

# 8. Rock art evidence for Macassan–Aboriginal contact in northwestern Arnhem Land<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Some of the most important evidence for the activities of Southeast Asian or ‘Macassan’<sup>2</sup> visitors to Australia prior to the European settlement of this continent can be found in the rock art of northern Australia—from the Kimberley to the Top End of the Northern Territory to parts of northern Queensland (for example, see Chaloupka 1993, pp. 191–2; 1996; Clarke and Frederick 2006; Roberts 2004). Rock art is widely acknowledged as encoding social, economic and cultural information about the artists and their cultural groups and it can reflect changes in these societies as well as the wider landscape. This is the case for the early encounters and ongoing regular interaction between Australian Aboriginal people and Macassans. Rock art illustrates some of this complex, sustained and diverse story.

As discussed in Clark and May (this volume), the commonly accepted date for the earliest Macassan visits is contested, as is the theory of pre-Macassan contact (see, for example, Berndt and Berndt 1954; Evans 1992, p. 66; McIntosh 2004). European accounts, such as those of Matthew Flinders in 1801 (Flinders 1814), have led researchers to suggest that these visits began between 1650 and 1750 (for example, Macknight 1976; Crawford 1969); Macknight later revised this to 1780 (Macknight 2011). The interpretations of early radiocarbon dates continue to be debated (Clarke 2000); however, recent accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) dating of a beeswax snake design overlaying a prau (*perahu*/ship) painting

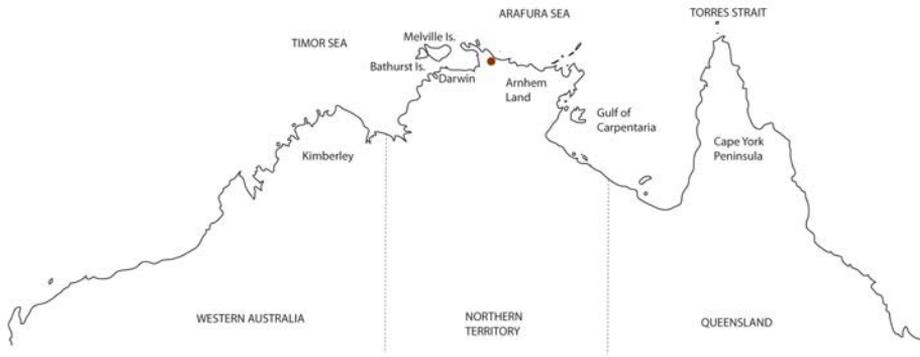
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2 Following convention, we use the term ‘Macassan’ to refer to those people from Southeast Asia visiting northern Australia as part of the trepang industry. As Macknight (2011, pp. 128–9) notes, it appears anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt replaced ‘Malay’, prevalent in historical documents, with ‘Macassan’ to describe Southeast Asian visitors.

at the Maung site of Djulirri suggests praus were present prior to at least 1664, and possibly much earlier (Taçon et al. 2010; see also May et al. 2010). This is supported by recent archaeological excavations and dating of human skeletal remains (of Southeast Asian origin) buried near Anuru Bay. Theden-Ringl et al. (2011, p. 45) argue that one individual was buried before AD 1730 while another could predate the 1700s. We mention these dates as they directly relate to northwestern Arnhem Land, the area of focus of this chapter (Figure 8.1).

Map of Northern Australia



**Figure 8.1 Map of Australia showing the study area in northwestern Arnhem Land**

Source: Meg Travers and the Picturing Change Project Team

Macassan praus were home to diverse crews, with sailors from Sulawesi, Madura, Java, Borneo, Flores, Timor, Rote and even New Guinea (see, for example, Earle 1846, p. 240). While the main motivation for coming to Australia may have been to obtain trepang for trade with China, they were also part of wider regional trade patterns which, after AD 1500, included Arab, Chinese and the newly arrived Portuguese and Spanish. Southeast Asian visits were largely over by the early twentieth century, with the Dutch and then British dominating these trade networks from the seventeenth century (Macknight 1976).

