



Melville Island Indigenous Dugout Canoe A16593

Vessel number

HV000370

Description

The Melville Island Indigenous Dugout Canoe is part of the collection of the South Australian Museum, numbered A16593. It is built from a single trunk of an undetermined species of tree. Although the inner hull has been smoothed over there are axe, adze and chisel marks still present indicating how it was formed. The outer surface of the hull appears to have been treated with fire. There are two repairs, one on the gunwale near the stern and another on the outer hull near the stem. The forward section is beamier than the aft section. A distinct stern and stem shape is carved into both ends. The most interesting feature is the series of four paired support cleats along the inside of the hull. These would have supported seating in the form of simple thwarts. The cleats are an integral part of the timber log created in the hollowing out process with accurate shaping and location. These supports are evident in other Macassan craft, including one of their canoes in the Australian National Maritime Museum collection. Another intriguing feature is the small repair at the bow, formed by a piece of sheet

metal nailed to the hull. The draft, beam and volume of the canoe indicate the craft was capable of carrying a reasonable number of people and their catch, such as dugong or turtle. It is a solid piece of timber and the canoe is of sufficient size to make short passages in open water, such as the crossing of the Clarence Strait between Melville and Bathurst Islands and mainland Australia. The concept of a log canoe was unknown to Indigenous Australians until it was introduced to them by the Macassan people from the Indonesian islands north west of Australia. They are thought to have begun to come to Australia in search of trepang and other food sources as early as the 1600s. They then maintained this seasonal visiting practice until the 1900s. The larger Macassan sailing vessels carried dugout canoes, a method of construction used for centuries by South East Asian people. The Macassans also had the ability to make metal tools which are needed to hollow out and shape the logs. The shape of the South Australian Museum canoe, with its carved ends and the presence of the thwart cleats, suggests that this is an example of a

Macassan canoe traded with the community on the islands, or one built by the Macassans for the community. In 2009 the canoe was in storage with the South Australian Museum. References: This text has been prepared using material from a thesis by Zack King, Flinders University SA, and information from the South Australian Museum.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.8 m x 0.46 m (15.75 ft x 1.51 ft)