

# Maritime Rock Art: exploring depictions of sea craft from across Australia

*A symposium presented by the Canberra Archaeological Society and the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology for the 2018 Canberra and Region Heritage Festival.*

A series of fascinating and illustrated talks by researchers about the ships, boats and sea craft Indigenous artists painted across Australia. This symposium will present research about the spectacular maritime rock art of Australia - where it's painted, how it's painted and how these depictions can inform us about the complex relationships and experiences these Indigenous artists had with the people of the ships they painted.

## Programme

| Time  | Presentation  | Speaker(s)  |
|-------|---|---|
| 9:30  | Welcome to Country and introduction   |   |
| 9:40  | What is that ship?  | Dr Michael Pearson AO   |
| 10:00 | A ship image in the southern Kimberley and the role of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry | Dr Tim Maloney on behalf of Prof Sue O'Connor and Prof Jane Balme |
| 10:20 | Crews and Canoes: Depictions of canoes in Kimberley rock art                                      | Prof June Ross and Dr Meg Travers                                 |
| 10:30 | Morning Tea break   |   |
| 11:00 | North Australian rock art: Maritime imagery understood within a context of "culture contact"      | Dr Tristen Jones, Dr Daryl Wesley and Dr Mirani Lister            |
| 11:20 | On board the Trochus luggers  | Dr Duncan Wright  |
| 11:30 | Q&A session   | All speakers  |
| 12.00 | Finish  |   |

## Presentations

### What is that ship?

Michael Pearson

When trying to identify a ship or boat depicted on a rock art site, there are several approaches that have been used. The first task is to determine the type of vessel, which can be relatively simple if the depiction is naturalistic, but more difficult if it is abstract. In a few cases it may be possible to determine if a particular named vessel is being depicted. Knowledge of the vessel types frequenting a particular coast can be developed by researching the historical sources, photographic collections, and studies of particular ship or boat types (such as

Indonesian craft, or pearling luggers). Identification of specific named ships uses the same sources, and can be successful where the profile of a ship can be matched to a known ship visiting that coast, or internal evidence such as lettering is depicted that gives clues to a name or other association. The use of these approaches in researching Arnhem Land and Great Barrier Reef art sites is described in the presentation.

*Michael Pearson AO, has a PhD in prehistoric and historical archaeology from ANU, and has worked for over 40 years in the heritage field, with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, as head of the historical environment activities and Deputy Executive Director of the Australian Heritage Commission, and since 1993 as director of Heritage Management Consultants Pty Ltd. He is a former Chairman of the ACT Heritage Council, former Chairman of the Institute of Professional Practice in Heritage and the Arts at ANU, and a former president of Australia ICOMOS. Michael's current research work includes Antarctic archaeological sites and maritime history topics.*

## **A ship image in the southern Kimberley and the role of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry**

Sue O'Connor<sup>1</sup> and Jane Balme<sup>2</sup>

Contact themed rock art of any sort is rare in the inland southern Kimberley. The exception and the only example of art which clearly depicts European-themed subjects is found on a single panel at Mimbi, in Gooniyandi country about 70 km east of Fitzroy Crossing. This panel of painted art is unusual in several respects, not least because it contains a painting a European steam ship. At 300 km from the nearest point in the Kimberley coast, the Mimbi ship is one of the furthest inland representation of watercraft in Australian rock art. In addition to the ship, the panel includes representations of a horse-drawn tram, a camel and a person wearing a top hat, as well as other traditional motifs in the same pigment colour. The presence of this panel of European-themed images raises a number of questions, including the identity of the artist, whether they were Indigenous or European, when the art was painted and in what context? Here we provide a historical context for the type of ship painted at Mimbi and speculate about how it came to be painted so far inland

*Sue O'Connor is currently conducting a major archaeological research project in East Timor investigating the cultural and environmental changes that took place across the Neolithic transition and into the Metal Age. This project complements and builds on previous research in the eastern Maluku region and Wallacea and current research in Papua New Guinea which is investigating Pleistocene colonisation in Island Southeast Asia and Greater Australia and subsequent patterns of migration, interaction and exchange.*

*Jane Balme began her interest in archaeology while working for the Western Australian Museum on cave sites in south west Australia. She completed my PhD at the ANU on Pleistocene fishery on the Darling River in Western New South Wales in 1989. She has worked on topics in Indigenous archaeology in a variety of regions in Australia including northern New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.*

1 Department of Archaeology and Natural History, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University ACT 0200, Australia.

2 Archaeology, School of Social Sciences, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia.

This paper will be delivered Dr Tim Maloney, Postdoctoral Fellow at the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University

## **Crews and Canoes: Depictions of canoes in Kimberley rock art**

June Ross<sup>1</sup> and Meg Travers<sup>2</sup>

A distinctive feature of the painted rock art in the northwest Kimberley is the depiction of manned canoes. Crew numbers vary from a single sailor to as many as twenty nine, with crews depicted either seated or standing in a row. Who were these mariners? Stylistic analysis suggests that at least some of the canoe paintings and engravings predate the incursion of Macassan fishermen along the Kimberley coastline, while the size and structure of the canoes indicates that some would have been capable of difficult sea-crossings. Adding to the puzzle, scant ethnographic records suggest that canoes were not used in this region prior to the visits of Macassans, currently believed to have begun several hundred years ago. Could these paintings then depict ancient mariners from the north - or venturesome Aboriginal seaman from distant regions? How early were these incursions and from where did the crews originate? Is there other archaeological or linguistic evidence in the northwest Kimberley that supports the early arrival of outsiders? The First Australians arrived by boat, but we know little or nothing of later mariners who may have arrived on our shores prior to the last millennium.

