

The First Immigrants

Recent dating of ancient Aboriginal sites suggests that people have lived in Australia for more than 50 000 years, and may have been among the first people on Earth to achieve advanced social organisation.

This makes the 200+ years of European settlement look like a very short time indeed. An immense amount had happened to the land and its people before the first recorded visit by a European in 1606 and the British occupation in 1788. This ancient Aboriginal history was passed from generation to generation in songs, artworks and stories. Some of these records were lost with the breakdown of traditional Aboriginal lifestyles after European colonisation.

Tales of Monster Marsupials and Ice Ages

Traditional Aboriginal lore tells of the last ice age (about 15 000 years ago), and even of the giant marsupials that roamed the Australian landscape 50 000 years ago. Artworks carved on rock shelves and painted in red earth (ochre) on rock walls also tell us of the lifestyles and spiritual beliefs of the original Australians.

While some of this rich knowledge still exists and remains a sacred part of modern Aboriginal culture, much of what we know of Aboriginal history comes from scientific investigation of archaeological sites across Australia. Scientists are able to tell how Aboriginal people lived in the past by studying artefacts such as tools and decorations.



This rock painting is in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It is at least 3000 years old, and shows people dressed in ornate costumes.

A Perilous Sea Voyage

The first Australians probably landed on the north-western shores of Australia from the islands of Indonesia, possibly Timor. The trip would have been achieved during an ice age, a time when the sea level was much lower than it is today. During ice ages more of the earth's water is held in the polar ice caps, so much of what is now ocean, at that time was land. Even so, those first explorers would have travelled about 100 kilometres across the ocean, perhaps on rafts made from the logs of rainforest trees.

Occupying the Continent

The first Australians gradually spread across the vast continent. Archaeologists think they spread along the coasts first and occupied the dry interior later, and that they had occupied most of the continent by about 30,000 years ago. At this time Tasmania was still joined to the mainland. When rising sea levels flooded low lying land to form Bass Strait about 12 000 years ago the people and animals of Tasmania were cut off from the mainland.

Farming Adapted to the Environment

The harsh conditions of Australia meant that the Aboriginal people had to live in harmony with the environment. While people living at that time in Asia and Europe had started to grow crops and keep animals for food, and begun to live in towns and cities, the Aboriginal people continued to live a largely nomadic life.