

**PAINTED SHIPS ON A PAINTED ARNHEM LAND LANDSCAPE**

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**Introduction**

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rock art is an extraordinary pictorial record of life in the north of Australia, often hailed as representing the world's longest continuing artistic traditions.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, it is also a unique archive of Australian *history*, revealing relationships between local Aboriginal groups and visitors to their shores. In this paper we explore the contact period rock art and, more specifically, depictions of ships at a site called *Djulirri* (also spelt *Djurrirri*) in north western Arnhem Land, Australia. During our 2008-2012 study of contact rock art we found that, in northern Australia, ships dominate the introduced imagery made during the last 500 years.<sup>2</sup> This,

in turn, has forced us to question how rock art can help us understand the roles that these ships played in Aboriginal life and the impact of new maritime ventures on local communities.

Contact rock art is a little studied area in Australia yet this archive provides us with some of the only contemporary Indigenous accounts of interactions that were taking place after the arrival of Asians and Europeans. Working with Traditional Owner Ronald Lamilami and his family, fieldwork was undertaken in the Wellington Range area of northwestern Arnhem Land between 2008 – 2011 to document contact rock art, as part of the *Picturing Change* and *Baijini, Macassans, Balanda, and Bininj* projects (see Taçon and May editorial, this volume). During our surveys of the Wellington Range (Figure 1) we recorded over 200 rock art sites, with contact period rock art concentrated in a number of particular locations.<sup>3</sup> Three rock art complexes were then selected for more detailed recording and analysis. These site complexes are known locally as *Malarrak*, *Maliwawa (Bald Rock)*, and *Djulirri*. Each complex consists of multiple rock shelters housing a large number of rock paintings, beeswax figures, stencils and prints. Rock shelters with hundreds of rock paintings are not unusual in this part of Arnhem Land, however, our selection of case study sites was based on the number and diversity of contact images present in the Wellington Range.<sup>4</sup>

Map of Northern Australia

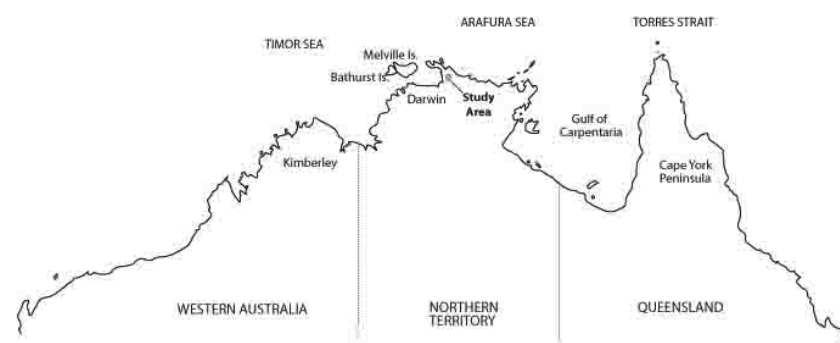


Figure 1: Map of northern Australia showing study area.

For this paper, we focus on one of these case study sites – *Djulirri*, a site recently added to the Northern Territory Heritage Register and now nominated for National Heritage Listing (Figure 2). Djulirri is the

*Maung* language name for a series of rock shelters that adjoin each other and overlook a long valley of other painted rock shelters. It sits approximately 20 kilometres from the coast in the Wellington Range sandstone massif which is surrounded by coastal plains and a number of small to large rivers that feed out into the sea. It was important to the team that all surviving rock art at a site was documented, not just the contact period art or the introduced subject matter such as ships, horses and guns. This allowed us to analyse contact art within its full rock art context. At just the main gallery of this site over 1100 individual rock paintings, 46 beeswax figures, 17 stencils and 1 print were documented.



Figure 2: General view of one section of the Djulirri rock art complex, Arnhem Land.

