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NOTES ON THE ROCK ART OF AIBURA CAVE, KAINANTU,
EASTERN HIGHLANDS DISTRICT OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

A detailed description of the rock art of Aibura Cave, near Barapuna Village in the Kainantu Sub-district of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea is given. Techniques used are described, and the form compared with Kundiawa sites. Previous investigation has revealed two periods of occupation, 4000-2000 and 1000-600 BP. Two distinct art styles and techniques are present but correlation with occupation periods is difficult. The paper does not attempt to detail fully the purpose and symbolism of the art. Brief notes on the pre-history of the area, a local legend associated with the cave, and an account of its more recent uses are provided.

AIBURA CAVE

Location

Aibura Cave is situated 19 km south-south-west of Kainantu, as the crow flies, and 35 km by way of the Obura road, and a short walk from Karata, an extension of Barapuna Village, in the Tairora Census Division of the Kainantu Sub-district in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It is at an altitude of approximately 1600 m and is located in a small swampy valley which drains into the Kondanauta Creek, a small tributary of the Lamari River.

Topography and Geology

The area surrounding the isolated limestone block in which the cave is contained is undulating in contrast to the usual rugged Papua New Guinea terrain. Trees are almost completely absent from the area. "Pit pit" grass is the only pronounced vegetation. The area is swampy with the exception of a small section of drained and cultivated land east of the limestone outcrop where shrub regrowth and induced grassland are prevalent.

Sub-recent and recent alluvial and colluvial clayey soils with some peat are developed on greywacke, siltstones and granodiorite (CSIRO, 1970).

Recent history

Aibura was probably first visited by Europeans in 1945. Later, in 1961, it was noted as a possible archaeological site (White, 1972). White visited Aibura and carried out archaeological research during 1964-65. The cave is apparently regularly visited by Europeans and the location is consequently quite well known.

Pre-history

Human habitation and use are immediately obvious on entering the cave by the abundance of charcoal drawings and white clay paintings that appear throughout the cave. It has been ascertained by artifactual evidence (White, 1972) that Aibura was first used some 4000 years ago. Then followed a period of 2000 years abandonment or infrequent use. A second phase of extensive use commenced about 1000 years

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ago. A wide variety of artifacts discovered by White supports his proposal. Post holes indicate that some form of structure, a shelter or dwelling, was erected inside the cave during this second phase (White, 1972).

While no confirmation can be offered in this paper, it is reasonable to assume that the occupants of the cave, during this second period were, at least in part, responsible for the diverse and unique drawings and paintings.

Description of Cave

The cave is quite small and measures 60 x 25 x 15 m (see survey). It has four negotiable entrances converging on the main chamber (10 x 15 m) which is dimly lit by a number of holes in the roof. With the exception of the north-west passage, the walls and roof are heavily smoke stained and blackened above 0.9 m (presumably due to fire lighting during occupation). The roof varies in height from two to four metres. Apart from some deposition in the main and western chambers, the cave appears to be "dead". Normally, the cave is damp but not wet. White (1972) records floor wash occurring during the wet season. Some algae are apparent in places on the walls which are normally quite dry. Drawings and paintings are protected and located behind the "dripline". On the western side of the outcrop a small alcove-like cave is located.

Local mythology

One Taka-Kaino, an elder of Karata, related the following legend (translated from local dialect to "pidgin" and further translated to English).

"About three generations ago, seven children of Barapuna Village came to Aibura Cave to play. Whilst they were playing an elder from the village came down and told them to stop playing in the cave because it was dangerous. The cave was then heard to say the following (dialect), "Bitori mau ori pempu urau bainbain". (Roughly translated, this means 'I am going to close'.) With that, all entrances of the cave sealed themselves, and the walls began to close in, trapping the children inside. The parents of the children came to the cave when they heard what had happened, and brought freshly killed pigs and cooked vegetables in an offering, and begged the cave to release their children. The cave remained closed and occasionally the children could be heard crying and shouting for help, until finally only one child remained. Later he too died, and the crying stopped. Some weeks later the cave opened up again. The parents went inside and recovered the bodies of their children. They were carried back to the village where there was great sadness and mourning."

