

Aboriginal Carvings Found at Trial Harbour

By

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(Read 8th November, 1937)

Plates IX-X.

Along the shore near the old settlement at Trial Harbour there are numerous middens of the Tasmanian aborigines. A large one is situated on the south side of the creek, and there still remain the hollows in the sandy soil over which the natives built their huts. Other middens are to be found along the seaside, both to the north and to the south.

On the northern side, about a quarter of a mile from the harbour, a large boulder of granite lies on the upper part of the beach beyond the reach of ordinary tides (Plate IX, figs. 1 and 2). In shape it resembles a broad-beamed decked boat. The top measures about ten feet by seven. It is smooth and fairly level. This rock evidently was the resort of the natives of the vicinity, who used the flat top for engraving their carvings and for other purposes. Probably it was thus used for many centuries, as the remains of incisions that have partly weathered away can be seen, in addition to those made more recently.

About a dozen rings have been made to a depth that, at present, averages about a quarter of an inch. It seems probable that, originally, this depth was greater, and has been diminished by the action of the sea and the weather. In size these rings measure from a foot in diameter to about half that width. The incisions forming the circumferences of the rings are about one and a half inches wide.

At the north end of the boulder there is a group of seven rings placed rather closely together. These are each of about seven inches in diameter. The other rings are scattered irregularly over the

surface, and are mostly of larger size, the largest being fifteen inches from edge to edge. Besides these, there are arcs of other circles, indistinctly visible, the remainder having weathered away.

In addition to these circular markings there are several smooth hollows that appear to be the work of the natives (Plate X, fig. 1). The largest of these is about seven inches long, three inches wide, and, in the middle, about one inch deep, the depth lessening regularly towards the edges all round.

This depression appears to have been produced by friction—perhaps by grinding some hard substance, such as ochre, by means of a smooth, round stone. It resembles the hollows made by the Tasmanian natives in some of their stone implements, but is larger than any of these that the writer has seen. In addition to this large hollow, there are two groups each containing several smooth hollows of smaller size and of lesser depth.

The boulder on which these carvings were made is a solid mass of very hard granite. How the natives were able to mark it to the depth mentioned is difficult to understand. The writer hoped, before the visit to Tidal Harbour commenced, that by excavating round the base of the rock and sifting out the surface soil, some of the implements used in forming the rings might be discovered. Unfortunately, however, after the necessary tools had been carried to the spot, it was found that the boulder was not above water-mark during storms, and that, at such times, the waves swirled almost all round it, and must have shifted the surface material again and again. Only one portion of the surface, situated on the landward side and protected by two large rocks, had not been thus disturbed by the waves. In this space, measuring about three feet along the side of the boulder, several implements were found, but they were only flakes, and probably had nothing to do with the formation of the rings. The smooth surface of the rock must have made it a favourite resort of the natives from the neighbouring camps. Its solidity and hardness provided an excellent anvil, or table, for the manufacture of the various implements they used.

How they formed the markings in such a very hard medium is, at present, only a subject for conjecture. Repeated hammering with a hard stone on the surface of the granite makes almost no impression, while the rock rings like metal when struck. If the rings were made by cutting or scratching the surface with a harder kind of stone, the edges would probably be sharper and the ring itself narrower, as requiring less material to be removed. If, however, the rings were formed by hammering the surface with a hard and heavy stone, they would be wide and shallow, as they are.

Their purpose can only be guessed. It is well known that it is customary among peoples like the Tasmanian aborigines to depict by drawings, paintings, or carvings, objects upon which they are

dependent for their welfare, in the belief that such representations of these objects will increase or favourably influence their production. Some of the carvings found at the Bluff, Devonport, by Mr. A. L. Meston undoubtedly represent the haliotis, a shell-fish that formed an important part of the food supply of the natives living near the shore. The numerous circles found near Mt. Cameron West and at Trial Harbour do not appear to represent an article of food. A large ring found at the former place was surrounded by numbers of small markings cut into the rock. Do these rings represent the heavenly bodies? By a naked savage, dwelling on the exposed West Coast, where bitter winds from the south-west are common even in the summer months, the sun must have been regarded as a beneficent influence that might be induced, by means of the representations on the face of the rock, to come forth from the heavy clouds which so often obscured its kindly rays.