Before looking specifically at the ships, it is important to have a general idea of the contact rock art present. To summarise, the earliest identifiable contact art at Djulirri (and the oldest yet found in Australia) dates to before AD1664 (and possibly to sometime in the 1500s) with the depiction of a yellow painted Macassan prau.<sup>5</sup> This prau is painted beneath a beeswax ‘snake’ that was sampled and radiocarbon dated, hence, providing a minimum age. Importantly, many hundreds of paintings were produced at Djulirri after this date and continued to be produced until approximately 50 years ago. Other contact rock art at this site includes a bicycle, a buggy, letters from the English Alphabet, Ngalyod (the Rainbow Serpent), and kangaroos depicted in x-ray form.<sup>6</sup>

At least 25 introduced types of watercraft (including praus) are painted at Djulirri and research is still continuing into the possible

identity and age of many of these vessels. Rather than discussing each of the ships individually, we focus on six key examples for this paper. First, however, it is important to acknowledge that Arnhem Land rock art is not always a literal depiction of the subject matter and, in our analysis to-date, there are rarely definitive matches between the rock art images and named ships – thus we take a cautious approach to identification. While some ships may have been seen by or visited or worked upon by local Aboriginal people, others may be a mixture of features from different ships sometimes with additions being made over time, perhaps by different artists. Some show less familiarity between artist and subject matter. Other paintings suggest that the artist may have only seen their subject matter in magazines, newspapers, books or possibly as decoration on tobacco tins in the nineteenth century. One of the remarkable aspects of Djulirri is the ability to explore these issues thanks to a diversity of depictions over a long time period.

It has become increasingly apparent to the authors of this paper that a solely technical analysis of paintings of ships in rock art does little to increase our understanding of the images themselves and the cultures of which they are part. Technical analysis does assist in defining the multiple layers of change that may occur within a single motif which in turn reflects industrial chronologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. We firmly believe that such images must first be considered in their archaeological and rock art context. The case studies presented in this paper highlight not only the shortfalls of non-contextualised descriptive analysis of ships in rock art but also the enormous benefits of merging archaeology, rock art studies and maritime history to study the contact period in Australia.

### Prau

The oldest non-Indigenous vessels depicted at Djulirri are almost certainly prau (also known as proa or perahu). These vessels relate to the often overlooked period in Australian history when fleets made seasonal visits from southern Sulawesi (predominantly from Macassar, hence the reference to *Macassan* prau) and neighbouring regions to northern Australia to harvest trepang and trade with Aboriginal groups for goods such as turtle shell, iron wood and pearl shells, in return providing items such as food, tobacco, alcohol, cloth, axes and knives.<sup>7</sup> Large

and regular fleets of prau sailed in with the northwest monsoon each December and returned home with the southeast trade winds around March or April.<sup>8</sup> These seasonal visits ceased around 1906.<sup>9</sup> During their visits, the Macassans are thought to have developed close social as well as economic ties with the local Aboriginal groups across coastal Arnhem Land and including Groote Eylandt.<sup>10</sup> Abundant accounts have reliably noted that Aboriginal men worked as crew aboard Indonesian sailing vessels.<sup>11</sup> The yellow painted prau at Djulirri is currently the earliest rock art evidence we have for Macassan contact with Australian shores<sup>12</sup> (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Yellow painted prau from Djulirri (left) and enhanced version (with DStretch) of the same image (right) showing the prau underneath other paintings and beeswax figures.

The main characteristics shown in Aboriginal representations of praus can be understood by looking at the designs of the various vessels used in southern Sulawesi and its nearby region, from whence the Macassan seafarers originated. A number of key features in Arnhem Land paintings of praus have been identified including (but not limited to): (a) high projections at bow and stern, (b) multiple projections from the bow, (c) tripod masts and rectangular sails, (d) twin rudders, and (e) deck housing.<sup>13</sup>

The early prau at Djulirri (Figure 3) is a good example of a Macassan vessel with its distinctive tripod mast and rectangular sails but lacks the detail of prau painted in other areas visited by Macassans, especially Groote Eylandt.<sup>14</sup> Clarke and Frederick<sup>15</sup> suggest that the detail of Groote Eylandt prau paintings reflects the frequency and duration of Macassan visitation over European visitation. At Djulirri this is, in fact, the opposite with European vessels depicted with greater detail and frequency than prau. Whether or not this suggests a less substantial (or very different) relationship between Macassan visitors and Aboriginal communities in northwest Arnhem Land is the subject of ongoing research.

### Steamers

One of the paintings that most drew our attention at Djulirri was the depiction of a steamer in profile with intricate detail including port holes and a bow wave (Figure 4). The style of this painting is very unusual for the art of this area. For instance, the angle on which the ship is painted and the possible alternative view of the same ship (Figure 5) suggest an artist with some training in European methods perhaps through their schooling on nearby Goulburn Island or at the Gunbalanya (Oenpelli)



Figure 4: Painting of steamer from Djulirri.

