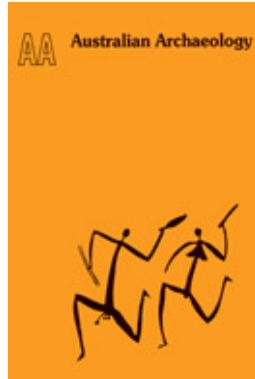


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MUTILATED HANDS OR SIGNAL STENCILS?

A consideration of irregular hand stencils from Central Queensland

G.L. Walsh

Stencil art, although widespread throughout the rock art regions of Australia, has been largely overlooked by rock art researchers who have tended to specialise in engraving and freehand painting. Nonetheless, most students of Aboriginal art would be only too familiar with the nearly ubiquitous 'hand stencils'. Among the many galleries of the central Queensland sandstone belt, where stencils dominate the motifs, an interesting variation of the common hand stencil is encountered. This variation consists of stencils of both left and right hands, contorted to form unusual patterns, some appearing to have missing, partly missing, or distorted fingers.

These unusual stencils have generally been referred to as 'mutilated' hands, and this appears to be an accepted terminology (e.g. Mulvaney and Joyce 1965; Moore 1974). 'Mutilated' hand stencils are by no means unique to this area of Queensland, and have been reported elsewhere in Australia (Brandl 1973; Trezise 1971:14) as well as Argentina (Pericot Garcia 1969), and in Paleolithic cave art in Europe (Moore 1974:5).

The central Queensland sandstone belt between Taroom and Tambo has a long history of rock art reports, in which 'mutilated' or 'warning' hand stencils have been specifically mentioned, sometimes over-enthusiastically. Worsnop (1897:38) in his description of the Buckland Creek site stated, '...a magnificently executed picture, representing a sea of fire, out of which are stretched dusky-brown arms in hundreds, in every conceivable position, the muscles knotted and the hands grasping convulsively, some pointing a weird finger upwards, others clenched as in agonies of death, as though a host was engulfed in a seething lake of fire...'

Mulvaney and Joyce (1965:204) report an association of 'mutilated' hands with an unusual full human body stencil in 'The Tombs' site on Mt Moffat Station:

At least nine of the twelve prints visible are 'mutilated', with one or two fingers missing. Left and right hands are both represented; various fingers are involved; in one or two instances the same hand is duplicated; two hands must be of children. Naturally the fact that this group, alone of all the handprints on the site, contains amputations and is in the cave behind the standing figure raises the question as to whether the motifs are related.

Mention is also made of another nearby site:

...it might be remarked that a small engraved and painted site on Marlong Creek is known locally as 'jackass cave'; inspection established that the alleged painting of a kookaburra bird was in fact, a decaying hand print.

