

Monsoon traders lost on the Northern Australian coast – historical evidence for their existence

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Abstract

During the pre-colonial and early colonial period of Australia's history c.1780–1907, monsoon traders from the eastern part of Indonesia sailed to parts of Australia's northern coast searching for marine products such as trepang for the Chinese market place. During this period, most of these small ships left the port of Makassar in Sulawesi, one of the larger Sunda Islands of the Indonesia archipelago, with the onset of the west monsoon and returned with their cargo on the south easterly winds of the east monsoon. Despite historical evidence that some vessels were wrecked and lost on the northern Australian coast, no tangible archaeological evidence of their existence has been found and identified to date. This paper summarises the historical evidence for the loss of a number of these vessels and provides some evidence of what some of these vessels may have looked like. In conclusion it explores the possibility of finding the remains of one of these wrecks in the future.

Introduction

This paper sketches the historical evidence and provides some context for the loss of 28 trading vessels (*perahu*) on the Northern Territory coast of Australia between 1802 and 1907. It also presents historical evidence of what some of these vessels may have looked like. Known as Macassans (Macknight 1976:1–2) or more recently as monsoon traders (Knaap and Sutherland 2004) these mariners were regular visitors to the waters of the Northern Territory coast of Australia during the years 1780 to 1907 (Macknight 1976 and 2008:137). They came primarily to fish and trade for trepang (various species of edible *holothurian*, more popularly known as sea cucumber), but also to collect other marine products of value to the Chinese markets they served. These products included (amongst others), Hawksbill sea turtle shell (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), pearl shell (*Pinctada* sp.) and pearls and were part of a much larger trade network that included the Maluku islands (Moluccas) and west Papua (see Figure 1).

Leaving the trading port of Makassar with the onset of the west monsoon (November-December), these fisher traders worked the Arnhem Land coast of the Northern Territory for four or five months before returning with the south-easterly trade winds in April-May. According to Alfred Searcy, Sub-Collector of Customs at Port Darwin (1882–1896), the *perahu* usually, "sighted Melville Island first before working their way down the coast to the eastward, some proceeding as far as the Gulf of Carpentaria" (Searcy 1907:45–46).

In 1882 a licence fee to fish for trepang was introduced by the South Australian Government on Macassan vessels entering Northern Territory waters (Macknight 1969:405). This fee, together with customs duty payable on tradable items such as rice and arrack, was levied and payable on arrival. Captains of vessels therefore needed to obtain clearance papers from the Dutch authorities in Makassar listing their stores and trade goods and were required to produce

this documentation when purchasing their licence. The requirements for these documents indicate that most of the trepang voyages after 1882 began and (probably) ended at Makassar, Sulawesi, the centre of the trepang industry and the China trade in the eastern part of Indonesia. However, prior to this, many voyages (c.1780–1881) may have originated in other places to the east of Makassar and the catch trans-shipped to Makassar from other ports, such as the Tanimbar Islands (Timor Laut) and Aru (Searcy 1905:42) or Sumbawa (Earl 1846:65) and the Maluku islands.

In 1882 the South Australian Government set up a revenue station at Bowen Strait near Raffles Bay and employed Edward Robinson as the Revenue Officer (Macknight 1969:403–405). Robinson was tasked with accessing and collecting import duties and licence fees from the visiting *perahu* captains. The process was administered from Port Darwin by Alfred Searcy, who made several voyages to the area to check on compliance and administer fines when breaches were found. Most of the primary source material available today that relates to wrecked *perahu* in the Northern Territory comes from the reports written and dispatched by Robinson and Searcy to their superiors in Adelaide.

