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# The discovery of an eighteenth century Chinese cash coin on Elcho Island, Northern Territory

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## Abstract

*An eighteenth century Chinese cash coin was recently found on a remote Northern Territory island east of Darwin during a heritage training workshop. Whereas most finds of this type of coin in Australia are associated with Chinese gold mining communities, the location of this find suggests it is associated with the Macassan trade, which for at least 150 years brought people from modern day Indonesia to collect trepang and trade with the Indigenous communities across northern Australia. The paper also touches upon the role of metal detection technology in cultural heritage studies in Australia.*

## Introduction

In the course of a week-long cultural heritage training program for Indigenous Sea Rangers on Elcho Island, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Chinese cash coin was found on the outskirts of the Yolngu Aboriginal community of Galiwinku in the Northern Territory (see Map). The coin was found on the loose sandy surface of a coastal dune, recorded and left where it was found, in accordance with the NT's *Heritage Conservation Act 1991*. This paper records the circumstances of the find, provides a description of the coin and speculates on how it came to be on this remote beach.

Although Chinese cash coins of the same age and origin have been found in Australia before, usually on or near gold mining sites, we argue that the context of this find is unusual. And the coin is unlikely to have been lost or discarded from a Chinese household or been associated with a 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese gambling venue, which are the most common contexts of such finds in Australia.

We assess that the coin was most likely to have been brought to Australia either by Macassan traders or by a Yolngu person returning from a visit to the trading city of Macassar in present day Indonesia sometime between 1775 when the coin was first possibly minted and 1906, the time of the last Macassan trading voyages to Australia.



The Northern Territory's Top End. Galiwinku is an Aboriginal community on Elcho Island, off the north coast of Arnhem Land, some 515 kms east of Darwin [Map courtesy of ANU cartoGIS].

## Background

Dutch East India Company [Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC] coins from the period 1690 to 1800 are well documented on historic sites around the coast of Arnhem Land,<sup>1</sup> where Aboriginal people and Macassans from present day Indonesia collected and processed trepang, a seafood delicacy in the Chinese cuisine. Archaeologist Campbell Macknight records that during the VOC control of the East Indies up to 1820, Chinese junks which sailed to Macassar direct from Canton or Amoy did so under a licence issued to them each year in Batavia (modern day Jakarta); the earliest one mentioned was in 1763.<sup>2</sup> Chinese rice bowls presumably imported from China into Macassar have been found at Macassan sites in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Macknight also mentions some Chinese investors living in Macassar who had directly invested in some Praus [Indonesian trading vessels] which visited Arnhem Land and named two of them: Kebera Ghiggheri (1828-29 season) and Captain Chinaman (1878 season).<sup>4</sup>

1 Mulvaney, D.J and Kamminga, J. (1999) *Prehistory of Australia*, Allen and Unwin; MacKnight, C.C. (1976) *The Voyage to Marege*, Melbourne University Press.

2 MacKnight, C.C *ibid* p.12

3 MacKnight, C.C *ibid* p.12

4 MacKnight C.C *ibid* p.46

Less well known is the discovery in 1945 of five copper coins dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the East African Islamic Sultanate of Kilwa (in present day Tanzania) that were found on nearby Marchinbar Island (part of Arnhem Land's Wessel Islands chain) along with four VOC coins.<sup>5</sup> These nine coins were found on a beach, remote from any Macassan site, during World War Two and are now housed at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

It was this extraordinary African coin find which prompted the collaboration of a team of heritage specialists (four of whom are the authors of this paper) to investigate how these mediaeval coins came to be found on a remote Northern Territory beach. Members of the team visited Elcho Island in July 2014, the closest settled area to Marchinbar Island, to train the local Aboriginal Sea Rangers who regularly visit the Marchinbar area, and other interested parties, including teachers and students, in identifying evidence of early shipwrecks. The rangers were trained in identifying the most common types of debris from early shipwrecks, such as ballast materials, glass and ceramics, and were given instruction in the use of metal detectors. It is hoped that research oriented field investigations, involving members of the specialist team and these Rangers, will next year find more evidence.

It was in the context of one of these training workshops that the Chinese cash coin was found near a Macassan site. The coin was located on an active dune face, with the aid of a metal detector. Several 1960's soft drink cans were also located in the immediate vicinity, with a cover of loose sand up to 20 cm thick, illustrating the dynamic nature of the land surface here. No archaeological features were disturbed during the identification of the coin or other finds in the area.