Taka also related that the cave was used, in the time of "tumbuna" (ancestors) and during his lifetime, by the women of the village during the act of childbirth. This was corroborated by other informants who also said that the alcove on the western side was used for this purpose. It is interesting to note a figure that is obviously female at the rear of the alcove (Fig.II). It was also said that the cave was used as a place of refuge during tribal warfare against the once traditional enemies, the Tsaiora. Local people account for the blackening of the roof and walls with the story that the Tsaiora once set fire to the grasses that grow over the outcrop. Taka said that the cave was occupied at the time, and that all the possessions of the occupants were destroyed in the ensuing fire.

THE ART

The techniques used, the motifs and patterns, and their occurrence and repetition in the cave are briefly described. Detailed location descriptions are provided in Appendix I.

Techniques

Four techniques appear at Aibura: (1) drawing with charcoal, (2) finger painting with white clay, (3) finger dotting with white clay, and (4) finger painting with a mixture of white clay and ground charcoal.

As a general rule, each technique appears separately (monochrome). However, on some occasions, all four techniques appear simultaneously (bichrome).

Classification (Fig. I)

'Occuli' and Circular Motifs (Fig. I.1): Circles 1(a), concentric circles 1(b), 'occuli' 1(c), circles with spokes or rays 1(d and e), in charcoal (monochrome). Circle 1(f), circle with rays 1(g and h), two circles joined by a horizontal bar 1(i), and concentric circles 1(j) in finger dotting or painting (monochrome). Circular motifs are the most common of all the motifs and occur frequently throughout the cave.

'Embryo' motif and Irregular Triangle Motif with two Projections (Fig. I.2): Triangular shaped motif with projections in monochrome finger dotted white clay 2(a). Motif of similar style 2(b) in bichrome charcoal and fingerpainted white clay. Motif in similar style 2(c) in monochrome finger dotted and painted white clay. Variations of these motifs appear some six times throughout the cave. (Fig. II, 1, c was described by P.J. White (1964) as follows, "Possibly an embryo figure; a complex but enigmatic design".)

Anthropomorphs (Fig. I.3): A diverse group of anthropomorphic figures appears throughout the site. Forms 3(a to e) are executed in white clay, the form of the figure 3(d) being filled-in in grey (bichrome). Forms 3(f) to 3(j) are executed in charcoal (monochrome). Forms 3(a), 3(b), 3(f) and 3(g) appear to have exaggerated male sexual characteristics whilst 3(c) is possibly female. Form 3(a) appears once (section C-D), form 3(b) twice (section E-F), and form 3(c) appears once on the roof (section F-G) and once elsewhere (section N-O). There are five variations of 3(d), 3(h) and 3(i) which appear in sections D-O. Form 3(g) appears once in section I-J, and twice in section AA-AB (see cave survey). Form 3(f) appears once in the passage area of entrance 1, and form 3(j) appears once in section AA-AC.

Zoomorphic Figures (Fig. I.4): A monochrome zoomorphic figure in charcoal, of unknown meaning and origin, occurs twice in section C-D and five times in an alcove in section E-F.

'House-like' Motif (Fig. I.5): This motif is drawn in charcoal (monochrome) and appears five times in the southern chamber (sections U-O). Although the form appears to be of recent origin, on at least two occasions it appears under other obviously old drawings, thus indicating its antiquity. The origin and meaning are unknown.

General

Fig. II shows a female form drawn in charcoal which appears on the east wall of the small alcove on the western side of the outcrop; a short distance to the right and slightly above this appear the forms shown in Fig. III which are executed in white clay and charcoal. Fig. IV is an enigmatic design painted in white clay and occurs immediately above 'E'. Fig. V(b) is a further enigmatic design drawn in charcoal and appears 0.5 m right of 'P' / Fig. V(b) which is drawn in white clay appears in section 'AH-AI' and Figures V(c), (e) and (f), which are drawn in charcoal, appear 2 m to the right of 'C'. The meaning of (c) remains an enigma whilst (e) and (f) obviously represent female and male genitalia. The form in Fig. V(d), which is drawn in charcoal and appears approximately 1 m to the right of 'T', appears to be a 'legless' anthropomorph.

