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The Macassans
A study of the early trepang industry
along the Northern Territory coast

by

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Two volumes and a case

Volume 1

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PART V: CONCLUSION

Chapter 14

The Macassans and Australian History

This study began with a consideration of the Macassan trepang industry in the context from which it emerged. It is appropriate to conclude by looking for its significance in the history of the area where it was actually carried on.

If the question is put in purely practical terms, the answer is clear. It had very little practical effect. Flinders and his crew were briefly diverted from their work, as were King and various other observers throughout the nineteenth century. Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington were established to take advantage of the industry, but even their failure has been of little consequence in the history of European settlement in the area. The Port Essington settlement achieved a more lasting renown, but the rôle of the Macassans in the origin and progress of that settlement was comparatively minor.

Despite the mass of detail given chapter 13, the Macassan trepang industry played only a very small part in the history of the South Australian development of the Northern Territory. It produced a few hundred pounds in revenue and was responsible for the setting up of a minor outpost in Bowen Strait. The example it provided may have stimulated some of the contemporary European activities along the north coast of Arnhem Land, but the opportunities for Europeans were more apparent than real in many areas of northern Australia. Nor did the Macassans have a rôle to play in the great debates on non-European labour in a White Australia, but then the Northern Territory as a whole has
in general been treated as a special case (or forgotten) in this regard.

Even in respect of those parts of Aboriginal society and culture which display certain indubitable effects of contact and co-operation with the Macassans, no fundamental revolution has been induced nor does any important feature distinguish these people from other Aborigines, as in the case of Torres Strait culture. Today this is all the more apparent, as the old men for whom the memory was at least real enough to be used as psychological weapon against the onrush of European civilization, gradually die away.

The archaeological remains of the industry are certainly extensive and repay the attention of the careful recorder and excavator. Yet to the untrained eye they could well- and often do - pass unnoticed. Even the tamarind tree, the introduction of the Macassans, is now spreading along coastal beach ridges and losing its rôle as a distinctive indicator of the sites of Macassan activity.

It could be argued, and with some force, that the mere existence of the industry, as the occupation of a relatively large number of men over a long period of time, provides the justification for its description. Moreover the regular voyaging of the praus, though not comparable with the great feats of global navigation, are certainly worthy of note as a maritime achievement. If one could take as the criterion of importance a simple aggregate of effort, then the Macassans would hold a not inconsiderable place in early Australian history and would loom large indeed in the very much more restricted history of the Northern Territory. Though such an extreme attitude as this cannot be sustained, it remains that the industry was a substantial activity carried on by men in Australia and as such deserves a place in a history of the continent. Perhaps the fact that it is a comparatively unusual and unfamiliar enterprise seen against the pattern
of other human endeavour in this land, gives it some claim to special recognition. But that is to anticipate the argument.

For those who like to perceive such themes, the industry is perhaps the clearest example in Australian history of the inadequacy of the Europocentric view of events. Even if the first Macassans did not precede the Dutch explorers who 'discovered' Australia for European geography, they were certainly the first non-Aboriginal group to visit Australia consistently and find a resource which could be exploited on the markets of the world. Although there is no evidence of permanent occupation by the Macassans, it is quite reasonable to regard men, who returned to the coast again and again over many years, as in a sense, Australians. Just as the miners and graziers, and before them the sealers and whalers, of European Australia based their economy on distant export, so did the Macassan trepangers. The continent's first industry in a modern sense, was trepang. Whatever the final verdict on the date of the origin of this industry, it would be possible to maintain very strongly that, using the terms as defined by Clark (1962:3), the earliest civilization to reach Australia was not European, but Asian; not Christian, but Muslim; and it came to the north, not to the west, the east or the south.¹

In my own view, there are three areas in which the study of the Macassans has some significance. They are all concerned with creating attitudes or establishing orientations.

