

Abstract

The emergence of regionally distinct rock art styles is a well documented phenomenon in Australia. However, few researchers have addressed the question of how rock art is used in the negotiation of social interaction and the mediation of social strategies. This thesis presents the first detailed description of a painted rock art assemblage focussed on a distinctive anthropomorphic motif found in the Leichhardt, Argylla and Selwyn Ranges of the Northwest Queensland Highlands. The anthropomorphic motif was found to occur in two different but standardised forms, each found in a different geographic context. The discrete distribution of this motif suggests that it may have been 'emblemic' and used to signal group identity. The standardisation of its form and its differentiation from the art of neighbouring areas further suggests that it may have been related to a process of boundary maintenance.

The creation of a distinctive art style as a mechanism for maintaining group boundaries may have arisen from an increased need to negotiate predictable social interactions with other groups as the result of an increase in widespread trade throughout the Lake Eyre Basin during the late Holocene. In particular, the manufacture of axes on a large scale provided the trading network with a valued economic, social and ritual resource. The art would have reaffirmed the affiliation of the inhabitants of the region to each other, while at the same time marking out their territory, thereby providing a means of governing the movements or behaviour of outsiders. I suggest that the artist utilised the artistic system as a mechanism to achieve the desired social outcome, while the viewer responded to the art by modifying their behaviour in some manner. Used in this way, art can be a powerful social tool which provides a means to reinforce social values, manipulate human behaviour and bring about predictable social interaction.