In this chapter we focus on the Aboriginal–Macassan story as illustrated by rock art in northwest Arnhem Land and, specifically, at a site complex known as Malarrak, as it is beyond the scope of this chapter to undertake a continent-wide survey. The Malarrak complex is located within the Wellington Range, the northernmost outlier of the Arnhem Land Plateau. The Wellington Range is home to extensive and diverse rock art, including many examples of paintings that reflect contact between local Aboriginal people and international visitors (May et al. 2010; Taçon et al. 2010; May et al. in press). This range covers a

large geographical area and is associated with various Aboriginal language groups. The Malarrak sites are located within the traditional country of Maung speakers, where Ronald Lamilami is a Manganowal senior traditional owner.

Macknight (see, for example, 1976, 2011) and Theden-Ringl et al. (2011) have demonstrated aspects of the extensive Macassan occupation of this region. It is no surprise then that evidence for this relationship also appears in rock art at Malarrak, a complex of multiple rock shelters. All of the paintings depicted at the four main shelters within Malarrak were comprehensively documented between 2008 and 2010 as part of the Australian Research Council project ‘Picturing Change’ (Taçon et al. 2012). This rich record reveals many examples of contact rock art including European watercraft, smoking pipes, a building, guns, horned animals and even a drinking mug. While we have discussed aspects of the contact rock art corpus at Malarrak elsewhere (see, for example, May et al. 2010, in press; Taçon et al. 2010), in this chapter our aim is to analyse the depictions argued to relate to Macassans within their wider rock art context.

For most Australians the story of Macassan–Aboriginal relations is unknown—it is a forgotten history. Some may even argue that this pre-European contact with Australia has been deliberately erased from our history books and left out of our school classrooms. Yet this history is painted across northern Australia. The following is just a snapshot of a much wider and more complex Macassan-related rock art heritage.

## Rock art recording in the Wellington Range

During the dry season of 2008, the Malarrak complex was recorded using rock art recording procedures developed by the authors over many years. This included compiling a detailed inventory of the art and noting the layering of different styles and subject matter. The main shelter (Figure 8.2) comprises one large art panel that measures 31 m long by 4.8 m deep. Despite poor preservation conditions, this shelter contains a minimum of 232 paintings and eight stencils. The remaining three rock shelters contain at least: 1) 33 paintings; 2) 62 paintings and two beeswax figures; and 3) 33 paintings and six stencils (May et al. 2010, pp. 61–2). A total of 34 paintings that clearly depict introduced subject matter (contact art) was recorded at Malarrak and includes 17 European sailing vessels and much smaller numbers of horned introduced animals, guns and smoking paraphernalia. Importantly, a number of these paintings are argued to relate to Macassan contact and will now be explored in more detail.



**Figure 8.2 Main shelter, Malarrak**

Source: Paul S.C. Taçon

## The prau

A single white Macassan prau is depicted at Malarrak, with yellow ochre added to the image at a later date. The painting (Figure 8.3) measures approximately 102 cm in width and 99 cm in height and is depicted with its bow oriented to the right, sails furlled and with no visible crew. It has an overall shape, mast and decking typical of Southeast Asian praus (see Chaloupka 1996, p. 137).



**Figure 8.3 Macassan prau painted at Malarrak**

## The knife

A Macassan-style knife was also painted in the main Malarrak shelter, using the ‘x-ray technique’ so that features of the blade can be seen within its sheath (Figure 8.4). It has a solid white background and red-purple outline. Measuring 33 mm by 119 mm, it has typical features of an Indonesian small sword-like object known as a ‘*badik*’ (see Chaloupka 1996, p. 136). The *badik* is a dagger with a hilt (handle) set at an angle in the plane of the blade (Gardner 1992, pp. 8, 41). Most notably, the *badik* has a ‘small, straight, usually single-edged blade, with a straight or concave edge’ (Gardner 1992, p. 41), as shown in the Malarrak depiction (compare Figure 8.4 with 8.5).



**Figure 8.4 Knife painted at Malarrak**

Source: Sally K. May



**Figure 8.5 A typical *badik* on display at Museum Balla Lopa, Gowa, Sulawesi, in 2012**

Source: Paul S.C. Taçon

## A monkey?

The third painting that is argued by others to relate to Macassan contact is highly contentious (Figure 8.6). Chaloupka (1996, p. 136) argues this scene 'represents two monkeys in a tree and is, in all probability, the work of one of the many men from this western region who travelled with the Makassans to Sulawesi'. While the figure on a lower branch does resemble a macaque in many regards, it is clearly a human-like figure on the higher branch holding what appears to be a curved object that has both a boomerang-like and a *kris*-like shape.



