MISCELLANEOUS

AUSTRALIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF ROCK ART IN THE CHILLAGOE AND MITCHELL-PALMER LIMESTONE BELTS OF NORTH QUEENSLAND.

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ABSTRACT

Some of the archaeological work on Aboriginal prehistory is reviewed and comparisons made of Aboriginal rock art in the Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer areas with rock art in other areas of North Queensland. The idea of rock art fashions being transmitted by trade and social contacts between groups is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Following many years of amateur and semi-professional archaeological work, it was only during the early 1960's that the first professional archaeological investigations were undertaken in Australia. It had become customary until then to see Australian Aboriginal prehistory as the product of a sequence of relatively independent migrations, and of ideas (characterized archaeologically by distinct forms of stone tools) which diffused from one or more centres of cultural innovation within Australia.

Mulvaney's archaeological work at Kenniff Cave (Central Queensland Highlands) during the 1960's established three major aspects of Aboriginal prehistory, each of which has now become a major tenet in the history of Aboriginal culture. Firstly it was thence established that the direct ancestors of modern Aborigines settled wider Australia (Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania) sometime during the Pleistocene (the period of the ice ages, from about 2 million to 10,000 years ago). Secondly, Mulvaney found that the earliest episode of Aboriginal occupation in Australia was characterized by stone tools qualitatively different from those of later times (the Holocene, from 10,000 years ago to present). And thirdly (and this, to me, is the most important), Mulvaney argued that the change from the earlier to the later stone tool sequence was a gradual one, involving the adoption (or invention) of new tool types, but at the same time also involving the partial retention and gradual abandonment of the older types. I say that this was a major new idea in Australian prehistory because for the first time Aboriginal prehistory was not seen as the sum of distinct Aboriginal cultures replacing each other sequentially, but as Aboriginal culture(s) developing internally through time. Mulvaney saw Aboriginal society as a dynamic cultural system, changing through time, and characterized by its own, particular historical development. This, then, was the setting for the archaeological innovations of the 1970's.

Some archaeologists believe that perhaps the most important revolution in the history of Australian archaeology has taken place only during the last 15 years. I say this in full awareness of the invaluable pioneering work of Australia's first generation of professional archaeologists (including Mulvaney's), professionals who established not only the Pleistocene antiquity of Australia's initial settlement, but who also placed Australian archaeology firmly in the realms of international prehistory. Yet it was not until the early to mid 1970's that Australian archaeologists began questioning the very foundations upon which their discipline was built: archaeology was to become more than the study of stone tools and buried bones (and in this way the discipline reverted, in some ways, to the archaeology of the first half of the 20th century, although the methods had changed), giving way to the study of peoples who made the societies in which they lived. In the spirit of Mulvaney's contributions, social systems were no more seen as frozen in time, but it was the people that made them that were finally seen as the active creators, recreators, and transformers of the very societies in which they lived. Let me illustrate this point by reference to one of the most important debates currently under way in Australian archaeological circles. It is this debate that has led me to undertaking an analysis of the rock art of the Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer limestone zones.

In the mid-1970's a number of archaeologists noticed that Aboriginal prehistory was far more complex than previously imagined. Led by the work of Dr. H. Lourandos (now of the University of Qld), the idea began to be developed that sometime in the latter period of Aboriginal prehistory, Australian Aboriginal societies witnessed dramatic changes in many arenas of life. These changes affected stone tool technologies, hunting and gathering strategies, and many believe also socio-political systems and trading networks. More specifically, after noting that in South West Victoria it was not until the last 2,000 years that extensive water management networks were developed by the local Aborigines, Lourandos suggested that this latest period of Aboriginal prehistory was one of intensification, whereby local populations developed extremely complex systems of social relations which enabled them not only to care for the maintenance of the water management networks he studied (such networks diverted natural water systems over long distances to facilitate the trapping of eels, which migrated annually along creeks and rivers), but at the same time resulted in an intensification of social interaction during this time. These findings have become extremely important (although archaeologists disagree, or rather are still debating, the precise nature of changes in the Aboriginal prehistory of different regions) because it places Australian Aboriginal society on the same foot-

ing as other types of societies: the intensification question had previously been applied almost entirely to agricultural, pastoral and industrial societies, whilst hunter-gather societies were usually thought of as relatively static (when change was considered amongst hunter-gatherers it was usually in terms of a "static" type of change, not one coined in terms of intensification).