### **Previous Finds in the General Vicinity**

Three 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch coins were found 'along the beach 'south of the current township of Galiwinku according to early Elcho Island missionary, Reverend Harold Shepherdson.<sup>6</sup> Archaeologists MacKnight and John Mulvaney visited the general vicinity at different times in the 1960s and they found Macassan pottery, fragments of at least 17 early black glass bottles and numerous stone artefacts on a dune. Due to the very dynamic windblown sandy conditions in the general area, possibly Macassan stone lines seen by Mulvaney were not visible to MacKnight two years later nor to our team in 2014.

The dynamic nature of the environment, coupled with 1960s surveying limitations, means that the exact spatial relationship between the earlier historic finds and this find cannot be determined. In any case, it could be argued that the whole of the coastal

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5 Owen, M. (2014) 'Trade Winds', in *Australian Geographic* Volume 118, pp. 86-92

6 MacKnight *ibid* p.305

Arnhem Land landscape holds a legacy of this Yolngu-Macassan interaction rather than there being discrete heritage sites as usually delimited by archaeologists; a view held by many Yolngu traditional owners.

### Description of the Coin

The cast cash coin is in good condition with all the lettering easily readable. It is a relatively common coin, being minted at a major mint in the Chinese capital over six years. Unlike Western currencies, China did not have fractions like the penny, shilling and pound. These coins were often threaded together in hundreds or thousands or strung together to make the shape of a sword or in simple strings. A comparable face value compared to European currency was made in 1907 and approximately 10,000 cash were worth one pound sterling at that time.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Western coinage which can often accurately date an archaeological site, with Chinese cash coins it is not unusual to have coins three or four hundred years old or older still in circulation, commingling with modern currency. The cash coins were never dated, but simply recorded the reigning monarch and where they were minted.



Obverse

Reverse

Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) Chinese cash

Emperor: Qian Long Tong Bao 1736-1795

Minted: circa 1775-1781

Mint: Beijing

Obverse: Inscription read from top, bottom, right and left. Translation: Qian Long Tong Bao

Reverse: Inscription [in Manchu] read right to left. Translation: Boo Chiowan (Board of Revenue, Beijing) west branch

Metal: cast brass

Size: 23-24mm

Reference: F.Schjoth 1464, Hartill 5.104 Type F2, KM 387.1<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eville, A. Ritchie, and Park, Stuart (1987), 'Chinese Coins Down Under: Their Role on the New Zealand Goldfields, in *Australian Historical Archaeology*, p.44

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/gallery/displayimage.php?pos=-66729>





Left to right: archaeologist Michael Hermes, metal detectorist Nenad Lonc, archaeologist/geomorphologist Tim Stone, accompanied by some young history enthusiasts at the find site. Looking east [Photo: Mike Owen].

## Discussion

The presence of Chinese cash coins on Australian historic sites, typically on goldfields, is usually interpreted as evidence of an ethnic Chinese community having lived there, and they are often found in association with fan-tan gambling venues. The discovery of this coin does not, in our view, provide strong evidence for either a Chinese community or for gambling. No other artefacts of Chinese origin were located in the immediate vicinity and the nearby Macassan site contains only Aboriginal stone artefacts, shell midden material and some fragments of Macassan pottery.

Two scenarios are proposed to explain the presence of the Dutch VOC and now the Chinese coin on early coastal habitation sites in the Northern Territory.

The Macassans would have carried coins to Australia on their annual voyages for use in transactions with those they encountered in the Indonesian islands and for ship to ship trade, a cash economy not in place in Arnhem Land until the twentieth century. Occasionally these traders would have lost items in areas they frequented. This scenario is consistent with the fact that coins are rare finds on these sites, with only

six being recorded to 1988 (not including the Marchinbar finds).<sup>9</sup> As anthropologist Donald Thomson documented in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Macassans and Indigenous communities had developed a complex exchange system, incorporating technological, economic and ritual values, covering trade items such as knives, axes, tobacco and alcohol, which all became highly prized items in the Arnhem Land trade cycle.<sup>10</sup> Certainly by the 19<sup>th</sup> century an exchange system involving steel axes and knives from Macassar and numerous indigenous trade items was well developed across the Top End of the Northern Territory, well beyond the beaches and islands frequented by the Macassans. Thomson's study of the development of the Arnhem Land multi-dimensional value trade system endures as a powerful insight into the complex interactions which occur when mercantile and subsistence economies are brought together.<sup>11</sup>

