

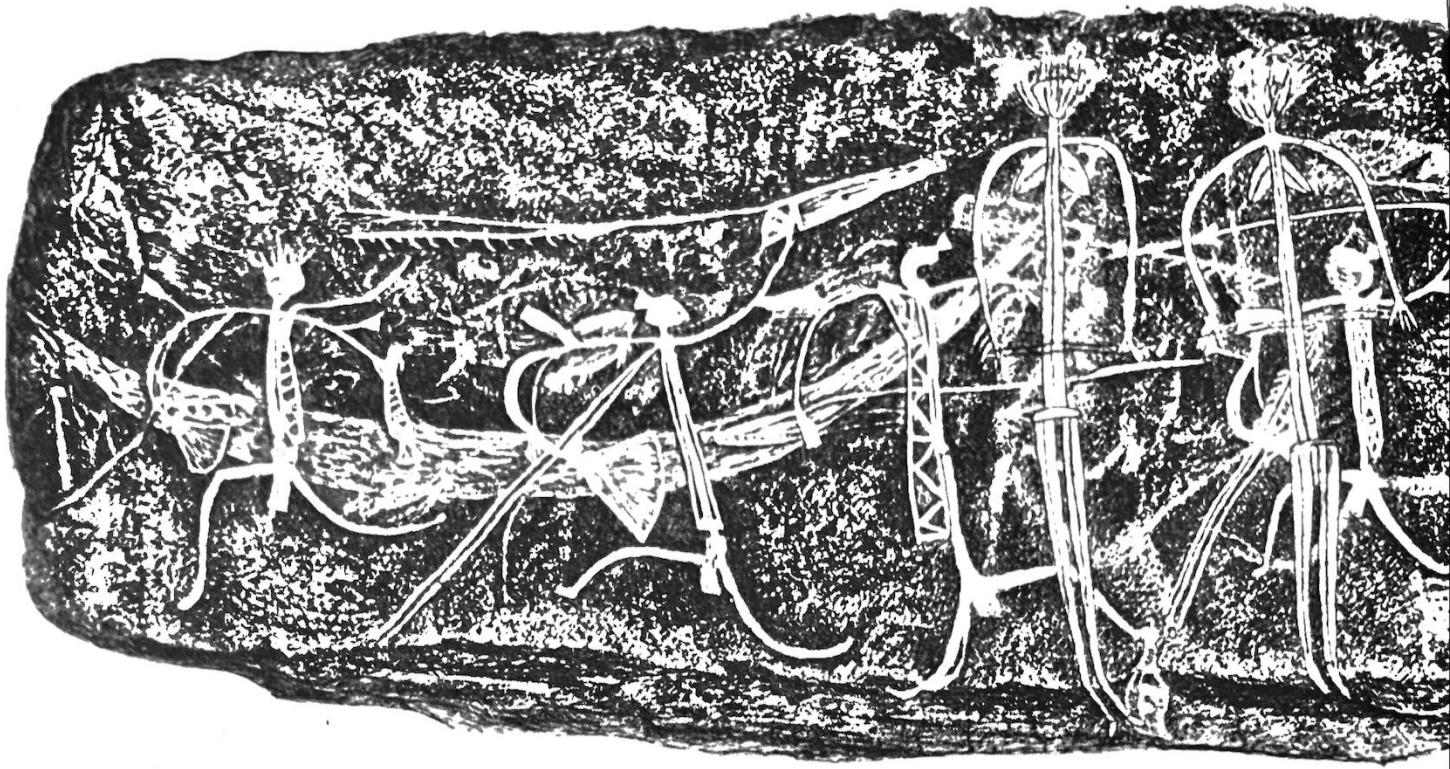
From the composition of archaic paintings from Obiri I, Nos. 54–64, the paintings of spirits 60 & 61 are of special interest. 61 is better preserved and although I have not yet found similar pictures elsewhere, there are still some points in common with the paintings of large crouching figures from Mt. Brockman. The painting of some sort of tail at the end of the body is reminiscent of similar large painting from Mt. Brockman, and the associated two animals remind us again of similar painting from Mt. Brockman, where we find flying foxes. This is undoubtedly another spirit, but the psychological motivation of the painting, or rather of the symbols, is similar.

Thus it can be seen that on the whole the archaic style in all its phases of development is very rich in mythological beings of different sorts, showing the complicated tradition and the broad fantasy of the Aboriginal artists.