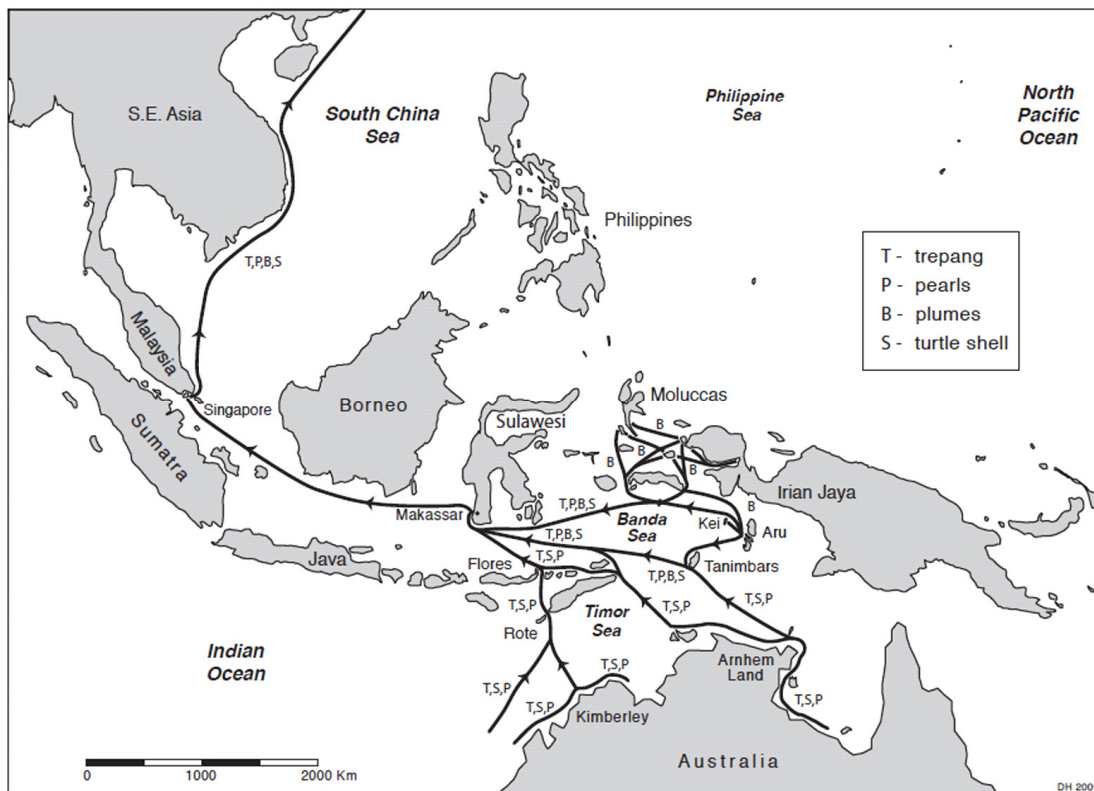


Figure 1. Map of the Indonesian archipelago showing trade routes in plumes and marine products 1500–1900 and trade in marine products to the north Australian coast, c.1780–1900 (after Forrest 1779 and 1792; Searcy 1905 and 1907; Crawford 1969; Macknight 1969 and 1976; Healey 1980; Swadling 1996; Morwood and Hobbs 1997:198; Morwood 2002:35). Cartography, Douglas Hobbs.

The perahu wrecks (1802 - 1907)

The earliest written evidence of a wrecked Macassan *perahu* (proa, prau, prows) located on the Australian coast comes from the diary of Robert Brown, botanist on board HMS *Investigator* (1795–1872). Brown, engaged as the ship's naturalist, together with artists Ferdinand Bauer and William Westall, were employed by the British Navy to assist commander Mathew Flinders, who had been sent in 1801 to map the Australian coastline and to record the plant and animal life of the new colony. Flinders, a navigator and cartographer of renown, was the first mariner to circumnavigate Australia (1801 to 1803). In December 1801 while at Vanderlin Island, part of the Sir Edward Pellew Group, Brown writes of finding a wreck on the western side of the island, "one piece of wreck was also picked up on the beach of the same cove in the bight" (Brown 1802–1803). Amongst the wreckage were bamboo water containers, a wooden anchor and three boat rudders, one of which was taken onboard *Investigator* (ibid; Flinders 1814:231).

