Maritime contact history and rock art

The arrival of Europeans and Asians to indigenous lands of Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific heralded great change for the native inhabitants of these areas. Although there is an extensive literature about contact history and the changes that occurred with colonisation, until recently there has been little published on how rock art can inform this topic. Rock art consists of human-made marks on natural rock – paintings, drawings, stencils, prints, engravings, bas-relief and figures made of beeswax. It is found all over the world in rock shelters and caves, on boulders and platforms. These are special, often spectacular places that reflect ancient and contemporary experience, identity, history, spirituality and relationships to land. Rock art also provides us with unique insights into human cultural evolution, settlement patterns, what long extinct animals looked like and contact between different cultures. In this sense rock art can be considered a unique historical archive.

In order to explore ways in which rock art could be used as an historical archive alongside written records, photographs, oral history and archaeological excavation we developed a project on contact period
rock art, the first national study of this kind. The project, *Picturing Change: 21st century perspectives on recent Australian rock art, especially after European contact*, began in 2008 with funding from the Australian Research Council. It was initiated by the authors with Alistair Paterson and June Ross. Some of the aims in establishing this project were to:

- Use contact rock art imagery to give voice to Indigenous artists and their communities
- Re-define our understanding of Australian contact rock art
- Explore the impact of contact encounters on particular communities and how these interactions were mediated through rock art
- Define how rock art changes (or does not change) throughout the contact period
- Explore regional, Australia-wide, and international trends in contact rock art

*Picturing Change* includes study in four key regions – Wollemi National Park (NSW), the Pilbara (WA), Central Australia (NT), and western/northwestern Arnhem Land (NT). Alongside *Picturing Change*, Daryl Wesley has been investigating the archaeology of northwestern Arnhem Land through an Australian Research Council-funded project with Sue O’Connor: *Baijini, Macassans, Balanda, and Bininj: Defining the Indigenous past of Arnhem Land through Culture Contact*. Wesley’s work focuses on changes that have occurred in the Indigenous occupation of northwestern Arnhem Land since the earliest contact. He is investigating the interrelationship between local populations, Macassans, and Europeans. In particular, he is focused on the Indigenous and Macassan archaeological sites to explore the chronology and complexity of occupation in the local area through rock art and the excavation of cultural deposits in rock shelters and at Macassan shore based trepang processing sites.

**Things that bring new people**

One of the first observations we made while conducting field research was that transport – the things that brought new peoples to Indigenous lands – was one of the most popular themes in Australian contact rock art and in a number of rock art bodies overseas. Ships and boats are particularly frequent but there are also depictions of horses, camels, aircraft, trains, buggies, bicycles and motor vehicles. At some sites in Australia, such as Djulirri in Arnhem Land’s Wellington Range, there are dozens of rock art depictions of ships of varying ages at the one location along with other forms of transport (May et al.). There are also many smaller rock art sites where certain watercraft were engraved, painted or drawn that are just as significant, such as Inthanoona in the Pilbara of Western Australia (Paterson and Van Duivenvoorde). Indeed, as we explored further we soon found there is a wealth of maritime imagery in rock art as well as Indigenous material culture and that a lot of it, although very detailed, was made soon after various contact events.

It must have been an amazing experience for Indigenous people to see unusually large watercraft full of new people wearing strange dress for the first time. But for the most part fascination overcame fear and Indigenous peoples were more than happy to go on board the great wooden beasts that arrived on their shores. Thus Bungaree of Sydney became one of Australia’s great maritime explorers, accompanying Matthew Finders and Phillip Parker King on key voyages that accurately charted Australia’s coastline for the first time. The indigenous Motu people of what is now the Port Moresby area of Papua New Guinea were so fascinated by a visit by the H.M.S. *Basilisk* in February 1873, the first European vessel and the first Europeans they had encountered, that they insisted on measuring and recording its length and breadth, as Captain John Moresby recounts:

> On one occasion an incident happened here which bringing with them a bundle of rushes, and knotting them together carefully measured the length and breadth of the ship. They evidently wished to preserve a record of the size, for they stowed the rush lines away in their canoe with many signs of wonderment.

