Introduction

A new find of an engraved ‘archaic face’ in the Toomba Range, on the northeastern edge of the Simpson Desert, provides additional evidence for the production of these distinctive motifs on the eastern side of the arid zone (Figure 1). This supplements an earlier report of an engraved archaic face at Carbine Creek, 100km to the northeast of the Toomba Range (Morwood 1978, 1985). Together, these two engravings with characteristic bas-relief facial features extend the known distribution of archaic faces and suggest that sometime in the past people shared aspects of a common visual vocabulary across the entire breadth of the arid zone, north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

Engravings of archaic faces are currently known from the Calvert Ranges (McDonald 2005), the Durba Hills and Dampier Archipelago (Dix 1977; Mulvaney in press) in Western Australia, and the Cleland Hills (Edwards 1968) and Jalijbang (David et al. 1992; Lewis and McCausland 1987) in the Northern Territory. Their age remains unknown. Most early reports assumed a considerable antiquity for these deeply weathered engravings (Dix 1977; Edwards 1968; McCarthy 1979). More recently, a chronology of at least 25,000 years has been flagged (e.g. McDonald 2005:130; Mulvaney in press), although such claims remain speculative without direct dating of engraved surfaces. Where there have been attempts to date regionally distinctive archaic faces, such as those at Jalijbang (David et al. 1992), the results obtained from associated archaeological deposits indicate a mid-to-late Holocene age.

In collaboration with Alan Watchman we have attempted to date ‘rock varnish’ on one of the archaic faces in the Cleland Hills in order to provide a minimum date for this style of engraving but our efforts so far have proved unsuccessful.

Gap Hole

The new find was located at a site known as Gap Hole (also known more recently by the misnomer, ‘Painted Gorge’), in the Toomba Range on the edge of the Simpson Desert (Figure 1). Here a large waterhole has formed, where a deeply scoured creek channel cuts a prominent gap through low sandstone and quartzite ridges. This waterhole provides reliable water in all but the driest times (Max Tschiler, pers. comm., 2008) although no surface water was evident during our visit in 2008 when the region was experiencing a period of prolonged drought.

The rock art at Gap Hole features a striking suite of engravings located on the northeastern approaches to the gap, with smaller clusters of motifs found along both sides of the creek bed. Concentric circles (including circles and pits) dominate the assemblage at the entrance to the gap; many are weathered and patinated signifying considerable antiquity, some have been reworked several times, while a large suite of bright, freshly engraved and un-patinated concentric circles attest to the significance of the site in the recent past. There are some notable changes in the range of motifs produced through time: the earlier (patinated) motifs include small anthropomorphic figures, quadrupeds, lizards and panels of pecked pits; while variants of circles (e.g. barred circles and circles with external lines), track series, meandering lines, ferns, grids and concentric arcs are common in the more recent (un-patinated) assemblage.

In this context, a solitary archaic face (Figure 2) was recorded amongst a small and isolated assemblage of patinated motifs at the western entrance to the gap, less than 20m north of the (dry) waterhole. This face is amongst the most deeply patinated of the engravings at Gap Hole. The quartzite substrate on which it has been engraved is covered in black accretions making the motif difficult to discern except under oblique lighting.

Similar to many of the other archaic faces noted above, the Gap Hole face has been engraved on a prominent vertical rock panel – in this case, on the side of a large block of quartzite. Significantly, the archaic face is orientated to the southwest, and placed 4m above the flat below, ensuring that it would have been
highly visible to people approaching from the desert in the west.

The Gap Hole face shares most features typical of other archaic faces – including engraving technique, size, the context of production, and the advanced state of patination (e.g. David et al. 1992:72; McDonald 2005:131). Its features include a full frontal perspective, pit eyes enclosed by an outline, a circular mouth area with an oval shaped mouth (but with no discernable expression), a heart-shaped head, antennae-like head appendages and intaglio areas forming bas-relief (Figure 2). The size of this engraving (420mm high and 270mm wide including antennae) falls within the average range for other known archaic faces. Each archaic face recorded to date includes some unique features; in this case it is an outline that forms a jowl or hair-line around the chin region of the face.

Discussion and Conclusion

Another archaic face was found in this region by Mike Morwood in the late 1970s at Carbine Creek, northeast of the Toomba Range, near the township of Dajarra (Morwood 1985). Although more simple in form, the Carbine Creek archaic face shares some of the characteristic features discussed above indicating that the Gap Hole find is not an isolated occurrence, nor are these aberrant examples of archaic faces.

With a distribution of archaic faces in the Burrup, across the northern part of the Western Desert and in western Central Australia, a case could be made for strong contacts across the northwestern part of the desert, perhaps analogous to contemporary Tingarri traditions involving travelling groups of men and novitiates (e.g. Myers 1986). However, finds of archaic faces on the eastern edge of the arid zone complicate this as they indicate shared aspects of a common visual vocabulary spanning the entire breadth of the arid zone (>2000km), across what today are marked cultural blocs. Extensive documentation of art sites in the intervening areas – especially from the Cleland Hills in western Central Australia, east to the Toomba Range (e.g. Gunn 1995, 2000; Ross 2003, 2005) – has failed to locate archaic faces in these areas. However, they may yet be found as these are relatively rare motifs and their context of production appears to have been different to other desert rock engravings. What is striking is that many of the archaic faces occur on or near the Tropic of Capricorn (e.g. the Calvert Ranges, Durba Hills, Cleland Hills and Toomba Range) or north of this (Dampier Archipelago, Jalijbang and Carbine Creek) suggesting a distribution limited to the northern monsoon rainfall zone of the desert.

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