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Fig. IV is a detail of the wall in section 'J-K' showing two anthropomorphs outlined in charcoal and filled in with a mixture of white clay and ground charcoal; these figures are surrounded by geometric and linear designs drawn with charcoal. A white clay finger dotted pattern, of no apparent form, is superimposed over the anthropomorphic and charcoal designs.

RECORDING METHODS

The drawings and paintings were photographed using a 35 mm through-the-lens single reflex camera and 400 ASA black and white film. An electronic flash device was also used. Where photography proved to be impracticable, the grid method of copying was applied. The cave was surveyed with a compass and inclinometer to the nearest degree and with a non-magnetic tape to the nearest centimetre (C.R.G. Grd 4).

CONCLUSIONS

The Aibura art style differs greatly from the art style of the Kundiawa sites (Wilde 1974) with the exception of some similarities between circular motifs and some anthropomorphs. Dating is as always difficult, but as previously mentioned, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the paintings and drawings were executed by the people who occupied and used the site during the second phase of habitation (1000-600 BP). It is possible but very doubtful that some art has survived from the first phase (4000-2000 BP). However it is more reasonable to assume that the majority of the art is attributable to the second phase and that the older art lies hidden beneath the smoke stains. There are, however, two distinct styles and techniques which may indicate cultural differences in the artists themselves. Much of the art appears to be associated with childbirth and fertility and the site apparently fulfilled this purpose until very recent times.

CONSERVATION

As with many of the other parietal art sites throughout the highlands, Aibura has been vandalised by local youths. It is obvious that sites lacking in 'tambus' are abused by village children and in some cases by Europeans too. Perhaps schools could be made aware of the catastrophic destruction of this aspect of local culture? Students should be made aware of this tragedy and be educated towards preserving these unique, valuable and beautiful assets of their cultural heritage.

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APPENDIX I

General Description of Art

For ease of description the walls of the cave have been divided into sections from convenient survey points and are marked from A - X and AA - AH.

SECTION A - B - C: The wall and ceiling of section A - B to a point 2 m after B - C shows mainly white clay, finger drawn or dotted 'occuli' and circular motifs of the type shown in Fig. I, 1, f-j. Also present are a number of charcoal 'occuli' and circles similar to those shown in Fig. I, 1, a-e. Near the entrance are four variations of Fig. I, 3, f. Also at the entrance and at a height of approximately 2 m are a group of recently executed charcoal figures. Local informants say that this group was drawn by village children. Almost the entire roof of these sections consists of white clay, finger dotted, circular patterns of no apparent form to the writer; the roof also has a number of circular motifs of the type shown in Fig. I, 1, f-j.

SECTION C - D: Above 'C' there is a motif of the type shown in Fig. I, 2, a, and a centrally placed anthropomorphic form (Fig. I, 3, f); surrounding this form is a white clay, finger dotted pattern of no apparent form. Approximately 2 m to the right appears an isolated anthropomorph (Fig. I, 3, a) and below this and slightly to the right are a number of faded, old, linear charcoal drawings (Fig. V, c, e and f). A further 2 m to the right and 0.5 m above the floor is a faded, double zig-zag design 0.8 m long and 0.2 m high. A number of scratched lines of a geometric form also appear but are most likely of recent or accidental origin. No drawings or paintings appear on the smoke blackened roof of this section.

SECTION D - E: Has a number of motifs and drawings in charcoal including two anthropomorphs and two zoomorphic forms as in Fig. I, 4; a number of circular and 'occuli' motifs (Fig. I, 1, a-e) and some linear charcoal designs. The roof of this section is clean and high with no drawings.

SECTION E - F: Immediately above 'E' appears an enigmatic design (Fig. IV). The design is finger painted in white clay upon dark brown, smoke stained rock. In an alcove, almost at ground level, appears a design of 'complete' and 'incomplete' zoomorphic forms of the type shown in Fig. I, 4. These are drawn in charcoal. Approximately 3 m above the floor and to the right of 'E' is an anthropomorphic form of the type shown in Fig. I, 3, b. Above the group of zoomorphic forms, drawn upon calcite flow, are a number of white clay, finger dotted designs which are faded and almost indistinguishable; and another anthropomorph of the type shown in Fig. I, 3, b. 0.3 m to the right of this is a white clay, finger dotted design consisting of a double circle with three upright, dotted lines between the two circles; the design is 0.3 m high.

