

Abstract

Theoretical approaches adopted in recent rock art research throughout the world have explicitly or implicitly invoked ritual as an activity associated with the production of rock art but the articulation between the structure and composition of rock art assemblages and ritual behaviour is rarely made clear. In this thesis I investigate the relationship between the central Australian rock art assemblage and ritual behaviour. I have proposed a theoretical framework formulated from Roy Rappaport's anthropological study of ritual, which identified the structural form he saw as universal to all ritual. I have identified the form and structural features of the central Australian rock art assemblage and compared them with the theoretical framework in order to identify rock art assemblages associated with ritual behaviour.

Recording of rock art sites focused on the National Parks of the southern region of the Northern Territory of Australia and included 51 site complexes located in the rugged central highlands and the vast sand-ridge deserts. I described the recorded data from these complexes and designed analyses, which identified the form and structural principles of different aspects of the assemblage. I analysed the relationships between the engraved, painted, stencilled, drawn and printed assemblages and the geographic and cultural contexts in which they were produced. In order to develop a relative chronology for the assemblage, I investigated multiple lines of indirect evidence, while detailed mapping enabled me to establish the spatial distribution of the assemblage on several scales; across the region, within complexes and within individual rock art panels.

Results showed that a core motif vocabulary persisted through time, across the region and between techniques. Repetition of particular motifs was a dominant structural principle with motifs repeated across the region within complexes and on individual panels or faces, while other motifs have been re-marked, repainted or abraded. The form and structural features of nine motifs Groups identified from the analyses were compared to the universal structural form outlined in the theoretical framework. Comparisons showed that five of the motif Groups produced in a number of media and varied geographic contexts are structured in a manner that suggests that they were produced as a result of ritual behaviour. Many of the painted and engraved motifs were produced in association with rituals involving the transmission of canonical messages but the form of the stencilled and printed motif group indicates that it was produced during more mundane or self-referential ritual activities.

The theoretical approach explored in the thesis has provided the means to develop an understanding of the context in which much of the central Australian rock art assemblage was produced. While the theoretical framework proposed has some limitations, it provides a foundation for the development of theory that will further the understanding of the relationship between the production of rock and ritual in hunter-gatherer society.