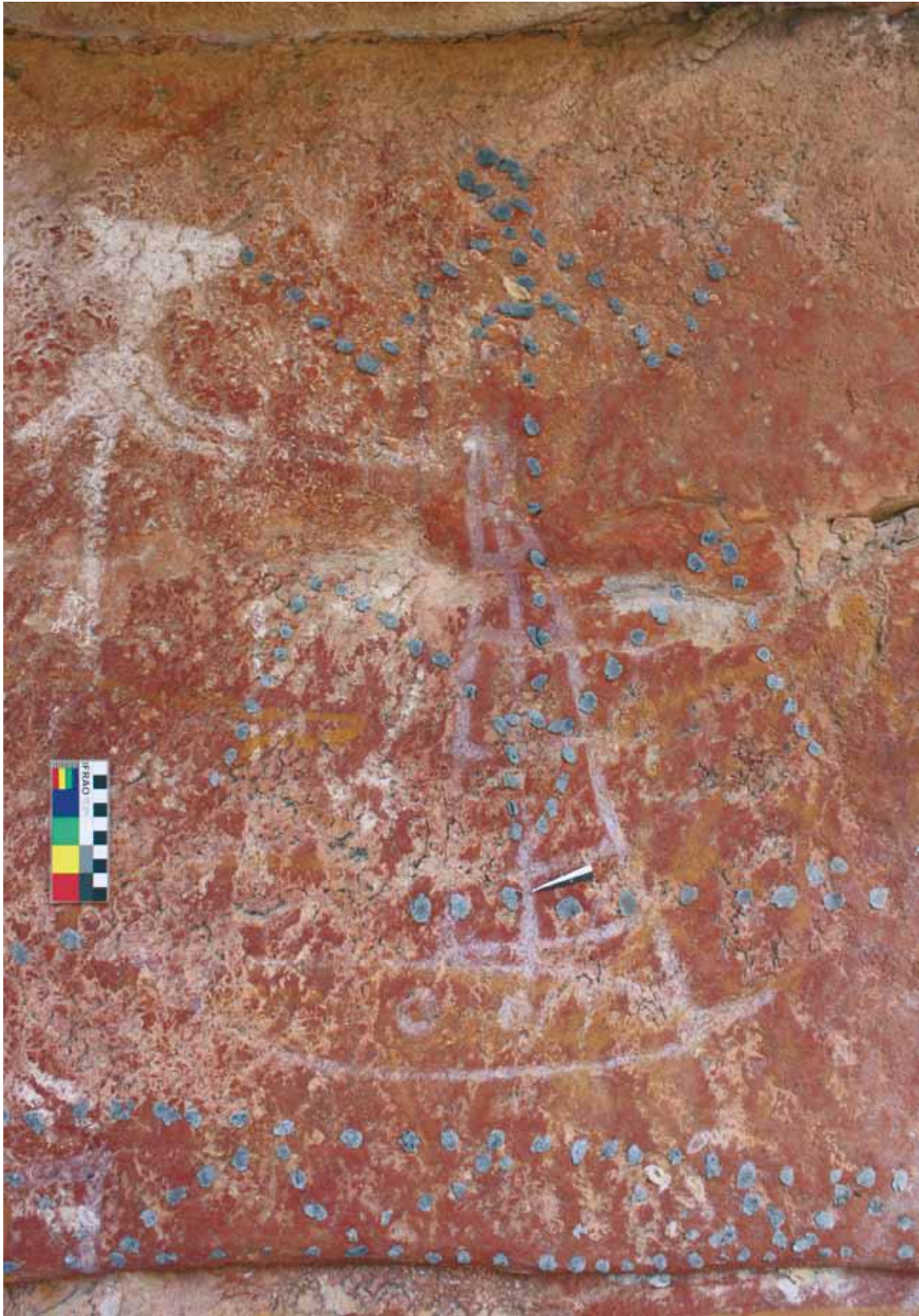


When Did the Macassans Start Coming to Northern Australia?

Near Nhulunbuy in February 1803 Matthew Flinders, in the *Investigator*, encountered a fleet of Macassans praus (perahus) fishing for trepang (bêche de mer). He later discovered from one of their captains, Pobassoo, that the Macassans had been coming from Makassar (a port on the south east coast of Sulawesi) with the summer monsoon for about 20 years. Later analysis of historical records by Professor Campbell Macknight and others suggested these visits to "Marege" (Arnhem Land) and "Kayu Jama" (Kimberley coast) had commenced in the 1720s. More recent historical information indicates the Macassans may have been coming as early as 1640. Some radiocarbon dating carried out by Macknight at three Macassan campsites in the 1960s produced dates from 1170-1520 AD. However these have not been accepted because of a possible bias in the dated material (mangrove wood) and uncertainty whether the material was from Macassan or Aboriginal occupation layers. Nevertheless, among the Yolgnu of Arnhem Land there are songs and traditions about visiting sea people who seem to have preceded the Macassans, known as the Baijini. The Baijini may have been Bajua ("Sea Gypsies"). But none of the early Dutch explorers of the north coast, such as van Colster (*Pera*) and Carstenszoon (*Arnhem*) in 1623, or Tasman in 1644, ever reported seeing any Baijini or Macassans. So the puzzle remains, when did these visits to north Australia commence?

It may not be possible to specifically date the first contacts between Indigenous Australians and Indo-Malay people, or other outsiders. We know that, after a long period of isolation, that regular contact with Melanesians crossing Torres Strait or sailing down the northern coasts of Queensland, began about 4,000 years ago. Their impacts show up in terms of new types of stone tools, language change and adoption of new types of watercraft. It was at this time that the dingo came into Australia, but whether through Torres Strait or with seafarers from the Indonesian region is uncertain.

We know that the first historically documented contact Europeans had with Australia took place in 1606, first with the *Duyfken* sailing down the coast of west Cape York, followed shortly after by Torres' voyage through Torres Strait. So the question arises, did the Macassans or their predecessors begin to visit northern Australia prior to that? Recent dating of rock art at a site in Arnhem Land suggests they might have. The site in question is a recently rediscovered rock art gallery, at a place called Djulirri, in the Wellington Range, about 20 kms from the coast. The gallery includes paintings of Europeans and their ships from around 1700, as well as depictions of praus.



One of the rock paintings at Djulirri of praus, over-painted with beeswax figure
(Photograph: Paul S. C. Taçon)

An archaeological program to date these images is being led by Professor Paul Taçon. The paintings are being dated by radiocarbon dating beeswax figures and lines that were applied at a late time. The oldest (SANU 1682) has a date range from 1517 to

1664, with the median age being 1577. It means this painting of the prau must pre-date that. Although not absolute proof that the Macassans or other mariners from eastern Indonesia were sailing to northern Australia before Europeans made landfall, it certainly provides strong circumstantial evidence.

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