

NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE EXTINCT
TASMANIAN RACE.

[No. 3.]

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Plates IV.-V.

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INTRODUCTION.

It is not proposed in this paper to attempt any detailed description of the method by which the Tasmanians disposed of their dead, but rather to give a brief account of the discovery of aboriginal remains at Sandford during April, 1927.

On the 12th of that month Mr. Alfred Morrisby showed me a cranium that he had found partially exposed in his orchard some days before. This orchard had been under cultivation for between 20 and 30 years, and had been ploughed six months previously.

It is possible that the cranium was turned up at that time, and the injuries it had sustained were inflicted by the ploughshare.

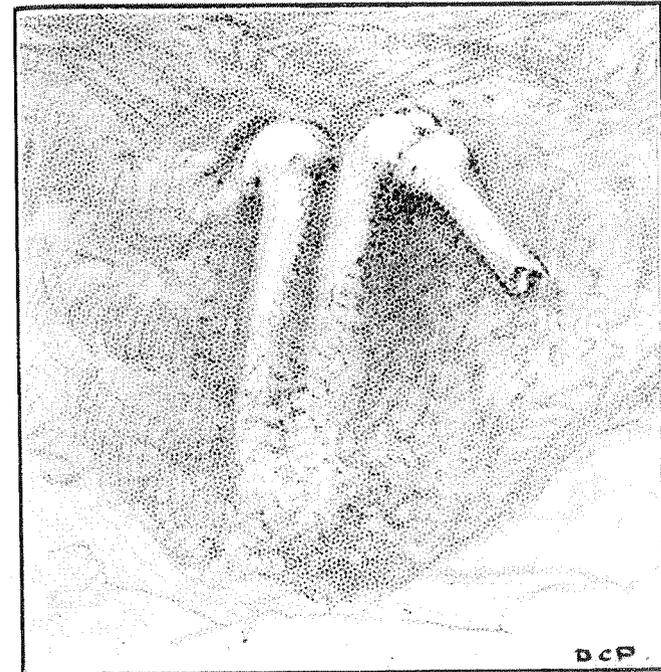
The presence near-by of a spring of fresh water and the abundant remains of oyster shells clearly pointed to the fact that it was on the site of an aboriginal camping-ground.

Four days later, in the company of Dr. Inglis Clark, a detailed examination of the locality of the find was made.

DESCRIPTION.

The cranium—No. 86, Tasman Series (Wunderly and Wood-Jones, 1933)—showed the characteristics of the Tasmanian type, and was that of a male of full adult age. The teeth were complete, except for the upper central incisors, which had dropped out.

When found it was on the left side, with portion of the left occipital area exposed.



Illustrating the Strongly Flexed Portion of the Bones of
the Left Side.

The right temporal area was very friable, and the zygoma, outer wall of the orbit, and a considerable area of the superior maxilla of the same side, wanting (as a result of weathering or trauma).

The cranium was heavy and sodden with moisture and the cerebral cavity filled with sand.

The slight depression from which the skull had been lifted some days previously showed small pieces of bone scattered over an area of about 2 square feet. Interest was at once aroused by the fact that they had been broken into pieces not longer than 3 to 4 inches in length and showed traces of exposure to fire. One fragment was from the right scapula, others of more dense structure were probably parts of the humerus, radius, and ulna of the same side.

It is difficult to account for the broken-down condition of these bones, except by deliberate repeated fractures following partial incineration—crushing or accidental trauma does not appear to have been the cause.

A few feet away from these fragments nodules and a flat piece of red ochre were found—brought almost certainly from considerable deposits of ochre in the face of a steep bank of the adjacent lagoon.

Having carefully looked over the surface, we commenced to dig with our hands and a small entrenching tool.

Two areas of sand, each of about one cubic foot, were found to be discoloured by carbon and ashes.

Extending the search 4 feet away more bones were recovered, proving to be parts of several vertebræ (cervical and thoracic), two clavicles, a mandible in two pieces (less the ramus of the left side), and small portions of ribs.

Under these fragments a more solid mass was to be felt, which, on careful removal of the sand, proved to be a most interesting grouping of bones.

There were—

- (1) The proximal portion of the left humerus, with adjacent articular area of the scapula.
- (2) The distal portion of the femur of the same side, with the patella attached.
- (3) The proximal portion of the tibia.

Their relationship was as shown in Plate IV., and drawn from a very poor photograph taken at the time.

The bones of the leg were flexed at the knee to such an extent as to bring them into the closest contact. The body as a whole must have been placed in a position of marked flexion (Plate V.), as the head of the humerus was in intimate contact with the sharply flexed knee. To attain this result the knees must have been tucked up until almost under the chin, either before the onset of rigor mortis or after decomposition had set in.

Calder (1875) states that before incineration the Tasmanians were observed to tie the limbs in this way by thongs of rushes or grass.

THE POSITION OF THE BODY.

It was on its left side, the plane horizontal or with a slight inclination towards the vertical.

The level at which this group of bones was found was about 18 inches below the surface.

Detailed search, whilst revealing no trace of such bones as the lower thoracic or lumbar vertebræ, those of the pelvis, or below the middle of the tibia, showed a large area of sand, discoloured by fire, and containing ashes, indicating an attempt to dispose of the body by burning.

Through some want of fuel or shift of wind the incineration was incomplete, destroying only that part of the body below a line drawn obliquely across the upper thoracic vertebræ (see unshaded area in Plate V.).

This would leave undestroyed the bones already described, the ashes representing the remainder which had been incinerated.

CONCLUSION.

We know from several eyewitnesses of funeral ceremonies at Bruny Island and at Whybalena that the Tasmanians disposed of their dead by burning or by depositing the body in a position of strong flexion in a hollow tree.

In both these procedures it was customary to place the body in an upright position. In other instances (usually with children) the parents carried certain bones or wore them suspended around their necks.

The discovery at Sandford confirms the evidence as to the strongly flexed position of the body before incineration, and shows that in this instance the latter was lying on its left side, and not upright.



Supposed Position of Body. (Unshaded area shows complete incineration.)

As this is the first occasion since Peron (1809) upon which such human remains have been discovered, it seems only fitting that the details be placed in record.

REFERENCES.

- PERON, M. F. 1809. "A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere." Page 207, *et seq.*
- CALDER, J. E. 1875. "Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c., of the Native Tribes of Tasmania." Page 27, *et seq.*
- J. WUNDERLY and FREDERIC WOOD-JONES. 1933. "The Non-Metrical Morphological Characters of the Tasmanian Skull." *Journal of Anatomy*, Vol. LXVII.