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Interpreting the In-between: Rock Art Junctions and Other Small Style Areas between Provinces

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Introduction

What is depicted? How old is it? What does it mean? What is its distribution across the landscape, the country, the world? These are common questions for all rock art researchers but also they are the queries an increasingly interested general public invariably asks. In order to address them a first response has been to define and interpret rock art in terms of regions and "style provinces." The geographic limits of styles, forms, subjects, and techniques were charted, placed in chronologies, correlated to past and sometimes present groups of people, analyzed, and then compared to the rock art of other regions and provinces. In the process, a great deal of effort has gone into articulating the nature of rock art regions and provinces, their changes over time, their relationships to environment, and their placement near deposits that, once excavated, reveal certain types of archaeology, such as particular forms of stone tools. Attempts

have also been made to address meaning more directly, often utilizing ethnography, analogy, and sometimes historic documents, as well as formal methods (see Taçon and Chippindale 1998). Age has been determined in multiple ways, increasingly with radiocarbon and uranium series dating methods.

But in the process, there has been relatively little attention to the areas in between now well-described regions and provinces. Instead of being large classic provinces these “betwixt and between” landscapes are either (a) small internally consistent rock art bodies or (b) landscapes that can be considered junctions or gateways where different groups of people interacted and left their marks behind or where influence from different directions and provinces changed over time. In the past, these interlying areas have usually been regarded as subregions, outliers, or spin-off regions. The focus on provinces has thus led to a distorted impression of rock art change and regionalization across large areas of both countries and continents.

The concept of junctions and gateways, places where different peoples came in contact with each other or places occupied by different groups at different times, might better explain the nature of rock art bodies at many intermediary locations and some examples are presented below. At junction locations we may expect to find much rock art diversity but both fewer sites and fewer images than in nearby rock art regions. Often there is one particularly large site with many superimpositions if it is a landscape with pictographs. These “Rosetta Stone” sorts of caves or shelters are integral in terms of defining chronologies.

However, junction bodies of rock art can be particularly challenging to make sense of because a greater mix of internal and external forces has contributed to rock art change over time. Indeed, often it is quite difficult to separate internal change in subject matter, brought about by a changing local physical environment, from change caused by shifts in social influences or connections to and contacts with other groups of people. Furthermore, some rock art junctions may exhibit both internal and external rock art change at the same time, as well as influences from different directions at different times. And it is important to not confuse rock art junction landscapes with aggregation sites (e.g. see Conkey 1980; Galt-Smith 1996). Aggregation sites can occur anywhere, in rock art provinces as well as other sorts of landscapes and have different sorts of patterning. However, it would be interesting to compare the frequency of aggregation sites within junction landscapes to nearby rock art provinces as aggregations may have contributed to the rock art we find in junction landscapes.

In this article, I wish to begin a global exploration and examination of “in between” zones. Because of space limitations I focus on the junction and gateway concept in relation to parts of Australia and Southeast Asia, where I conduct much of my field research. However, this discussion has implications for how we interpret rock art and other aspects of landscape archaeology in many parts of the world, including Europe, southern Africa, India, and North America. This is because by incorporating areas in between provinces into comparative research we will get a more complete and possibly more complex picture of not only

the rock art record but also the peoples that made it, their relationships to landscape, and their interactions with each other.

Australia

I began my career in rock art research exploring the great rock art province of western Arnhem Land. Although I still conduct research there, my work has taken me to many other parts of Australia and across the globe. Wherever I went I attempted to define and describe the new rock art province I encountered. But over time I began to realize that two other types of rock art landscapes can be described, often near classic rock art provinces. I have now published on three such areas in Australia (see below) but most recent general publications on Australian rock art that take continent-wide views, including my own, continue to focus on rock art provinces (e.g. Mulvaney 2011; Taçon 2011; Ross 2012).

In Australia, rock art junctions and small internally consistent rock art bodies are located between better known rock art style regions, such as between the west Kimberley and Arnhem Land, between Arnhem Land and northwest central Queensland, between northwest central Queensland and Cape York, between the Sydney region and Cobar, and so forth. At many Australian rock art junction landscapes influences from arid, coastal, and other environments can be detected for different time periods. Interestingly, arid zone influences at junctions close to the arid zone often appear early in junction sequences, with arid zone influence waxing and waning thereafter. In many cases, arid zone influence appears minimal during the late Holocene but future rock art dating

programs will help pinpoint the timing of shifts in arid and other zone influences.

