
Assessment of the Indigenous National Heritage Values for Wurrwurrwuy Stone Picture Site

A REPORT TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE

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Place: Wurrwurrwuy Stone Picture Site

Place ID: 106088

Heritage listings

Northern Territory Heritage Register

Description

The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy that depict aspects of the Macassan trepang industry lie on an open rocky shelf about ten kilometres south east of Yirrkala in Eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. The area is bounded to the north by a small creek; on the west by a strip of dense coastal vine thicket; and to the east and south by the sea. The vegetation on the shelf is low grass and stunted shrubs.

The stone pictures cover an area of about 80 metres by 70 metres. They are divided into three groups with a few outlying features. The group of pictures at the southern end of the site mainly depict Macassan subjects in simple outlines. The northern group also depicts Macassan subjects, but the style is different with stones of different sizes use to give weight to parts of the pictures. The western group comprises a mixture of Macassan and Aboriginal subjects.

Location

All that parcel of land near Dalywoi Bay in the Northern Territory of Australia containing an area of 1.41 hectares more or less, being those parts of Northern Territory Portions 1044 and 1692 designated Northern Territory Portion 6647(A) and enclosed by a fence line located on a series of straight lines connecting in succession the Map grid of Australia Zone 53 coordinates listed as follows:

Point Easting (metres) Northing (metres)

710097 8636036

710131 8636024

710181 8636007

710223 8636049

710262 8636086

710226 8636124

710186 8636159

710145 8636123

710105 8636083

710102 8636042

Condition

When first recorded in the 1960s there was some minor damage to the site from buffalo mainly at the southern end. There is no evidence for subsequent deterioration. The site

has recently been fenced and paths and interpretive signs have been installed. The place is maintained by Dhimurru Corporation Aboriginal Rangers.

Statement of Significance

The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy might be nationally significant as a rare example of stones arranged to depict secular subjects rather than the arranged stones being associated with ceremony and the sacred. The stone pictures depict a range of subjects including Aboriginal camps, fish traps and images relating to the Macassan trepang industry including *praus*, canoes, the stone fireplaces where trepang were boiled and Macassan houses. The depictions of *praus* at Wurrwurrwuy show the internal arrangements of the vessels, which is rare in Aboriginal depictions of *praus* in any medium. The creators of the stone pictures would have acquired their knowledge of the internal arrangement of *praus* during visits to, or voyages on, such vessels.

History

During his epic circumnavigation of Australia in 1802-1803 Matthew Flinders (1814: Chapters 7 and 8) found bamboo frameworks, lines of stone fireplaces, pieces of cloth and the stumps of trees cut down with metal axes at a number of places along the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. He interpreted this as evidence of Chinese visits to this part of Australia. Then, on Wednesday 16 February 1803, he met a fleet of Macassan *praus* anchored in the waters off the English Company Islands. It was here that he learnt from Pobassoo, the captain of the fleet, that Macassan *praus* came to the coast of northern Australia every year on the north-west monsoon winds to collect and dry trepang or *bêche de mer* which they then sold to the Chinese (Flinders 1814: Chapter 9).

Interactions between Aboriginal people and Macassans

Flinders' encounter with Pobassoo is the first Australian record of the north Australian trepang industry. Macassans had probably started to visit the northern Australian coast before 1650 (Taçon *et al.* 2010) but Dutch East India Company documents suggest that the intensive catching and processing of trepang for the Chinese market probably began in about 1750 (Macknight 1986, 2011: 133-134). Macassan involvement in the industry ended in 1906 when the South Australian Government, which administered the Northern Territory at that time, restricted the issuing of licenses to locally owned vessels.

The distribution of tamarind trees, an exotic species, trepang processing sites and the depiction of Macassan *praus* and other items of Macassan material culture in rock art provide direct material evidence for the Macassan trepang industry. Trepang processing sites are found on the Kimberley coast (Crawford 1968, 2001; Morwood and Hobbs 1997) and on the the Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt coasts (Macknight 1976: Chapter 5). While depictions of *praus* and items of Macassan material culture are not unusual in the rock art of Arnhem Land (Taçon *et al.* 2010; May *et al.* 2010) and offshore islands like Groote Eylandt (McCarthy 1960; Clarke and Fredrick 2006), Chasm Island (McCarthy 1960) and Bickerton Island (Turner 1973), such images are rare in the Kimberley (O'Connor and Arrow 2008). These data and Aboriginal oral tradition suggest that the relationship between Macassans and Aborigines in the Kimberley was different to the relationship between Macassans and Yolngu with the former relationship characterised by hostility (Australian Heritage Council 2010).

