

Chapter 1

'There are no traces now'

THE MATERIAL HERITAGE OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

To many people, Australia is a 'new' country. The idea that it is really an 'old' country is taking some getting used to. The first shock came in the 1960s and 1970s, when research workers demonstrated that the original Australians, the Aboriginal people, had been in this continent for fifty thousand years or so. The second shock is occurring now, with the realization that two hundred years have elapsed since the beginnings of European settlement. Two centuries is a tiny piece of time compared with fifty thousand years, but a great many things have happened during that period and the whole appearance of this land has been changed. The territories of highly adapted hunter-gatherers have become sheep runs, cattle stations and cultivation paddocks; have been torn apart by mining; have been covered by massive cities and scattered with country towns and rural dwellings; have been seamed with railways, roads and land divisions, and altered in countless other ways. This has not been a simple process of transformation: in those two hundred years land-use has changed several times in some areas; the mines have flourished and died; cities have continuously modified their appearance, while whole towns have been abandoned and thousands of rural dwellings have vanished; and roads, railways and fences have changed their course or been dismantled. As a result the Australian landscape is like a drawing to which each generation has added a few lines, whilst erasing a few others. Our land is patterned with its past and it is a pattern of great complexity that grows daily more complex. This pattern tells us not only about our country but also about ourselves.

Some of the faintest parts of the pattern belong to the Aboriginal settlement that pre-dates European colonization. Interpreting those traces has become the task of the prehistoric archaeologist. There is much that has now been published on this subject, including some general books.¹ Most of the pattern, however, relates to European settlement and study of that part of the pattern is relatively new in Australia. Whose task is it to interpret such evidence?

In the first instance, the investigation of Australia's last two hundred years is obviously the task of Australianist historians.² However, historians are specialists in interpreting the contemporary written records of the past, or the subsequent written commentaries on those records, and have enough to do puzzling over documents in the various archives without worrying about a heap of bricks in the middle of a paddock or an unusual pattern on an aerial photograph. They have usually regarded such material evidence as not really their business, although some remarkable exceptions exist.³ Also, historians have tended to be more interested in political and constitutional developments and in the activities of the more notable individuals of the past. To say this is to do a grave injustice to the social and economic historians, but they seem to have been in the minority, and even they have been

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more interested in general trends than in particular elements of the landscape. The study and writing of *local* history has remained largely in the hands of interested amateurs. Nevertheless, it is clear that a detailed knowledge of Australia's history is essential for anyone seeking to understand the material evidence scattered across its landscape.

Landscapes are of interest to geographers and, in so far as landscapes are created by humans, they are of particular interest to historical geographers. As a result, scholars studying the historical geography of Australia have contributed substantially to our understanding of the impact of European colonization on this continent.⁴ Indeed, because of the technological complexity of that impact, there have also been other specialists who have played an essential role in its study. A very obvious part of the human contribution to landscapes are buildings which, in some places, virtually obliterate any natural features. Because of this, architects and architectural historians have much to tell us about the material evidence for Australia's last two hundred years.⁵ That evidence also includes bridges and tunnels, roads and railways, mines, factories and machines. In order to understand things of that sort we need the expertise of engineers, and some of them have indeed turned their attention to the study of such material evidence for the past.⁶ Others who can help us to understand the very varied evidence that exists include metallurgists, soil scientists, agronomists, botanists, photogrammetrists, industrial chemists and many more.