A month later, on 17 February 1803, Flinders had a meeting at Malay Road, English Company's Islands, with Pobassoo, a Bugis *perahu* captain from Makassar who recognised the rudder as belonging to one of the canoes of a vessel lost the previous year (ibid). Six weeks later, Flinders himself documented another *perahu* wreck on the southern side of Marchinbar Island in the Wessel Group where he found a 'Malay proa' washed up on the beach. He instructed his crew to cut it up for fuel (ibid:345).

Forty-two years later, in January 1845, J. Beete Jukes, naturalist on board HMS *Fly*, another British survey ship, reported the loss of four *perahu* off the entrance to Port Essington (Jukes 1847:358). A fifth was recorded in 1869 off Escape Cliffs in Adam Bay, near the mouth of the Adelaide River (SAA 21 June 1869:3-4) and a further 12 were documented along parts of the Northern Territory coast over the next 32 years until 1902 (see Figure 2). Another eight wrecks are likely to have occurred during the last few years of the industry (1903–1907), but the references to the loss of these vessels are based on oral histories and have no dates attached (Berndt and Berndt 1954:111–112). The last wreck listed in Figure 2 that may have occurred before 1907, was reputed to have been seen from the air by a Parks and Wildlife Ranger in the 1960s (Baker 1985:42).

Apart from recording the event however, most of these accounts from local informants or chance discovery provide little information about the actual location or the size and type of vessel lost. Robinson, while at the Bowen Strait Revenue Station (1884-1899) estimated that on average 25 *perahu* sailed each year to fish for trepang and trade with the indigenous inhabitants (Searcy 1905:11). It is logical to assume therefore, that up to 375 *perahu* may have arrived during his 15 year tenure at the station. During this time eight *perahu* are known historically to have been wrecked (see Figure 2), which represents a 2% yearly loss rate.

Without considering any other factors that might affect Robinson's figures, such as Pobassoo's assertion that in 1803 alone there were 60 *perahu* on the

coast (Flinders 1814:228), it is possible to extrapolate and consider that 3,175 *perahu* voyages (at 25 per year) may have occurred during the 127 years of Macassan voyaging to the Northern Territory coast. If the same loss rate of 2% is applied as was estimated for Robinson's time at the station, we can expect approximately 62 *perahu* wrecked or lost, on or off the coast. Given Pobassoo's comments it seems that this is a conservative estimate, but it does provide a starting point for considering the next question; what did these vessels look like?

Date of loss	Wreck	Location	Reference
1802	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	West side Vanderlin Is., NT	Brown 1803:345, Macknight 1969:196 & Vallance 2001:329-333
1803	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Southern side Marchinbar Is., NT	Flinders 1814:345
1845 (Jan)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> 1	off Port Essington, NT	Jukes 1847:358
1845 (Jan)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> 2	off Port Essington, NT	Jukes 1847:358
1845 (Jan)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> 3	off Port Essington, NT	Jukes 1847:358
1845 (Jan)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> 4	off Port Essington, NT	Jukes 1847:358
1869 (May–Jun)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	off Escape Cliffs, NT	SAA 21 June 1869:3-4
c.1874	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Mallison Island, NT	Searcy 1884: letter GRS 1/1884/445 SRSA
c.1875	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	False Point, Cape Stewart, NT	Lorance 1875: letter GRS 1/1876/74 SRSA & MacKnight 1981:139
1882 (Feb)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> (Captain Jago [Djago])	Melville Island, NT	Robinson 1882: letter GRS 1/1882/346 SRSA
1884 (Jan–Mar)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> timber & large dredging/fishing canoe	Cotton Island, NT	Searcy 1884: letter GRS 1/1884/445 SRSA & Searcy 1905:24, 1907:93
1886 (Dec)	<i>Lasalasya</i>	North side Melville Is., NT	Robinson 1886: letter GRS 1/1882/346 SRSA, SAPP 1886 (53):11 & Searcy 1905:10
1886 (Dec)	<i>Erang Poleang (Polea, Polia)</i> (c.17 ton, Captain Using)	North side Melville Is., NT	Robinson 1886: letter GRS 1/1882/346 SRSA, SAPP 1886 (53):11, Searcy 1905:10 & Macknight 1969:485)
1886 (Dec)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	At sea off Melville Is., NT	Robinson 1886: letter GRS 1/1882/346 SRSA, SAPP 1886 (53):11 & Searcy 1905:10
1892 (Jan–Mar)	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Brogden Point, between Crocker and Goulbourn Islands, NT	Searcy 1905:40-42 & Berndt and Berndt 1954:118
1895 (Mar)	<i>Bondeng Patola</i> (c.17 ton Captain Using)	Caledon Bay, NT Gulf of Carpentaria, NT	Robinson 1895: letter GRS 1/1895/175 SRSA, Searcy 1905:10 & Macknight 1969:485
1895 (April)	<i>Tjinna Mataiya (Tinna Motaya, Malaya, Motava?)</i>	Sir Rodericks Rocks, Gulf of Carpentaria, NT	Robinson 1895: letter GRS 1/1895/175 SRSA & Searcy 1905:10 & Macknight 1969:485
1896	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	West side of Truant Is.	GRS 1/1374/6875 SRSA
1902	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> – Ahmat from Banda	Cape Wilberforce, NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:120-121
c.1902-05	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Rocky Bay, Yirrkalla, NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:111
c.1902-05	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> (Captain Jaming)	Trial Bay, NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:111
c.1902-05	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> (Captain Laululawa)	Rocky Bay, Yirrkalla, NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:112
c.1900-07?	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Port Bradshaw (1), NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:112
c.1900-07?	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Port Bradshaw (2), NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:112

