

Australia's earliest contact rock art discovered

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The contact rock art at Djulirri (highlighted in inset).

(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers have discovered evidence of Southeast Asian sailing vessels visiting Australia in the mid-1600s -- the oldest contact rock art in Australia.

The discovery was made by the team taking part in the Picturing Change fieldwork project in the Wellington Range, Arnhem Land. The rock shelter the researchers are studying at Djulirri has nearly 1200 individual paintings and beeswax figures. It was documented by Professor Paul

Taçon (Griffith University), Mr. Ronald Lamilami (Senior Traditional Owner) and Dr Sally K. May (ANU).

“This site includes at least 20 layers of art,” said Dr May. “And importantly, it has also yielded the oldest date yet recorded for contact rock art in Australia. A yellow painted prau (Southeast Asian sailing vessel) is found underneath a large beeswax snake. This snake was radiocarbon dated by Dr Stewart Fallon at ANU to between AD1624 - 1674, meaning that this is a minimum age for the sailing vessel painting.”

While historians and archaeologists have speculated that visits to the northern parts of Australia from Southeast Asian ships have been happening for hundreds of years before European settlements, this is the first rock art evidence found that dates the visits back to the 17th century.

The ARC-funded ‘Picturing Change: 21st century perspectives on recent Australian rock art’ project highlights the importance of contact rock art as some of the only contemporary Indigenous accounts of cross-cultural encounters that took place across Australia through the last 500 years.

Between 2008 and 2010 the researchers worked with local traditional owner Mr Ronald Lamilami to document rock art sites in the Wellington Range, one of the areas of focus of for Picturing Change.

“This part of Arnhem Land is well known for its Southeast Asian heritage and extensive pioneering [archaeological research](#) undertaken by Campbell Macknight, although rock art was not a focus of his early archaeological research,” said Dr May.

“Djulirri has more diverse contact period rock art than any other site in Australia” said Professor Taçon. “Besides the oldest dated paintings of

Southeast Asian ships, there are European tall ships and many other forms of watercraft, all of which can be placed in chronological sequence”.

The research will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Australian Archaeology*.

Provided by Australian National University

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