Mission.<sup>16</sup> Goulburn Island Aboriginal men were also no strangers to modern seafaring in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, as crewing and even skippering Mission boats has been well documented.<sup>17</sup> The attention to

detail and the use of perspective and colour all add to the uniqueness of this image.



Figure 5: Front view of ship painting from Djulirri, possibly the same ship as depicted in Figure 4.

The steamers painted at Djulirri could represent vessels such as the Burns Philp ship *M.V. Merkur* (5,946 grt, 393 x 51.9 ft) or her sister ship the *M.V. Neptuna* (5,944 grt, 393.1 x 52 ft) (Figure 6). These sister ships, both with twin funnels as in the rock painting, were built in 1924 for Flensburger Dampfer Co by Krupps. The ships were originally named *Rio Panuca* and *Rio Bravo* and operated in North and South American services, before being laid up during the depression in 1931. They were purchased by Norddeutscher Lloyd and renamed *Neptuna* and *Merkur* in 1934 for use on the Australia-New Guinea-Hong Kong service but Australian objections to this intrusion into its traditional routes led to the cessation of the plan and the sale of the two ships to Burns Philp in 1935. *Neptuna* operated from 1935 to 1942 for Burns Philp, and *Merkur* from 1935 to 1953. *Neptuna* operated the Hong Kong route, while

*Merkur* joined *Marella* on the Singapore – Java service via Darwin. *Neptuna* was sent to Darwin with supplies days before the Japanese bombing, and her cargo of mines exploded during the attack, sinking the ship at the wharf and killing 45 men. *Merkur* continued on the Singapore service after the war, she was overhauled and given a black hull in 1949, and was sent to the breakers in 1954.<sup>18</sup> Importantly for the interpretation of this rock painting, *Merkur* and *Neptuna* appear to have been the only Burns Philp ships with twin funnels. These Burns Philp ships are regularly referred to in accounts by the Missionaries that went to the AIMS missions across Arnhem Land.<sup>19</sup> Lamilami<sup>20</sup> notes that he and others were frequently sailing between Goulburn Island and Darwin harbour where they would encounter the Burns Philp steamers.



Figure 6: Possibly a modified MV *Neptuna* in c.1942, a ship similar to that painted at Djulirri and depicted in Figures 4&5 (courtesy National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn4349313).

There is no doubt that Djulirri was still being used by local Aboriginal people during World War Two. Surface artefacts (i.e. bottle shard dated 1942) stand alongside the rock art as evidence. It is the detail of this painting that suggests a ship well-known to the artist, perhaps having sighted the steamer or seen it in newspapers. After the establishment of the Goulburn Island Mission in 1916, it is possible that the artist came across these ships during World War Two as Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land commonly travelled as far as Darwin at this time.

### Two masted sailing vessel, steamer or both?

As with other rock art across Arnhem Land, a seemingly straightforward painting of a ship is actually very complex. On publication of an earlier article<sup>21</sup> this image (Figure 7) and its caption attracted the attention of a number of maritime historians and archaeologists. What many failed to recognise (and what was very difficult for non-rock art researchers to see from a small photograph in a journal article) was that this image was not produced in one sitting and probably not by any one artist but is the product of layering and retouching or reworking original images to produce something different.<sup>22</sup> This is not uncommon in rock art of western and north western Arnhem Land (or in other areas of Australia such as the Kimberley).



Figure 7: Layered painting of ships from Djulirri, northwestern Arnhem Land.

Detailed analysis further adds to our understanding of layered painting. Originally the ship was most likely a two masted vessel painted using red ochre (almost pink in colour) with human figures with hands on hips standing on deck to the left (only one is still clear). The ship also has a large almost Macassan-style rudder. Later the vessel was completely re-outlined in red with additional rectangles across the side of the ship and a smokestack with smoke added. Perhaps during the same sitting, the neighbouring painting of a crocodile leg was also re-outlined and lengthened so it crosses over the top of the ship. Another repainting event took place using kaolin clay (white) whereby the artist added two

crew members on deck, as well as some letters, and reoutlined some of the rectangles on the hull. The shape of the hull is significantly different to the other steamship at Djulirri (including Figure 4) and to those at Mt. Borradaile.<sup>23</sup>

