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PRESS RELEASE

29TH JULY 2014



Early Chinese Coin Discovered on Remote Northern Territory Beach

The inaugural 'Past Muster' held at Elcho Island, in the far north of Australia, has made a unique archaeological discovery says Mike Owen, co-founder of the history research group Past Masters. Working hand in hand with Yolngu (Aboriginal) Rangers from the Marthakal Resource Centre and 'Learning on Country' students, scientists from the Past Masters identified a Chinese coin minted in Beijing as early as 1736.

The coin was found on the beach in the vicinity of a known Macassan trepanging site. The Macassans from Sulawesi in Indonesia are known to have fished northern Australian waters for trepang (sea cucumber) from about the mid-1700s until 1907.

The trepang trade is Australia's first documented export industry and one in which many Aboriginal people were intimately involved in pre-colonial times. Macassans would sell the trepang harvested on the beaches of north Australia to the Chinese in Singapore. For the Chinese, trepang was a rare delicacy with aphrodisiac properties.

Prof. Tiequan Zhu of Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou has identified the brass coin as being from the Qing Dynasty and made during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795 AD). Two Manchurian characters on one side of the coin indicate that it was minted at the Chinese Central Government's coin manufacturing factory at Baoquan in Beijing. Noted Australian numismatist and member of the Past Masters, Mr. Peter Lane of Adelaide, agrees with Prof. Zhu's analysis.

The coin find was made by Mr. Nenad Lonc, also of Adelaide, using a metal detector supplied for the 'Past Muster' by Minelab. Dr. Ian McIntosh of Indiana University, also co-founder of the Past Masters, said that the Chinese coin discovery provides further opportunity for re-writing Australian history as it suggests that Australia was trading with the Middle Kingdom in the period before it became a British colony.

The Past Masters are currently attempting to explain how medieval East African coins ended up on the Wessel Islands north of where the Chinese coin was found. The Past Masters will present their findings in Addis Ababa this October at a Chinese Government sponsored conference on the ancient Indian Ocean maritime silk route.

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