HOW OLD IS OLD LOOKING?

The Dampier Petroglyphs in Review

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The Dampier Archipelago lies on Western Australia’s Pilbara coast, extending over an area of 1,456 km² (~300 km² actual landmass) into the Indian Ocean. These islands are the easternmost of a chain of islands that extend from Exmouth Gulf, 335 km to the WSW. They are the only islands which comprise intrusive igneous rock and basalt lava, providing excellent weathered surfaces on which the petroglyphs are preserved. The progression of weathered rind (erosion rate) is among the lowest measured anywhere in the world. This in part explains the abundance of the rock art; more importantly it allows for the likelihood of preserved ancient rock art.

No systematic and complete survey has been conducted of the Dampier Archipelago petroglyphs. However, work to date shows this area to be one of the richest concentrations of petroglyphs in the world. Not only in sheer number (500,000 to 1,000,000), but in the diversity of subject, form and technique displayed. This diversity covers the spectrum of motifs which may be broadly grouped as geometric (shape-like), anthropomorphic (human-like), zoomorphic (animal-like) and “spooromorphic” (track-like), comprising many hundreds of distinct motif types.
Attempts to date the petroglyphs have not proved successful. Archaeological investigations of shell middens provide evidence of occupation throughout the last 9,000 years. There is one date, ~21,500 BP, from a shell fragment retrieved from a rocky slope containing petroglyphs, which suggests a greater antiquity for human presence in the area. Evidence from other parts of the Pilbara indicates that people were in the region at least 35,000 years ago. Just how this may relate to the production of the petroglyphs, what is their antiquity and temporal patterning is examined through relationship of superimposition and physical condition of the petroglyphs. As weathering is a process of time, the record of contrast-state to describe the weathering condition provides a relative, not an absolute time scale. Contrast-state is an assessment of both the colour difference between the petroglyph and adjacent rock surface, and the comparative weathered condition.

Change in rock art production does not necessarily indicate the emergence or arrival of a replacement people, but it can be indicative of cultural adjustments. The pattern of superimposition and changing motif repertoire indicates that dramatic shifts in artistic expression were tied to changes in the dry land/marine regimes of the Archipelago. Investigation of specific motif types demonstrated that a number of graphic elements appeared in the Dampier Archipelago rock art assemblage at different times. Some of these were relatively short lived, while others were produced over extended periods. Broader archaeological and palaeoclimatological data for the region suggests a number of significant events and changes, providing a logical framework for comprehending the temporal sequence in the rock art.

Five major rock art phases (artistic traditions) are indicated by the evidence. The earlier phases are Pleistocene in age, possible the oldest prior to the LGM (i.e. > 22,000 BP), comprising complex geometric designs, “Dampier faces” and disarticulated blob-head figures (figure). This is followed by a significant change in structure, subject and situation. This suite of rock art is characterised by motifs, especially key subsistence species like emu and kangaroo, which are large and placed in prominent, highly visible locations. The third phase marks an increase in range of subjects, forms and situation of motifs.

The subsequent rock art traditions are directly associated with the formation of the Dampier Archipelago during the Holocene (~8,000 BP). The proximity of marine resources is reflected in the petroglyphs and other archaeological evidence. In addition to the depictions of marine fauna (primarily turtle and fish), human figures, ingroup scenes and dynamic representations, are displayed in association with graphic elements (boomerang, dance wands and headdress). These material culture items have parallels with contemporary and ethnohistorical records of ceremonial performance. Such petroglyphs suggest an antiquity of at least several thousand years for such cultural practices.

It is thus suggested that the Dampier Archipelago petroglyphs span more than 20,000 years of production, only ending with the disruption brought about by the coming of European settlement in the region in the 1860’s. The old-looking rock art could be more than 25,000 years old. It is also evident that structurally elaborate designs existed in the earliest surviving petroglyphs of the area; that there is not a progression through the Pleistocene to Holocene from simple to complex.