The importance of junctions was first realized when working in Gadjerong/Mirrurung country, otherwise known as the Keep River region or East Kimberley of the Northern Territory/Western Australia. There, influences in rock art “style,” technique, and subject matter could be detected from the west, east and south, with changes in intensity over time (Taçon et al. 2003). The Keep River region is characterized by a complex body of carved, painted, and beeswax rock art, distinct from but with links to nearby style provinces. At least four major periods of figurative art have been identified with differing subject matter and age. Significant changes in depictions of humans and animals in terms of style and subject matter are evident over at least a 10,000 year time period.

The change in subject matter over time suggests shifts in both social and ecological focus. When some of the oldest rock art was made, primarily purple paintings of humans and some animals, a clear association and/or influence from the Gwion Gwion or Bradshaw tradition of the Kimberley can be seen. There then may have been a period of Keep River region abandonment, as archaeological excavations suggest, followed by a movement of people into the area from the south (or perhaps even the now submerged north). This subsequent group was most concerned with depicting mammals and birds, especially creatures characteristic of dry environments. In the Recent period, the ecological focus of the art shifted to a wetter ecology, with reptiles a special feature. There is also evidence that a significant body of the rock art is associated

with or are depictions of Ancestral Beings of the so-called Dreamtime and their narratives. At this time ties with neighboring groups may have been primarily focused to the east and perhaps northeast, with the Wardaman of Victoria River and other groups near Port Keats. Certainly, both the art and recent ethnography suggests this but, with the arrival of Europeans, ties have also become further strengthened with western Aboriginal peoples.

More recently, a major junction area was described in Waanyi country of northwest Queensland, from Riversleigh north through Boodjamulla—Lawn Hill National Park. Fieldwork in 2002 confirmed not only in situ rock art development but also influences from the southwest, west, and northwest. Recent oral history also suggested connections not just to these areas but also to the northeast while stone tool analysis revealed some trade with the immediate southeast (see Taçon 2008). The rock art consists of very old looking geometric engravings typical of Central Australia, old and recent looking paintings similar to those of regions to the north and northwest, recent paintings consisting of geometric designs, tracks, and reptiles, again typical of Central Australia, and other motifs that may have developed in situ.

In southeastern Australia, another junction/gateway rock art landscape has been documented between 2001 and 2011 in the rugged and difficult to access Wollemi National Park near Sydney. Daruk, Darkinjung, Wuradjuri and other peoples are associated with the area studied. The rock art consists of a mix of paintings, stencils, drawings, vertically placed engravings (in rock shelters), and horizontally located engravings (on rock

platforms) often associated with clusters of grinding grooves. An early influence from the far northwest is apparent in the older engraved art (possibly several thousands of years old) while the more recent engraved art shows stylistic links mainly with the east and northeast. The pigment art, believed to be less than 3,000 years of age, shows influences from the west, south, east, and northeast in both discrete and overlapping locations.

If we look at the whole of the Australian continent we would expect many more junction/gateway areas. These need to be mapped out. A detailed study of Australia's large rock art style provinces in relation to small style regions and to junction landscapes could be particularly illuminating.

Southeast Asian Case Study

Southeast Asia is a little understood rock art region but recently a number of new research programs are highlighting its importance for archaeological interpretations of the past. To date, different rock art bodies have not been well classified but we can now conclude that the northern and eastern part of Borneo, encompassing Sarawak, Sabah, and eastern Kalimantan, can be considered a junction/gateway area as it has more rock art diversity than any other part of the region and has examples of forms and styles of rock art found in many nearby rock art bodies of both island and mainland Southeast Asia. A survey of known rock art in Borneo (Taçon 2010; Taçon et al. 2010c) has shown that Borneo has at least nine types of rock art connected to traditions within and beyond its shores: (a) stencils (east Kalimantan), (b) ochre paintings of animals and humans phase I (east Kalimantan),

(c) ochre paintings of animals and humans phase 2 (east Kalimantan), (d) early painted ships and humans (e.g. Kain Hitam, Niah Cave complex), (e) recent drawn ships and humans (e.g. Sabah), (f) other charcoal drawings (e.g. Gua Sireh, Sarawak), (g) engravings of humans and curvilinear designs (Sabah and Sarawak), (h) bas relief (e.g. Sarawak and Kalimantan highlands), and (i) Santubong-type engraved symbols (north Sarawak). There also are some recently discovered handprints in a Gunung Mulu National Park cave (Sarawak).

