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Dreamtime Superhighway:
An analysis of Sydney Basin Rock Art
and Prehistoric Information Exchange.

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Except where otherwise stated in the acknowledgements or text, this thesis is based entirely on my own fieldwork and research.

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Abstract

This research examines the prehistoric rock art which occurs in the Sydney region in coastal south-eastern Australia. The rock art is located in two distinct contexts provided by the sandstone bedrock which defines this region. Engravings, or petroglyph, sites occur in open locations. In rockshelter locations the art consists of drawings, stencils, paintings and engravings.

The principal aim of this thesis is to define a model for cultural interaction which can describe a prehistoric art system. The basis for this proposed model is information exchange theory. By perceiving art and 'style' from a functional perspective it is possible to view the region's art as a conduit for the expression of social affiliations. Depending on the level of interaction - individual, local, regional - different types of information about social interaction might be expected.

Patterns in stylistic variability are examined, with three possible sources of variability being investigated. The effects of medium, diachronic change and synchronic variability are all considered. The contemporaneity of art and occupation evidence is also investigated across the region. Four rock shelter art sites were excavated for this purpose.

Using information exchange theory, as has been developed ethnographically, it is argued that varying levels of stylistic heterogeneity reveal different types of social information. Higher levels of stylistic homogeneity demonstrated by prehistoric art can be interpreted in terms of larger-group cohesion. Higher levels of heterogeneity is interpreted as demonstrating local-group identifying behaviour. In the Sydney region, complex patterns in the levels of variability in both contexts demonstrate the nature of the contacts between language groups, as well as areas where the stresses resulting from these contacts may have been the greatest.

It is argued that the rock art in the Sydney region functioned as a prehistoric information superhighway. Through stylistic behaviour, groups around the region who were not in constant verbal contact with each other were able to communicate important social messages and demonstrate both broad-scale group cohesion and within-group distinctiveness.
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Plate 3
Engraving site on the ridgetop overlooking Berowra Waters. This vast expanse of sandstone had only one motif engraved on it.

Plate 4
Relatively small boulder with engravings near Maroota, just south of the Hawkesbury River. Engraved mudeoes and anthropomorphs are located on the sloping top surface.

Plate 5
Large shelter with honeycomb weathering near Warre Warren Creek. This shelter has formed in an extensive sandstone cliffline along a minor ridgeline. Art is located on smooth surfaces on the periphery.

Plate 6
This small overhang near Wheelbarrow Ridge Road has formed as a lip in an extensive sandstone platform, above and below the shelter. Despite its small size this shelter has a moderately large assemblage.

Plate 7
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Plate 8
This is the smallest recorded shelter in the region, near Warre Warren Creek. To enter this overhang you have to crawl in behind the large tree. Three motifs only were found in this site. [WW1/14]

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