All these many contributions are essential if we are to comprehend the very complex material evidence that we have for the European settlement of Australia. However, the people who really specialize in extracting information about the past from *material* evidence are archaeologists. It is a common belief that they are interested only in remote antiquity, and much has been published on the prehistory of Australia. However this is not true, things don't have to be very old before archaeologists are interested in them. Nor is it the case that archaeologists only study societies that did not have the capacity to write their own histories. Some of the most famous research done by archaeologists during the last century or so has been on the historical civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Italy. Indeed, in Western Europe, archaeologists have extended their interests to include sites belonging to the Middle Ages and even to the post-medieval period. Particularly in Britain, the main interest of archaeologists studying this most recent period has been in the technology of the so-called Industrial Revolution, and so the archaeological investigation of the last two to three hundred years is often referred to as 'industrial archaeology'. However in several parts of the world that were colonized by Europeans after A.D. 1500 there has developed a far broader interest in the archaeology of recent centuries. In the United States of America, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and in Australia, interest and concern has grown for what has come to be known by its American title: 'historical archaeology'. In Australia this development is a very recent one, it originated no earlier than the late 1960s. The Australian Society for Historical Archaeology, for instance, was not founded until 1970,⁷ and it was 1983 before it was able to publish its own scholarly journal *The Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology*. This now appears once a year, but the fact remains that many people in Australia have not yet heard about historical archaeology. It is the purpose of this book to provide a brief introduction to the subject. The intention is to do this not by a general survey, which would be impossible in a book of this size, but by looking at a selection of studies that historical archaeologists have done in Australia. This selection has been mostly based on published sources so that those readers who wish to do so can read more by consulting the Suggested Reading section at the end of the book.

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We have already examined two common but incorrect ideas about archaeology: first, that it only studies things that are very old, and second, that it only concerns itself with prehistoric societies. Before going further it is important to dispose of a third common misconception. This is that archaeologists spend all their time digging holes or, to give it its more polite name, excavating. This is just not true. Even for periods of quite remote antiquity there are landscape features of human origin that can be studied from their surface characteristics. Although most of the evidence for such periods is buried beneath the ground, not all of it is. In the case of Australian historical archaeology, concerned as it is with relatively recent times, a very large amount of the evidence is in the form of standing structures that survive as part of the visible environment in which we live. Because of this there are many useful investigations that do not involve excavation. However, much of the earliest colonial settlement, and many of the later activities, have not left visible remains. To all intents and purposes they have vanished. It is in these instances that archaeological excavation can sometimes be appropriate and can give us information that would not otherwise be obtainable. Modern archaeologists, however, regard excavation rather as modern medicine regards surgery: it is something you do if you cannot fix your problem any other way. Excavation is 'the unrepeatable experiment',⁸ you have only one chance to get it right; once a site has been excavated it is virtually useless for further investigations.

Along with popular misconceptions about archaeology go doubts about its value for studying recent periods. What is the point, many people ask, in conducting archaeological inquiries when there are such huge quantities of historical records? There are several answers to this question. First, even very recent archaeological sites can tell us things that contemporary documents have not recorded. For instance, many of Australia's earliest European settlers were illiterate or of limited literacy, such people have not left us accounts of what they did. Contemporary records that describe the activities of such people were usually written by their social and economic superiors who were often ill-informed, if not prejudiced, witnesses. The role of convicts in the early settlement of Australia is a case in point. Other early settlers who would have been well able to write about themselves were often too busy carving out a new life to have either the time or the inclination. Tragically, such letters and diaries that were written by them were, in many cases, destroyed by their descendants who thought that they were of no value. In many ways it is a miracle that so many contemporary documents have survived, but it is a fact that the ordinary people and the underprivileged are not as well represented in those records as they might be. With archaeology, however, we can reconstruct the way that such people lived and appreciate some of the things that they achieved. This is important because it was they who made modern Australia, with their own hands.

Another frequent limitation of contemporary written records is that they will often tell us that something was done, but will be uninformative about how it was done. Thus a document may tell us that a certain person built a homestead in a particular place at a specified date, but it may tell us nothing about how that building was constructed. If the building survives, either intact or as a ruin, an archaeological structural analysis can provide quite a lot of information even if it has been subsequently modified by later additions. If it does not survive, archaeological excavation can inform us of its plan, and give some indication of the materials used and the building technique employed, even if all that remains are stains on the surface of the subsoil.