c.1900-07?	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Port Bradshaw (3), NT	Berndt and Berndt 1954:112
Unknown	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Bickerton Island, NT	Cole 1973:46
Unknown	Unidentified <i>perahu</i>	Angwarigba Point, Dalimba Bay, Groote Eylandt, NT	Cole 1973:23
Unknown	Unidentified <i>perahu</i> , seen c.1960	S.E of Sandy Island, Smith Point, Port Essington, NT	Baker 1985:42

Figure 2. Table showing *perahu* wrecks lost off the Northern Territory coast of Australia between the years 1802–1907.

What a Macassan perahu may have looked like

The earliest written accounts describing watercraft from the region that are known to have existed at the time of the trepang voyages to Australia, appear in three travel books published towards the end of the 18th century. The first two written by Thomas Forrest were published in 1780 and 1792, and the third, by John Splinter Stavorinus, was translated from Dutch and published in English in 1798. Forrest (1779, 1792) in particular, has left a rich narrative of his time and travels through Maluku and New Guinea in 1774–1776. He was employed by the British East India Company and in November 1774 he sailed from Balambangan (Sabah, Malaysia) in the *Tartar Galley*, a locally built vessel from the Sulu archipelago, fitted with a tripod mast and a tilted rectangular main sail. He was accompanied by two Europeans (a mate and a gunner) and a ‘Malay’ crew, which included Malays, Indonesians, Indians (lascars), Christian Filipinos from Visaya, and Muslims from Mindanao.

The purpose of Forrest’s voyage was to explore possible routes into the ‘spice islands’ and gain as much intelligence as he could without antagonising the Dutch, who controlled the clove and nutmeg trade at the time (Bassett 1969:8-11). Forrest made a number of sketches and drawings of boats and canoes that he saw. Often these sketches appeared in the margins or at the bottom of the charts he made of the areas he visited. These included the *padewakang* (paduwakang, paduakan) from the southern Sulawesi region around the port of Makassar, which Forrest ascribed to the Bugis people of the region (see Figure 3). Forrest also made reference to the Bugis sailing to northern parts of Australia in their *perahu padewakang*, “I have been told by several Buggesses, that they sail in their Paduakans to the northern parts of New-Holland, possibly Carpentaria Bay, to gather Swallow [trepang], which they sell to the annual China Junk at Macassar” (Forrest 1792:82–83). The larger of Forrest’s drawings, shown in Figure 3, is of a smaller 7-10 ton variety of *perahu padewakang* with a single tripod mast, although he mentions that they could be as big as 45 tons (Forrest 1792:80).