Or perhaps the rings, surrounded by the smaller markings, may have represented the moon and stars, which, to natives spending almost all their lives in the open, must have been objects of great interest. George A. Robinson and others who were in close touch with the aborigines in their wild state reported that they feared the moon, and would not travel at night. It may be that a desire to placate it and to diminish its evil influence was the motive that induced them to undertake the heavy labour of inscribing these circles.

In relation to the formation of such circular objects in stone by the Tasmanian natives, the writer desires to draw attention to another activity of the West Coast tribes that may have had a somewhat similar purpose to that suggested above. These natives, especially those living in the north-west corner of the island, were in the habit of shaping stones into a circular form. They did this sometimes with remarkable accuracy, the circular edges being as true as though produced by a lathe (Plate X, fig. 2). Their method of working was peculiar, and was nearly always the same. They selected a smooth, waterworn stone of oval shape, commonly of white quartzite, though other varieties were sometimes used. This stone was used for hammering, or, perhaps, was hammered to reduce its length. It was held so that blows were struck only with, or on, the ends. Many specimens can be found with both ends flattened and worn away, but without any scar from a blow appearing on any other portion of the stone, which, except at the ends, retains the waterworn smoothness that it had at first. By continued hammering, these ends were, in time, so worn away that the long axis of the stone became reduced to the same length as the shorter one. When this was accomplished, the natives began to hammer, not only with the ends, but with the edge, gradually producing a circular form flattened all round its circumference,

and, but for the curved faces, resembling the casters of an arm-chair or sofa. It is interesting to note that, though so much hammering was done in reducing the length and in forming the circular edge, the two faces do not show the scar of a single blow, but remain smooth and unhammered.

These stones appear to have always been formed in the same manner, and may be found in all stages of development in the middens between Cape Grim and the Pieman River. They are commonest about Mt. Cameron West, Marrawah, and Bluff Point. Their weight is usually about three ounces, but many perfectly formed specimens weigh one ounce, while a few are little more than a half-ounce in weight. Some, however, are much larger, and weigh as much as two pounds, but the large ones are seldom as well formed as the lighter ones.

A very interesting fact in connection with this matter is that stones of precisely similar formation, size, and material, and apparently of precisely similar workmanship, have been found buried under limestone floors in Kent's Cavern, near Torquay, England. These can be seen in the British Museum, and date back to a very remote period indeed.

The very diminutive size and weight of some of the smallest Tasmanian hammer stones seems to preclude the notion that they were formed for hammering, and leaves their actual purpose a mystery.

In concluding this article the writer desires to point out that, on the West Coast of Tasmania, there are, at present, numerous evidences that the aborigines in this district had permanent dwellings, or, at any rate, occupied the same camps for considerable periods. Several sites of their camps, showing the positions of two to six or eight huts, are still to be seen, though the movements of hundreds of head of cattle, which are turned out each year to graze over the area, are producing sand-blows and causing the destruction of many of the sites.

If a model were made from accurate measurements of one or two of the larger sites, showing the kind of position the natives selected, it would probably be of great interest in years to come, when the originals will have disappeared.

In his 'Journal of Discoveries in Van Diemen's Land' (1827) Jorgensen makes frequent mention of the superior quality of the huts of the natives along the West Coast. In one entry he says: 'The huts, as well as baskets and other things produced by the Western natives, evince great ingenuity, and the nature of the country compels them to build compact dwellings to shelter them against the bleak winds blowing over a large tract of open country, not well supplied with fuel and of a piercing chilliness'. In another

place he says that Native Hut River 'is so called from a peaceable tribe of natives who reside in good huts hereabouts'.