It is the intensification debate which led me to an interest in rock art in general, and to a study of the rock art of the Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer regions more specifically. As briefly stated above, one of the key points to come out of the intensification question is that the nature of Aboriginal social relations are believed to have changed during the later stages of Aboriginal prehistory. These changes may have involved changes in trading networks, in inter-group ('tribal') relations, and perhaps even changes in the structure of Aboriginal familial (kinship) systems. To test these ideas, however, we need to study aspects of human behaviour which are sensitive to changes in these spheres of life. Creative activities which involve fashion are one such sphere, and the formation of rock art is an excellent example of such an activity. The logic of this is briefly summarized below.

When people paint, they are restricted, both consciously and unconsciously, by complex social conventions, the nature of which differs in every culture. Some of these restrictions take the form of explicit taboos, but of greater importance to us is the fact that the way pictures are created depends on the methods and styles of depiction practiced by the culture(s) from which the artist has been influenced. These influences change with time (through history), and affect the stylistic conventions associated with artistic behaviour. These are the "fashions" which come and go in every human society.

So fashions are not static. They are passed on from group to group, and the way these fashions travel through time depends on the way people relate between each other. Here two friendly groups may influence each other in such a way that fashions are passed on between them, perhaps slightly modifying them in the process. In another case, the nature of social relations may inhibit the interchange of ideas, and hence artistic conventions (or fashions) are not shared, resulting in the creation and development of distinct artistic styles.

Archaeologically, one of the best ways to study fashions is by an analysis of pictures, and more pictures survive in caves and rock shelters than on any other surface (e.g. sand, bark, human bodies, items of material culture, trees, etc.). Since a comparison of the rock art from different regions can tell us how different cultural groups related between each other, an incorporation of the time factor (i.e. seeing how these relations changed over time) can tell us a great deal about the dynamics of social groups in the past; it offers us a window into the past in the sense that we can, by studying rock art, find out how cultures have developed through time, and how these changes are related to changes in other, neighbouring or distant cultures. This is largely why I have turned to rock art in my studies of past Aboriginal societies (cultures) in Australia.

The rock art of North Queensland has been studied, both in amateur and professional circles, for many years. The art of the Laura region has received particular attention, first by Percy Trezise (since the 1960's), and later by professional archaeologists Dr. Andree Rosenfeld of the Australian National University (Canberra) and Dr. Josephine Flood (Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra) who has recently studied the art of the Koolburra Plateau region, to the immediate NW of Laura. More recently, I have been involved in a detailed study of the art of the Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer limestone zones, and this work aims at a fine grained comparison of these various bodies of art with the cave art from more distant regions (e.g. Lawn Hills, Mt. Isa, South Australian, etc.), in order to find out more about the way people from different cultural groups interacted with each other in the past. I now turn to a presentation of the results obtained so far.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer limestone belts are geologically parts of the same formation, formed under shallow sea conditions around 400 million years ago. At that time reef conditions prevailed to the east of what is now known as the Palmerville fault, which, following continued uplifting, resulted in the formation of massif fossiliferous limestone karsts, many of which became riddled with caves and rock shelters of various sizes. It is in the entrances to these caves that Aborigines have left so many traces of their prolonged presence, an occupation which undoubtedly spanned the entire length of Aboriginal prehistory on this continent (45,000 years ago to present, although to date the oldest direct evidence for Aboriginal presence in North Queensland dates to 19,000 years ago).

