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Discontinuities in arid zone rock art: Graphic indicators for changing social complexity across space and through time

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ABSTRACT

For several decades it has been argued that episodic behavioral dynamism provides a better explanation for Australian arid zone social organization than earlier models founded on perceptions of long term, widespread cultural conservatism. This new understanding continues to develop with the consideration of rock art as a behavioral proxy. The development of a rock art style sequence in the Australian Western Desert has modelled for changing occupation indices and art production modes through time based on environmental changes and their likely effects on mobility patterns and territoriality (McDonald and Veth, 2013a). This model which sees rock art accompanying the first peopling of Australia's deserts and stands in stark contrast to that of Smith (2013) which sees rock art as a mid-Holocene addition to the adaptive social repertoires of arid-zone peoples. We have argued that rock art provides evidence for an early mapping onto arid landscapes and that there is a long, albeit syncopated, arid zone style chronology. Early pigment rock art dates from Sulawesi (Aubert et al., 2014) support the view that symbolic behaviour was part of the social repertoire of human groups colonizing Australia and its interior. This paper tests the arid-zone style sequence by quantifying the synchronic and diachronic stylistic discontinuities observable at Kaalpi and Katjarra – two style provinces in the Australian Western Desert. While stylistic variability in the recent past demonstrates the nature of synchronic discontinuity in arid zone symbolic behaviour, punctuated changes in style graphics and changes in the way that this art has been placed through time demonstrate deep-time stylistic discontinuities, providing support for the phased art sequence and evidence for earlier configurations of arid-zone social networks.

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1. Introduction

Major changes in graphic vocabularies are the stylistic changes which can be used to explore discontinuities in rock art production. Stylistic variability is the key to disentangling dynamic human uses of the arid zone, as this reveals how social groups have signaled their cultural similarities and/or differences across space and through time. Australia's earliest arid zone rock art demonstrates long-term continuous use of a homogenous graphic vocabulary over vast tracts of the continent (Maynard, 1979; Franklin, 2004; McDonald and Veth, 2010). Through time, in some parts of the arid zone (e.g. the Pilbara) this is replaced by extreme stylistic heterogeneity (Mulvaney, 2013) with adjacent social (language) groups producing wildly different art bodies (Wright, 1968; McDonald and Veth, 2009, 2013a). The sandy Western Desert rock art provinces reveal punctuated discontinuities within and between dialect groups, while in central Australia there is

continuity in graphic vocabulary into the recent past (Rosenfeld, 2002; Ross, 2005) and even into contemporary art (Smith, 1989; and see Ross, 2005). These continuities and changes demonstrate how style as social strategy has been used in the complex network of personal and social identifying behaviours through time across a variety of arid landscapes.

And the synchronic and diachronic processes are critically linked.

If we don't understand how people produce art in a contemporaneous network, and the social and environmental influences which are at play in any given moment; then we cannot begin to disentangle how art production worked, and changed, in the deep past. We need to theorise the semiotic and behavioural systems that are at play in any one rock art production mode and we need to theorise how this can be projected into the past. We have begun to understand how recent art production may have functioned within the contemporary social networks of this part of the Western Desert cultural bloc (e.g. McDonald, 2013; McDonald and Veth, 2013b) by understanding the ethnographic present in the Western Desert (e.g. Gould, 1969; Tonkinson, 1974). This

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necessarily involves a theorised understanding of anthropological and ethnohistoric data, modelled into archaeologically testable approaches with rock art providing vital and complementary proxy data to compliment other evidence for the changing human condition – and arid hunter-gatherers' responses to the world (McDonald and Veth, 2013a). This model has been described in detail previously, but the main phases and key art characteristics are reiterated (Table 1). This model is predicated on the assumptions of information exchange theory which see people's signalling behaviour being explicable in terms of the openness of their social networks – with the nature of social networks being affected by broad-scale environmental factors. Stylistic heterogeneity is considered to be an indicator of increased territoriality/decreased mobility which results from more fertile conditions: stylistic

homogeneity is a ramification of more arid conditions, and the need for widely ramified open social networks in times of greater social mobility.

The phased art model theorizes broad signalling changes as being triggered by changes to climate, social systems and population packing: demonstrated archaeologically by stylistic discontinuities – evidence that people are relating differently to each other and to their social landscape. The art phases have been chronologically identified by broad stylistic trends, relative superimpositioning and weathering: there has been no absolute dating of most phases, except the last two pigment phases. The definition of these broad regional phases was predicated on technique, subject choice and stylistic manners of depiction. Important factors to stress about our model are that it:

Table 1
Western Desert art phases, with projected age ranges (based on archaeological signatures), diagnostic graphics and behavioural correlates (from McDonald and Veth (2013a)).

Phases-age ranges (ka)	Diagnostic graphic	Occupation model's behavioural and art correlates
Phase 1 >45–35	 Cupules then, 'Panaramitee' arid-zone track and geometrics	Open style graphic as colonizing populations first mark the land. Pluvial phase – focus on earlier water Sparse archaeological signature sporadic engraved art production
Phase 2 35–23	 Archaic faces Regional variations emerging	Slow reduction of surface water, contraction of settlement to increasing aggregation at refugia; regional variation in engraved art production emerges at focal points. Increasing stylistic heterogeneity
Phase 3 23–19 (LGM)	 Large outline fauna	Drier and colder conditions – many sites abandoned. Territorial tethering at upland refugia: engraved art production episodic and showing long distance connections between refugia
Phase 4 19–14	 Decorative infill figures	Warmer and wetter condition with slight population increase (hiatus in many sites 20–13 ka). Refugia effect with territorial tethering leading to development of distinct local engraved art signatures
Phase 5 10–6	 Attenuated Anthropomorphs mostly bichrome	Climatic amelioration > population increase; sea level rise may have effected populations moving inland from coastal plain. Occupation all bioregions. Stylistic heterogeneity as stabilising populations assert territoriality. Pigment art production preserved: engraved style analogues
Phase 6 4–2	 Headdress figures, many bichrome	Onset of drier conditions and greater climatic variability > demographic packing and technological innovation – spread of Pama-Nyungan languages. Longer occupation at key locales > intensified territoriality identifying behaviour. Pigment production is dominant, minimal engraving
Phase 7 1.5–0.5	 Bichrome geometrics, zoomorphic depictions – increased local stylistic traits	Increased populations and tethering results in localised style regions with increased stylistic heterogeneity. Pigment art demarcates broad scale connection and local cohesion, minimal engraving
Phase 8 500yrs >>>	 Increased localised art forms (white pigment; geometrics and snakes)	Multiple forms of symbolic behaviour: petroglyphs drop from repertoire > stone arrangements, body and sand painting. Pigment art continues to show local innovation despite shared language and open social networks

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