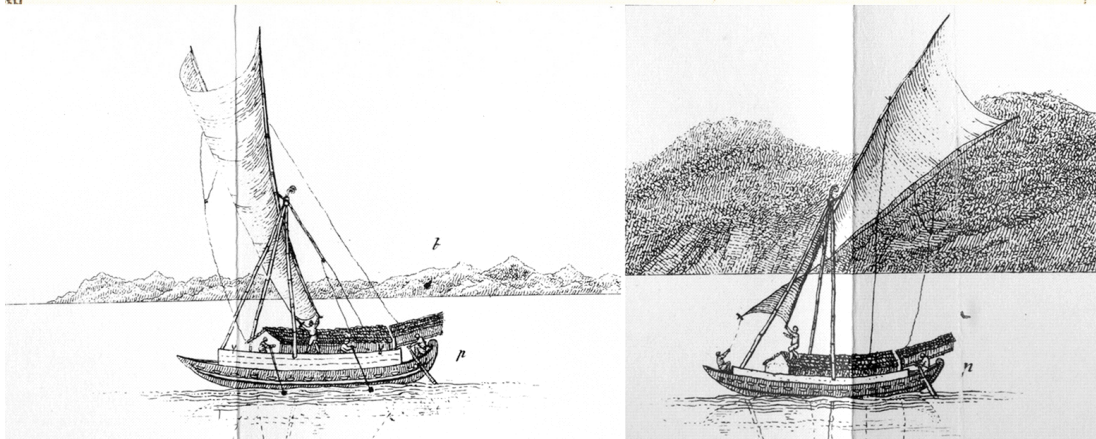
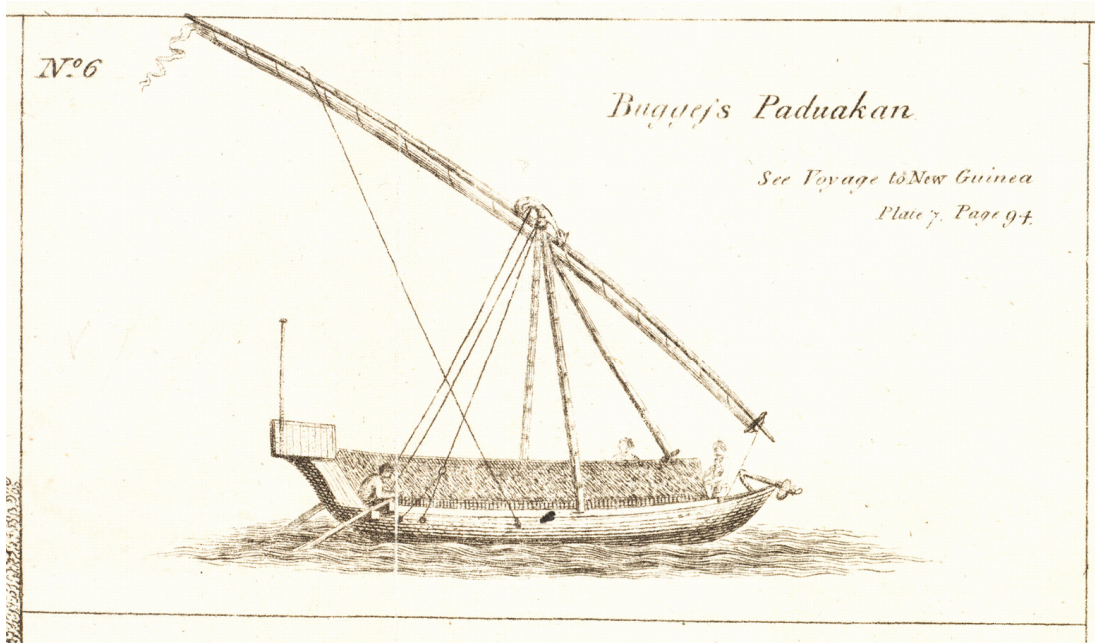


Figure 3. A Bugis *padewakang* as described and drawn by Forrest (1792) from the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, and two similar drawings of different sized *padewakang* from Forrest (1780:94 plate 7).