Contemporary documents, in spite of their enormous value for any understanding of the past, have one other shortcoming that every historian is aware of. The information they

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contain is what the writer says happened — this may not be the same as what actually happened. The writer may have been deliberately dishonest, prejudiced, poorly informed, mistaken, or may merely have made a slip of the pen. In contrast, relevant archaeological evidence may be able to show us what really happened. Thus the historical document gives us evidence comparable to that of a witness in a court of law; archaeology provides evidence similar to that of the forensic scientist.

A second reason for studying the archaeology of the recent past is that archaeologists are interested in an aspect that historians have not usually concerned themselves with. This is the study of human 'culture'. This word is used here in a specialized anthropological sense, and is not intended to have anything to do with either the Sydney Opera House or with the things that interest bacteriologists! The best definition of the anthropological use of the word is that of James Deetz, who defined 'culture' as 'learned behavior', or 'everything a person would not do were he [or she] to grow up completely isolated on a desert island'.⁹ Anthropologists know that human cultures vary from place to place, and archaeologists can show that they also change with time. The learned behaviour of a past human group can be studied by archaeologists through the agency of surviving parts of its 'material culture', that is, the things that the group made. Anthropologists tell us that human culture is patterned, and they have argued that it is possible to infer non-material aspects of a culture from the material aspects that archaeologists study. For the archaeologist, one of the most intriguing questions about past human societies is to understand how and why their cultures change. And so we come back to Australian historical archaeology. The European colonization of this continent was one of the longest-range mass migrations in human history, involving the transplanting of large numbers of people from one side of the world to the other and from one group of environments to a completely different group. Those people brought with them the cultures of their own societies in Western Europe, but their descendants in Australia evolved a culture of their own. Just as the historian is fascinated by the process by which the English, Irish, Scots, Germans and others became Australians, so is the archaeologist. All around us, in the Australian landscape, there is material evidence that can help us to understand more about this most remarkable example of cultural adaptation and change. Such an understanding could improve our knowledge of how human societies function in general, and that is relevant, not merely to the study of the past, but also to our present and to our future.

There is a third reason for archaeologists investigating the material remains of the recent past and it is an unashamedly selfish reason: it helps *them*. As has already been stated, it is the business of archaeologists to extract information from the material remains so as to discover how people lived in the past. The difficulty is to know how to do it. As the American archaeologist Lewis Binford has pointed out, archaeological evidence is 'a sort of untranslated language, something that we need to "decode" in order to move from simple statements about matter and its arrangement to statements of behavioral interest about the past'.¹⁰ Another American archaeologist, William Rathje, has defined archaeology as 'a focus on the interaction between material culture and human behavior and ideas, regardless of time or space'.¹¹ Clearly, the only place where archaeologists can discover the detailed linkages between material culture and human behaviour is in the present time or in the recent past. Historical archaeology therefore provides a wonderful testing ground for archaeologists to try out their theories and their methods. This is because the documentary record, and sometimes the oral record, can provide the experimental control. For example, if one wants to know more about how archaeological sites form, one can excavate the sites of

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structures for which there is detailed historical information.¹² Or, to give another example, if one wishes to test the validity of an archaeological dating method such as the technique known as 'seriation', which provides dates from changing fashions in artefacts, one can try it out on historical remains where all the dates are provided, such as the tombstones of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century cemetery.¹³ In short, it is being increasingly realized that the archaeology of the recent past can help us to understand the archaeology of the remote past. With Australian historical archaeology there are some particularly exciting possibilities of this sort. One of the most interesting of these has been perceived by the historian David Denholm, a scholar with a lively appreciation of the value of historical archaeology. 'Our unique situation when we look at Colonial Australia', he has written, 'is that we can actually see and study disappearance in the process of happening, for the act of disappearing is taking place in front of our eyes.'¹⁴ Perhaps Denholm should have been an archaeologist!

This brings us back to the pattern of Australia's past which is scrawled across its landscape. The quotation in the title of this chapter is taken from a poem of Henry Lawson's, three stanzas of which are printed at the beginning of this book. Some of the other chapters also have titles which include extracts from this poem and the title of the book has the same origin. Lawson was called, by one of his contemporaries, 'the first articulate voice of the real Australia'.¹⁵ His poem *Reedy River* is evocative of a past that is lost beyond recovery. Yet perhaps he was too pessimistic; Australia's colonial achievement has not vanished without leaving traces, those traces are all around us, and it is the archaeologist's task to recover from them an understanding of past life.

