

Notes on the Habits of the Extinct Tasmanian Race

No. 4:—On the Discovery of Tasmanian Aboriginal Remains at Mt. Dromedary, Tasmania

By

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In September, 1938, a small group of human bones was discovered by N. Johnson, whilst looking for birds' nests in a sandstone cliff, at Mt. Dromedary. An incomplete cranium, forwarded to the Tasmanian Museum was recognized as being almost certainly that of a Tasmanian aboriginal.

A police inquiry being necessary, a visit was made to the locality by the writer, accompanied by Dr. Pearson and Mr. Whittle of the Police Department.

On the northern face of Mt. Dromedary is a deep valley running downwards in a north-west direction towards the Back River. Here, at an elevation of 1475 feet, is a bold sandstone scarp in the face of which is a series of sandstone shelters known locally as Martin Cash's Caves. Cash, the well-known bushranger, hid for a time in this area about 1840, and it is possible that he and his gang actually occupied these shelters.

At the site where the bones were found, the scarp slightly overhangs the base, and there are several recesses, which, although not actually caves, give shelter from all weather except from the north-west and north. The sandstone itself is soft and deeply fretted in places, resembling lace-work, and there is a general tendency for the stone to weather rapidly. The bones were found in a shallow recess about 12 feet above the base of the scarp.

The recess was little more than a shelf, about 6 feet each way and inclined downward and forward. At the time of our visit the human bones had been removed to ground level, but scattered in cracks and inequalities of the shelter were remains of birds and small marsupials principally the ring-tailed opossum.

There was no evidence that the human remains had been wrapped or preserved.

DESCRIPTION OF THE BONES

The bones were as follows:—

- (1) The facial portion of the cranium.
- (2) The right *os innominatum* (incomplete).
- (3) The left *os innominatum* (incomplete).
- (4) Two pieces of the left femur.

The Cranium

This comprised the facial portion consisting of the frontal bone, right and left malars and maxillae, all in excellent preservation. The orbital areas showed the Tasmanian characters being low and quadrilateral in shape. These were not, however, as marked as in a fully developed skull, nor did the superior margin project beyond the lower.

The dentition was not complete, and many of the teeth were missing. The 1st molar (right) and 2nd pre-molar (left) had been broken at the alveolar margin—only the 2nd molar (right) and the 1st and 2nd molar (left) were *in situ* and complete. The non-erupted 3rd molars of both sides were missing.

Ossa Innominata

Both right and left halves were defective in regard to much of their iliac and pubic portions, but the ischial areas were more complete. The right acetabulum was nearly complete, but that of the left side lacked the pubic portion. The acetabular cavities were not completely ossified, the lines of the bony sutures being still well marked.

The Left Femur

Two fragments, an upper comprising the head, neck, and portion of the great trochanter, and the lower epiphysis complete. The upper portion had separated into two parts, probably as a result of handling since the discovery, the head having come away from the neck. The head does not, however overlap the neck when fitted back into position, pointing to ossification not having been complete.

From the foregoing it may be concluded that the skeletal remains are from the one individual, an immature Tasmanian aboriginal. The characters of the sutures and dentition of the cranium indicate an age of 16-17 years, possibly less.

The racial characters, while not so strongly marked as in an adult skull, are definitely Tasmanian. The weight and size of the bones (especially those of the pelvis) point to their being those of a female. None of the bones show signs of attempt at incineration or damage from teeth of carnivorous animals.

THE METHOD OF DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

The methods by which the extinct Tasmanians disposed of their dead have been summarized by Ling Roth (1899). Instances of disposal of individual bodies have been described by Péron (1807, p. 265), Calder (1875, p. 27), Pülleine (1924, p. 83), and Crowther (1934, p. 22). In some cases the body was bound in a strongly-flexed position and was usually either incinerated or left in a hollow tree. The position of flexion was not attempted in all cases, and many remains have been discovered in sand-dunes and elsewhere that appear to have been simply left where they died without any attempt at systematic disposal. Many observers speak of the widespread habit of the Tasmanians of wearing bones of their relatives, either suspended around their neck or carried in receptacles. Pülleine (*ibid*) describes a case in which the remains were contained in a skin bag which were found in a recess in a sandstone scarp high up on the shoulder of Mt. Nicholas, a discovery very comparable in site and nature to that described on Mt. Dromedary.

It may be concluded that the remains found at the latter site are those of an immature Tasmanian aboriginal placed there by a relative in accordance with the accepted custom of the race.

Acknowledgements

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