**Figure 8.6 Rock painting possibly depicting a monkey in a tree, Malarrak**

Source: Paul S.C. Taçon

Although the lower figure is macaque-like in form and many people visiting the site interpret it this way, it is possible that the artist depicted some other animal. For instance, when shown a photograph of this painting, Aboriginal elder the late Jimmy Galareya Namarnyilk immediately identified it as '*djabbo*', the northern spotted quoll (*Dasyurus hallucatus*). He interpreted the composition as a hunting scene with a *Bininj* (Aboriginal person) in the tree above. The painted image does have a quoll-like bushy tail but the rounded head/face looks macaque-like. Given that quolls are nocturnal, whether someone would climb a tree at night to catch such a fast-moving animal is questionable. Of course, Jimmy was primarily thinking about Australian fauna from his region when looking at the

photograph and this influenced his interpretation just as a pro-Macassan bias may have influenced the monkey interpretation of many researchers. Thus, we conclude there is not enough information to confirm or deny this is a Macassan-related piece of art and only further research will clarify this issue.

## A smokehouse?

Another painting subject to varying interpretation is the rare depiction of a building, in this case with a peaked roof (Figure 8.7). Internal elements suggest vertical supports and possibly a second storey, also with decorative elements. It has been argued that this painting represents a Southeast Asian building or, more specifically, a Macassan smokehouse (Chaloupka 1993, 1996). Chaloupka (1996, p. 136) states that:

Reports from European observers, and an outfitter's contract located by Macknight (1976:20) in South Sulawesi record that Makassans brought with them bamboo and prefabricated wall panels, in a form of kajang and ataps, mats of woven cane and palm leaf from which they constructed their living quarters and smokehouses for curing trepang.

The rock painting also resembles some Macassan structures shown in an 1845 sketch from Victoria, Port Essington, by H. S. Melville (see Macknight 1976, Figure 11).



**Figure 8.7** Painting of a building, possibly a smokehouse, Malarrak

Certainly, the building painted does not appear to be consistent with any British structures at Port Essington (described in Allen 2008); however, it may represent a structure at later settlements such as the Oenpelli or Goulburn Island missions. Indeed, it is just as likely to represent a house or church made from sheets of bark or corrugated iron at such settlements. This argument is strengthened by its proximity and similarity in colour and style to two non-Macassan ships—one immediately to the right and one below the house painting. Thus, we are inclined to interpret the building painting as being more European influenced than Macassan, but also are open to the interpretation that the painted structure may exhibit features of both Macassan and European types of buildings and may have been produced during the period of overlap between Macassan visitors and European settlement in the north.

## Discussion and conclusion

Rock art imagery, such as the examples explored in this chapter, provides us with Indigenous accounts of contact encounters and relationships that developed between local communities and visitors from Southeast Asia. These images are historical records—a visual narrative of contact experience—and are part of a much wider and important body of rock art that informs us of past cross-cultural contact from an informed, Indigenous perspective (for example, see Taçon et al. 2012). In this sense they are a form of historical documentation that is visually based rather than text based. They also are accounts produced from the perspective of the encountered rather than those doing the encountering, as is usually the case. Therefore, they need to be better considered when researching contact history within Australia, especially as they provide unique insights into past Indigenous experience of encounter rather than that of people of Asian or European descent—the so-called ‘reverse gaze’ (Ouzman 2003, p. 253).

An analysis of historical documents has revealed that from at least the mid seventeenth century until 1906 Macassans made seasonal visits to the region to harvest trepang and to trade with Aboriginal groups for goods such as turtle shell, ironwood, pearls and pearl shell. In return, they provided Aboriginal people with food, tobacco, alcohol, cloth, axes and knives (Earle 1846; Clarke 2000; Macknight 1976). These visits also provided artists with new subjects to paint, with praus a particularly popular topic (Chaloupka 1993, pp. 191–2; 1996; Clarke and Frederick 2006; Macknight 1976, p. 84; May et al. 2009; Roberts 2004). Importantly, the detail of the prau painting at Malarrak, like those at the nearby site of Djulirri (see Taçon et al. 2010), shows intimate familiarity with Macassan fleets. It is depicted with key features shown, such as a characteristic tripod mast and deck structures. It is also shown with a flat bottom, likely the artist’s understanding and illustration of the waterline.

