

Rock Art and Prehistory (Oxbow Monograph)

A MINIMUM AGE FOR EARLY DEPICTIONS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN PRAUS

in the Rock Art of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

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Abstract

In 2008, we began two related research projects that focus on recent Australian rock art, made after the arrival of Asians and Europeans, in part of northwest Arnhem Land's Wellington Range. This area has extensive and diverse rock art, including many examples of paintings that reflect contact between local Aboriginal people and visitors to their shores. At some sites figures made of beeswax are found superimposed under and over paintings, thus providing a means of obtaining minimum and maximum ages for pigment art. We report on the results of an initial radiocarbon beeswax dating programme at the Djulirri site complex. Results include the earliest age for a depiction of a Southeast Asian watercraft in Australian rock art, which is also Australia's earliest contact period rock art depiction discovered so far. Based on the probability distribution of the calibrated ages, it is 99.7% probable this image dates to before AD 1664 and likely is much older. The significance of this result is discussed in relation to early contact history, as revealed by historic documents and archaeological excavation. Other important results suggest a close encounter between local Aboriginal people and Europeans occurred in the 1700s, before British exploration and settlement in the Arnhem Land region.

Introduction

Arnhem Land is renowned for its extensive painted rockshelters, including some which are home to the most recent rock art of northern Australia (Chaloupka 1993; Chippindale and Taçon 1998; Lewis 1988; Taçon 1989). The Wellington Range study area (Figure 1), south of South Goulburn Island, is a particularly significant place for rock art in Arnhem Land, with many recent sites, unique contact period imagery and highly variable subject matter (May et al. 2010). As the northernmost outlier of the Kombolgie Sandstone that forms the famous Arnhem Land Plateau, there are many shelters with contact subject matter associated with Macassans and Europeans visiting the Arnhem coast.

Since mid-2008, over 200 art sites in the centre of the Wellington Range have been documented as part of two ARC-



Figure 1 Map of western Arnhem Land with the Wellington Range study area and the location of Djulirri indicated.

funded projects. The first, *Picturing Change*, focuses on rock art produced during the 'contact' period (i.e. the period in which Aboriginal Australians began contact with visitors to their lands). While *Picturing Change* involves fieldwork in four key regions (Wollemi National Park, the Pillara of Western Australia, central Australia, and western/northwestern Arnhem Land), this paper focuses on attempts to date contact imagery from Arnhem Land only and the significance of these findings to this Australia-wide initiative. The second project, *Baitja, Macassans, Batanda, and Bininj: Defining the Indigenous Past of Arnhem Land through Culture Contact*, is more focused on the Wellington Range and nearby coast. Besides rock art study, this project includes new excavations of rockshelters and Macassan stone lines. The dating of contact rock art imagery is central to both projects.

Djulirri is the largest art site documented in the Wellington Range. It forms part of the Maung language group's traditional territory and is located at the western side of senior traditional owner Ronald Lamilami's clan estate. Djulirri is considered one extremely large site by Aboriginal traditional owners. Each panel is less than 25m from its neighbour, close enough to be considered part of the same site from an archaeological point of view. Photographer Axel Poignant was taken to the site by Lamilami's father, Lazarus, in 1952 (Lamilami 1974; Poignant 1995).

During this visit, most likely the first by any non-Indigenous person, Poignant photographed key rock paintings shown to him by Lazarus and was told of their significance. In the 1970s, George Chaloupka (1993) photographed and described part of Djulirri's main panels but further research did not take place until 2008 when an intensive recording programme of the entire site commenced (see May et al. 2010; Taçon et al. 2010). Across a 55m length of dissected sandstone, Djulirri's main gallery was

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