Aboriginal people in Arnhem adopted a number of items of Macassan material culture (Warner 1932; Thompson 1949; Berndt and Berndt 1954; Russell 2004) including dugout canoes and iron. This transformed Aboriginal economies so they had an increased marine focus. This is shown by the large numbers of dugong and turtle bones in middens on the Coburg peninsula that date from the time of the Macassan trepang industry (Mitchell 1996) and an increased marine focus on Groote Eylandt (Clarke 2000a, 2000b). There is also evidence for changes in the way Aboriginal people used space and evidence for changes in their exchange networks (Mitchell 2000; Clarke 2000a, 2000b; May *et al.* 2010).

Aboriginal people living in Arnhem Land incorporated the memory of Macassans into their social and cultural life. For example, Macassans and their voyages are important in some ceremonies and song cycles where songs may reference Moslem prayers (Thompson 1949; Berndt and Berndt 1954; Russell 2004; Macknight 2011). Oral tradition also provides accounts of Aboriginal people working for Macassans on trepang sites and undertaking voyages on *praus* to the Celebes and further afield (Berndt and Berndt 1954:43, 51-53; Macknight and Gray 1970). The close relationship between Macassans and Aborigines is reflected in the large number of Macassan loan words found in Aboriginal languages in Arnhem Land and on Groote Eylandt which includes words for different parts of *praus* and the rigging on these vessels. Aboriginal people in these areas use the Macassan names for some parts of *praus* and their rigging that are depicted in rock art (Turner 1974: 54, 180-181).

The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy

The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy are part of the story of Macassan Aboriginal interactions in Arnhem Land. They lie within the territory of the Lamomirri clan but on the death of the last responsible Lamomirri man they were taken into the custody of the Gumatj clan. A father and son, Yumbul and Dhatalamirri, created the pictures, probably in the second half of the nineteenth century (Macknight and Gray 1970). Oral histories recorded in 1967 indicate that Yumbul, possibly with the aid of some of his fellow clansmen, made the first pictures. The site was entrusted to his second son, Dhatalamirri, who added further pictures at a later date.

The stone pictures created by Yumbul and Dhatalamirri depict Macassan *praus*, canoes, houses with multiple rooms, fireplaces where trepang were boiled, trepang drying houses, a house for storing wood and stones for sharpening iron knives. There are also pictures of an Aboriginal fish trap and Aboriginal dwellings that may not have been made by the father and son. The elements of Macassan and Aboriginal culture depicted at Wurrwurrwuy

When Macknight and Grey (1970: 5) recorded the site in 1967 two Aboriginal informants, Mung-gurrawuy (a Gumatj custodian) and Mawalan (a relative of Yumbul Dhatalamirri), were able to explain how the divisions within the pictures of the *praus* represented different parts of the vessel: the crews' quarters, the galley, the eating space, the store and the water tank. They also provided Macassan names for the different parts of *praus*, the rudder, bowsprit and the tripod mast with its sail and rigging. These pictures show that Yolngu visited trepang sites and spent enough time on *praus* to learn the various parts of the vessels and where the crew lived and ate. This is consistent with

historical records showing that Aboriginal people travelled in *praus* to the Celebes (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 54-58; Macknight 1972: 286), a trip that was made by Mungurrurawuy's father (Macknight and Gray 1970: 6).

The custodians told Macknight and Gray (1970: 37) that Wurrurrwuy was a legacy from the past with no sacred associations. They felt that it was useful as it provided younger men with some idea of the way of life of Macassans who had come to the area to collect trepang. The pictures are a permanent reminder of Yolngu knowledge about this past.

