Excavation under way at Garnawaia site no. 1. The two large figures are Djangural, and the smaller matchstick figures are Yirmi-Nyonong (beings who came from Port Keats to the northwest of Wardaman country during the Dreaming)

Below left: Dr. Val Attenbrow excavates beneath two White Cockatoo Dreaming beings at Mengeya

Centre: Earthwatch volunteers sort archaeological materials at Garnawala (site no.2)

Right: Menge-ya, Dr. Bruno David discussing Dreaming stories and archaeological work with Wardaman owners.

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The Lightning Brothers
Investigating Rock Art and the Dreaming

Yagjagbula and Jabirringgi are brothers. Yagjagbula is tall, young and handsome, but his brother is short and rather unattractive. Every day one of the brothers goes out hunting kangaroos, each taking his turn on alternate days. One day, as Jabirringgi returns home from the hunt, he hears his wife whispering to his brother in a secluded crevice in a sandstone outcrop. He immediately becomes suspicious and investigates, only to find Yagjagbula seducing his wife. In a fit of rage, Jabirringgi throws his spear at Yagjagbula, who evades it. Retrieving his own weapons, Yagjagbula takes up the fight on the sandy plains. As spears and boomerangs are thrown, the lightning strikes, splitting the surrounding sandstone outcrop in half. The fury of the fight is so intense that, from the distant south, the frogs come to watch the fight, as does wiyan, the rain, who was distracted from his travels northwards by the illuminated skies. Eventually, the fight comes to an end as Yagjagbula hits Jabirringgi across his forehead with his boomerang, knocking off his headress, thereby winning the fight. To this day, the frogs and the rain can be seen as distinctive sandstone outcrops at Yiwarlarlay, the Lightning Brothers’ Dreaming-scape, as can the Lightning Brothers themselves, transformed onto the rock wall in a rockshelter nearby.
There is an air of timelessness in the Dreaming. It is a time of creation, a time when the essence of being—animal, vegetable, human, spiritual, celestial or otherwise—creates the world through a whole network of events. Here dingo passed, imbuing the landscape with the essence of dingo-ness, and transformed itself into a hill where it finally came to rest. The hill is dingo. People, too, trace back their essences to Dreaming beings, sometimes in animal form, others as celestial objects or other elements of what we would call ‘nature’. This is the world where one could find the Lightning Brothers.

The Dreaming is of the past, present and future. It is of the past as it has always existed, of the present in the essence of life, and of the future where it has already set the rules of behaviour and already enacted the scope of punishments for deviance. In all three, it has set the law of the land. It is a way of seeing the world—an unChristian world, not set to see the cosmos as consisting of a person here, trees and rocks and stars over there; in that Christian scheme there is a detachment, an isolation of one's being or spirit from the surrounding world. But in the Dreaming all is linked to life, to the trees and mountains and animals, by the network of relationships established by the creator beings. Every individual is essentially linked with everything around them in very special and different ways, ways that may involve obligations, caretaking and restrictions.

Elsie Raymond is an elderly Wardaman woman who has a very special relationship with Yiwarlarlay, the land of the Lightning Brothers in the Northern Territory. She is its principal caretaker, having inherited the responsibility from her father. Yiwarlarlay is physically impressive, containing large outcropping sandstone boulders, and what are, to Europeans, magnificent galleries of ancient paintings, testimony of past human activities. But to Wardaman people, both the land and the rock are buwarraja, Dreaming, rather than mere rocks, plains or paintings. They are (and not just represent) the essences of the Dreaming beings who sit in the rock in the Dreaming. The rock art here is diverse and abundant. There are dingoes and echidnas, snakes, crocodiles and goannas, ghosts and rainbow serpents and many other things unfamiliar to most but the local Aboriginal people.

Wardaman people today know the land as a complex configuration of Dreaming events such as the one recounted in the Lightning Brothers story. Most of the rock art found in the rockshelters is, to Wardaman people, an expression of these events. It was this combination of a living Dreaming tradition and of extensive galleries of cave art which led us to investigate the Wardaman past. Our approach to Wardaman prehistory followed an unusual avenue, for here the relationship between the rock art and the Dreaming enabled us to investigate expressions of the Dreaming itself via an investigation of the art.

