

DREAMING PEARLS AND PASTURE: MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE KIMBERLEY

On 5 May 2010, Corioli Souter, a curator from the Department of Maritime Archaeology at the [Western Australian Museum](#), spoke to the Kimberly Society about some of the Museum's work. Her summary of the presentation follows, with links added for further information.

The Kimberley is currently being assessed for inclusion on the [Australian National Heritage List](#). This area has also been identified as highly prospective for oil and gas resources. These potentially conflicting interests have sparked a number of studies of the environmental and cultural diversity of the Kimberley coast and archipelagos. This summary presents further interpretation of what began as a government commission to assess shipwrecks in the Kimberley region as part of this heritage listing. The range of maritime sites is far broader than initially anticipated and cannot be looked at in isolation from both the historic and contemporary Aboriginal cultural history. The cultural history of the Kimberley coastline, a region once solely occupied by Aboriginal people and later visited by maritime peoples from the Indonesian Archipelago, European explorers and eventually exploited by [pearlers](#), [pastoralists](#), [guano miners](#) and [missionaries](#), is complex.

Kimberley sites investigated to date primarily relate to first colonisation of Australia and ongoing contact. The inland Kimberly has yielded the earliest dates of human occupation; 46,500-43,500 BP and 47,500-44,000 on the Devonian limestone reef systems at Carpenter's Gap (in Windjana Gorge National Park) and Riwi (in the Mimbi Caves). Similarly, rockshelter sites on High Cliffy Island in the Buccaneer Archipelago demonstrate antiquity for Kimberley island occupation (7000 years BP). Little work, however, has been undertaken in relation to archaeology of the contact and post-contact periods.

Historical archaeological studies undertaken to date have been opportunistic and rudimentary, largely due to the inaccessibility of the area. However, we can still discern three distinct overlapping phases of regional activity for the contact and post-contact periods.

1. Historical Indigenous activities (prior to European exploration and settlement until the present). Maritime connections between Aboriginal people and past visitors can be seen in the local rock art. Eighteen watercraft images have been identified (and put in the public domain through publication) in the Kimberley region.

2. South East Asian seafaring activity and trepang harvesting (last few hundred years until 20th century). From at least the 1720s until the early 1900s fleets of perahu sailed from Macassar in southern Sulawesi to the northern Australian coast each year to collect trepang or bêche-de-mer. This trade began well before European colonisation of the Australian continent, and involved significant contact with Aboriginal people. Evidence of Macassan fishing activity is documented in Dutch archival records, in recorded contact with other Europeans, and also from the results of archaeological investigations. Site types include trepang shore processing camps, trypots, fireplaces, shelters and shelter foundations, remains of smoke houses, charcoal concentrations, introduced plants, graves and shipwrecks.

The Indonesians referred to the Kimberley as [Kaju Jawa](#). The British Navigator, Matthew Flinders met the Macassan trading fleet further to the East in Arnhem land where he also observed archaeological sites on islands and the mainland. In 1838, Stokes discovered a broken jar on Turtle Is off Port Hedland, which may indicate that Indonesian seafaring extended to the southern end of the Eighty Mile Beach region. While fishing for trepang was the primary purpose for visiting the Kimberley, Macassans also collected pearl shell, pearls, minerals, sandalwood, dugong, clam meat, and turtle shell. Collecting trepang continued into the 20th century, so great care needs to be made to ensure that more recent archaeological remains — such as scatters of metal, glass and ceramic artefacts — are not dismissed as those of Europeans when they may relate to this important Asian activity in Australian waters.

3. European exploration and activities (both prior to the foundation of the British Swan River Colony in 1829 and, later, in the colonial era). Tasman's voyages contribute to [the first interpretation](#) of the Kimberley coastline. [William Dampier](#) careened his ship the *Cygnēt* in King Sound in 1688 making his the first British landing on the Australian continent. Phillip Parker King conducted three surveys from 1819-1822. King's first contact with the indigenous population took place in Vansittart Bay in 1819 (Jar Is and Encounter Cove). King surveyed Montague Sound and named a number of islands and features after his crew, and careened his leaking vessel the *Mermaid* at Careening Bay, Port Nelson in September 1820. The French were also active along the Kimberley coast in the early nineteenth century and explorers such as Baudin, in 1803 record his making contact with Indonesian fishers at Cassini Is.

Pearling began in the north-west in 1864 as a shore-based venture rapidly growing to a vessel-based industry extending from Baningarra Creek at the southern end of Eighty Mile Beach to northern shores of King Sound. The majority of [shipwrecks](#) relating to this industry are located in the Eighty Mile Beach (66 recorded losses) and Broome (131 recorded losses) areas although we know pearling vessels operated speculatively up and down the north western Kimberley coast up until the c. 1930s. Another unexplored site type can be found where the camps of pearlmen and shellers were dotted along the coast.

Two decades after reports of the agricultural potential of the Kimberley by the explorer [Captain George Grey](#), the Camden Harbour Pastoral Association was formed in Melbourne in 1864 with a capital of £20,000 "to settle a very superior, well-watered pastoral and agricultural country around Camden Harbour by placing one head of cattle on every thousand acres". Approximately 70 settlers bought shares in this venture and sought to farm the area arriving on the vessels *Stag*, *Helvetia* and [Calliance](#). By February 1865, with the arrival of the government resident [Robert Sholl](#), the settlement was drought stricken and suffering heavy stock losses. It was abandoned in October 1865 after the last of the sheep had perished.

Research into past contact

Beyond [the failed pastoral settlement of 1864–1865](#), this region has the potential to reveal material evidence for Aboriginal, European and Indonesian culture contact. A preliminary survey was conducted at the Camden Harbour settlement and its environs in October 2009 to identify some of these features. Historical archaeological survey work had not been undertaken since 1978, when the focus was on the European elements of the archaeology only. The archaeological assemblage at Camden Harbour along with descriptions contained in European journals clearly demonstrates the contemporaneity of these culture groups—neither of which has been explored in any detail. Aboriginal accounts passed down in oral tradition also provide a different perspective to events, including interpretations of shipwreck events. New research angles are required to better understand the more recent historical events of the region which to date, have been Eurocentric in interpretation. Our current aim is to investigate with communities what sites are best suited to assist us in our understanding of contact between Aboriginal people and outsiders over the last few centuries.

Further reading

Corioli Souter, 'Camden Harbour reconsidered', *Bulletin of the Australasian Institute for Maritime Archaeology*, 37, 2013, pp. 87-97.