Comparative Analysis

Criterion (a): The place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance in the course, or pattern, of Australia's cultural history;

Macassans began to visit the northern Australian coast before 1650 (Taçon et al, 2010). By 1750 they had established a trepang processing industry which supplied this delicacy to the Chinese market (Macknight 1972, 1976, 1986, 2011). The trepang industry is important in the course of Australia's cultural history as it is the first industry to be established on the continent and led to historically important interactions between Aboriginal people and Indonesians.

Evidence of this industry is provided by the distribution of trepang processing sites on the Kimberley (Crawford 1968, 2001; Morwood and Hobbs 1997), the Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt (Macknight 1976: Ch 5) coasts. The pottery in these sites and the distribution of tamarind trees, an exotic species, provide evidence for the presence of Macassans on the north Australian coast.

Interactions between Macassans and Aboriginal people in the Kimberley appear to have been different to the interactions in Arnhem Land. Relationships in the Kimberley appear to have been hostile and there is little evidence that Aboriginal people were heavily engaged in the trepang industry (Australian Heritage Council 2010). Anthropologists have long recognised, however, that in Arnhem Land interactions with Macassans led to changes in Aboriginal material culture (Warner 1932), ceremonies and song cycles (Thompson 1949; Berndt and Berndt 1954; Russell 2004).

Recent research on the effect of Macassans on Aboriginal society in Arnhem Land and the adjacent coastal islands has focused on sites occupied by Aboriginal in the past (Mitchell 1996, 2000; Clarke 2000a, 2000b; May *et al.* 2010) and Aboriginal rock art (Clarke and Frederick 2006; Taçon *et al.* 2010). Comparisons of the contents of middens on the Coburg peninsula showed that the Aboriginal economy changed with the Macassan trepang industry. Mitchell (1996) found that middens which accumulated after the arrival of Macassans contain a greater number of dugong and turtle remains than earlier shell middens and relates this to the use of dugout canoes and steel heads on fishing spears. Dugout canoes were adopted from Macassans and replaced the earlier Aboriginal bark canoes, and steel and iron were important goods obtained from the Macassans. Mitchell also found an increased amount of exotic stone in middens that accumulated during Macassan times which suggests that trade between Aboriginal groups on the coast and the interior expanded at this time (Mitchell 2000). Research on Aboriginal sites on Groote Eylandt also suggests changes to Aboriginal economies and

settlements after the start of the trepang industry (Clarke 2000a, 2000b). Once Macassans started to come to the island, Aboriginal people occupied new sites close to the sea. Their use of shellfish also changed with a greater reliance on mudflat species and an increased range of shellfish being taken. The Macassan period Aboriginal middens also contain a range of introduced material including glass and pottery.

Research on rock art in the Wellington Ranges in Arnhem Land has shown that Macassan *praus* were probably sailing off the northern Australian coast before 1650 which is much earlier than previously thought (Taçon *et al.* 2010). Clarke and Fredrick (2006) have looked at the interaction between Aboriginal people and Macassans on Groote Eylandt through the depictions of *praus* in the rock art. While Macassans were processing trepang on Groote Eylandt, the masts of the *praus* would have been lowered. They found that all but one of the paintings of *praus* on Groote Eylandt have raised masts and sails that are set. Many of the paintings also show human figures at the top of the mast. They relate this to the Macassan practice of having a prayer-man climb up the mast and chant when it is raised for a voyage. They suggest that the figures on top of the mast and the sails emphasise the social importance of the arrival and departure of Macassans.

Wurrwurrwuy lacks physical evidence from the processing of trepang and there are no middens at the place that show the way that Aboriginal people modified their economy to accommodate interactions with Macassans. Unlike depictions of *praus* in rock art, the stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy show the division of space inside *praus* and this is evidence for Aboriginal knowledge of the way that space on *praus* was organised. The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy provide important information about the interactions between Aboriginal people and Macassans. Wurrwurrwuy does not meet the national heritage threshold under criterion (a) when compared with the Macassan trepang processing sites (Macknight 1976: 71-74), Aboriginal midden deposits (Clarke 2000a, 2000b) and rock art (Clarke and Fredrick 2006) on Groote Eylandt and similar sites on the Coburg Peninsula (Macknight 1976: 62-70; Mitchell 1976, 2000) although the place has state heritage value.