So, in 1988 we began the Lightning Brothers Project. We tried to investigate Wardaman prehistory by working back in time. The project started by documenting the Wardaman social landscape of recent times, including the way that recent Wardaman social life is expressed in the archaeological record. By going back in time through the archeological record, we can look to see how far back in time the modern archaeological signature extends; in this way, we can look for discontinuities in the archaeological record that may indicate past changes in the lifestyles of the ancestors of today's Wardaman people. What we were interested in doing was to investigate general patterns of stability and change in behaviour. Our research has already identified some fascinating aspects of the Aboriginal past in what is today Wardaman country.

Today, the Wardaman people have considerable inter-regional contacts with people to the south and west of Katherine, whereas interaction with people to the north and to the east is much more restricted. This is reflected in patterns of trade...
relations, as well as in other social phenomena. For instance, both Wardaman people and those to the south and to the west share a common kinship system, resulting in the presence of close as well as distant kin throughout the region. This affinity is helped by the shared custom of what is known as the eight-class system. This convention is based on the fact that, in addition to their normal names, every individual inherits their mother’s social name by birth. By this we mean that everyone in Wardaman society belongs to one of eight possible social classes (non-hierarchical). Amongst Wardaman people these are inherited from the mother while in some other groups they are inherited from the father. The eight classes are also known as skins and are described in the footnotes.

It is a complex task to work out these relationships, for they articulate many forms of relatives that we do not normally recognise (for instance, different types of grandmothers and grandfathers). The advantage of the 8-class system is that it enables every adult Wardaman person to know automatically how they should behave towards anyone else just by knowing their skin name, even if they have never met before.

Social networks such as these are part of the law of the land, giving order to life. They enable people to situate themselves in relation to other people, to the spiritual world and to the land. The 8-class system is a lubricant for inter-group interaction, regulating behaviour between individuals, structuring appropriate marriage opportunities, and setting up a mechanism by which long-distance movements of people and goods can be organised. Today, this shared social network is predominantly a desert and semi-desert phenomenon which does not occur to the north of Katherine.

We were particularly interested in the antiquity of such networks. While this cannot be investigated archaeologically, since there are no material correlates, we can, however, investigate archaeologically the antiquity of the modern inter-regional networks. One way is to determine the provenance of the raw materials (such as stone used to make stone axes) that were traded. Another is to document the spread of different rock art conventions through space and time, the assumption being that the spread of a particular style reflects patterns of interaction.

In asking how long today’s interactive networks have been in existence, we concentrated on documenting the distributions of various rock art styles in time and space. Since 1988, we have found and recorded over 47,000 rock paintings and engravings, stencils and prints, executed in a broad range of styles
and techniques. While the art is extremely different from that of the Kakadu region to the immediate north, it is very similar to that of the Victoria River and Keep River regions to the west, as well as to many other regions to the west and south. This pattern matches well the patterning of social interaction recorded between Aboriginal groups in recent times. No changes to the basic pattern are visible through time, although during earlier times interactive networks may have been broader, as the earliest styles extend further to the south than the later ones.

We also believe that this pattern of social interaction may be as old as 5,000 years because, although the paintings from the area are probably more recent in age, some engravings were excavated by John Mulvaney (ANU) in the 1960s in pre-5,000 year-old deposits in a site called Nimji (near the Yingalarri waterhole).

It is likely that human occupation in the region goes back to the ice ages, perhaps as far back as 50—60,000 years ago, as evidence of human occupation dating to that time has been excavated from Arnhem Land to the north.

Within a general context of inter-regional stability, some major changes also appear in the rock art and in the stone tools of Wardaman country. In both these aspects of human behaviour, a major change appears to have taken place around a thousand years ago. In rock art, the amount of painting activity appears to have increased dramatically around this time. Indeed, although earlier paintings are likely to exist (as they do in surrounding regions), we have so far found little evidence of cave paintings dating to pre-1000 year-old times. This is despite the fact that we have already excavated in six rockshelters. In five, pieces of ochre were recovered from the excavations in relatively large numbers and paintings were common on the cave walls. In some cases, people camped in the sites over 5,000 years ago.