Notes

¹ For example: J. Flood, 1983. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, Collins, Sydney, and J.P. White and J.F. O'Connell, 1982. *A prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul*, Academic Press, Sydney.

² For example: C.M.H. Clark, 1962-1987. *A history of Australia* (6 vols), Melbourne University Press, Carlton, and R. Ward, 1978. *The Australian legend* (New edn), Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

³ For example: L.A. Gilbert, W.P. Driscoll and A. Sutherland, 1974. *History around us: An enquiry approach to local history*, Hicks Smith, Sydney, second edition 1984, Methuen, North Ryde, and R.I. Jack, 1986. *Exploring the Hawkesbury*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst. Also D. Denholm, 1979. *The Colonial Australians*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

⁴ For example: D.N. Jeans (ed.), 1984. *Australian historical landscapes*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney; D.N. Jeans and P. Spearritt, 1980. *The open air museum: The cultural landscape of New South Wales*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney; J.M.R. Cameron, 1981. *Ambition's fire: The agricultural colonization of pre-convict Western Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands; M. Williams, 1974. *The making of the South Australian landscape: A study in the historical geography of Australia*, Academic Press, London and New York; J.M. Powell, 1970. *The public lands of Australia Felix: Settlement and land appraisal in Victoria 1834-91 with special reference to the Western Plains*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

⁵ For example: J.M. Freeland, 1968. *Architecture in Australia: A history*, Cheshire, Melbourne, and M. Herman, 1970. *The early Australian architects and their work* (2nd edn), Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

⁶ For example: Institution of Engineers, Australia, 1982. *The protection of the engineering heritage, Brisbane, May 1982*, Institution of Engineers, Australia, National Conference Publication No. 82/2, and C. O'Connor, 1985. *Spanning two centuries — historic bridges of Australia*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Brisbane.

⁷ Judy Birmingham, of the Department of Archaeology in the University of Sydney, was the prime mover in this development.

⁸ P. Barker, 1982. *Techniques of archaeological excavation* (2nd edn), Batsford, London, pp.11-12.

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⁹ J. Deetz, 1967. *Invitation to archaeology*, Natural History Press, Garden City, New York, p.6.

¹⁰ L.R. Binford, 1983. *In pursuit of the past: Decoding the archaeological record*, Thames & Hudson, pp.19-20.

¹¹ W.L. Rathje, 1979. Modern material culture studies. In M.B. Schiffer (ed.), *Advances in archaeological method and theory*, Vol. 2, Academic Press, New York, p.2.

¹² For example: G. Connah, 1986. Historical reality: archaeological reality. Excavations at Regentville, Penrith, New South Wales, 1985. *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology* 4, pp.29-42.

¹³ For example: J.F. Deetz and E.S. Dethlefsen, 1978. Death's head, cherub, urn and willow. In R.L. Schuyler (ed.), *Historical archaeology: A guide to substantive and theoretical contributions*, Baywood, Farmingdale, New York, pp.83-9. (Originally published in *Natural History* 76(3), pp.29-37, in 1967.)

¹⁴ D. Denholm, 1979, p.111.

¹⁵ D.M. Wright, 1980. *In the days when the world was wide: The poetical works of Henry Lawson*, Currey O'Neil, Windsor, Victoria, p.viii.

