

Finding the Unexpected on the Trail of the Extraordinary in Arnhem Land

Ian McIntosh

ABSTRACT: An archaeological expedition to northern Australia in search of clues surrounding the discovery of medieval African coins, the oldest foreign artefacts ever found on the continent, has yielded some extraordinary finds. Anthropologist Ian McIntosh takes us on a journey to the Wessel Islands describing mysterious Aboriginal rock art, WW2 wreckage and, most unexpectedly, evidence of the visit of a Hollywood star—Jimmy the chimpanzee of the Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan films of the early 20th century.

In the 2012 issue of *Australian Folklore* I described the curious circumstances surrounding the discovery in north-east Arnhem Land of medieval African coins from the once celebrated Sultanate of Kilwa. The ruins of this Swahili settlement lie due west across the Arafura Sea and the Indian Ocean, more than 8000km away. In the article, I considered the various possibilities for how these coins found their way to an isolated beach that is rarely visited even by the island's traditional Aboriginal land owners. I also speculated on the deeper significance of these coins for Australian history, as they are the oldest foreign artefacts ever found upon our shores. Were the Aborigines of the Wessel Islands, a people known as the Yolngu, implicated in some fashion in the vast maritime silk route that linked East Africa, Arabia, Persia, India and China?

This is what we sought to find out.

To Australia's Wessel Islands

In July 2013, with my team of archaeologists, heritage specialists, and historians (who are known as the 'Past Masters'), I embarked upon a preliminary expedition to the coin deposition site in search of answers. The local knowledge of, and close collaboration with the traditional owners of the Wessel Islands, was critical in helping the Past Masters determine primary and secondary target sites. Given the 'needle in a haystack' nature of our task, we had to cast a very wide net for possible clues to this mystery. By drawing upon the expertise of noted numismatists, a geomorphologist, and quite a number of local enthusiasts with deep connections in the region, we were confident that, if there were more coins to be found, then we would find them, and solve the mystery.

To the untrained eye, the Wessels littoral appears pristine—untouched and untrodden. But by turning a scientific eye to these long beautiful beaches, a different story emerges. The Past Masters, for example, engaged the services of a researcher of ballast, so that we might pinpoint the former presence of non-Aboriginal seafarers. What might be viewed by some as an insignificant rock, half-buried in the intertidal flats, could be like gold to our team members. A rare rounded basalt boulder that is utilized today by Yolngu for grinding cycad nuts is not indigenous to Australia. In all likelihood, it was introduced hundreds of years ago by Indonesian traders as ballast on their praus. Such a rock would have been tossed overboard as the visitors took on their Australian cargo, whether it was trepang (or sea cucumber), ironstone, or some other commodity. Aborigines then utilized this rock for their own purposes and attributed to it a certain sacred mythological significance. In a similar way, the Dutch used yellow brick as ballast, the Arabs—lead ingots, the Portuguese—cracked limestone, and so on. As we searched those secluded beaches, these were the sorts of clues we were seeking. For the most part, however, we did not even know what form the clues might take. Shipwreck debris, iron tools, broken pieces of pottery?

The training of our Yolngu colleagues was absolutely critical to our expedition's success. We fly in and fly out of Arnhem Land with their permission and at their pleasure but they are the ones who monitor the immense Northern Territory coastline on a day-by-day basis. They are best placed to make those discoveries that really can re-write Australian history, and we work closely with them in this endeavour. The Past Masters call the process of bringing together the very best of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge, technology and training 'collaborative history making'.

And so, as we were combing the Wessels strand, our minds were open to all possibilities. Nothing was too outrageous for our deeper consideration. Some of our team thought that Africans themselves had brought the coins to Australia, which is not beyond possibility, when you consider that there was a two-way flow of peoples across the Indian Ocean from as early as 200 CE. Indonesians from Borneo and the Makassar Strait had populated the island of Madagascar around this time which was at least 500 years before the emergence of the nearby Sultanate of Kilwa in what is now Tanzania. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea indicates that the Romans were also in the vicinity of Kilwa as early as 150 CE. They recorded the presence of a trading base named Rhapta, whose exact whereabouts remains unknown.

Some of the team felt that the Portuguese were a more likely suspect, as they had sacked Kilwa in the early 1500s. And anyone who has studied Portuguese 'freebooting' in the Indian Ocean knows that they left no stone unturned in their search for 'God, Gold and Glory'. If there was

profit to be had in north Australia, then they would have been the first ones to take advantage of it. In addition, we know that the Portuguese had a strong presence just to the north of Arnhem Land in the Spice Islands, a short sail away. There is also some evidence that the Portuguese were engaged in slaving in the Tiwi Islands near Darwin from their base in Timor, a subject that requires much further investigation.

Others in our team thought that Indonesian fishermen from Makassar were implicated in the coin deposition, as they were in regular communication both with the Dutch and the Portuguese, and also with the Yolngu from at least the mid-1700s. The Macassan trepang trade lasted into the early years of the 20th century.