It is unlikely we will ever know exactly which ship the artists were originally depicting (if they were in fact thinking of just one ship at all). Twin masted vessels visited northern Australia regularly from the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The artists could have seen such vessels along the coast and at major settlements (such as Victoria Settlement/Pt Essington and Fort Dundas) throughout this period. For example, in 1827, Captain Stirling commanded the HMS *Success* and was accompanied by 3 merchant vessels to establish Fort Wellington.<sup>24</sup> The ships involved in starting the Fort Wellington settlement included the HMS *Success* and the merchant vessels were known as the *Marquis Of Landsdowne*, and the *Amity* and Caledonian brigs.<sup>25</sup> Figure 8 illustrates one example of a two masted vessel from 1840 near Pt Essington. Interestingly the artist chose to depict three Aboriginal men (one in European dress) surveying the scene from a distance. While local Aboriginal people would have been very familiar with Indonesian sailing vessels (prau) visiting their shores, in 1840 the site of a British sailing vessel under repair would still have been considered unusual. In cases such as the HMS *Pelorus*, Aboriginal people had the opportunity to see parts of the ship usually hidden below the waterline. It is interesting to note, however, that the Royal Navy vessels, such as HMS *Pelorus*, were predominantly square rigged, whereas the vast majority of depictions found to date in Aboriginal art appear to be fore-and-aft rigged. As suggested below, this may reflect the experience of Aboriginal artists, who were familiar with, and often worked on or travelled on fore-and-aft rigged ships, but seldom on larger square-riggers.

In terms of the later adaptation to a steamship there are a few possibilities. These ships are possible candidates due to the limited number of single funnel, two masted ships navigating the north Australia waters. Twin masted steamships were utilised on the Overland Telegraph Line supply run to the Roper River depot in 1872. The SS *Young Australian* puts into South Goulburn Island in 1872 to wait out rough weather conditions and affect repairs after becoming waterlogged. From this time, Goulburn Island becomes known as a safe harbour with



Figure 8: H.M.S. *Pelorus* at low water, 1840 (Owen Stanley, State Library of NSW).

fresh water. An etching in the *Northern Territory Times and Gazette* in 1899 illustrates the SS *Cygnets* cruising past the Goulburn Islands.

One possibility is the S.S. *Wollowra* operating for the Adelaide Steamship Company on the Australian coast from 1894 to 1915.<sup>26</sup> Alternatively, the *Changsha* and *Taiyuan*, built in 1886 in Scotland, together with two sister ships, operated for the China Navigation Company transporting Chinese migrants and labourers between China and Australia from 1886. In 1912 the Australian-Oriental Line purchased the *Changsha* and *Taiyuan*, as well as Burns Philp's *Guthrie*, to carry on the same trade, taking a route from Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Queensland ports, Thursday Island, Darwin, the Philippines, to Hong Kong. They maintained this route until 1926, when they were replaced with new ships.<sup>27</sup>

There are also other possibilities – the S.S. *Airlie* and *Guthrie* (Figure 9) operated for Eastern and Australian Steamship Company from 1884, then Burns Philp from 1904, between Singapore and Australia, with stops at Darwin. *Airlie* was withdrawn and broken up in 1912, the *Guthrie* was sold to the Australian-Oriental Line (see above), but only ran one trip before being sold on again and wrecked in 1914.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the S.S. *Coolgardie* operated on the Western Australian goldfields trade for McIlwraith McEacharn as the *Boswell Castle* (1896-1899) then the *Coolgardie* (1899-1913). The ship then operated for other owners in the Pacific until broken up in 1922.<sup>29</sup>

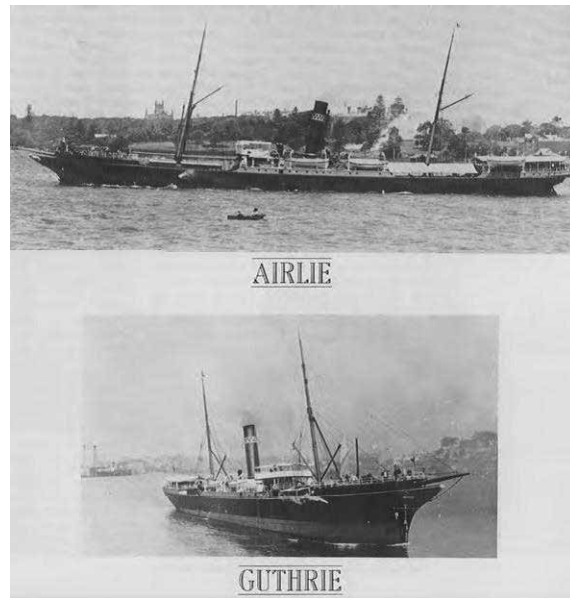


Figure 9: S.S. *Airlie* and *Guthrie* (Plowman 1981 Vol 1: 136).