The artist's intimate knowledge of praus, and the way in which they sailed, is suggestive of direct experiences with the Macassan fleets along the coast, several kilometres to the north. There, Aboriginal people not only observed praus in their waters but also sometimes ventured onboard. Occasionally they would travel to other parts of northern Australia and even all the way back to Makassar, where they visited before returning during the next monsoon season or settled into a new way of life, never to return to Australia (Earle 1846, pp. 239–40; Lamilami 1974, p. 70; Macknight 1976, p. 85). It is also interesting to note that when other details were added in yellow to the original white prau depiction, a European ship (possibly a cutter) was painted next to it, reflecting changing times and the arrival of new (European) ships. Consequently, these sorts of contact rock art images should be considered as historical accounts of activities that have local, regional and international dimensions, especially as Southeast Asian trade articulated with global trade and communication networks (for example, see Sukkham et al. 2011).

The painting of the *badik* in its sheath is likely evidence of its importance in trading relationships between Aboriginal people and Southeast Asian visitors but also later between different Aboriginal groups. Metal knives were a highly sought-after trade item during cross-cultural encounters across Australia (for example, see Layton 1992). As Mitchell (2000, p. 182) notes, 'one of the most visible consequences of culture contact with outsiders...was the adoption of foreign material culture as trade goods within indigenous societies'. Importantly, and as mentioned earlier, the *badik* painted in the main Malarrak shelter is illustrated using the traditional x-ray manner of depiction, with the blade shown in its sheath. The use of this technique indicates the continuation of artistic conventions that may demonstrate something of what Frederick (1999, p. 134) argues are 'the measures Indigenous Australians took towards securing their own cultural survival in a transforming world'. Of course, from a practical point of view, it also allows the artist to depict all the key features of the object, with the blade inside being most important.

The presence of both the prau and the *badik* paintings at the main Malarrak shelter, along with other depictions of praus at nearby sites, clearly indicates that the Macassans had a profound influence not only on the art but also on the material culture of the Arnhem Land region. Yet, the majority of introduced subject matter at Malarrak relates to contact with Europeans across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This overall lack of Macassan-related rock art in an area known to have been visited by Macassans for hundreds of years prior to (and overlapping with) European settlement is intriguing. One of the key issues is whether a more detailed rock art record of Macassans once existed and has naturally deteriorated over time. Accurate interpretation of contact rock art is another consideration:

are some of the paintings we attribute to the European or pre-contact period actually depicting Macassan contact? For example, many human figures painted throughout northwest Arnhem Land are difficult to interpret and only more detailed analysis will allow us to accurately identify their subject matter.

On the other hand, we could argue that preservation and identification are not key factors in this problem and that there was, in fact, a lesser visual record of Macassan life in northwest Arnhem Land compared with European life. In order to start to explore this issue it is important to begin by understanding something of pre-contact rock art. It is not enough to view contact-period rock art as a collection that stands alone and that can be analysed separately. Is there a tradition of non-literal depictions in northwest Arnhem Land that might explain the lack of Macassan-related rock art? If so, why is this rule broken for European-related rock art? We must question the overall system of representations in rock art by Aboriginal artists in this region and how these systems are affected by first Macassan and later European contact (May et al. 2010). In the Wellington Range we are asking these questions of the rock art based on thousands of individual paintings, stencils and beeswax figures and we are comparing these findings with other detailed research that has taken place in Arnhem Land for decades.

The study of Macassan-related rock art in Australia is only at its beginning but because of a lack of detailed previous research, and indications that there are hundreds of rock art sites yet to be documented across the Wellington Range, new, important insights into the nature of cross-cultural contact during the past few hundred years are likely to emerge. A related issue to explore is whether older rock art will reveal much earlier contact with people from across Asia. For instance, the curious introduction of the dingo into Australia at least 3500 years ago is linked to earlier contact or colonisation events (Gollan 1984; Oskarsson et al. 2011), and recent DNA studies suggest people travelled from as far away as India about 4200 years ago (see Pugach et al. 2013). Indeed, there is evidence in the form of ancient stencilled objects in various parts of Arnhem Land, including the Wellington Range, that are unlike any forms of material culture known from Australian Indigenous ethnographic records. Once they are better dated and interpreted, and further genetic research highlights other forms of ancient cross-cultural encounter, a whole new picture of Aboriginal Australian contact with Asia will finally refute the long-held theory that Aboriginal Australians were isolated from the rest of the world until just a few hundred years ago.

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