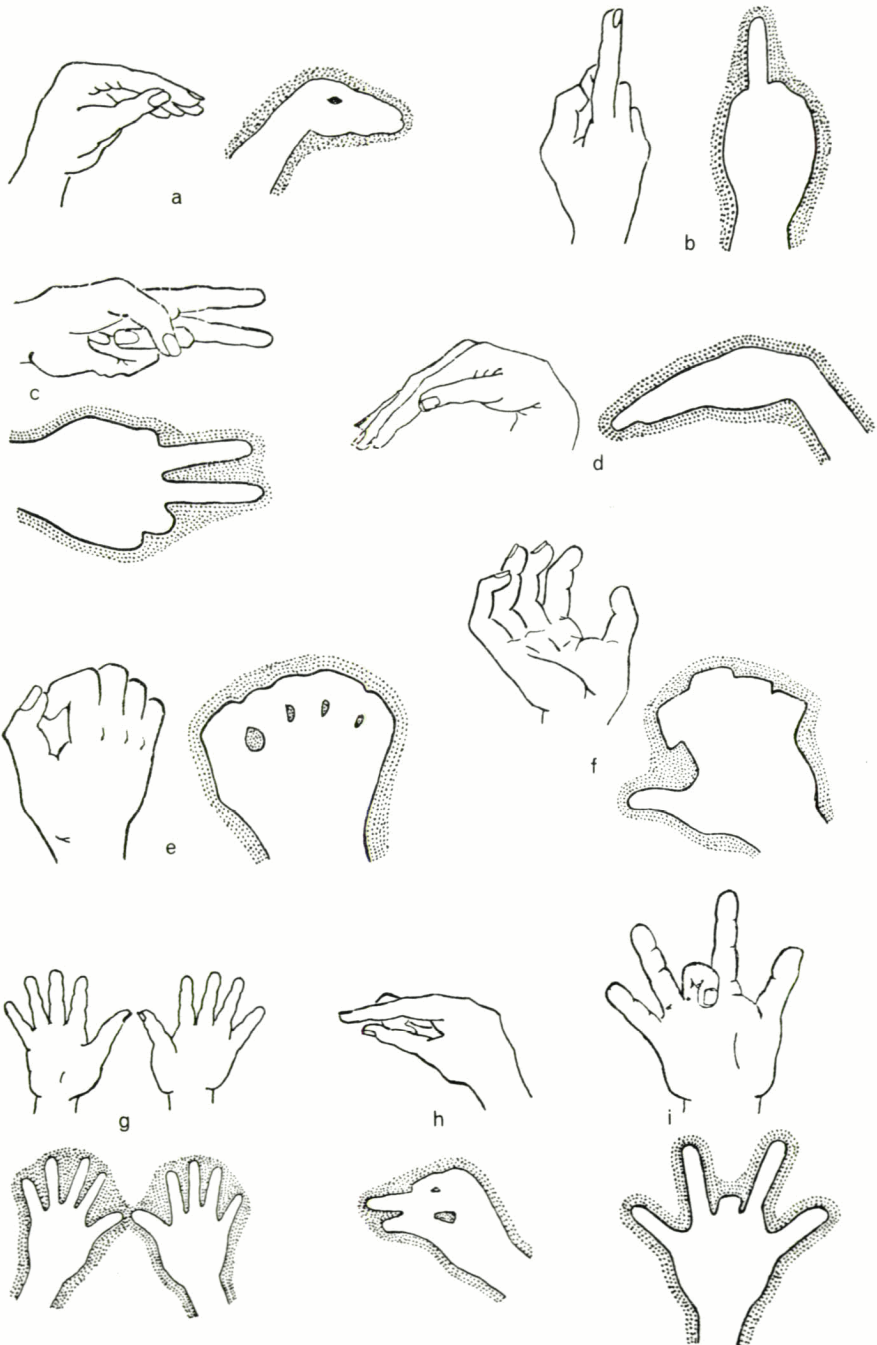
Although the appearance of these hand stencils may at first suggest missing or distorted fingers, the term 'mutilated' may well be inaccurate, but this is only borne out when a number of these motifs are closely examined. In most cases there is evidence of indistinct or foggy stencilling in the area of the 'missing' or 'contorted' digits, suggesting a possibility other than mutilation.

Without going into great detail on the application of stencils, it is nevertheless necessary to draw attention to the fact that relatively flat objects held against a comparatively level rock surface will, when stencilled, create a sharply defined outline. Objects with high rounded edges, or not held firmly against the surface will give foggy or indistinct silhouettes, caused by underspray of pigment at the perimeter of the object. In fact so-called 'mutilated' hands show a high degree of underspray. In the case of genuine amputation, the stub would press against the rock surface with the rest of the hand, giving an outline as distinct as the remainder of the fingers. Obviously a finger folded under the palm of the hand does not allow this section to come in close contact with the rock surface, and fogging from the underspray will occur. For this reason I began to consider that the 'mutilations' might in fact be some kind of deliberate but temporary arrangement of fingers and hand.

The 'mutilation' theory to explain these stencils has undoubtedly grown from early descriptions of deliberate amputation or mutilation of certain digital sections amongst Aborigines in some areas. As early as 1788, Governor Arthur Phillip stated in a letter, that many women and a child of about six years lacked joints of their left hand little finger (Historical Records of Australia, Ser.1, vol.26). Petrie (1932:55) describes the method of digital joint removal in coastal southern Queensland. Other reports of this practice can be found in Curr (1887:II, 252), Spencer (1928:610), and Cobley (1962:44, 96, 127).

Speaking of interpretations by two informants, (Joogoomoo and Toomacalin) of stencils occurring in the rock art of southeast Cape York, Trezise states '...They had no explanation for the "Missing Finger" hand stencils which frequently occur. However, I have not yet found a hand stencil with only the top joint missing, and assume that the missing finger was doubled under' (Trezise 1971:14).

Little interpretative work has been attempted in the field of stencil art to date. This is possibly due to researchers recognising the problems of interpretation without the assistance of the original artists, or at least the 'traditional owners' of the site. Some of these pitfalls are highlighted in MacIntosh's interpretations of the art sites in Arnhem Land (MacIntosh 1974). There is little hope of any information becoming available from traditional owners or artists in the central Queensland area,



Figures A-I

due to its being depopulated by the Aboriginal inhabitants at an early period, a number later being settled at Barambah which was established in 1904.