*June Ross was drawn to Kimberley rock art when she worked with Grahame Walsh, Rhys Jones and Mike Morwood on the 1994 rock art dating expedition from which the first significant dates for famous Gwion figures were formulated. As well as lecturing at the University of New England over two decades, she has undertaken numerous rock art recording, dating and conservation projects across Australia. But her enthusiasm for the challenges and romance of remote regions has seen her focus her studies on the rock art of arid Australian – the subject of her PhD – and the rugged Kimberley. Currently, she divides her time between collaborative rock art research projects such as the ARC Songlines project that resulted in the recent blockbuster Seven Sisters exhibition at the National Museum of Australia and a broad-scale archaeological project focused on the northwest Kimberley.*

*Meg Travers' research interests include rock art research and cultural heritage management. She received her PhD from the Department of Archaeology, University of New England in 2015. Her doctoral research focused on the stylistic changes in the rock paintings of the northwest Kimberley. More specifically her work examined the varying environmental, social and economic factors that contributed to, or drove such changes in order to develop an understanding of the social and economic lifeways in the northwest Kimberley through time.*

1 Adjunct Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of New England, Armidale NSW Australia 2351.

2 Department of Archaeology, University of New England, Armidale NSW Australia 2351.

## **North Australian rock art: Maritime imagery understood within a context of “culture contact”**

Tristen Jones<sup>1</sup>, Daryl Wesley<sup>2</sup> and Mirani Lister<sup>3</sup>

The significance of the depictions of watercraft in the ‘contact’ rock art of western Arnhem Land have often been the focus of academic study in order to assist in ascertaining the chronology of culture contact with outsiders in northern Australia. In this presentation depictions of watercraft will be discussed in context with other introduced subject matter in the Arnhem Land rock art assemblage in order to highlight the extent and impact of information exchange on Indigenous material culture, but also emphasise the ways in which these new knowledges from outsiders was incorporated into existing social and cultural artistic practices.

*Tristen Jones is an Australian indigenous archaeology and cultural heritage practitioner with specialist rock art research and conservation experience and training. She has experience researching, digitising and cataloguing museum collections and is a former Australia Awards Endeavour Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Barcelona. She holds a PhD from the Australian National University and her doctoral research investigated rock art in the East Alligator River Region of western Arnhem Land. The project included a large scale rock art survey and a comprehensive rock art recording program, in addition to a radiocarbon rock art dating program supported by AINSE - Australian Institute of Nuclear Science and Engineering. Tristen was also awarded the prestigious Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory’s George Chaloupka Fellowship in 2014.*

*Daryl is a multidisciplinary archaeologist that has developed a high degree of proficiency in field archaeology, rock art, archaeological sciences, heritage conservation, and anthropological research over two and a half decades. During this time he has accomplished valuable contributions to Indigenous and historical archaeological studies in the Northern Territory, Australia. Daryl’s particular research interests have been the archaeology of culture contact between South East Asians, Europeans and Aboriginal people in remote north-western Arnhem Land. The extent of Daryl’s research has been involved in multidisciplinary collaboration with a number of specialists to research various aspects of culture contact material culture analysis, rock art analysis, ships depicted in rock art, the Macassan trepang industry, Macassan pottery, glass beads, pXRF analysis of rock art, isotope studies, and radiocarbon dating.*

*Mirani Lister is based in the Department of Archaeology and Natural History in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. She is an archaeologist with regional expertise in the Indian Ocean and Australasia. She has published on a range of subjects, including globalisation, culture contact, human responses to environmental change, and early conflict in the archaeological record.*

1 Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University ACT 0200, Australia.

2 Department of Archaeology, College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Flinders University

3 Department of Archaeology and Natural History, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University ACT 0200, Australia.

## On board the Trochus luggers

Duncan Wright<sup>1</sup>

In the Flinders Island group (far north Queensland), a fleet of trochus and pearling luggers have been painted on the roof of a remote rock-shelter. Sails have been stowed and anchors thrown out by a crew who sitting below deck are unlikely to have seen the artist, or the dugong which surfaces within the painting. This scene has undoubtedly been witnessed (and recreated using ochre paint) by the artist many times before. What is different on this occasion is a name – also painted in ochre – that appears underneath this frieze of bobbing boats. In this paper we strive to rekindle a story about contact between a trochus lugger captain, Edward Pitt, and a Flinders Island artist.

*Duncan Wright is a Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University in Canberra, specialising in Australian Indigenous archaeology. Since completing a doctorate at Monash University in 2010, he has conducted extensive fieldwork in the Australia-Pacific, with a particular focus on Torres Strait.*

1 Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University ACT 0200, Australia.

**This symposium was supported by**

