

Background Sheet 4 (Stage 2 British Colonisation of Australia)

Exploration within the Region

It is difficult to know how much contact Australia's near neighbours had with Australia and how much they knew about Australia. It is known that the Timorese fished regularly off the Australian coast, and still do. It does not appear that they landed regularly, possibly because the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley were fierce (or were reputed to be so in Timor).

The Malay-speaking Macassans are reputed to have fished annually for trepang (sea slugs) in the Gulf of Carpentaria for about 600 years, with a lengthy break in the middle. Matthew Flinders came across the Macassans when circumnavigating Australia and, as his cook spoke Malay, conversation was possible. That year, 1803, 60 proas (boats) belonging to the Rajah of Boni, were in Australian waters. They came annually in November or December, with the aid of the north-west monsoons, and returned in March/April when the winds swung around. They caught, gutted, boiled and smoked the slugs, which were traded as far away as China. There were peaceful relations between the Macassans and the Aborigines of the Gulf of Carpentaria. There is some evidence of cultural exchange.

Sources:

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