

Max Shachar¹, Heather Burke², Lynley A. Wallis^{3,4}, Mia Dardengo^{3,4}, Anthony Pagels^{2,4}, Noelene Cole⁴, Jill Huntley³, Bryce Barker⁵, and the Laura Rangers⁶

Background

The myriad rock art sites of Australia document thousands of years of history, stories and cultural continuity, and are integral to Indigenous ways of life. Quinkan Country (located around Laura) in southeast Cape York Peninsula (CYP), Queensland, has a vibrant tradition of rock art. Quinkan Country encompasses the traditional lands of Kuku-Warra, Kuku-Possum and Kuku-Thaypan custodians (Figure 1).

A common technique used in rock art throughout this broad region is stencilling, with stencilled objects, especially boomerangs, stone axes and woomeras, and even European objects, such as metal axes and tobacco clay pipes, making up a significant portion of the regional rock art assemblage (e.g. Cole 1995). However, many of the objects used to create these stencils have yet to be identified, leaving gaps in the stories that they tell.

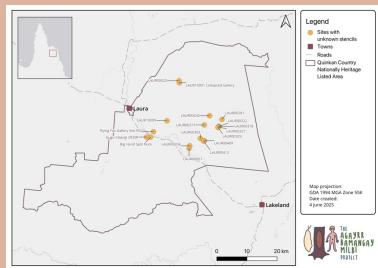


Figure 1: Map of sites with unidentified stencil motifs in the Quinkan Country part of the ABM Project area.

Research Goal

This study aimed to identify potential sources of otherwise unidentified stencils and shed light on the potential significance and meaning of the proposed objects to past Indigenous peoples living in Quinkan Country.

Methods

1. Stencils were isolated, photographed and measured by Agayrr Bamangay Milbi (ABM) Project team members during fieldwork undertaken from 2021–2025.
 2. DStretch was applied to the stencil images to highlight pigments and features of the stencils that were not otherwise able to be clearly seen.
 3. Stencils of unknown origin were compared to (a) Indigenous objects collected by Walter E. Roth in CYP during the late 19th century and (b) to Indigenous and European/Chinese artefacts from the CYP region held in museums in Cooktown, Cairns and Brisbane.

Results

Amongst hundreds of other stencilled objects, there remain 22 motifs at 11 sites in Quinkan Country that we have not yet been able to identify (see images at the bottom of this poster). While most sites have only one unidentified stencil, one site (LAUR00001) has five stencils that we cannot identify the source object for, while another (LAUR00373) has four. Half of the unknown stencils have been created using white pigment, while nine are red, two are orange and one is a dark reddish brown. They sometimes occur in superimposed sequences (usually as the most recent motif), but more often are situated on their own.

Conclusion

Identifying the sources of previously unknown stencils can shed light on the value past Indigenous groups living in southeast CYP placed on their material culture. The prevalence of European tools and objects as possible sources for the unknown stencils indicates that their ritual and ceremonial significance to Indigenous peoples living during the contact period needs to be re-assessed. Further analysis and collaboration with Traditional Owners will continue to take place to confirm the proposed origins of the mystery stencils.

Examples of Possible Sources of Unidentified Stencils

There are some instances where we have been able to identify material culture items in museum collections that bear at least a passing resemblance (in terms of their shape and size) to some of the unknown stencils from Quinkan Country.

For example, the scrap metal scrapers shown in Figure 3 have a remarkably similar shape to the unidentified stencil shown in Figure 2. While smaller in size, the regular rectangular shape of the stencil leads us to consider it is likely a repurposed piece of metal. The sizes of scrap metal scrapers vary widely as they could be sourced from a wide variety of European tools, including horseshoes, ship parts, barrel hoops and tin cans (Harrison 2002).



Figure 2: LAUR0022 Panel 2 Motif 7, a rectangular material culture object (enhanced with DStretch). Height: 6 cm; Width: 24 cm.



Figure 3: Scrapers manufactured from scrap iron, held in the Queensland Museum collection, Brisbane. Bottom Scraper Height: 4 cm; Width: 13 cm.

