Rock-art sites spread widely across Australia provide a rich record of culture contact and the fascination of Indigenous artists with the forms of vessels that have borne visitors and settlers to Australian shores.

Professor Paul Taçon of Griffith University, Queensland, has made extensive field studies of this genre and has written this introduction to the subject for Signals.

Australia has one of the largest, most diverse and oldest continuous rock-art traditions in the world, with over 100,000 sites and millions of images. Rock art consists of paintings, drawings, engravings, bas reliefs, stencils, prints and designs pressed onto the surface in beeswax. They are located in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and on rock platforms widely distributed across Australia. Today rock art is still being encountered and recorded by researchers in remote, rugged environments. However, there are also sites in and around cities with thousands of them found in the greater Sydney region. Some are in quite well-traversed locations; others lie almost unnoticed on rock surfaces in parks and reserves.

Rock-art sites are often important spiritual and historical places where aspects of group and individual identity and experience have been recorded visually, but they were also used in many other ways. When Asian mariners visited Australia’s northern shores at different periods, and Europeans arrived to settle across Australia, Indigenous artists added new subjects and styles to their sites to reflect the changing environment they found themselves in.

One of the most common new additions to rock-art sites consists of images of the things that brought the new people to their lands, especially boats and ships – but there are also depictions of horses, aircraft, motorised vehicles, buggies and even bicycles. In many other parts of the world, indigenous peoples who were still making rock art when outsiders arrived – especially in North America, southern Africa, New Zealand and some locations in South-East Asia – also engraved, painted and drew representations of new transport, occasionally even showing trains (in South Africa) or a motorcycle (in Malaysia).

The widespread act of depicting ships, by far the most common new subject, reflects a fascination with the large range of watercraft navigating past and arriving upon traditional lands. They are often a form of transport associated with first contact. In Australia, this has led to some sites now containing dozens of paintings of ships, while one in southern Thailand has over 70. In many cases these depictions of different ships were painted over hundreds of years.

Australia has more rock paintings of non-Indigenous watercraft than any other country, with several hundred scattered around the coastline and some at sites as much as a couple of hundred kilometers inland. Particularly large concentrations can be found in parts of northern Queensland, on Groote Island and in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, but there are smaller clusters in the Kimberley and Pilbara of Western Australia. Drawn and engraved ships can also be seen scattered across the greater Sydney region as far inland as Falconbridge in the Blue Mountains.

Most Australian rock-art ship depictions can be identified as being vessels of South-East Asian origin (for example various types of perahu, the Indonesian term for boat) or those of the European shipbuilding traditions including Australian colonial craft. Indigenous rock-art depictions were made from memory so often we see unusual combinations of features, making precise identification of vessels challenging and often impossible. Nonetheless, many detailed images can be described according to type. Only a few rock-art depictions of watercraft can be precisely correlated to particular known vessels.

The earliest surviving image of a foreign vessel that we know of is a yellow painting of a South-East Asian perahu at Djulirri, an outstanding Northern Territory rock-art site in Arnhem Land’s

On the rocks
ships at Aboriginal rock-art sites
Rock-art sites spread widely across Australia provide a rich record of culture contact and the fascination of Indigenous artists with the forms of vessels that have borne visitors and settlers to Australian shores. Professor Paul Taçon of Griffith University, Queensland, has made extensive field studies of this genre and has written this introduction to the subject for *Signals*.

**Australia has one of the largest**, most diverse and oldest continuous rock-art traditions in the world, with over 100,000 sites and millions of images. Rock art consists of paintings, drawings, engravings, bas reliefs, stencils, prints and designs pressed onto the surface in beeswax. They are located in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and on rock platforms widely distributed across Australia. Today rock art is still being encountered and recorded by researchers in remote, rugged environments. However, there are also sites in and around cities with thousands of them found in the greater Sydney region. Some are in quite well-traversed locations; others lie almost unnoticed on rock surfaces in parks and reserves.

Rock-art sites are often important spiritual and historical places where aspects of group and individual identity and experience have been recorded visually, but they were also used in many other ways. When Asian mariners visited Australia’s northern shores at different periods, and Europeans arrived to settle across Australia, Indigenous artists added new subjects and styles to their sites to reflect the changing environment they found themselves in.

One of the most common new additions to rock-art sites consists of images of the things that brought the new people to their lands, especially boats and ships – but there are also depictions of horses, aircraft, motorised vehicles, buggies and even bicycles. In many other parts of the world, indigenous peoples who were still making rock art when outsiders arrived – especially in North America, southern Africa, New Zealand and some locations in South-East Asia – also engraved, painted and drew representations of new transport, occasionally even showing trains (in South Africa) or a motorcycle (in Malaysia).

The widespread act of depicting ships, by far the most common new subject, reflects a fascination with the large range of watercraft navigating past and arriving upon traditional lands. They are often a form of transport associated with first contact. In Australia, this has led to some sites now containing dozens of paintings of ships, while one in southern Thailand has over 70. In many cases these depictions of different ships were painted over hundreds of years.