Archaeological investigations in the Mitchell-Palmer region has merely begun. With respect to the rock art, some very interesting patterns are already emerging. By far the predominant motifs from the region are naturalistic pictures of animals (e.g. catfish, dogs, sawfish, flying foxes, emus, turtles, and perhaps echidnas) and humans. These depictions are painted in a style that is reminiscent of the Laura and Koolburra paintings, and indeed are believed to be a sub-set of paintings from these regions. The Mitchell-Palmer animal paintings are often undertaken in profile, and this is especially so of the larger animals such as dogs and large birds. Other animals, such as bats, are painted front-on, whilst turtles are depicted in plan view. In each case, the picture captures that animal's most characteristic features, whilst simplifying the complexity of its separate anatomical parts. For example, the profile view of emus highlights the elongated neck and legs, and pays particular atten-

tion to the beak and trident feet. The body itself, however, is generalized, so that the bodies of most of the animals depicted are extremely similar, and could not be differentiated in themselves.

It is interesting to note the very great similarity between these paintings and those from the Laura and Koolburra Plateau region to the immediate north and northwest. Whilst variations do exist (for example the large human/spirit figures from Laura, and the echidna dreaming figures from the Koolburra, do not appear to occur here), stylistically each of these three regions appear to have followed a very similar tradition. It is also important to note that a very similar pattern emerges linguistically: although the languages spoken in these three regions show some variation, they are extremely similar both in terms of semantics and syntax. The pattern, then, is one whereby, north of the Mitchell River, Aboriginal peoples developed relatively homogeneous artistic fashions, coupled with similarly homogeneous linguistic identities.

On the other side of the Mitchell River (to the south-southeast), are a series of extremely rugged mountains (parts of which are known as the Featherbed Ranges) as well as the Walsh River, which holds water throughout the year in its upper and middle reaches. It is to the immediate south of the Walsh that we find the Chillagoe limestone belt.

Here the rock art is entirely different to that of its northern neighbours, in spite of the short distance between the two (70 km). Around Chillagoe, decorated caves and rock shelters are painted with long, linear designs, usually painted in a single colour (mostly red, white, or black, but with some yellow, orange and brown). These paintings are not naturalistic, and do not remind the casual observer of any obvious features of the land. Typical motifs are circles, star-shapes, long, relatively straight lines, grid-patterns (often undertaken in charcoal) and various amorphous linear shapes. Undoubtedly these pictures had meanings to the artists who painted them and to the peoples whose culture they were from, but these meanings are largely lost to us now. The important thing archaeologically, however, is the fact that they are so different from the paintings from the regions to the immediate north. Could they have been painted by peoples from a culture with little to no contact with the peoples north of the Mitchell River? Do these two different artistic traditions (fashions) reflect the relative isolation of two distinct Aboriginal groups, one which had affinities with peoples to the north, the other with peoples to the southwest? I say southwest because of another interesting observation: the art of the Chillagoe region shows very great similarities with the art of the Mt. Isa region to the southwest, and even to regions as far away as the Olary Province (South Australia), 1700 km away. It is likely that these patterns reflect the nature of prehistoric Aboriginal socio-economic relations; the peoples from the Chillagoe region probably had extended trading links with peoples to the southwest, so that ideas, and with them stylistic conventions, travelled in that direction, creating a "chain of connections" progressively further and further away from Chillagoe itself. On the other hand, it may have been the presence of rugged mountain ranges, major rivers, and rain forests which isolated peoples of the Chillagoe region with peoples to the immediate north (the Laura, Koolburra and Mitchell-Palmer peoples) and to the immediate east (the rainforest peoples, which also had a very distinct artistic tradition).

FUTURE STUDIES

But many questions remain. For example, how did these patterns of contact change through time? Was there ever a time when people interacted in a totally different way in this region? Heavily patinated, and believed to be much older than the paintings, are numerous engravings in the Chillagoe area, testimony to more ancient artistic traditions. An investigation of these may well reveal important differences (or similarities) in the way Aboriginal society was structured in the more distant past. It is to investigate these questions that my own work is geared, and future research in both the Chillagoe and Mitchell-Palmer regions and beyond may well prove to offer invaluable answers to such questions, questions which archaeologists have as yet had little opportunity to ask because most archaeological materials are relatively insensitive to preserving the types of information which can enlighten us on these issues.

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