Criterion (b): the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Australia's cultural history;

The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy are a very rare example of stone arrangements used to depict utilitarian objects and secular places. The three depictions of Macassan *praus*, one highly schematic, are exceptionally rare images showing the internal arrangement of these vessels. These three depictions are an expression of the knowledge that Aboriginal people would have acquired either during visits to or voyages on *praus*.

Aboriginal stone arrangements occur everywhere in Australia (McCarthy 1940; Massola 1963; Campbell and Hossfeld 1966; Rowlands and Rowlands 1966, 1985; Stockton and Rogers 1979; MacIntyre-Tamwoy and Harrison 2004; Bowdler 2005; Ross 2011). They come in a variety of forms and may have a number of different purposes. There appear to be three simple forms of stone arrangements: monoliths, heaps or cairns, and circles. At some places these simple forms are combined into more complex arrangements (McCarthy 1940; Rowlands and Rowlands 1966; Ross 2011). The purpose of Aboriginal stone arrangements are varied and include their role as sacred sites associated with

particular creation beings, as totemic sites associated with particular species and their use in a range of ceremonial activities including initiation, death and increase ceremonies (McCarthy 1940; Bowdler 2005). Aboriginal people may describe a particular stone arrangement as a particular animal species, but the form of the arrangement does not normally match the form of the species. For example, the Kantyu people in Cape York describe a line of elongate stones, up to three feet high, set on end along a ridge, as a file of ancestral kangaroos: buck, doe, and young (McCarthy 1940: 185). Examples of symbolic and totemic stone arrangements also occur in Arnhem Land and on the adjoining islands. For example, McCarthy (1953a, 1953b) describes stone arrangements on Groote Eylandt and the Ancestral Creation Beings that they symbolise. This includes parallel lines of stones that represent a pathway that an ancestral snake followed as well as arrangements that represent other totemic ancestors.

The only known sites with stones arranged as naturalistic or highly schematised depictions of non-sacred or secular subjects are Wurrwurrwuy and a site on Hardy Island (Macknight and Gray 1970). The images at Wurrwurrwuy depict Macassan *praus*, two types of Macassan canoes, houses with multiple rooms, fireplaces where trepang was boiled, trepang drying houses, a house for storing wood, and stones for sharpening iron knives. There are also pictures of an Aboriginal fish trap and Aboriginal dwellings. The site on Hardy Island has a less diverse range of images. Here the stone arrangements depict the lines of fireplaces used for boiling trepang. There are, also, some arrangements that can no longer be deciphered. This is a very restricted range of images when compared with those at Wurrwurrwuy.

While the stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy are a rare example of stones being arranged to depict Macassan subjects, images of these subjects also occur in the rock art of Arnhem Land and in modern bark paintings. Macassan images are found in most parts of Arnhem Land and the adjoining islands, including the Wellington Ranges (Macknight 1976: plate 12; Taçon *et al.* 2010; May *et al.* 2010), Groote Eylandt (McCarthy 1960; Clarke and Frederick 2006), Bickerton Island (Turner 1973) and Chasm Island (McCarthy 1960). The subject matter of this art is broad and includes *praus*, canoes, a possible smoke house and knives.

Praus are one of the more common items of Macassan material culture found in rock paintings. A detailed analysis of *prau* paintings on Groote Eylandt by Clarke and Frederick (2006) identified a consistent set of features in the images: rudders, decking masts, sails and rigging. They also found that all of these *praus* except one had their sails set, and that the images often include a human figure at the top of the mast. They point out that when the mast was raised a prayer-man would climb to the top and chant. They suggest that the figures on top of the mast and the sails emphasise the social importance of the arrival and departure of Macassans.