The roof of sections E - F, F - G, H - I, and I - J forms an 'archway' which is smoke blackened; upon this 'archway' appears a complex circular and geometric design covering the whole roof and overlapping on to the walls. The design is finger dotted in white clay; a 'kidney' shaped motif appears to have been recently retouched. Near to SP 'G' is an anthropomorphic form similar to Fig. I, 1, c; a similar but dotted anthropomorph appears adjacent to this, a triangular design similar to Fig. I, 2, a, and a variation of form I, 2, c also appear in this section.

Entrance area 2 has a fallen rock slab across it with a number of faded and almost indistinguishable charcoal designs.

SECTION H - I: On the wall immediately adjacent to SP 'H' are a number of recently executed charcoal drawings. No original drawings appear on the wall of this section.

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SECTION I - J: Beneath the 'arch' there are a number of older charcoal drawings, including an anthropomorph. A short distance before SP 'J' and 0.75 m above the floor is a white clay, finger dotted anthropomorph similar to Fig. I, 3, e. Immediately above SP 'J' are a number of recently executed charcoal drawings (probably drawn by juveniles). Amongst these are a number of the 'house-like' motifs (Fig. I, 5) which casts some doubt on the antiquity of the design. However, in other areas of the cave the motif appears underneath old white clay paintings. It is possible that the ones in this section are recently made copies of older ones.

SECTION J - K: This section has a complex group of drawings in both charcoal and white clay. Amongst the drawings are two variations of the anthropomorph in Fig. I, 3, d; these two forms are outlined in charcoal and filled in with a mixture of charcoal and white clay. Charcoal drawings are predominant with superimposed white clay dots (Fig. VI).

SECTIONS K - L, L - M and N: This section has little in the way of drawings or paintings with the exception of a number of very recently executed charcoal drawings which local informants say were drawn by children from the village. There are a number of old and faded and no longer recognizable drawings beneath these.

ALCOVE: On the western side of the outcrop near entrance 3 is a small alcove or cave. This small cave has a number of monochrome charcoal drawings and bichrome charcoal and white clay paintings. Fig. II, an obviously female form appears on the east wall and a short distance to the right and slightly above it is the 'embryo' motif and anthropomorph that appear in Fig. III. The female form is drawn with charcoal and the 'embryo' motif is painted with white clay and outlined in charcoal.

SECTION N - O: This section continues with recent, juvenile drawings superimposed over old and faded charcoal drawings. To the right of SP 'N' and 3 m above the floor is an anthropomorph similar to Fig. I, 3, d but in charcoal outline only; the form is over one metre high and is faded and possibly old. The right hand extremities of the figure are obscured by calcitic flow and algae. One metre to the right of SP 'O' is a white clay, finger-dotted anthropomorph similar to Fig. I, 3, c with a white clay, finger painted 'loop-like' design superimposed over it. Below this are a number of charcoal linear, zig-zag, curvilinear and rectilinear drawings which are faded and almost indistinguishable and above a dry inlet by the ceiling is a further 'loop-like' painting similar to, but older in appearance than the previous one.

SECTION O - P: There are no drawings in this section, with the exception of some faded, linear, charcoal drawings and a heavily drawn group of sweeping, charcoal lines left of SP 'P'.

SECTION P - Q: Half a metre from SP 'Q' is a white clay, finger-dotted anthropomorph similar to Fig. I, 3, e and below this appears a linear charcoal design (Fig. V, a) to the right of this is a faded and indistinguishable white clay, finger-dotted design and a linear charcoal design, also indistinguishable.

SECTION R - S: This section is smoke blackened above 0.9 m leaving a group of linear charcoal designs only partly exposed. At SP 'S' is a circular charcoal motif as in Fig. I, 1, e and a faded, linear, charcoal pattern which is almost completely indistinguishable.

