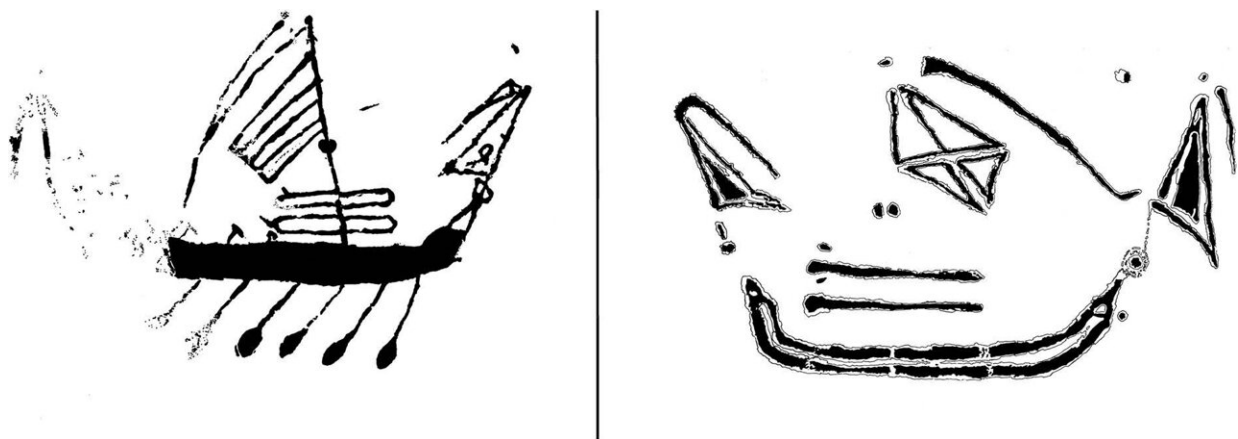


Archaeologists identify Moluccan boats that may have visited Australia from Indonesia in rock art drawings

May 31 2023



Drawing of Awunbarna 1 (left) and Awunbarna 2 (right). (Drawings by Darrell Lewis, 1998). Credit: Flinders University

Archaeologists at Flinders University have identified rare images of Moluccan vessels from Indonesia's eastern islands in rock art paintings that may provide the first archaeological evidence of visitors from Southeast Asia from somewhere other than Makassar on Sulawesi.

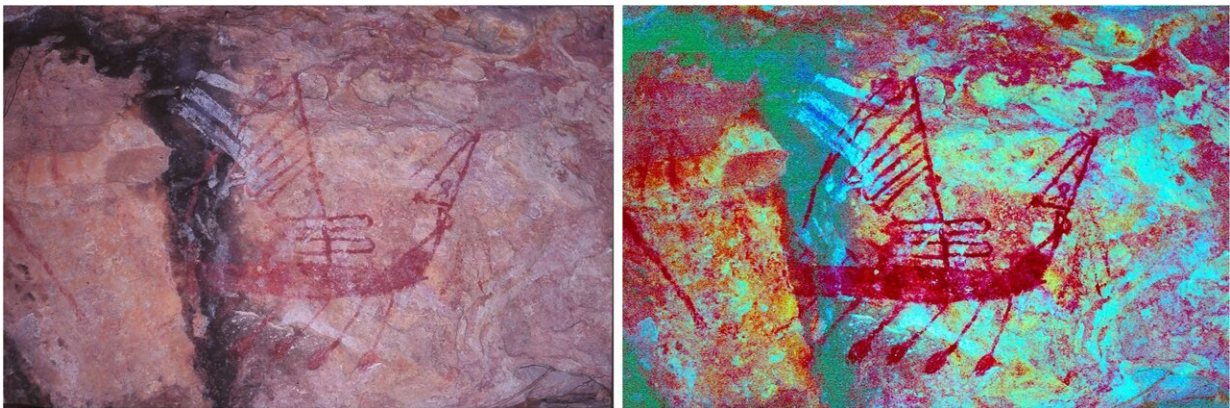
The [rock art](#) offers new evidence of elusive and previously unrecorded encounters between Indigenous people from Awunbarna, Arnhem Land and visitors from the Moluccas to the north of Australia, according to

the research.

Two watercrafts depicted in the rock art feature motifs that appear on the Moluccan types of Southeast Asian vessels that are unlike the Macassan prahus and Western boats shown at other contact sites in northern Australia and offer enough details to help confirm their identity.

As well as their [distinctive shape](#) and configuration, both boats appear to display triangular flags, pennants, and prow adornments indicating their martial status. Comparing these two depictions with historically recorded watercraft from Island Southeast Asia shows that they probably came from eastern Maluku Tenggara in Indonesia.

The rock art depictions of Moluccan vessels in Awunbarna may instead mean that Aboriginal people who traveled north encountered vessels like these and then painted the rock art upon their return home.



Credit: Flinders University.