However, stencil representations are at least direct impressions of an actual object or body part which existed in the past. Although the underlying meaning of rock art, as it may have existed in the mind of the maker, may be obscure in most instances, this may not be the case with the irregular hand stencils I have recorded in the central Queensland galleries.

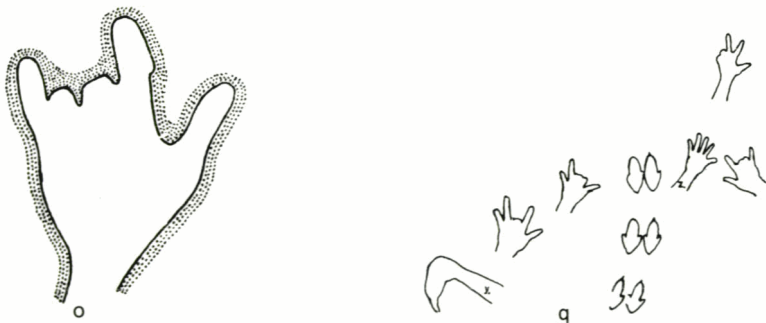
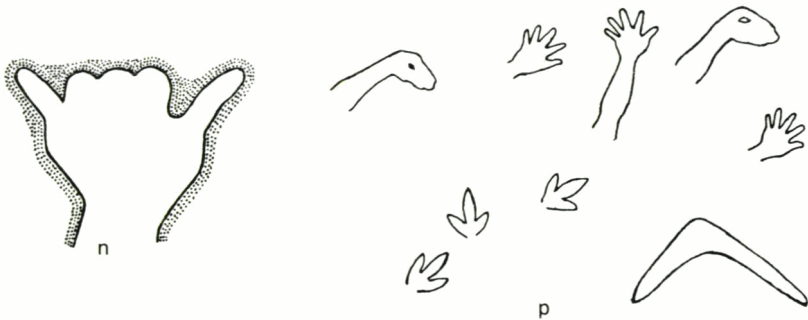
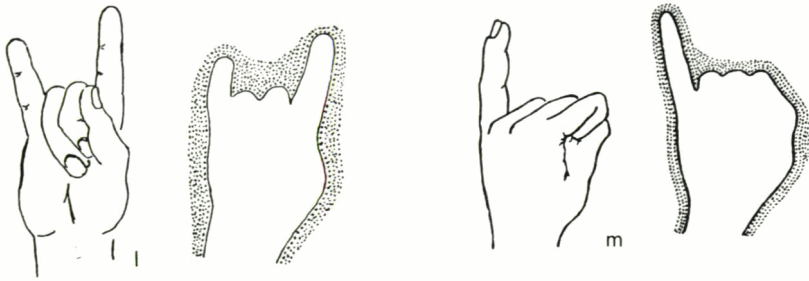
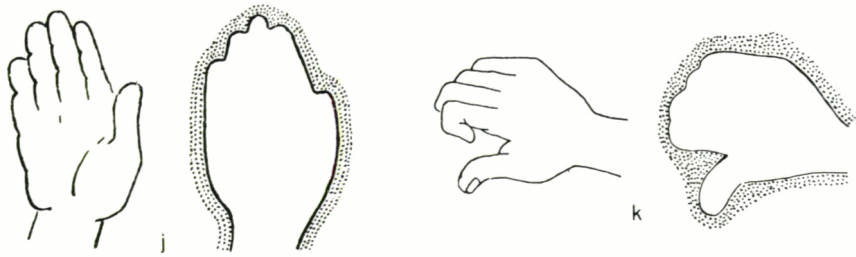
'Mutilated' hands as messages

Moore (1977:322) suggested 10 possible meanings for hand stencils:

1. as an individual signature of an artist or record of a visit;
2. as a memorial, to be mourned over after death;
3. as a message to the spirit ancestors;
4. as a secular message to other Aborigines;
5. as a record of an historical event;
6. as a story-telling device to record the myths at sacred sites;
7. as a means of using the power of a sorcery site;
8. hand prints left by the totemic ancestors of the Dreaming and obviously especially sacred;
9. hand prints made in sacred places to derive spiritual strength from the ancestors;
10. stencilled representations of parts (or the whole) of totemic species for mythic or magical purposes.

In an effort to sort out which if any of the above meanings might apply to the central Queensland hand stencils we might begin by considering similar and possibly related use of configurations of the hand which were recorded by W.E. Roth before the turn of the century. I have been impressed by the similarity of some of the hand sign language recorded by Roth and the 'mutilated' hand stencils in rock art galleries. In the following illustrations I have compared some of the rock art stencils and some of Roth's recordings of sign language collected about 600km west of where the stencils have been found.