SECTION S - T: Immediately to the right of SP 'S' is a faded group of bichrome motifs, smoke stained and very difficult to distinguish in any detail. There is a clearer group of white clay paintings left of SP 'T'.

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SECTION T - U: To the right of SP 'T' and 1 m above the floor is a concentric circle motif drawn in charcoal (Fig. I, 1, b) and 1 m to its right is a legless anthropomorph (?) 0.7 m high, also drawn in charcoal (Fig. V, d). 1.3 m to the right is a group of faded, linear, charcoal designs and above them is a white clay, finger-dotted curcular motif of type Fig. I, 1, f on the roof of this section is a white clay, finger-dotted pattern, similar to the entrance areas 1 and 2, but almost completely obscured beneath smoke stains.

SECTION U - V: Open area (entrance 4) with no drawings.

SECTIONS V to Z: No drawings.

SECTION Z - AA: This section has a number of recently executed charcoal drawings (presumably drawn by village youths) which are superimposed over old and faded charcoal designs. In a hollow in the roof is a white clay, finger-dotted pattern similar to previous roof patterns.

SECTION AA - AB: A number of faded, charcoal, linear designs and white clay, finger dotted patterns; circular motifs, rectilinear designs and an anthropomorph similar to Fig. I, 3, e.

SECTION AB - AC: Has a faded enigmatic, linear charcoal design too complicated to describe here in detail and, left of a calcite flow in the centre of the section, is a charcoal anthropomorph as in Fig. I, 3, f, and a faded, linear charcoal design. Two metres left of SP 'AC' are a number of faded, linear, charcoal designs partly obscured by smoke staining.

SECTION AC - AD: In this section are a number of charcoal drawings and white clay, finger-dotted paintings but above 0.9 m the roof is completely smoke blackened, leaving little of the drawings exposed to view.

SECTION AD - AE: Linear, charcoal drawings are visible on a clean wall up to 1.4 m above the floor, with the remainder smoke blackened and indistinguishable. White clay designs are partly visible through the smoke stains.

SECTION AE - AF: One metre from the floor and in the centre of this section appears a number of faded, linear, charcoal patterns; approximately 2.5 m left of survey point 'AF' is a charcoal circle motif and faded linear, geometric designs. One metre to the right and 1 m above the floor is an anthropomorphic form with a rectilinear drawing below it.

SECTION AF - AG: Here is a circular charcoal motif which appears 0.5 m right of survey point 'AF' and 1.7 m above the floor; it is similar in appearance to Fig. I, 1, d and is 25 cm in diameter. 1.5 m across from SP 'AF' is a white clay, finger-dotted pattern of no apparent form to the author but similar to previous ones; left of this is a linear charcoal design.

SECTION AG - AH: This section has a number of old and faded indistinguishable, white clay, finger dotted patterns similar to previous ones.

SECTION AH - AI: Has a white clay, finger dotted 'flower-like' motif (Fig. V, b) which is 40 cm across and continues with white clay, finger dotted patterns similar to previous ones; some circular motifs also appear.

SECTION AI - A: Entrance 1.