¹ For the date when it was written, the first chapter of Professor Clark's great history is remarkably perspicacious. However, just as the last decade of work on Aboriginal prehistory has rendered his remarks on that subject totally obsolete, so more recent work on the Macassans and Indonesian history in general has necessitated a recasting of other details in his vision.
The first, and perhaps the simplest, concerns the implications of such a study for the theory of historical and prehistorical research. Mulvaney (1966:454) has appealed to historians of Southeast Asia between 1750 and 1850 'to leave those dreary wastes of Colonial Records and direct their attention to humbler sources.' As he envisaged, this study has involved following leads into many fields, not least being colonial records. The work of Allen on the Port Essington settlement, integrating the historical and archaeological evidence, forms an instructive comparison, though the material on which the present study is based is more varied and more diffuse. On the one hand, there is material gathered from a range of techniques more or less familiar to the archaeologist: field recording, excavation, carbon dating, the study of artefacts such as pottery, coins, glass, fish-hooks and the like, together with an awareness of the possible effects of change in the biological and geomorphological environment. Beyond these, there is information to be derived from ethnography, language and physical anthropology. It is a situation with which the prehistorian is well acquainted. On the other hand, there is an almost equally wide range of documentary material, to be handled with a variety of techniques. The analysis of official statistics and the study of government correspondence are complemented by a critical reading of the accounts of explorers, adventurers and tellers of tales. This is a field with which the historian is familiar.

Some pains have been taken in this study to bring as wide range of evidence as possible to bear on specific points. This is intended to demonstrate, by particular example, the interaction of various types of evidence. The intention is not to challenge the utility or validity of specialized techniques, but only to assert the need for seeking out information wherever it is to be obtained. If the final
account is difficult to classify, that is a reflection on the theory of classification.

To be specific, there are many situations in the study of the past of Australia, and probably of most of the Pacific and Southeast Asia, where the conventional categories of history and prehistory, though conceptually useful, cannot be separated in practice. The study of the Macassan trepang industry is certainly one of these situations.

The second area in which the study of the Macassan trepang industry is of some significance is in the recognition of northern Australia as a distinct historical unit. The case for regarding the area in this way has been outlined elsewhere (appendix 12: Introduction), and it is not necessary to repeat the argument here. Except for the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the shores of Van Diemen and Joseph Bonaparte Gulfs, virtually all the coast of northern Australia was visited by foreign trepangers. This is in itself one of the factors linking the various parts of the coast and distinguishing it from the rest of Australia. Just because this industry, whether on the Kimberley coast or in Northern Territory waters, is so clearly exceptional within the main pattern of Australian history, it can be seen to have a symbolic value, far in excess of its actual practical effect. At a time when great efforts are being made to develop the economic resources of northern Australia, the establishment of regional identity and the orientation of opinion towards a rounded interest in the region may prove to be the cornerstone of social progress. The story of the Macassans has a small, but significant part to play in this process.

Finally, the Macassans are important in Australian history simply because they are unusual. Their story serves to remind us that the history of the continent is not fully described
by the relatively well known picture. In the central foreground, the spectacle of the European settlement and expansion from the south will always remain under the brightest light. Around the edges of this and stretching back into the millenial mists behind, there are the details of Aboriginal ethnohistory and prehistory, which are only now gradually coming into focus. Yet the picture is not solely made up of white and black. Here and there, are small areas of brown or yellow. In the desert there were Afghan camelmen; on the canefields there were Melanesian labourers; on the pearling grounds there were Japanese and Malay divers; on the goldfields there were Chinese fossickers. These people have not left a mark on Australian civilization comparable with the dreams of the Catholics, the labours of the Protestants or the schemes of the sons of the Enlightenment. Indeed their contribution is even less than that of the baffling complexities of the Aboriginal imagination. Yet their separate gifts are, in themselves, unique, and the history of the contact between them and their white or black neighbours almost infinitely various. The Macassan trepangers, on the southern boundary of their world, displayed only a small part of their civilization, and despite the long series of fleets anchoring in so many bays and inlets, their impact was slight on a distant and barbarous coast. Nevertheless, the side niche burial on a lonely beach or the shattered fragments of a blue and white porcelain bowl, half covered by the drifting sand, are the final eddies of those mighty religious and economic currents that began in Arabia and in China. Perhaps an awareness that even a few of the ghosts of the land are not in the image of present society can enrich our understanding.