Australia has more rock paintings of non-Indigenous watercraft than any other country, with several hundred scattered around the coastline and some at sites as much as a couple of hundred kilometers inland. Particularly large concentrations can be found in parts of northern Queensland, on Groote Island and in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, but there are smaller clusters in the Kimberley and Pilbara of Western Australia. Drawn and engraved ships can also be seen scattered across the greater Sydney region as far inland as Falconbridge in the Blue Mountains.

Most Australian rock-art ship depictions can be identified as being vessels of South-East Asian origin (for example various types of *perahu*, the Indonesian term for boat) or those of the European shipbuilding traditions including Australian colonial craft. Indigenous rock-art depictions were made from memory so often we see unusual combinations of features, making precise identification of vessels challenging and often impossible. Nonetheless, many detailed images can be described according to type. Only a few rock-art depictions of watercraft can be precisely correlated to particular known vessels.

The earliest surviving image of a foreign vessel that we know of is a yellow painting of a South-East Asian *perahu* at Djulirri, an outstanding Northern Territory rock-art site in Arnhem Land’s...
The widespread act of depicting ships, by far the most common new subject, reflects a fascination with the large range of watercraft navigating past and arriving upon traditional lands.

Wellington Range (shown on this page, top left). Perahu can be identified at rock-art sites because of distinctive types of sails, tripod masts, the shapes of the hull ends and other features associated with those boatbuilding traditions. At Djiurri, the perahu image is overlain by parts of other paintings and a snake made out of beeswax pellets pressed onto the shelter wall.

Recent radiocarbon dating of the beeswax snake design on top of the perahu painting suggests this depiction was made prior to at least 1664 and probably much earlier, since the beeswax figure has a date range of 1517 to 1664 and a median age of 1577 according to the variability assigned to the radiocarbon dating technique.

A second perahu painting, in white (below left), has a beeswax female human figure over part of it with a date range of 1644 to 1662 and a median age of about 1777.

The minimum dates for these two perahu paintings are significant as they support the theory that people from South-East Asia were visiting Australia’s northern shores well before the start of the trepang (sea cucumber or bêche de mer) industry, an organised fishery carried out by people known collectively as Macassans who sailed each year from parts of the Indonesian archipelago, from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. This is argued by historians to have commenced about 1780, based upon the available documentary evidence. The yellow perahu is the oldest dated contact subject from any rock-art site in the country. The minimum age from carbon dating suggests that visits from South-East Asia occurred around the same time the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and other Europeans first sailed near or to northern Australia, and perhaps even before.

Many paintings of ships in Australian Aboriginal rock art are compositions with new features added by different artists over time. For instance, at Djiurri one of the oldest dated paintings of a European vessel is a three-masted ship (shown on page 42). Numerous samples from beeswax designs over and under the ship were radiocarbon dated. They consistently revealed the painting was made sometime in the late 1700s or early 1800s, and so represents a sailing ship even though no yards or sails are evident. Later a funnel was added in and on the middle of the deck, complete with smoke billowing from the top, turning the painting into what now resembles a steamer from the late 1800s or early 1900s. On two occasions some crew members, shown with hats and pipes, were painted standing on deck, first in red and later in white. The result is a mosaic of imagery and colour that documents changes in maritime movements along the coast about 20 km north of the site.

Supporting the observation that additions were made to the original tall-ship painting are two similar tall ships in other parts of Djiurri’s main gallery that did not have new additions. Furthermore, at Malarak, another site in the Wellington Range, two small lugger-like ships were initially painted next to each other in white. More painting was done later to join them together, making a painting of a much a larger ship. A funnel was also added, turning the painting into a large depiction of a steam ship rather than two smaller vessels.

Some paintings highlight the essential features of ships, illustrating them in a schematic rather than totally realistic manner. For instance, there are paintings where ships are shown in full sail but also with an anchor deployed from a chain or cable below, something not normally seen in real life. Occasionally in Arnhem Land, cargo is shown in the hold of ships using the region’s traditional x-ray convention of depicting the inside of things as well as the outside.

In various parts of the country, especially from the Pilbara across to Groote Island, crew members are shown standing on board ship depictions. Sometimes the captain is illustrated with a hand on the wheel or someone is shown looking through a telescope (page 43, top). In both the Pilbara and western Arnhem Land, European crew members are often illustrated with their hands resting on their hips. People from South-East Asia standing on ships are not shown this way and a global survey indicates that in many parts of Australia, and several other countries as well, Indigenous artists distinguished depictions of Europeans at rock-art sites from other people by using a ‘hands on hips’ convention.

On Groote Island, human figures shown on the decks of large perahu were painted in different colours, perhaps reflecting the ethnically diverse crew known to be on board, originating from various seafaring cultures of South-East Asia as well as Aboriginal Australians and even indigenous Papuans.