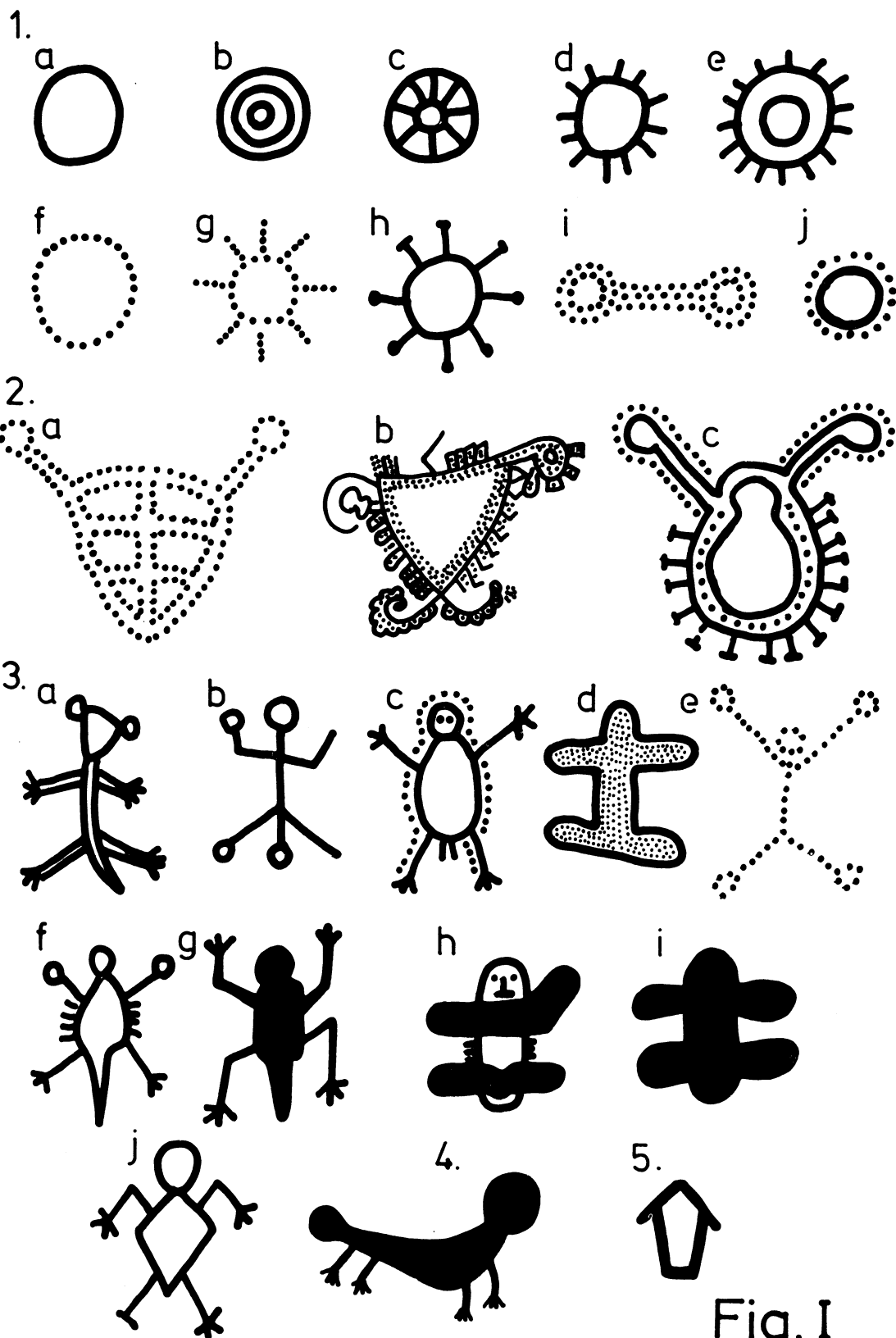
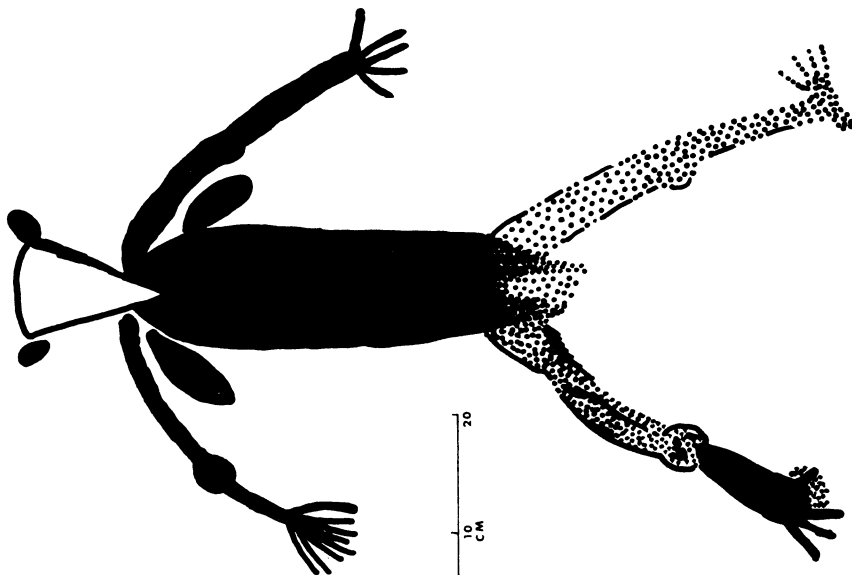