Our second witness, Stavorinus, originally a captain in the Dutch Navy, transferred to the Dutch East India Company and in 1768 sailed from Zeeland in command of *Snoek* (Pike), bound for Batavia (Jakarta). His book in three volumes was published in English in 1798 and contains accounts of five voyages (1768, 1771, 1774, 1775, and 1778) in the Southeast Asian region. Of particular interest is his description of the south Sulawesi *perahu padewakang*, which not only describes parts of the hull (in particular the bow) and the tripod mast, but also the technique of edge joining the planks with dowels, luting with bark and the Indonesian boat building technique of 'plank-first' (sometimes called shell-first) construction (Stavorinus, 1798 Vol II:260). Forrest also noted the plank-first

method and made the point that European ship building was ‘frame-first’ (Forrest 1792: 80). Additionally, Stavorinus states that the largest *padewakang* could be as much as 50 tons in size, which corroborates Forrest’s observations (Stavorinus, 1798 Vol II: 260). Forrest also documented two other smaller vessel types, the *kora-kora* (korokoro, cora-cora, corocoro) and the double outrigger canoe both of which, particularly the larger forms, were quite capable of making the voyage to the northern Australian coast (see Figure 4). The *kora-kora* had a very high stem and stern and was generally fitted with outriggers. They varied in size from small boats to craft greater than 10 tons (Folkard 1863:217).

On the cross pieces [outrigger arms] which support the outriggers are often fore and aft planks on which part of the crew sit and paddle when there is no wind; besides which, others who sit in the vessel use long [sweep] oars. In smooth water they are propelled in this manner with considerable velocity (ibid:217–218).

The *kora-kora* were used for intra-regional trade and warfare (as war canoes) and in the 17th century by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) at Ambon (Amboyna) as punitive war ships (*guarda costas*) to enforce the spice monopoly (Folkard 1863:217; Guy 1998:78–79).

Westall from the *Investigator* in 1803 left two pencil drawings of Macassan *perahu* that he saw at the English Company’s Islands (Perry and Simpson 1962:54, plates 109 and 110). They are similar in detail to some aspects of Forrests’ drawings, particularly the rigging and sail pattern, but differ slightly in the bow arrangement. Westall’s *perahu* appear to be more ‘built up’ and have the prominent ‘step in the bow’ noted in Indigenous rock art paintings from the Northern Territory (Burningham 1994; Chaloupka 1996).

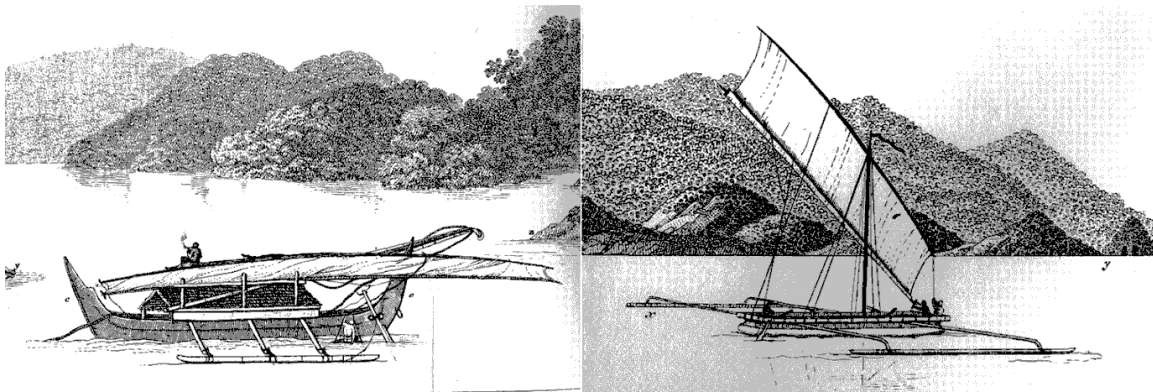


Figure 4. A *kora-kora* on the left and an outrigger canoe on the right, as drawn by Forrest off the coast of Selang Island and West Papua respectively (Forrest 1780:82 plate 5, 130 plate 10).