Chapter 2

They came by sea

THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF PRECOLONIAL CONTACT

In the last chapter there was some discussion of Australia's archaeological landscape and of the things that we can learn from its study. It needs to be emphasized, however, that this 'landscape' includes not only the surface of the continent but also its coastal margins and the seabed in its vicinity. Indeed, research by maritime archaeologists over the last two decades has made important and exciting contributions to the field of Australian historical archaeology. All human settlement in Australia had to cross the sea to get here. This was as true for the earliest Aboriginal settlers, who are thought to have arrived from southeast Asia about fifty thousand years ago, as it was for the groups of Europeans and others who have settled here since 1788. From this arises important implications: first, that the Aboriginal arrival is the oldest evidence in the world for such a sea-crossing, and second, that the success and growth of European settlement required the maintenance of strong maritime contacts with the rest of the world. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the shores and seas around Australia are a vital source of archaeological evidence about our past. The last two centuries have seen several thousands of vessels wrecked in Australian waters. Convict ships, immigrant ships, general traders, whalers, even warships, are all represented. Some of this post-settlement maritime archaeological evidence will be considered, where appropriate, in later chapters. In this chapter it is the pre-settlement evidence that will be examined for it provides the only indications of contact with other societies with a written history prior to the commencement of European colonization at the end of the eighteenth century A.D. In short, the earliest study material available to Australian historical archaeologists is provided by maritime archaeology, taking that word to mean 'anything connected with seafaring' whether the evidence is situated 'underwater or on land'.¹

Before examining this evidence it is necessary to dismiss the numerous legends that have grown up about the existence of shipwrecks or other archaeological data said to demonstrate the presence in Australia of the Portuguese, Spanish, or even the Chinese during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Whatever the historical possibilities might have been, there are no material remains available for archaeological analysis that can be attributed with certainty to those people at that time. Our earliest certain evidence consists of one English and several Dutch shipwrecks, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that have been found on the Western Australian coast. Almost as early, however, are some of the trepang-processing sites scattered around parts of the northern Australian shoreline that represent seasonal visits by southeast Asian fishermen from about 1700 to about 1900 (Figure 2.1). These seafarers came from the Macassar region of the southern Celebes (now known as Sulawesi, and forming part of Indonesia). The average time for this voyage seems to have been about fourteen days, of which the longest piece of open-sea

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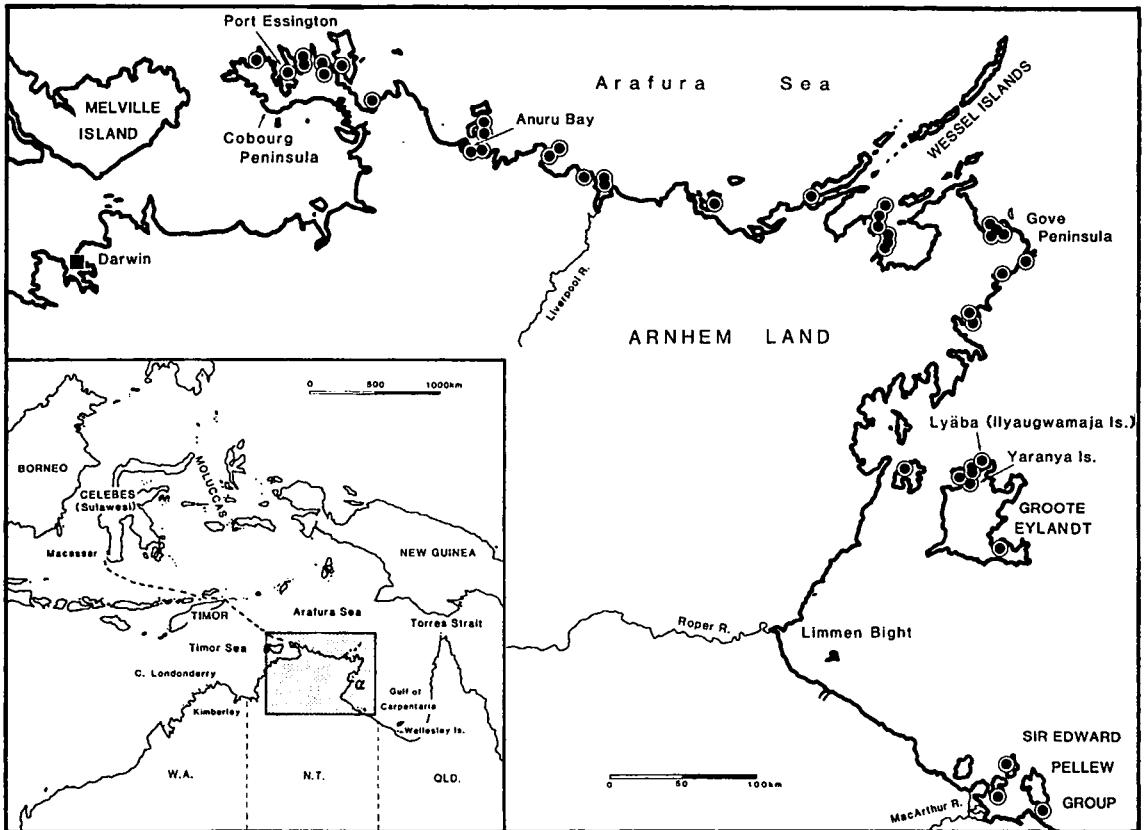


