

# Abstract

This monograph is based on PhD research completed at the Australian National University in 1994. The research examines prehistoric rock art from the Sydney region in coastal south-eastern Australia. The rock art occurs in two distinct contexts provided by the sandstone bedrock which defines this region. Engraving (or petroglyph) sites occur in open locations on horizontal platforms. In rockshelter locations there is pigment art (drawings, stencils and paintings) and occasionally engravings.

The principal aim of this research was to define a model for cultural interaction to describe a prehistoric art system. Information exchange theory provided the basis for this proposed model. By perceiving 'style' from a functional perspective the region's art was seen as a conduit for the expression of social affiliations. The concept of social context, e.g. public versus private, has been extremely important in developing this argument. So has the notion that style is a means of non-verbal communication used to negotiate identity.

Varying levels of stylistic heterogeneity reveal different types of social information. Higher levels of stylistic homogeneity in prehistoric art can be interpreted in terms of larger-group cohesion. Higher levels of heterogeneity are interpreted as demonstrating local-group identifying behaviour. In the Sydney region, complex patterns of variability in both art contexts demonstrate the nature of the contacts between language groups, as well as areas where the stresses resulting from these contacts may have been the greatest.

Patterns in stylistic variability were explored with the effects of medium, diachronic change and synchronic variability all considered. The contemporaneity of art and occupation evidence was explored in three decorated rockshelters excavated for this research. General regional patterns were also investigated.

The rock art in the Sydney region functioned as a prehistoric information superhighway. Through stylistic behaviour, groups around the region who were not in constant verbal contact with each other were able to communicate important social messages and demonstrate both broad-scale group cohesion and within-group distinctiveness. Throughout the Sydney region people have signalled information about themselves making interaction more predictable during a period of substantial social change.