Fig. I

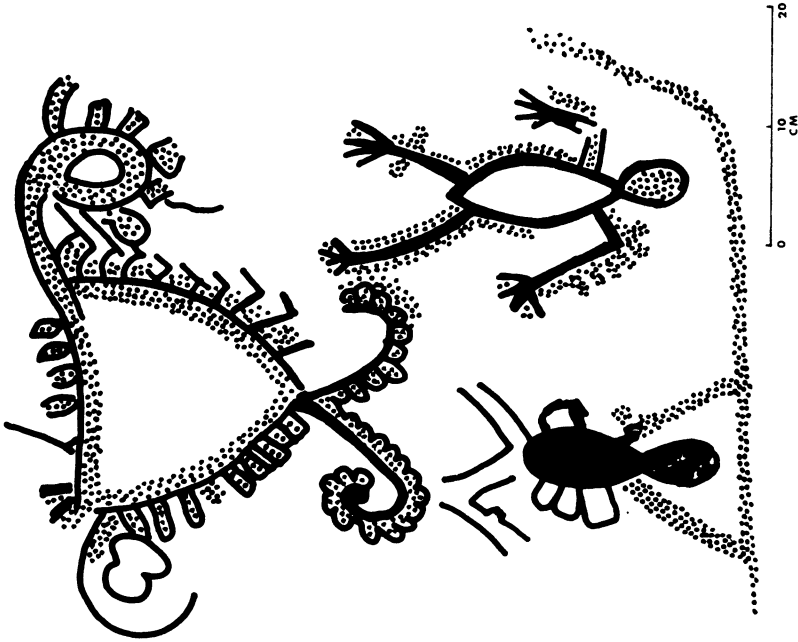
smudged areas with
some outline

Fig. II



'female figure west alcove'

