

Discovery of pottery rewrites Aboriginal history

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A terrestrial laser scanner in action on Jiigurru/Lizard Island. Credit: Ian McNiven

The discovery of the oldest pottery ever found in Australia on Jiigurru/Lizard Island off the Queensland coast is challenging the idea

that Aboriginal Australian communities were unaware of pottery manufacture before European settlement.

James Cook University's Distinguished Professor Sean Ulm is Chief Investigator for the Australian Research Council Center of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH). He said the ceramics were discovered in an [archaeological excavation](#) on Jiigurru conducted by CABAH in partnership with the Dingaal and Ngurrumungu Aboriginal communities, for which Jiigurru holds significant cultural importance.

"Archaeologists excavated a 2.4-meter-deep midden on Jiigurru over a two-year period to discover evidence of occupation, such as the remains of shellfish and fish collected and eaten by people on the island, which are more than 6,000 years old.

"Less than a meter below the surface, the team found dozens of pottery shards dating between 2,000 and 3,000 years old—the oldest pottery ever discovered in Australia," said Professor Ulm.

In a paper [published](#) April 9 in *Quaternary Science Reviews*, traditional owners and researchers report on the pottery find.

Professor Ulm said the discovery challenges previous notions that Aboriginal Australian communities were unaware of pottery manufacture before European settlement, instead suggesting a rich history of long-distance cultural exchanges and technological innovation long before British arrival.

"Geological analysis of the ceramics indicates the pottery was locally produced using clays and tempers sourced from Jiigurru. The age of the pottery overlaps with a period when the Lapita people of southern Papua New Guinea were known to have produced pottery," said Professor Ulm.

Dingaal clan member and Walmbaar Aboriginal Corporation Chairperson Kenneth McLean said, "Working in collaboration with archaeologists and traditional owners and working on country is something that's never been done before for my people, where we work together on country, sharing each other's story on country, and not only sharing this story from our people, the Old People, and from the archaeology side, scientifically, which is a good outcome that we can see. We can look after the country together."

Ngurrumungu Elder Brian Cobus said, "Every bit of knowledge we gain helps us tell the story of country. Research projects like this help us all to understand country better and help us to understand how to look after country."

Professor Ulm said the discovery reveals that the Aboriginal communities in North Queensland had connections with the pottery-making communities of New Guinea.

"The discovery gives us insights into the sophisticated maritime capabilities of First Nations communities in this region, and these objects are crucial in understanding the cultural exchanges that occurred on Jiigurru thousands of years ago," said Professor Ulm.

"We think that the ancestors of contemporary traditional owners were engaged in a very widespread trading system. So, they traded technology, goods and ideas, knew how to make pottery, and made it locally."

CABAH Chief Investigator Professor Ian McNiven from Monash University said the evidence points to a history of deep connections across the Coral Sea, facilitated by advanced canoe voyaging technology and open-sea navigation skills, contradicting the outdated notion of Indigenous isolation.

"These findings not only open a new chapter in Australian, Melanesian, and Pacific archaeology but also challenge colonialist stereotypes by highlighting the complexity and innovation of Aboriginal communities," Professor McNiven said.

"The discovery adds a new layer to our understanding of Jiigurru and Indigenous Australians' role in the broader network of maritime exchange and cultural interaction across the Coral Sea."

According to Professor McNiven, Jiigurru marks the southern boundary of ancient international maritime networks that linked eastern north Queensland, southern New Guinea and the Torres Strait, forming the Coral Sea Cultural Interaction Sphere.

"These networks facilitated the exchange of objects and ideas between Australian and New Guinean coastal communities over the past 3,000 years. While some objects, like cone-shell body adornments and bamboo smoking pipes, indicate widespread sharing of culture and ideas, others, such as [pottery](#), also suggest the sharing of technology."

More information: Sean Ulm et al, Early Aboriginal pottery production and offshore island occupation on Jiigurru (Lizard Island group), Great Barrier Reef, Australia, *Quaternary Science Reviews* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.quascirev.2024.108624](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2024.108624)

Provided by James Cook University

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