Figure 2.1 Trepang-processing sites in northern Australia. Inset shows the route sailed from Macassar. (After Macknight 1976.)

sailing (between Timor and Melville Island) took only four days.² The Macassans were equipped with very seaworthy boats known as 'praus', and when one considers that Madagascar, on the far side of the Indian Ocean, was colonized by Indonesians about fifteen hundred years ago, it is difficult to believe that the northern Australian coast was not visited until the end of the seventeenth century. Indeed, Macassan sites on the Australian coast have produced radiocarbon dates back to about eight hundred years ago, although historical and artefactual evidence has led to the rejection of these early dates.³ In Australia the Macassan sites are amongst the earliest historical sites and, because they may be only the latest manifestation of a very much older contact, it is perhaps appropriate to consider them first.

The Macassan visitors⁴ came to the northern Australian coast to collect trepang, which is a generalized name for a range of edible sea slugs otherwise known as sea cucumbers, or by the French name *bêche-de-mer*. These sea cucumbers are to be found in very large numbers in the shallow inshore waters of island southeast Asia and adjacent areas. Only some of the many species are both edible and easy to collect, however, and it seems that the Macassans regarded northern Australia as a good place to find these varieties. It is the Chinese that ate, and still eat, most of the trepang from southeast Asia. It comes in the same exotic food

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category as birds' nests and sharks' fin, and is valued for its jelly-like texture after cooking, for its supposed ability to bring out the flavour of other foods, and as a stimulant and aphrodisiac. The main problem with trepang was to get a highly perishable commodity to a relatively distant market. Because of this it was necessary to process the catch immediately, and this was done on the beach adjacent to the area of collection. The trepang were washed, gutted and boiled. The boiling process sometimes included tree bark, which not only dyed the trepang but also assisted in its preservation. Following this, the trepang were often buried in the beach sand for some hours, or perhaps several days, in order to remove calcareous deposits from the skins of certain species. Finally, they were thoroughly dried, and usually smoked over a slow fire. We know about the details of this complex processing from historical sources (Figure 2.2), but it is clear that such activities must have left archaeological traces on suitable parts of the northern coast of Australia.

This is indeed the case. To reach Australia, the Macassans relied on the northwest monsoon that blew steadily during the summer months. To return home, they depended on the southeast monsoon that was equally reliable during the winter months. This meant that it was the northern Australian coast between Bathurst Island and the Wellesley Islands that was the easiest to exploit, although a stretch of the northwestern coast, southwest of Cape Londonderry, was also visited. From the archaeological evidence it would seem that the northern and eastern coasts of Arnhem Land were the most important, and C.C. Macknight has recorded the existence of Macassan trepang-processing sites from the Cobourg Peninsula in the west, to the islands known as the Sir Edward Pellew Group in the east. The Macassans spent only a few months on the Australian coast during each year, roughly from January to April, and they moved regularly as the trepang became temporarily depleted in each place. Their utilization of individual processing sites was, therefore, often brief, but a suitable site would be revisited year after year. The most favoured places seem to have been sandy beaches adjacent to shallow inlets that provided both large numbers of trepang and a



Figure 2.2 Trepangers at Port Essington in 1845. (Drawing by H.S. Melville originally published in *The Queen*, 8 February 1862.)