Among the animal themes belonging to the archaic style, it is worth noting Nos. 27, 28 and Nos. 20, 21, 22 in Obiri III, fish paintings which



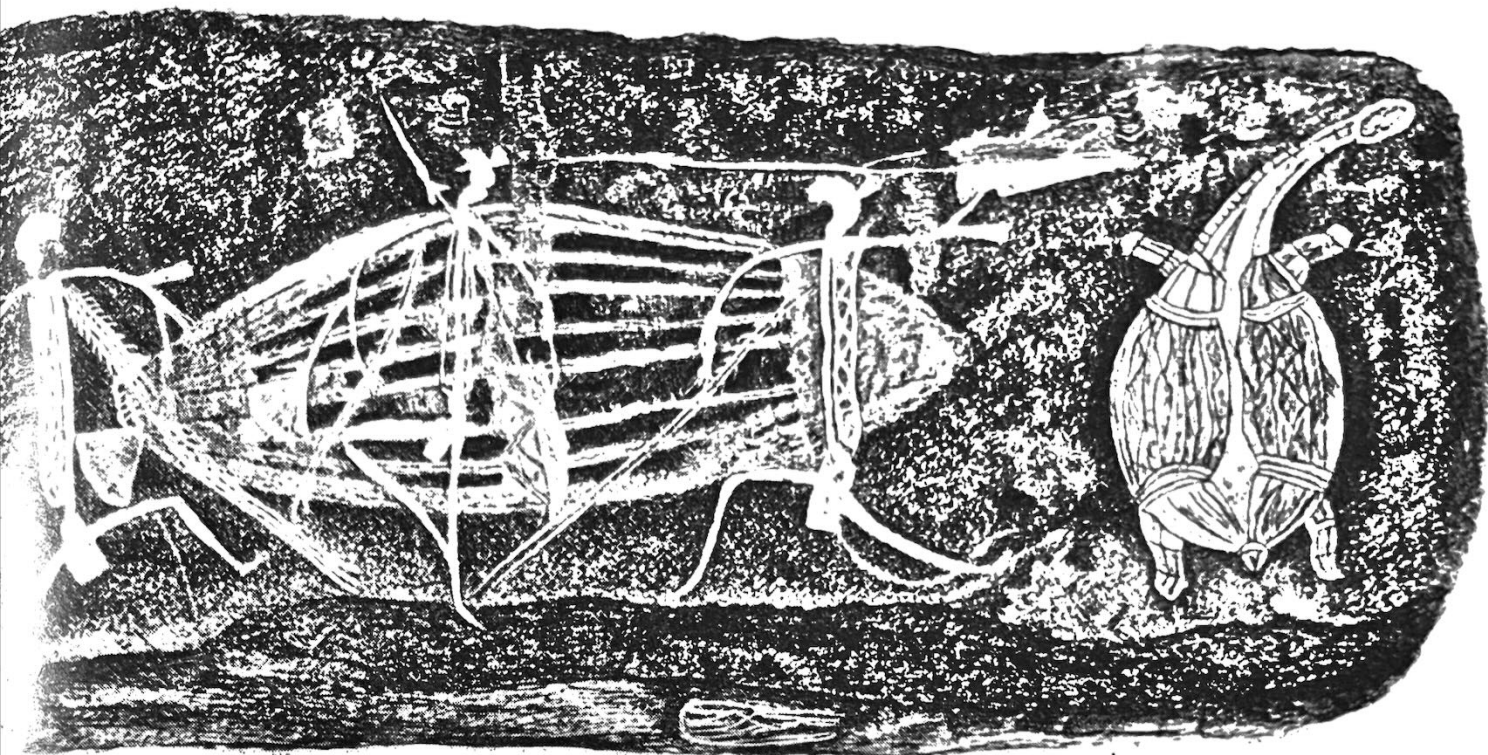
51. OBIRI III: A yellow decorative bird painting.