However you look at this series of paintings there is no simple answer to the question of identification. The significant chronological value though is that these larger twin masted sailing steamers were antiquated and on their way out of common use by the 1920s in Northern Territory waters. Considered in its wider archaeological context, however, it forms part of a wonderful story of shipping and Aboriginal re-use and re-touching of paintings of ships.

### Naval Vessels

Painted immediately adjacent to the twin funnel steamer (depicted in Figure 4) is another vessel possibly associated with naval activities (see Figure 10). While not precise, the image seems to show what appears to be two single gun mounts or at least two projections forward and aft, a single funnel, two masts connected by lines (possibly a radio array), a raised bridge and flush deck, with vertical bow and stern entry lines. While some colonial gun-boats had guns incorporated into the main superstructure as shown here, they also had very little freeboard forward, and hence a very distinctive profile, not shared by this image. In all later naval vessels the guns were on stand-alone gun mounts or in separated turrets. One possible but not particularly good match is

with HMAS *Gayundah*, one of two sister ship gunboats purchased by the Queensland colonial administration in 1884 and subsequently transferred to the Australian navy. Designed for coastal defence, the ship had a very low freeboard fore and aft, with a forward gun mounted within the main superstructure, and a rear gun in an open turret, together with lighter armaments. She had two masts and a single funnel, though at the time she was in Northern Territory waters in 1911 her forward gun had been removed, and from 1914 her bow had been built up to increase seaworthiness.



Figure 10: Rock painting from Djulirri, possibly a naval vessel from World War Two.

*Gayundah* had an interesting role in northern Australian history. In 1911 the *Gayundah* was sent on a cruise to Broome, to show the presence of the new Royal Australian Navy in northern seas, and reinforce Australia's power to control and impose customs duties on the fishing, trepang (*beche de mer*) harvesting, and pearling activities of Indonesian ships. HMAS *Gayundah* anchored in Bowen Strait between the southern end of Croker Island and mainland Arnhem Land for 3 days from the 30 July to the 1 August 1911, an area frequented by local Indigenous traditional owners crossing the strait between Croker Island and the mainland. During this time there was a great deal of mobility by various traditional land owning groups between the Coburg Peninsula, Croker Island, and adjoining areas, including the nearby Wellington Range where the Djulirri rock art gallery is located, and it is

highly likely that Traditional Owners came into contact with the HMAS *Gayundah* during this time.

Considering other naval vessels roughly fitting the characteristics of the rock art example, River and Bay Class frigates of World War Two had fore and aft single guns and single funnels, and operated out of Darwin, but had only one mast. A closer fit to this painting could be the Bathurst Class minesweeper, of which over 50 were built after 1940 and many frequented Darwin and northern waters during WWII, but these vessels lacked a flush deck.

A more likely possibility than any of these is that the image is of HMAS *Moresby*, a survey vessel based often in Darwin (Figure 11). *Moresby*, built as a 24 Class Convoy Sloop HMS *Silvio* in 1918, was acquired as a survey vessel for the RAN in 1925 and carried out much survey work in northern Australia before being sold in 1947. The vessel was 276.5 ft long, and 1650 tons. The ship had a flush deck, like the painting, one deck of accommodation, raised bridge, single funnel, two masts and projections (crane spars and awning frames) forward and aft of the superstructure. She had a vertical bow and stern, and carried a variety of guns in different positions at different times. If the painting does in fact depict HMAS *Moresby*, it would suggest a close association in dating between the images making up the panel of several vessels and a bi-plane depicted at Djulirri — all could have been operating in the region in the 1930s.



Figure 11: HMAS *Moresby* (Australian War Memorial P02305020 and 301056)

## Luggers

While some vessel types painted at Djulirri are represented by only an individual example, others are in abundance. Luggers are a case in point with many depictions at Djulirri, and other Wellington Range rock art sites, and hundreds of them operating in northern waters from the 1880s through into the 1970s (Figure 12). It is unlikely in these cases, unless some specific link can be made between a boat and an historical event depicted on the rock, that a positive match between the rock art and a single named lugger will be found.