Tupaia, a native Tahitian, travelled with Lt. (Later Captain) Cook to New Zealand in 1769. Because of his talents, soon after boarding he became the ship’s linguist, anthropologist and artist, as well as a superb navigator. When in New Zealand, one of the first things that reputedly happened is that Tupaia climbed a hill with Maori chiefs and made a rock drawing of a ship.
Elsewhere in the Pacific Indigenous peoples’ encounters with Europeans and their maritime vessels led to a range of new depictions of watercraft on items of material culture as Davies and Taçon reveal in Paper 6.

The Great Circle and rock art

After a preliminary article on ship depictions in Australian rock art, published in the National Maritime Museum’s journal Signals, we decided it was time for a more comprehensive volume on this particular topic. This special volume of The Great Circle is the result, partly because this journal had published a couple papers on rock art images of ships in 1994 and 2004. We solicited a range of papers on different aspects of ship depiction from a wide range of locations: The Pilbara (Paterson and Van Duivenoorde; Bigourdan), The Kimberley (Ross and Travers), Arnhem Land (May et al.; Davies and Taçon) and various parts of the Pacific including the southern coast of Papua New Guinea, the Torres Strait and the Solomon Islands (Davies and Taçon). Space did not allow for more but papers could also have been written on maritime depictions in rock art from Queensland, New South Wales and New Zealand, as well as places further afield such as southern Southeast Asia.

One of the challenges addressed in all of the papers is the difficulty of identifying particular ships and, at times, even the type of watercraft painted, drawn or engraved at rock art sites. Unfortunately, most ship imagery cannot be associated with particular vessels but occasionally we can use historical records, particular features illustrated and a process of elimination to narrow the possibilities (see especially Bigourdan’s paper and May et al.; Figure 1). More success can be obtained in terms of identifying the type of vessel depicted although at times even this is impossible if a very general or schematised image was produced. However, in order to undertake any sort of identification it is important to identify the specific vessel features shown in the rock art imagery as Wesley et al. advocate and as has been done in all of the papers published here.

Another problem is that some images changed over time with new layers and/or features added. For instance, as May et al. describe, the earliest European ship at Djulirri, Wellington Range, Arnhem Land originally was a two masted European vessel with a Macassan-like rudder but it was later repainted to turn it into a steamer. Furthermore, Aboriginal artists did not make exact replicas of what they observed but instead would often illustrate incongruous key features of watercraft to tell stories. So sometimes ships are shown in ways that would not actually have been seen, such as with sails and an anchor set at the same time (Figure 2) or an x-ray view of the inside of hulls. This both adds to and confuses interpretation.

Figure 1: Charcoal drawing of a brig with a small ship drawn underneath the spanker (sail) in a rock shelter near the Hawkesbury River, New South Wales. This is a close approximation of the Lady Nelson, known to have carried grain on other supplies on the Hawkesbury in the early 1800s.

Conclusion

Rock art and early post-contact material culture provides a unique historical archive that needs better exploration, especially in terms of maritime-based cross-cultural contact and indigenous perceptions of outsiders – the ‘reverse gaze’ of history. This is because this imagery gives us insight into cultural change as experienced by Indigenous peoples themselves. Perhaps the production of the images gave Indigenous artists a sense of empowerment and participation in events unfolding around them, as ongoing research suggests. No doubt the
imagery was important for story telling – conveying to others personal observations of encounter, exchange and change. These depictions certainly convey aspects of history, maritime history in particular, and are both historical records and reflections on a changing world. They tell us of the things that fascinated artists the most and provide us with a unique record of our cross-cultural past.

Figure 2: White pipe clay painting of a schooner with both sails set and anchor set, Hawk Dreaming, Kakadu National Park.

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Notes on abbreviations

In some papers ‘BP’ is used in relation to time. It stands for ‘Before Present’. ‘OSL’ stands for optically stimulated luminescence, a major archaeological dating technique different from radio carbon dating. ‘DStretch’ is a program that allows one to change the colour, intensity and hue of rock art designs in digital photographs in order to better make out what was originally painted or drawn.15
ENDNOTES

1 The word ‘Indigenous’ with a capital ‘I’ is used when referring to the original peoples of Australia while ‘indigenous, without a capital ‘I’, is used when referring to the original peoples of the larger region of Southeast Asia, Australia and the Pacific.