As Roth's work refers mainly to areas west of Winton, it may be strongly argued that his figures are of questionable value for comparison with central Queensland stencils. Numerous material culture items encountered in the Sandstone Belt are identical to those described by Roth, and this tends to support at least partial continuity of material culture items between these two



Figures J-Q

regions. While I do not suggest a complete association between the central Queensland hand stencils and the northwest central Queensland sign language, it is nevertheless useful to indicate the possibility of these stencils being indicators in a similar fashion to actual hand signals. In this way they may convey information to others besides the original artist.

- Fig.A Turkey Bustard
- Fig.B Spear: Woomera-spear
- Fig.C Emu
- Fig.D Diver-bird, 'shag': anything that dives, to dive
- Fig.E Spear: Woomera-spear
- Fig.F Large eagle-hawk (Uroaetus andax)
- Fig.G Large number, etc.
- Fig.H Mosquito
- Fig.I Woman: copulation
- Fig.J Fish
- Fig.K Place: here! In this spot
- Fig.L Bad: person (? or thing)
- Fig.M Small caterpillar; 'grub', etc.
- Fig.N&O Two often noted stencils with no comparable sign in Roth
- Fig.P Composite stencil panel, using a combination of stencil 'V' boomerang, emu feet, and hands. Note the painted 'eye' section on 'Turkey Bustard' symbol, this is a common practice on this symbol throughout the region
- Fig.Q Composite stencil panel using a combination of stencils of a variety of small marsupial paws (kangaroo paw stencils are uncommon), and various hand 'signal' stencils.

Note stencils Y and Z in this panel were executed in yellowish ochre, whereas the remainder are in red. The hand to the right of Z slightly oversprays it, suggesting possibly these two were *in situ* before the panel was painted, possible having no association with its meaning.

Distribution of 'signal' stencils

From my own field observations, the distribution of these stencils appears to be most common on the Tambo end of the central Queensland sandstone belt, with comparatively regular occurrence as far east as Carnarvon Gorge. In very isolated instances they are found further east in the Expedition Range, but there is an almost total lack of examples further east of this point. Infrequent examples occur south of the Great Dividing Range on the upper Maranoa and upper Warrego waters, with very few apparent in the Merrivale river area. Examples south of the range appear mainly confined within 30km distance of the main range. The heaviest concentration of this style is on the northern fall of the Great Dividing Range, northeast to Blackdown Tableland and extending west with intensity from Buckland Creek.

Associations and context

Also occurring in these areas are composite panels comprising 'signal' stencils, boomerang stencils and occasional sets of stencilled animal feet (both emu and a small type of marsupial). These panels are so strikingly obvious in their composition and semi-isolated positioning, that there can be little doubt that they contain a specific cultural meaning of significance.

It is interesting to note that these 'signal' stencils appear to cover approximately the same distribution pattern in this area as the heavy 'V' shaped boomerang stencils (or boomerang club) which is a unique feature in Carnarvon art. This type of boomerang is incorporated in a number of composite panels, with tips downwards.

Pigments

Shades of red account for almost the total number of examples noted, with minor numbers of white and isolated yellow examples occurring mostly in areas where their colour coincides with the dominant colour used in the site. This is possibly due to the local availability of ochre. To date no examples have been noted in the purple or black shades.

Superimposition

While most examples are not oversprayed or superimposed, there is one obvious exception to this in the Buckland Creek site, where a heavy concentration of stencilled hands, including a number of 'signal' variations, are both superimposed and oversprayed.

Positioning

In a number of instances 'signals' are depicted on areas of stark white sandstone, in close proximity to, but slightly aside from, the general art masses. Generally, these panels are in highly visible positions, and are so clearly defined that they are obvious at a considerable distance from the site.

As Moore has stated: '...the significance of it is that to the Aborigine the hand stencil is essentially a means of conveying information or telling a story and he is immediately able to place a logical interpretation on a particular arrangement of stencils...Stencils were, in fact, just as elaborate a means of communication as the hand sign language which appears to have existed before the breakdown of tribal life' (Moore 1977:319, 324).

Limitations of space have allowed only a few illustrations, though these should suffice to arouse interest in this type of

stencil art, and to assure more attention of detail in future site recording. Only when detailed recordings of a percentage of the thousands of art sites along the sandstone belt become available, will any idea of the distribution or diversity of weapons, composites and 'signal' stencils become apparent.

Acknowledgements

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