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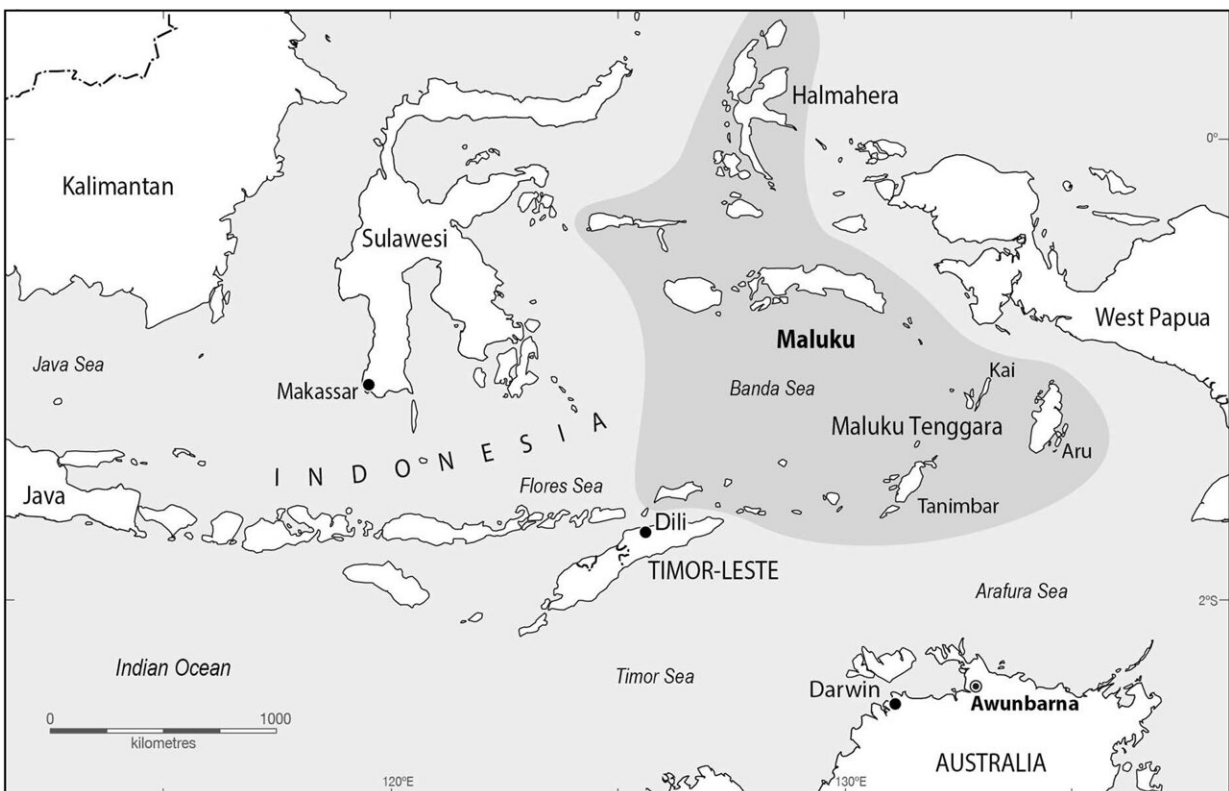
In their findings published in the journal *History Archaeology*, the researchers say the nature of the illustrations implies a degree of intimate knowledge of the craft through long or close observation or from actually voyaging in them.

The Moluccan 'fighting craft' identified in the paintings are likely linked to trade, fishing, resource exploitation, head hunting or slavery, and the presence of such vessels implies instances of physical violence or at least a projection of power.

The researchers say any explanation for the encounters that occurred between the Aboriginal rock art artists in Amburbarna and these Moluccan watercrafts isn't yet clear, and more research using other sources of evidence or different approaches may complete the picture.

First author and [maritime archaeologist](#) at Flinders University, Dr. Mick de Ruyter, says this as yet unique identification of Moluccan watercraft offers evidence of obscure encounters between the Aboriginal people of northern Australia and people from island Southeast Asia, although mystery still surrounds the exact nature of these meetings.

"These motifs support existing ideas that sporadic or accidental voyages from Indonesia to the Australian coastline took place before or alongside regular trepang fishing visits."



Arnhem Land and Maluku Tenggara. (Map by Mick de Ruyter, 2022). Credit: Flinders University

Flinders University maritime archaeologist and co-author, Associate Professor Wendy van Duivenvoorde, says that Dutch explorers in the Moluccas reported as early as the mid-seventeenth century that inhabitants from the islands regularly sailed to the north coast of Australia.

"Dutch traders established agreements with the elders in Maluku Tenggara for products like turtle shell and trepang that may have been sourced during voyages to Australia. Islanders in Maluku Tenggara also had a reputation as raiders and warriors, ranging across the eastern end of the archipelago."

"Regardless of the motivation that prompted the painting of these vessels, the presence of these fighting ships provides direct evidence of the ethnic diversity of the mariners from Island Southeast Asia known to Arnhem Land artists and further demonstrates the issues associated with the use of the generic term 'Macassan' for depictions of non-European vessels."

"The presence of Moluccan fighting vessels in Arnhem Land would support a significant departure from the accepted narrative of Macassan coastal fishing and trading and has important implications for understandings of cultural contact with southeast Asia."



Credit: Flinders University



Credit: Flinders University

Co-author and archaeologist, Dr. Daryl Wesley, says this unique combination of shape, proportion, configuration in the rock art drawings is absent from historical sources on Aboriginal watercraft.

"The drawings we have identified don't appear to represent any known European or colonial watercraft types. Similar 'canoes' are represented in rock art elsewhere on Australia's northern shore, but none appear with similar details to those at Awunbarna. The nearest candidate is the most elaborate Indigenous Australian vernacular watercraft, the canoes of the Torres Strait Islands."

"This identification of Moluccan fighting craft has significant

implications for the reasons mariners from these islands may have been on the northern Australian coastline, and subsequently for the intercultural encounters on the Arnhem Land coast."

More information: Mick de Ruyter et al, Moluccan Fighting Craft on Australian Shores: Contact Rock Art from Awunbarna, Arnhem Land, *Historical Archaeology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s41636-023-00390-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s41636-023-00390-7)

Provided by Flinders University

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