These images are very different from the three representations of the *praus* at Wurrwurrwuy. The most complex depictions shows a side view of a *prau* where a rudder can be seen but the mast and sails are not represented (Macknight and Gray 1970: 12). The remaining two depictions are very schematic with one having a roughly pyramidal form and the other a rectangular form. The *prau* shaped like a pyramid includes a mast and a line of stones that that represents rigging attached to a sail (Macknight and Gray 1970: 16). The stone lines in all three representations divide the inside of the figure into

compartments representing the crew's quarters, the galley, the food store and where the water was stored. This form of representation maps the internal arrangements of the *prau* and demonstrates a familiarity with sleeping and eating arrangements on these vessels, which is a very different depiction to that found in the rock art.

The stone pictures at Wurrurrwuy are of outstanding heritage value to the nation as a rare example of stones arranged to depict utilitarian and secular objects rather than being associated with ceremony and the sacred. It is also a place with rare depictions of *praus* showing the internal arrangement of these vessels. This is knowledge that the creators would have acquired either during visits to or voyages on such vessels.

Criterion (c): the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Australia's cultural history;

Macknight and Gray (1970) worked with the Aboriginal custodians of the place, Munggurawuy and Mawalan, when they recorded the place. The Aboriginal custodians provided comprehensive information about the history of the site and the meaning of each stone picture. It is unlikely that the place has the potential to yield more information that will contribute to an understanding of Aboriginal-Macassan interactions.

Criterion (e): the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group;

The stone pictures at Wurrurrwuy are actively promoted on the internet as a place tourists can visit to learn more about Aboriginal-Macassan interactions in the past (see for example http://en.travelnt.com/search/product-detail.aspx?product_id=9001646; <http://www.about-australia.com/attractions/wurrurrwuy-garanhan-macassan-beach-interpretive-walk/>). While these sites refer to the history told by the pictures and the uniqueness of the stone arrangements, there is no mention of their beauty. Similarly, Yolngu talk about the pictures being made as part of history and do not refer to the beauty of the images (Wurrurrwuy National Heritage nomination). Wurrurrwuy does not meet the national heritage threshold under criterion (e).

Criterion (i): the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance as part of Indigenous tradition;

Yolngu custodians have not described any traditions, customs or beliefs associated with the site. Rather, Yolngu elders made the pictures to remind their people of the past Macassan presence (Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation 1999:24). The importance of the site is demonstrated by the photographs in Macknight and Gray (1970) which show that the custodians had kept the site clear of weeds, major growth, and obstruction.

Values Table

	Description of Value	Meets Threshold
Criterion (a): <i>The place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance in the course, or pattern, of Australia's cultural history</i>	When compared with the rock art, Aboriginal sites and Macassan trepang processing sites on Groote Eylandt and on the Coburg Peninsula, Wurrwurrwuy does not meet the national heritage threshold under criterion (a). The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy do, however, provide important information about the interactions between Aboriginal people and Macassans and the place has state heritage value.	BT
Criterion (b): <i>The place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Australia's cultural history</i>	The stone pictures at Wurrwurrwuy might have outstanding heritage value to the nation as a rare example of stones arranged to depict utilitarian and secular objects rather than the arranged stones being associated with ceremony and the sacred. It is also a place with rare depictions of the internal arrangements in <i>praus</i> . This is knowledge that the creators would have acquired either during visits to or voyages on such vessels.	MHV
Criterion (c): <i>The place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Australia's cultural history</i>	The Aboriginal custodians of the place, Mung-gurrawuy and Mawalan, provided such comprehensive information about the history of the site and the meaning of each stone picture to Macknight and Gray (1970) that the place no longer has the potential to yield more information about Aboriginal-Macassan interactions.	BT
Criterion (e); <i>the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group</i>	A number of tourist sites on the internet refer to the history told by the pictures and the uniqueness of the stone arrangements but they do not their beauty. Similarly, Yolngu talk about the pictures being made as part of history and do not refer to the beauty of the images (Wurrwurrwuy National Heritage nomination). Wurrwurrwuy therefore does not meet the national heritage threshold for the places importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group.	BT
Criterion (i); <i>the place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of the place's importance as part of Indigenous tradition</i>	Yolngu custodians have not described any traditions, customs or beliefs associated with the site. Rather, they say the pictures were made to remind people of the past Macassan presence. Wurrwurrwuy therefore does not meet the national heritage threshold for the importance of the place as part of Indigenous tradition.	BT

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