Rock Art Provides a Window to the Past

During the week-long expedition, team members split up according to a predetermined plan. Equipped with radios, they could call the group together in the case of a discovery. One morning from Cape Wessel a call came in from our geomorphologist Tim Stone saying that he had located some fascinating Yolngu rock paintings, one of which might be an old sailing ship. Together with our Yolngu colleagues, we pondered at length about whether it could be a record of a visit by the Portuguese. Yolngu oral history speaks of men adorned with 'hats of mirror' coming ashore near here, so the idea was not too outlandish. The painting was quite unusual and very different from the totemic snakes, fish, and turtles which adorn many of the rock shelters. We shared photos of the curious circular images with our rock art specialist, and, through the process of colour separation, he was able to identify the various motifs in a matter of days. To our disappointment, this was not a representation of a Portuguese or Spanish galleon. Rather, to our complete astonishment, we were now 99% certain that what we had been looking at in that cave was a stylized rendition of a 1936 Fordson tractor linked to the former WW2 radar base just to the south in Trafalgar Bay. The tractor must have so impressed the local Indigenous people that they decided to emblazon one of the few cave walls of the Cape with an image of this large red-wheeled beast. The tractor, we have now learned, ended its days at the Elcho Island mission, on the southern end of the Wessel Island chain. Various bits and pieces of the jettisoned vehicle eventually found their way into the foundation of the mission jetty, now in total disrepair—an archaeological site that itself awaits excavation.

A World War 2 Drama

This same initial excitement was associated with the finding of a large wooden 'knee', that L-shaped piece of timber that supports a boat's deck. The 'knee' was found by our archaeologist at a special place that Yolngu

history and mythology links with ancient mariners. Called Mitjianguru, or 'the place of the boat', it was singled out by the team for special attention. The shape of the debris seemed unusual to us and inconsistent with modern boat construction. It was not unreasonable, then, that some might have jumped to the conclusion that it could be from an Arabian or Indian shipwreck or similar, and perhaps the source of our coins. Our detailed research, however, led us down another path. We soon came to the conclusion that it was probably not from a medieval vessel at all, but rather a Navy boat, the *HMAS Patricia Cam*, which was built in the 1930s at Brisbane Waters in NSW, and which was bombed and sunk by the Japanese off the Wessel Islands in WW2. Thus it was potentially a very important piece of timber, a vital link to a sad chapter in northern Australian history. Only one Australian was captured in Australia by the Japanese in WW2 and he was passenger of this ship, the missionary Len Kentish. Following the sinking of the 'Pat Cam', Kentish was taken to the Aru Islands where he was tortured and beheaded. He now lies in the Australian War Cemetery in Ambon.

Continued study of the 'knee' by Past Master, Mike Owen, leads us to the conclusion that it is probably from a south-east Asian vessel, but even so our search has still been very fruitful. It led us to the graves of two passengers of the 'Pat Cam', one Navy man (Percy Cameron) and one Yolngu (Gitjapuy) who were both presumed to have been lost at sea. Percy's daughter Jan Braund, had long hoped for more information about the disappearance of her father and the Past Masters were very happy to oblige. Contact has been made with the Australian Navy and the Australian War Memorial about the possibility of repatriating his remains.

A History of Visitation

Every possible lead that we encountered on the Wessel Islands was followed up by the Past Masters with meticulous probing. How could we explain the presence of the African coins in this remote corner of the world? One of the most interesting places for exploration is on Marchinbar Island, the largest of the Wessels group. On its southern extremity there lies an old stone fish trap that the Past Masters believe may have been built by Yolngu in collaboration with shipwrecked Macassans in 1802 in order to feed the 30 plus stranded fishermen. Could the African coins have been given to the Yolngu in appreciation of their help? The British explorer Matthew Flinders encountered the wreckage of the Indonesian vessel a year later during his ill-fated homeward voyage and he described in his diary the local Aborigines as 'the Australians', the first ever reference to this term. Our team playfully christened this place the 'Bay of the Australians' and we would like to see a plaque honoring this early encounter.

From at least 1623, this bay with its abundant fresh water has been a rendezvous point for foreign travelers. On his way to Ambon, Dutch explorer Jan Carstenszoon, for example, passed through here in his ship the *Arnhem* and named it the 'Bay of Good Hope'. This bay is also associated with a most extraordinary event in Australian history. The very first convicts to escape from Sydney stopped briefly here in the 1790s and we half expect to find artifacts related to their presence, like a broken white clay pipe stem, or a fragment of hand-blown-glass. One of the convicts was Mary Bryant, whose recapture and court case were the talk of London. On 28 March 1791, Mary and her husband William, their children, and a number of other convicts stole Governor Arthur Phillip's six-oared cutter and began their over 5000km journey to Timor in search of freedom. After a short stay on the Wessel Islands, that group pushed on to Kupang where they were arrested and sent for trial in England. Mary survived only through the legal intervention of James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson, who took pity upon her after hearing of her terrible ordeal, the loss of her children on the journey, and other deprivations.