Alfred Russel Wallace, who travelled through the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago nearly a hundred years later (1856–1862), also described the plank-first method (Wallace 1874:419–421). However, he also noted a technique common to many Austronesian peoples that has since become known as the ‘lash-lugged edge-joined’ construction technique (Evans

1927; Gibson-Hill 1952; Horridge 1982; Manguin 1985; Manguin 2009; Clark 1993; Green 1995; The Jakarta Post 2009),

Ribs are now formed of single pieces of tough wood chosen and trimmed so as exactly to fit on to the projection from each plank [lug], being slightly notched to receive them, and securely bound to them by rattans passed through a hole in each projecting piece [lug] close to the surface of the plank (Wallace 1874:421).

An engraving titled 'Dobbo in the trading season' by T. Baines (probably Thomas Baines) clearly shows a lash-lugged vessel under construction (Wallace 1874:472–473).

A similar double-ended vessel is also evident in LeBreton's 1841 lithograph of *Pêcheurs de Tripang a la Baie Raffles* (Trepang fishers at Raffles Bay) (Dumont d'Urville 1846). Although it is not clear whether LeBreton's vessel is lash-lugged, or if Baines' is double-ended, it does suggest the possibility that smaller double-ended vessels such as the *koro-koro* from the eastern part of Indonesia were being built and may have voyaged to the northern Australian coast during the early Macassan period. LeBreton also provides an illustration of a Macassan *perahu* off Raffles Bay titled 'Praos bouguis a la voile, Baie Raffles' but the detail is not as precise in terms of the vessels rigging or sail arrangements as is the case with Forrest or Westall's work (Dumont d'Urville 1846).

Discussion and conclusion

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, it is possible that small double-ended vessels, either with or without outriggers, such as the *kora-kora* described in the previous section also made voyages to northern Australia along with the well documented examples of the *padewakang* from Makassar (Macknight 1969:484–487). However, with the advent of the revenue station at Bowen Strait and the impost of licence requirements it is likely that the smaller vessel types found in the south, Nusa Tenggara Timur, and to the east of Makassar in the Maluku region, stopped coming once the industry became more regulated. There are at least four references that provide home port origins other than Makassar (Jukes 1847:358; Earl 1846:65; Searcy 1905:42; Berndt and Berndt 1954:120–121) and therefore lend support to this argument. Although we have very little information about the 28 wrecks that we know occurred, we have no knowledge of the other potential *perahu* that may have been lost.

It seems logical therefore, to propose that there may have been two phases of voyaging to Australia during the Macassan period. The early phase, 1780–1881, is potentially characterised by a greater range of vessel types and sizes, ranging from 7–10 tons (on average) for the smaller vessel types, to the larger 25–30 ton *padewakang* that was noted by Flinders (1814:230). The later phase 1882–1907, beginning after licences were introduced and the requirements for visitation became more regulated, is characterised by the larger *padewakang* vessel type in the range of 15–30 tons, with perhaps the occasional 50 ton example (Macknight 1969:484).

The chance of finding the remains of one of these vessels from either phase in an archaeological context seems remote but not improbable. With a tidal range of six to seven metres and a coastline prone to cyclones it is likely that only the lower hull timbers, protected by ballast and silt, and located in sheltered bays and estuaries will ever be located and identified. Associated with these potential finds, may be hand-held iron-edged tools and weapons, ceramics, (earthenware primarily, but in some cases small amounts of porcelain), bottle glass, coins, and iron cooking pans (shaped like large contemporary Chinese woks) for processing trepang. There is also the possibility of small ordnance such as muskets and bronze swivel guns. Macknight (1976) and Crawford (1969) provide well documented examples of a detailed range and analysis of such materials excavated from Macassan land sites on the northern Australian coast. The challenge for the future discovery of a Macassan shipwreck will be to realise the archaeological potential of such a find and the wealth of information it may contribute to our understanding of this early period in Australia's trading history.

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Abbreviations

GRS Government Record Series (South Australia)
 SAA South Australian Advertiser
 SAPP South Australian Parliamentary Papers
 SRSA State Records of South Australia

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