Figure 12: ‘Three men standing in pearling lugger on water, Palmerston [i.e. Darwin], ca. 1890’ (Florenz Bleaser collection, National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn3797940).

The appearance of lugger-style craft at Djulirri (Figure 13) is not surprising, as the pearling and supply luggers must have been the most common ship type along the Northern Territory coast during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many Aboriginal people in the north had experience of the pearling industry. The pearling industry started in 1861 in Western Australia, based initially at Cossack, then at Broome from the 1880s. The shell beds of Darwin were discovered in 1884, and 100 boats travelled from Thursday Island in Torres Strait to test out the grounds, with disappointing results.<sup>30</sup> Various reports in



the Northern Territory Times and Gazette contain references to luggers being utilised as general purpose maritime workhorses in northern Australian waters, supplying buffalo shooters, missions, and customs stations.



Figure 13: Rock painting of a lugger from Djulirri.

Pearling ‘luggers’ were not strictly luggers at all (i.e. they did not have ‘lug’ sails), but were gaff-rigged ketches. Ketches are two-masted vessels, with the aft mast shorter than the mainmast forward. The gaff rig was easy to operate and versatile. The generic term ‘lugger’ was also applied to many other types of vessel engaged in the pearling industry. The early luggers were small vessels of 9-10 m long and 10-15 tons, operating in conjunction with larger mother ships that were often schooners (also often gaff-rigged but with more complicated rigs and 2 or 3 masts of equal height or the aft or central mast the higher). Luggers, however, increased in size over time, and by the mid 20th century many were over double the earlier tonnage and most were motorised.

As O’Connor and Arrow<sup>31</sup> argue for the Kimberley region, the depiction of luggers (and other types of ship) is not a case of an artist depicting an unknown or unusual contact event:

“While the boats represented are European and therefore are categorised as ‘contact art’, it is unlikely they were perceived as ‘foreign’ by the Indigenous people painting them... the three European boats described here would have been a common sight along this coast

from the early 1900s until as late as the 1950s”.<sup>32</sup>

The luggers depicted at Djulirri would have been very familiar to the Aboriginal artist/s and, as such, they were depicting their own life rather than just commenting on the strange activities of the ‘other’. Roberts<sup>33</sup> work at nearby Mt Borradaile also reveals a dominance of sloops, cutters, ketches and schooners in rock art – all common vessels in this area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and all used to supply a variety of industries such as buffalo shooting camps, timber milling, as well as Anglican and Catholic Missions – the new places Aboriginal people associated with and increasingly resided in.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Our research emphasises that depictions of ships in rock art have potential to deepen our understanding of the maritime history of this country, but from an Indigenous perspective. At Djulirri, and throughout the west and northwest of Arnhem Land, we have a detailed Aboriginal pictorial account of Australia’s maritime history. Unravelling this history is a mammoth task that will continue for many years. It requires expertise from a range of disciplines, including rock art, Indigenous archaeology, history, and more. It also requires a holistic approach to analysis incorporating descriptive analysis of the design features of individual paintings alongside of wider rock art and archaeological studies. A descriptive analysis alone does little to further our understanding of this important heritage.

It is clear from our research that in northern Australia ships played a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal people in this area since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Artists have depicted this subject matter as part of ongoing artistic systems of representation but in far higher numbers than other contact period subject matter, such as guns, horses, and cattle. This can now be proven thanks to our wide-scale archaeological/rock art surveys of the area. So why depict so many ships? And what can these depictions teach us about the role of such watercraft in Aboriginal life at the time? The examples presented in this paper help to answer these questions in their own way. They tell stories of vessels well-known across the northern coast of Australia and others that might only have been seen once. As well, they suggest artists were not only familiar with their subject matter but also not afraid to use ‘artistic licence’ and

new techniques for painting. The paintings reflect the involvement of Indigenous communities in the new maritime industries and technologies that appear on their coastlines. They suggest watercraft became part of Aboriginal story-telling traditions but were not stagnant instead being updated and renewed with the coming of new watercraft into north Australian waters. While European artists aboard ships travelling the coast of Australia may have believed they were the observers, in fact, Aboriginal artists were engaging in similar behaviour.

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