Fig. III



white clay
charcoal

Embryo motif &
anthropomorphs

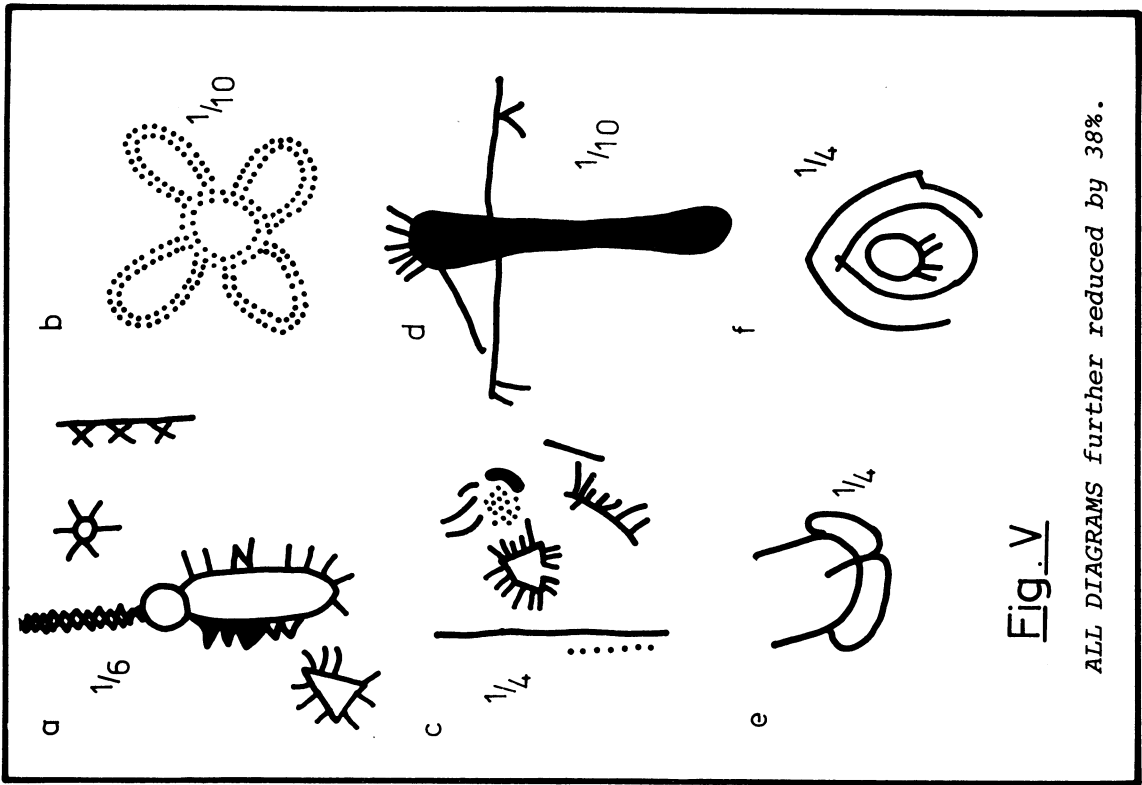


Fig. V

ALL DIAGRAMS further reduced by 38%.

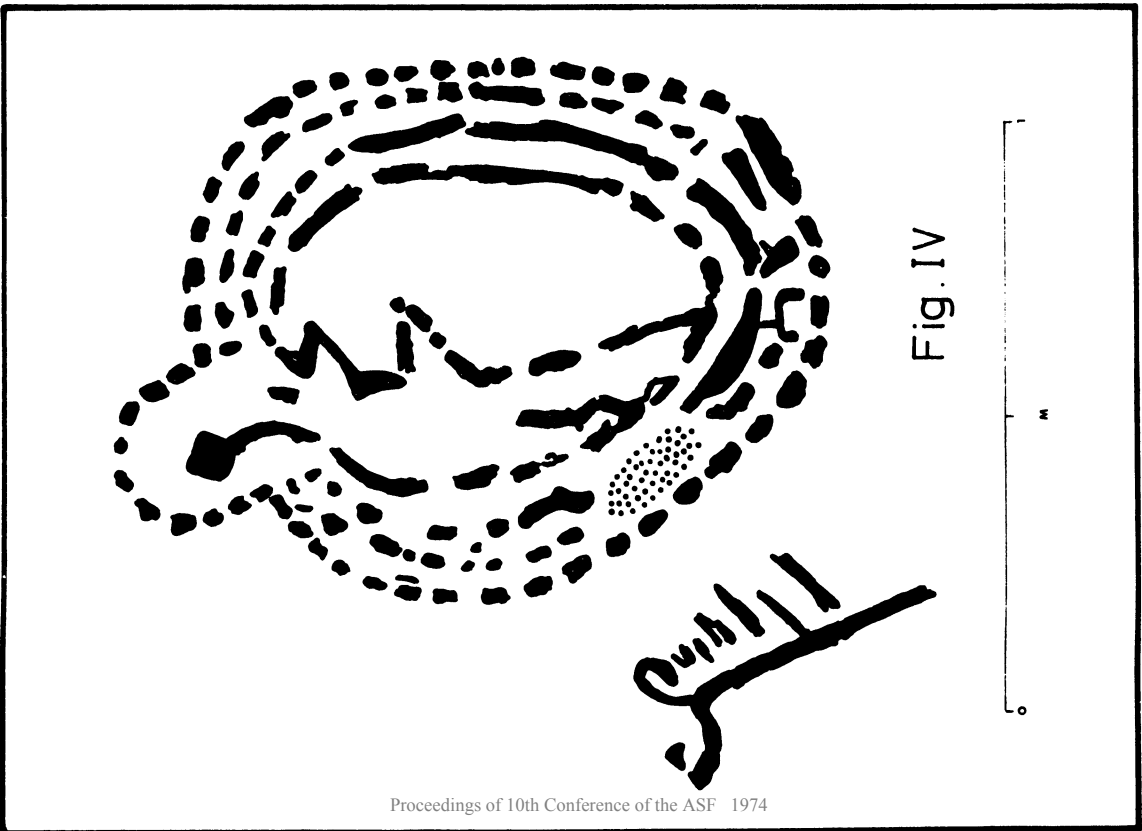


Fig. IV