The stencils, mostly hands and hands-and-arms, of East Kalimantan are obviously part of a stencil tradition that extends eastward across Indonesia to Papua New Guinea and Australia that has ancient roots (Plagnes et al. 2003; Fage and Chazine 2009; Taçon et al. 2010b). Importantly, these stencil sites are the only ones west of the Wallace Line that cuts through island Southeast Asia until one reaches Europe (see map in Fage and Chazine 2009: 161). This art is obviously

Fig 1 Red paintings of a boat and other designs, Kain Hitam, Niah Cave complex, Sarawak, Malaysia. (Image: Author)

connected to rock art traditions of peoples to the east.

Some of the early painted rock art of Kalimantan has similarities with that of the Kimberley and Arnhem Land, Australia. For instance, some human figures in action poses resemble Elegant Action Figures of the Kimberley and Dynamic Figures of Arnhem Land (compare those in Fage and Chazine 2009 to figures in Walsh 2000 and Chaloupka 1993). Whether there are connections is curious and debatable. Equally unsettling is that more recent Kalimantan paintings illustrated by Fage and Chazine (2009) are similar to some at Gua Tambon, Ipoh, Perak in western Malaysia (see Tan 2010; Tan and Chia 2010).

In Sabah, Gua Hagop Bilo has contact rock art depicting perahus (see Bellwood 1988). Other Sabah sites with engraved human figures and watercraft as well as charcoal drawings suggest links from afar (Mokhtar 2008; Mokhtar et al. 2008: 28–9). The drawings are reminiscent of the paintings at Kain Hitam, Niah Cave complex (e.g. Figure 1) while some of the engravings are like the Angono petroglyph site in the Philippines (see Barretto-Tesoro 2008). The Kain Hitam paintings themselves may be part of a broader Southeast Asian tradition (e.g. see Ballard 1992, Szabó et al. 2008).

The charcoal drawings at Gua Sireh and other Sarawak sites may be part of a recent indigenous tradition throughout Borneo, Peninsular Malaysia, and part of southern Thailand. Among other things, depictions of so-called “bird-men” (Figure 2) can be found in both southern Thailand (Sukkharn 2010) and Sarawak (Datan 1993). Bas relief on boulders is widespread across Sarawak, from near the coast to the highlands and in the

Fig 2 Charcoal drawings of “bird-men,” Gua Serih, Sarawak, Malaysia. (Image: Author)

highlands of Kalimantan (e.g. see Harrison 1958; Harrison and O'Connor 1970; Barker et al. 2009). It may also be part of a tradition that extends to other parts of Southeast Asia.

Lastly, newly discovered deeply incised symbol-like designs have been found on boulders at Santubong, Sarawak (see Figure 3; Taçon et al. 2010c). They resemble

Hindu symbols associated with and possibly made by pilgrims to the nearby Bongkissam shrine and Bukit Maras between the tenth and thirteenth centuries AD.

The rock art of Borneo needs intensive study but the whole of Southeast Asia would benefit from classifying its rock art into provinces, small style regions, and junctions followed by an analysis of interrelationships.

Global Implications

Many classic rock art provinces have been defined, described, articulated, and analyzed in parts of Europe, Africa, the Americas, and India since the late 1800s and more recently in the rest of continental Asia. But there are few detailed studies of the in-between areas, the junctions, gateways, and zones of contact, although some new research is beginning to address this (e.g. see Taçon et al. 2010a for an in-between area in south India). From recent research in Australia and Borneo it is clear that we should not view all rock art landscapes as distinct provinces.

Fig 3 Boulder with three engraved Hindu-like symbols of unknown meaning, Santubong, Sarawak, Malaysia. (Image: Author)

Instead, we need to better define the limits of large “style provinces,” the nature of small, internally consistent rock art bodies, and the extent of junction/gateway areas. In all rock art bodies, we also need to better distinguish internal change from change brought about by external forces, as well as to separate environmentally induced change from social, when possible. But we also need to be cognizant of changes in rock art regionalization within rock art provinces over time in order to better describe changing relationships to particular landscapes.

The Australian continent appears to be a mosaic of all three types of rock art landscape. This is probably also true across the globe. In the past, and often today, all three types have often been considered in similar ways, limiting understanding of different rock art bodies and relationships between them. Separating rock art landscapes into at least these three categories may allow us to better detect culture contact and exchange, the spread of people or ideas over time, and the ways in which different rock art bodies developed in concert together, in response to environmental change and in other ways. The concept of rock art junctions, in particular, may help us better understand unusual bodies of rock art in many parts of the world as well as related archaeological deposits.

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