The second scenario is that a Yolgnu person who travelled to Macassar with the Macassan fishermen at the end of the harvesting season brought the coin/coins back with them upon returning home, as adornments, souvenirs, gifts or talismen. Chinese cash coins are particularly amenable to use as personal adornments such as necklaces, armbands or buttons, due to the square holes through them.

Since there was some evidence of much later occupational activity in the area, with 1950s and 1960s artefacts such as soft drink cans, toys, and Australian decimal and pre-decimal coins being noted, the possibility that the coin was lost on the dune at this time cannot be completely discounted. However, since the date of the coin roughly coincides with the peak of Macassan activity in Arnhem Land in the early nineteenth century,<sup>12</sup> we suggest the coin is most likely to have been lost or discarded at this time.

### **Methods for Detecting Small Finds**

Aside from the particular historical interest of this find, this training exercise also clearly demonstrates that metal detectors do have a valid and valuable role to play in certain types of archaeological investigation in Australia. Modern detectors are very effective at discriminating between various metal objects/artefacts, allowing large areas to be scanned prior to any recovery taking place. When carefully employed, the use of metal detectors can greatly assist in archaeological investigations and in the case of the inquiry into the presence of mediaeval Kilwa coins in Arnhem Land, their use will be critical. With strict controls on the protection of stratified archaeological deposits, as were employed during these training sessions, metal detectors are a valuable new tool in such studies, remembering that the Kilwa coins were claimed to have been found

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9 Connah, G. (1993) *The Archaeology of Australia's History*, Cambridge University Press, p.11

10 Thomson, D. (1949) *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land*, McMillan and Co.

11 Thomson, D. *ibid*

12 Macknight, C.C. *ibid* p.97



exposed on the ground surface by the Australian serviceman, Maurice Isenberg, not within a stratified archaeological setting.

As a general observation, it should be borne in mind that the vast majority of historical finds made by metal detectorists currently go un-reported and that state and territory heritage authorities need to engage with this rapidly growing community group in order to maintain and enhance our cultural heritage resources across the country. The United Kingdom Government has developed a Portable Antiquities Scheme which is bringing together academics, heritage managers and metal detectorists to help record finds made by members of the public, which previously went un-reported. Australia's state and territory government authorities should consider adopting a similar strategy to encourage the reporting of significant finds such as this one of the early cash coin, to add to our understanding of Australia's history.

## **Conclusions**

Although a cash economy only became established in Arnhem Land in the twentieth century, it is argued here that the Yolgnu highly valued VOC, Chinese and Kilwa coins in the early historic period. Many hundreds of northern Australian Aborigines traveled to Macassar, often spending upwards of one or more years there before returning to Australia. Some married and raised families there. They would soon have come to realise the value of cash currency. If employed there over the interim, they would have been paid in coinage and would have come to understand that the objects had value beyond their aesthetic appeal and use as jewellery or for other material purposes. They symbolized the wealth and power of the rulers, and they would have brought this knowledge back to Arnhem Land with them as travel curios and as teaching tools.

More broadly, this incidental find, made during a heritage training workshop, highlights the need for State and Territory jurisdictions to acknowledge the growing use of metal detection technology and reach out to these community groups in order to enhance our understanding of Australia's history.

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **About the Authors**

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*Nenad Lonc is a professional metal detectorist with over 20 years' experience in their use, across Australia and in the US and Indonesia. For 12 of those years he worked for Minelab Electronics (a leading metal detector manufacturer) in roles which included product testing, tech support, export sales, technical writing and product training. Since April 2014, Nenad has been working under his own Phase Technical banner providing metal detection & training services, and is developing some niche accessory products.*

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*All four authors are a part of a loose collective known as the 'Past Masters' who have been researching early historical contacts between the Top End Indigenous communities and various Asian and European seafarer groups which appear to pre-date the Macassan period, which is generally considered to have commenced in the 1600s C.E.*