Similarly, the overall shape and the dimensions of a wooden mallet on display in the Cooktown Museum (Figure 5) are almost identical to those of an unknown stencil in the LAUR00302 site (Figure 4). Of relevance, the mallet on display is of the same style that ethnographer Walter E. Roth collected near the Palmer River (Khan 2004), immediately adjacent to Quinkan Country. According to Roth, wooden mallets in this region were often used as 'resin bats' or 'smoothing boards'. These were a usually small, flat piece of ironwood used for smoothing down the resin at the union of the shaft and butt during the manufacture of a spear.

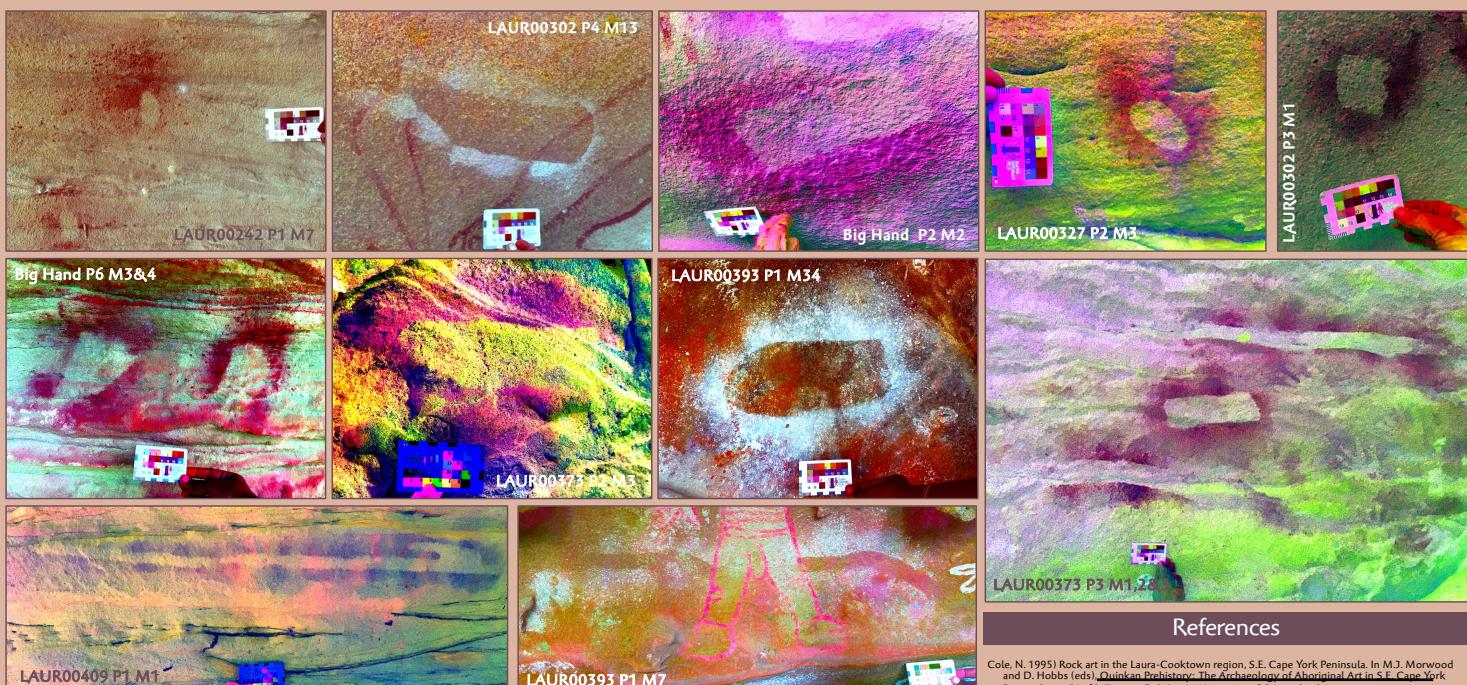


Figure 4: LAUR00302 Panel 4 Motif 3 unknown material culture stencil (enhanced with DStretch). Height: 15 cm; Width: 33 cm.



Figure 5: Wooden mallet from the Cooktown Museum. Height: 8 cm; Width: 30 cm.

The original objects used to create some of the stencils below remain unknown. If you have suggestions as to what they might be, we'd love to hear your thoughts.



References

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