52. Chronologically important painting of seven spearmen, overpainted by two Namarakain figures (in the middle).

53. OBIRI IV: A group of archaic paintings.





Older underlying paintings are well seen.

certainly belong to the thin dynamic figures (with womera). No. 20 especially is important because the spine is shown, indicating that the beginnings of the X-ray style are very old. The same goes for fig. 34 in Obiri IV, showing a water bird, apparently an ibis. The head and beak are spotted, the neck has crosswise stripes and the rear part of the body is also striped. With the painting of the spitting archer fish (fig. 45, Obiri III) we also find the first signs of internal body structure. Otherwise it is typical of the majority of animal paintings in the archaic style that they are either coloured all over or striped lengthwise (e.g. Nos. 30, 31, 22, 19, 7, 8, 9, 10, Obiri III).

The most common animal topic of the archaic style are fish (18 picture). The barramundi, which is so typical of the X-ray style, occurs here only once, as does the saratoga. I found a total of 10 unidentifiable four-legged animals, 5 birds (bush-turkey, ibis etc.), 3 kangaroos, 5 catfish (fresh water), 1 snake, 1 turtle and 1 archer fish.

Kangaroos occur comparatively rarely in Obiri in both the archaic and the X-ray styles, certainly less than in localities in the interior (El Sherano, Bala Uru, Cadell River, Goomadeer, etc.). This is wholly in keeping with the zoogeographical situation.

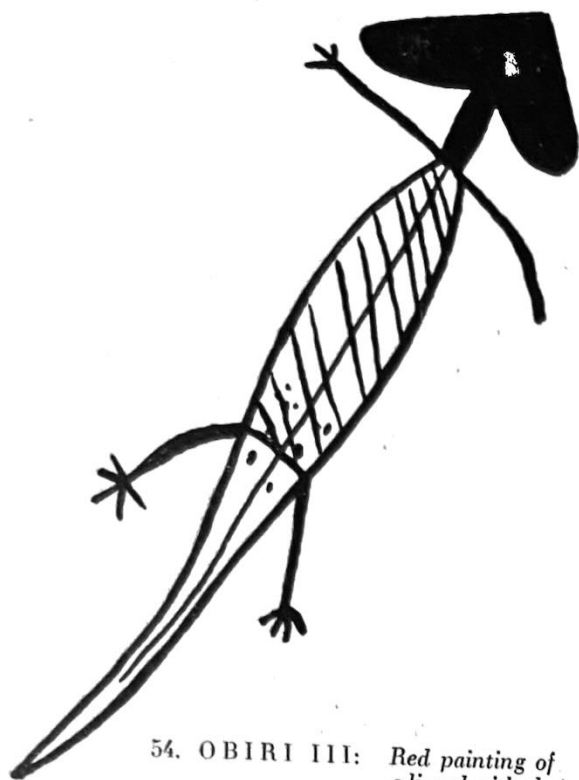
If we turn our attention to the X-ray paintings, we may first consider the simplest of them (some have already been mentioned, since they belong to the dynamic archaic style. To these can

be added No. 120 from Obiri III, with joints rounded and the body divided. This figure is also very close to the archaic style).

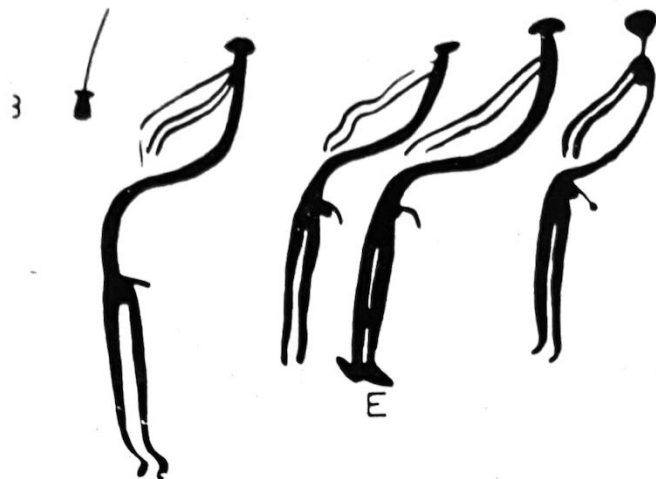
The spearman in fig. 24, Obiri II is the type of linear figure which survives in archaic execution well into the developed X-ray style. Without doubt No. 33 from Obiri IV is a good example. Of additional interest here is the use of three colours, red, white and black.