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sheltered anchorage for the praus. There also needed to be mangroves nearby to provide the large quantities of firewood needed for boiling and smoking the trepang, and adequate supplies of fresh water.

Archaeologically, the Macassan sites are usually indicated by the existence of several lines of stones, which mark the place where the trepang-boiling fireplaces were situated, and by a surface scatter of broken pottery and other artefacts. One or more tamarind trees are also often present. These magnificent trees have grown from the seeds in the tamarind fruit that the Macassans brought with them for flavouring their rice. Although having been introduced in this way, the tamarind tree now naturally propagates in favourable places. During the 1960s, Macknight carried out surface collections on some of the sites and was able to excavate at several of them.

The most informative of the excavations was at the Anuru Bay site, situated on the northern coast of Arnhem Land adjacent to South Goulburn Island. This site seems to have been frequently used, and is marked by a prominent tamarind tree, by twenty-one stonelines, by several shallow depressions indicating the location of former smokehouses, and by a rectangular arrangement of stones over a double grave (Figure 2.3). Prior to excavation there was also a substantial scatter of artefacts, and the surface sand was discoloured by the charcoal from the Macassans' fires. The preservation of the stonelines varied, suggesting that some were older than others, and the lack of glass fragments associated with the separate group of structures at the eastern end of the site indicated that this was the scene of the earliest activity. Excavation threw considerable light on the way in which the site had been used, revealing the fireplaces represented by the stonelines, the pits in which the trepang had been buried briefly, and the ash-filled depressions that were all that remained of the smokehouses. The grave proved to contain the skeletons of two Macassan men, one about thirty-two years old and the other in his early twenties. They had

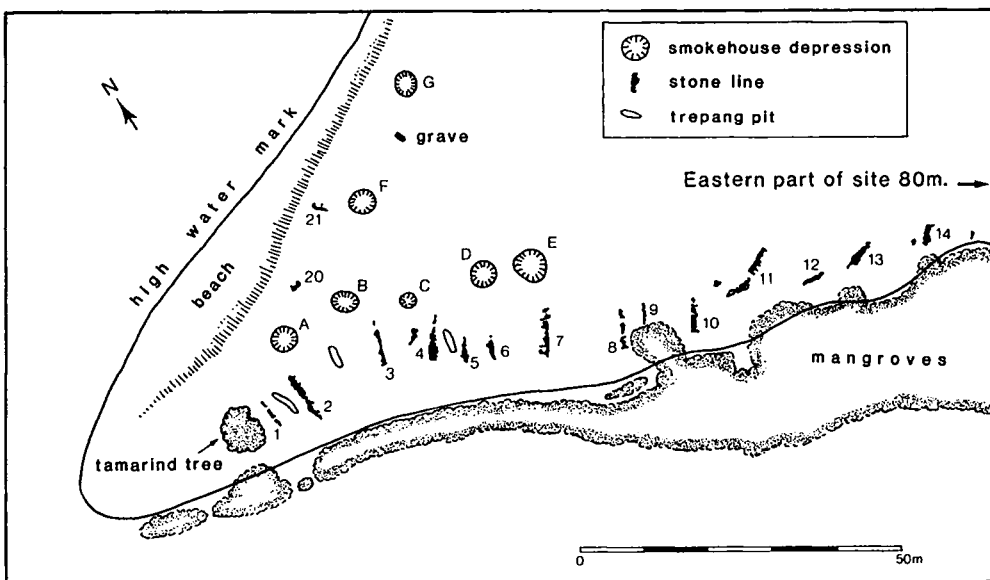


Figure 2.3 Anuru Bay trepang site showing some of the twenty-one stonelines. The eastern part of the site has been omitted. (After Macknight 1976.)