At about this time, a new stone tool technology also begins to appear in the archaeological record. This new technology is based on the systematic production of long blades and points. And, perhaps most important of all, and this is something that archaeologists have been finding throughout mainland Australia, the last thousand years or so witnessed a dramatic increase in the amounts of charcoal, bone, stone artefact and shellfish deposited in rockshelters. We are not yet certain as to what this means, but it is likely to have involved two factors: a change in lifestyles, and a significant population increase during what is known as the late Holocene period (the last 10,000 years).

The cultural changes documented in Wardaman country during the last few thousand years have also been noted in other parts of Australia by other archaeologists, although their exact timing varies from place to place. The widespread nature of this phenomenon means that the changes observed are more than a purely local thing. It may also be useful to note that as far as Wardaman country goes, all of the sites we have excavated relate today to important Dreaming stories. In each case, these stories, and indeed the sites themselves, reflect the identity of the surrounding landscape. The Lightning Brothers story is one such example. Another is Garnawala, where the Rainbow Serpent passed on its travels to the Yingalarri waterhole. It is near this waterhole that it was speared, and subsequently carried away to a nearby sandstone outcrop by a 'little Rainbow Serpent' (where it now sits in the rock). The paintings at these sites each relate to the local Dreaming events recounted in the stories.

If the paintings are repeatedly dated to the last millennium, does this imply that there has been a change in the way these stories were depicted? This may be so, but whether this is the case or not, we must never lose sight of the fact that to Wardaman people, the Dreaming 'stories' are more than stories. They are timeless realities, each relating a Dreamtime event. They articulate not only a morality and
set of rules by which social life should be guided, but also the realities of life in all its deviance and non-conformity.

The two ways of perceiving the past, the European scientific (archaeological) and the Wardaman Dreaming, are in a way very different, but they should not be seen as conflicting. On the contrary, our project in Wardaman country begins by acknowledging and respecting Wardaman reality, which itself encompasses a complex social and cultural framework by which people have decided to order their world. In effect, it is this world view—its present as well as its past—that we have tried to address in the Lightning Brothers project.

Bruno David and Josephine Flood

Bruno David is from the Department of Anthropology, University of Queensland and Josephine Flood from the Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra.

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The 8 classes (also known as skins) of the Wardaman people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Name</th>
<th>Female Name</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jangari</td>
<td>Nangari</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jabijin</td>
<td>Nambijin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jalyirri</td>
<td>Nalyirri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jabarda</td>
<td>Nimarra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jurlama</td>
<td>Nawurla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janama</td>
<td>Nanagu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jangala</td>
<td>Nangala</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jimija</td>
<td>Namija</td>
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An individual of any one of these skins is required to act in particular ways towards any member of the other skins. For instance, a man of Jabarda skin should ideally marry a Nalyirri woman. However, there is an avoidance relationship between a man and his mother-in-law, so that Nangala (Nalyirri’s mother’s skin) should avoid direct contact with Jabarda. It is a complex task to work out these relationships, for they articulate many forms of relatives that we do not normally recognise.

Whilst camping with Wardaman people in 1988, Bruno David was given the Jabarda skin name. Two apparent reasons for this were that Bruno spent a lot of time with an old man whose skin was Jabarda. In Wardaman society, one of the closest relationships is that between grandfather and grandson. This relationship involves ritual roles as well as a whole series of obligations on both grandfather’s and grandson’s part. The second reason was that while Bruno was in the bush with the old man, his hair was full of dust, making him resemble old man Jabarda.

This skin allocation meant that Bruno actually had an avoidance relationship with a social anthropologist colleague, meaning that he could not speak to her directly! However, this rule was easily overlooked by the elderly Wardaman people who saw the situation as very humorous.