These are the sorts of stories that the Past Masters prioritise in our training workshops. They are designed to fire the imagination of Aboriginal youth and others and to get them motivated and involved in our collaborative history making ventures.

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Introducing Jimmy the Chimp

For all our searching for clues about the African coins, there was one story above all others that was most unexpected, and most extraordinary. It was a tale connecting the Wessel Islands with a famous American magician and Hollywood star named John Calvert, who is often described as the original 'Indiana Jones'. In 1959, Calvert was already world famous for his innovative magic act. He was the man who could make an elephant disappear on stage! His Hollywood movie roles, especially as the detective 'The Falcon' in the 1940s, were legendary. Calvert had been sailing around Asia to various performance destinations like Manila and Singapore in his yacht the *Sea Fox* before setting out for Australia. He was accompanied by two very special crew members. First, there was a young Filipino singer named Pilita Corrales, who was then unknown, but who would go on to fame and fortune first in Australia and later alongside Sammy Davis Jr in Las Vegas. Then there was a real surprise; Jimmy the Chimp who had appeared in the Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan films (including *Tarzan and the Huntress*, *Tarzan and the*

Amazons, and *Tarzan and the Leopard Women*). Jimmy, like Pilita, was a key part of Calvert's magic show.

In July 1959, the *Sea Fox* ran aground at Elcho Island and, while the three were awaiting rescue and repairs, Calvert decided to perform his act at one of the more spectacular venues of his career—the Galiwin'ku Aboriginal mission. By all accounts, it was an unforgettable performance, a once in a lifetime experience especially for the older traditional Aboriginal residents. None had ever seen a monkey before and they were amazed at his expressive face and bizarre antics. In 1986, when I lived at Elcho Island, anyone over the age of 40 would retell the story of Jimmy and also Calvert's conjuring tricks in considerable detail and usually with much laughter. One old Aboriginal man in attendance by the name of Djingulul, as we learned later, was determined to capture for posterity this unforgettable moment.

Now when we were photographing the rock art shelters of Jensen Bay on Marchinbar Island, one team member located a weathered painting of a strange looking ship. The islands have been buffeted by two major cyclones in the past 30 years, and there has been significant deterioration in the colours of the rock paintings, but we could clearly make out the outlines of a small red figure with its arms held up high, just above a painting of a sea craft which had a small dinghy in tow.

Our rock art specialists searched high and low to find a match for this cave ship in the maritime record. The heritage expert in our group was of the opinion that this might have been an early 19th century French trading vessel. It certainly looked like a positive match, but it was only through serendipity that we learned the truth. By a curious turn of events, some months after our expedition our lead archaeologist, Michael Hermes, was browsing history titles in a second-hand bookstore in Sydney when he came upon a volume on Australian islands. This 1960s publication by international photographer Douglass Baglin revealed not only the entire story of John Calvert and his crew, but it also contained pictures of that very cave that we had visited. The boat in question was much clearer and so was the strange little red animal-like figure stationed above it. Even more thrilling was an image of the Yolngu artist himself, Djingulul, the aged Yolngu leader who had attended the Calvert show. What we had witnessed was probably the last painting done by a traditional elder in a traditional context in this part of north Australia.

Djingulul had immortalized the visit to his island home of the inimitable Calvert and the *Sea Fox*, and also his chimpanzee companion. In so doing, he had shed valuable light on the meaning and significance of 20th century Yolngu rock art, and also paved the way for a deeper appreciation of a rich artistic legacy. Some of the Yolngu creations probably date back perhaps 2000-3000 years from the very emergence of the Wessel Islands from the sea following the last Ice Age.

Calvert died in September 2013, at the age of 102, and was performing magic on Broadway right to the end. Pilita, now in her 70s, is recognized as a national treasure in her home in the Philippines. She has recorded many hit records and has a dedicated Facebook site with many thousands of fans. Jimmy the Chimp ended his days at the Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney at the end of a very illustrious career on stage and screen. After temporary repairs, the *Sea Fox* was later scuttled in Darwin Harbour.

Conclusion

Our voyage to the Wessel Islands has attracted considerable international attention. The Past Masters have given television, radio and newspaper interviews in over 20 countries with high profile media outfits like the NBC, BBC, Huffington Post, the Voice of Russia, and Channel Islam International.

The mystery of Australia's African coins has captured the imagination of a global public and in 2014 we plan further Yolngu training workshops, and more visits to the Wessel Islands. Our search for clues that might help solve the mystery has no bounds. The Past Masters believe in the principle of collaborative history making and that by casting a wide net, soliciting views from all possible sources, and following leads to their natural conclusion, we will not only solve the coin mystery, but all manner of historic mysteries as well.

Come join us!

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Bibliography

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