According to analogies from Bala Uru, Mt. Brockman and Inagurdurwil we know that figures with zigzag lines belong to the X-ray style (Obiri I, No. 34, Obiri III, Nos. 34, 113, Obiri IV, fig. 12). These zigzag lines here indicate evil forces. It is difficult to say where this association of evil with zigzag lines originated. Perhaps the snake or lightning played some psychological role. This symbolism is widespread among primitive peoples in different parts of the world. It is not exclusive to the Australian Aborigines.

I would like to draw more attention to a group of three yellow mamandis undoubtedly connected with the complex X-ray style, though they bear none of its characters. Mountford (1964) mistakenly asserts that the third of the group is incomplete. He did not notice that this figure is head down. These three figures form one composition and were certainly painted at the same time. Female genitalia and a large, outstretched, spear-like tongues are common to all three.



54. OBIRI III: Red painting of a lizard with characteristic head.



The figures of white men total 9, belong to the X-ray style in the presentation of clothing. The same is true of the female figure No. 62 in Obiri III. Two of the white men also have pipes.

Two pictures of spirits in Obiri IV (31 & 32) are exceptional. The first is a lizard with a bird's head and without front legs. The second is an evil male spirit with "spines" on its head, sexual organs, knees and on one elbow, and with the body filled with zigzag lines. This figure is complementary to the evil spirits with zigzag line which have already been described (fig. 15).

The paintings of arms form an interesting group. It is interesting that I did not find at Obiri the ancient red stencils which were, e.g. at Kolondjorluk, even covered by the oldest pictures of kangaroos and spearmen without womera. They were therefore — some of them at least — the oldest paintings of all. These are completely absent at Obiri. We find at Obiri I red paintings of hands surrounded by an elliptical line (Nos. 13, 14). These belong to the X-ray style, as do the decoratively painted arms, two placed opposite each other, at Obiri I (fig. 21). We can compare such paintings in Inagurdurwil, Nangalore and Injaluk Cave.

Beneath the second mushroom at Obiri III is a red and yellow symbol of a vulva. It is the only one at Obiri, but there are many parallels at Bala Uru, Inagurdurwill or Injaluk Cave.

Most common animal paintings represent fish, mostly barramundi. 14 barramundi were noted

(there were more of them in gallery I, but I did not make a note of all of them, 10 catfish (fresh water and sea), 5 saratogas, 1 gar fish and 18 unidentified fish. Thus there is a total of 48 fish paintings. All other animal figures are in a minority. There were 7 tortoises, 6 snakes, 3 kangaroos, 3 goanas, 1 echidna, 1 bandicoot, 1 ibis and 1 lizard. This selection clearly shows that most of the themes are of the water prey type (fish, tortoise, snakes). The paintings of Europeans form a special group (9) as do rifles (5) and axes (1). There are more of them here than in the localities further in the interior. There was undoubtedly more frequent contact with Europeans here during the final phase of rock painting.

THE MEANING OF THE PAINTINGS AT OBIRI

The painting of a yellow snake (No. 117) in Obiri III, at the level of the flood plain, was intended to insure the increase of snakes. The social meaning is, therefore, according to ethnographical information (cf. Mountford, 1964) a totemic ceremonial one. In front of the rock face on which the picture is painted there is an extensive open space, a large ceremonial ground. Typical magic sorcery figures (with isolated limbs) are rare among the Obiri paintings. Only the painting of an evil spirit in Obiri IV (No. 32) and Obiri III (fig. 44) could have a mythological or evil magic mean-

ing, or both. Erotic paintings are not so common here as is usual in other localities. Only the above-mentioned painting of an evil spirit (Obiri IV, No. 32) has an unusually large sexual organ, and in the gallery of Obiri III we find one erotic scene (Nos. 38 & 39) and one vulva symbol. One of the small white dynamic figures (No. 104, Obiri III) is depicted in a wide squatting position, which evidently has an erotic meaning. Finally, there is not the slightest doubt that many other figures, especially of spirits and supernatural beings, have a mythological meaning. Whether some of the figures were painted only to satisfy the creative tendencies of the artist and for his personal satisfaction, and if so which ones, is very difficult to decide without the authentic information of an enlightened Aborigine, and would be only a speculative exercise.

I found neither burials nor stone tool workshops in the localities described. Traces of dwelling sites were found at Obiri III, IV, II and I. I have said something of the dwelling sites of Obiri III

& IV in the geographical description. The sites were mostly shelters below small overhangs on the level of the alluvial plain.

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