Again he says: 'On our way to Venable's Boat Harbour we observed a very compact native hut, far different (as are all huts in this quarter) from those seen to the Eastward. It was a complete piece of Gothic Architecture, in the shape of a dome, and presenting all the first rudiments of that Science. It was made to contain 12 to 14 persons with ease. The entrance was small and not above two feet high. The wood used for the principal supports had been steamed and bent by fire'.

While there is still opportunity, it is very desirable that the valuable and interesting information concerning the West Coast natives that is still available should be collected, and that our knowledge of their lives and customs shall be extended before it is too late.

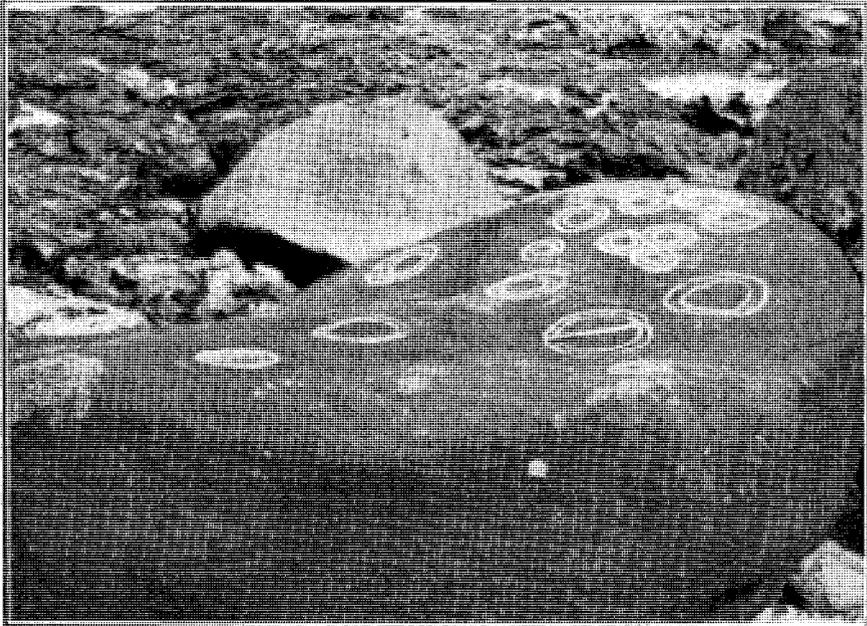


Fig. 1.

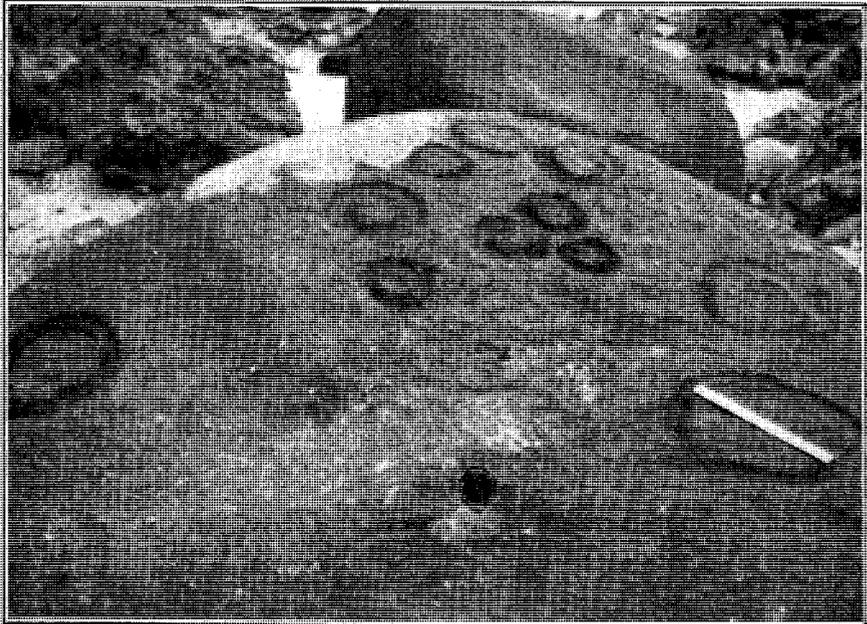


Fig. 2.