Changing maritime technology is illustrated through the accumulation of different sorts of ship imagery over time, with 20th-century war ships and ‘love boat’ cruise ships added most recently. At Mount Borradaile in the Northern Territory, an elaborate
Perahu can be identified at rock-art sites because of distinctive types of imagery and colour that documents beginnings of contact. The widespread act of depicting ships, illustrating them out of beeswax pellets pressed onto the shelter wall, has a beeswax female human figure over it. Another, smaller painting, in white (below), is visible to the right. Arnhemland Signals June to August 2012

The minimum age from carbon dating suggests that visits from South-East Asia were visiting Australia’s northern shores well before the start of the trepang (sea cucumber or bêche-de-mer) industry, an organised fishery of the region’s traditional lands and arriving upon parts of the Indonesian archipelago, as Macassans who sailed each year from South-East Asia as the de mer (merchants) would have arrived. The typical tripod mast and sail can be identified at rock-art sites because of distinctive types of imagery and colour that documents beginnings of contact. Wellington Range (shown on this page, top left), has a beeswax female human figure over it. Another, smaller painting, in white (below), is visible to the right. Arnhemland Signals June to August 2012

Some paintings highlight the essential features of ships, illustrating them in a schematic rather than totally realistic manner. For instance, there are paintings depicting the inside of things as well as the outside. Of particular interest are the depictions of Europeans, their ships and other features associated with the region’s traditional x-ray convention. In some instances, people are painted standing on deck, first in red and later in white. The result is a mosaic of imagery and colour that documents beginnings of contact.

This is argued by historians to have commenced about 1780, based upon many factors. The minimum dates for these two paintings are significant as they support the theory that people from South-East Asia were visiting Australia’s northern shores well before the start of the trepang (sea cucumber or bêche-de-mer) industry, an organised fishery of the region’s traditional lands and arriving upon parts of the Indonesian archipelago, as Macassans who sailed each year from South-East Asia, known to be on board, originating from various seafaring cultures of South-East Asia as well as Aboriginal Australians and even indigenous Papuans. Changing maritime technology reflecting the ethnically diverse crew of depicting the inside of things as well as the outside. Of particular interest are the depictions of Europeans, their ships and other features associated with the region’s traditional x-ray convention. In some instances, people are painted standing on deck, first in red and later in white. The result is a mosaic of imagery and colour that documents beginnings of contact.

In various parts of the country, ship paintings are significant as they support the theory that people from South-East Asia were visiting Australia’s northern shores well before the start of the trepang (sea cucumber or bêche-de-mer) industry, an organised fishery of the region’s traditional lands and arriving upon parts of the Indonesian archipelago, as Macassans who sailed each year from South-East Asia, known to be on board, originating from various seafaring cultures of South-East Asia as well as Aboriginal Australians and even indigenous Papuans. Changing maritime technology reflecting the ethnically diverse crew of depicting the inside of things as well as the outside. Of particular interest are the depictions of Europeans, their ships and other features associated with the region’s traditional x-ray convention. In some instances, people are painted standing on deck, first in red and later in white. The result is a mosaic of imagery and colour that documents beginnings of contact.
composition with all manner of ship painting has been interpreted as a representation of Darwin Harbour, shown on the opening pages of this article. It includes a warship, a passenger ship and vessels with forms that can readily be associated with the pearling industry and/or island workboats or mission boats.

In New South Wales, there are a number of rock engravings of ships of non-Aboriginal origin, most likely by Europeans. Among those that are confidently attributed to Aboriginal artists, however, are both a drawing (shown opposite) and an engraving of what may well be HMS Lady Nelson, the little 60-ton brig that, in the words of the Sydney Gazette, served the colony for more than a quarter of a century, contributing more to its exploration and settlement than any other. Used by Matthew Flinders and others, she was the first to sail through Bass Strait and the first to enter Port Phillip, transported the first settlers to Tasmania, and sailed up and down the Hawkesbury River in the early 1800s between explorations of the east Australian coast.

Much of the current investigation into rock-art depictions of ships resulted from a research project called Picturing Change that began in 2008, a collaboration with colleagues from Griffith University, The Australian National University, the University of Western Australia and the University of New England. During this project, rock art made after the arrival of Asians and Europeans began to be examined systematically on a national scale for the first time. Many exciting discoveries have been made in the process, resulting in both publications...
Australia has more rock paintings of non-Indigenous watercraft than any other country, with several hundred scattered around the coastline and at inland sites as well.

and films. A lavishly illustrated volume on maritime subject matter in rock art, to be published next year, will highlight the importance of this and other contact rock art as an Indigenous historical archive of life-transforming, cross-cultural encounter, experience and expression.

Professor Paul S C Taçon FAHA FSA has edited three books and published over 170 scientific papers on prehistoric art, material culture and contemporary Indigenous issues. He is a specialist in rock art, landscape archaeology and the relationship between art and identity. Professor Taçon is currently Chair in Rock Art Research and Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Queensland. He also directs Griffith University’s PERAHU (Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit). He was formerly Principal Research Scientist in Anthropology at the Australian Museum in Sydney.

Professor Paul S C Taçon FAHA FSA has edited three books and published over 170 scientific papers on prehistoric art, material culture and contemporary Indigenous issues. He is a specialist in rock art, landscape archaeology and the relationship between art and identity. Professor Taçon is currently Chair in Rock Art Research and Professor of Anthropology and Archaeology in the School of Humanities, Griffith University, Queensland. He also directs Griffith University’s PERAHU (Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit). He was formerly Principal Research Scientist in Anthropology at the Australian Museum in Sydney.