PLATE X

FIG. 1.--Worked hollows.

FIG. 2.--Completed hammer stones.

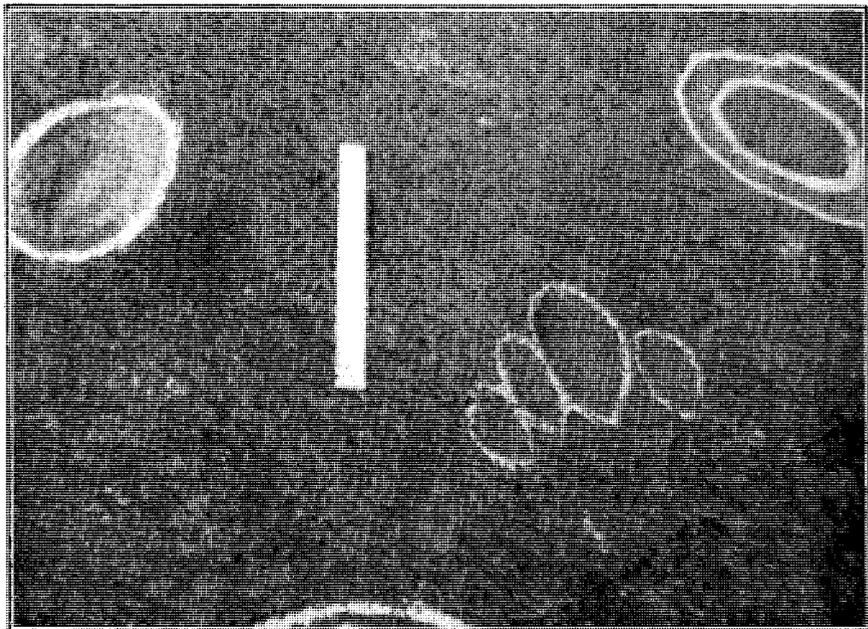


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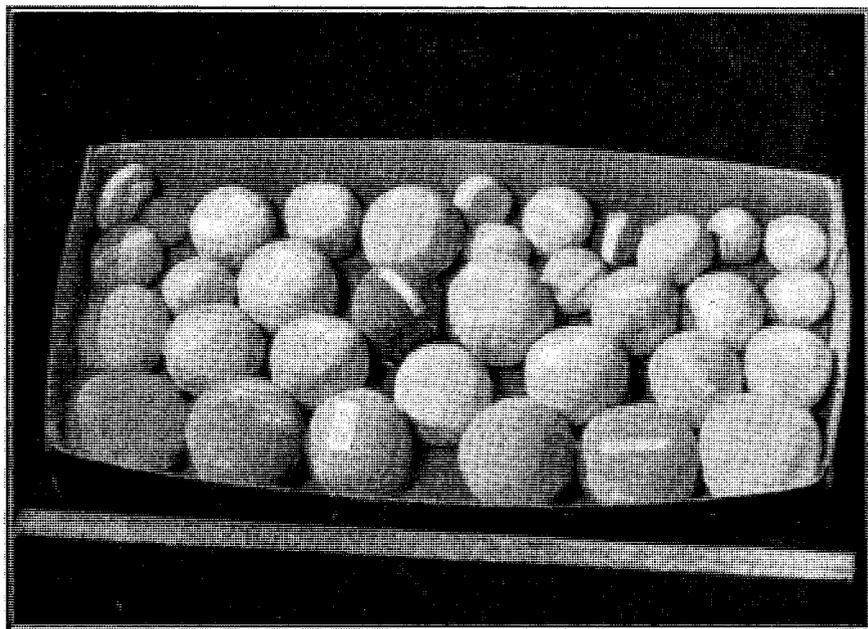


Fig. 2.