ABORIGINAL ROCK-CARVINGS ON THE NORTH-WEST COAST OF TASMANIA.

By

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Plates II.-VIII.

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Many descriptions have been given of aboriginal art in various parts of Australia, but accounts of the skill of the Tasmanians in drawing and carving have been extremely meagre. In recent years, however, a number of rock carvings have been discovered in one locality on the North-West Coast, and it is the purpose of this paper to describe them. Before doing this, I intend briefly to review all previous descriptions of the art of the Tasmanian aborigines.

Péron, who visited Tasmania in 1802 as naturalist on the *Géographe*, gave us the first account of aboriginal drawings. On the under surface of some of the best and largest pieces of bark covering a burial mound discovered by him at Oyster Bay, he found "some characters crudely marked, "similar to those which the aborigines tattooed on their "forearms."

In 1857 Daniel Bunce, describing his journey through Middlesex Plains, the Vale of Belvoir, and over the Black Range, makes a reference to aboriginal drawings. "Some "time previously," he writes, "two carts belonging to the "V.D.L. Co. had passed over this ridge each drawn by six "oxen with their drivers. It appears that some natives had "observed this, and a short time afterwards, one of the "Company's servants passing that way, found in one of their "rudely constructed huts, a piece of the bark of a tree with "a rough drawing of the whole scene. The wheels of the "carts, the bullocks drawing them, and the drivers with their "whips over their shoulders were all distinctly depicted in "their rude but interesting manner." This is obviously a reference to the taking of two carts to the Surrey Hills in 1828 by the V.D.L. Co., the first occasion that wheeled vehicles had ever passed that way.

Bonwick says that Mr. G. A. Robinson saw drawings of men and women with some curious hieroglyphics, like the totems of tribes, when he was on the West Coast in 1831. He also mentions "the red hand marked on trees and rocks

"alike in Tasmania and Australia," and gives "some rude "sketches of men and animals with five drawings as seen by "Mr. Commissary Browne on a tree representing the sun, "the moon, some snakes, and five persons in a boat."

Dr. Ross relates the discovery of "some rude drawings "of human figures, of squares and circles scratched on the "inner side of the bark of a hut in the valley of the Ouse."

Calder writes of some huts and "on the bark that "covered them, were some extraordinary charcoal drawings: "one representing two men spearing an animal, which from its "erect position was I presume meant for a kangaroo: though "the artist, by a strange oversight, had forgotten the animal's "tail and had made the forelegs about twice as long as the "hinder ones. There was also an outline of a dog, and an "emu, really not badly done; and some other designs the "exact meaning of which I was not able to make out." Elsewhere he states: "But the chef-d'œuvre was a battle piece—"a native fight—men dying and flying all over it."

All of these Ling Roth mentions, but there is another reference which escaped his notice. In February, 1827, Henry Hellyer, architect and surveyor of the V.D.L. Co., came upon two native huts in the Surrey Hills. "In one of "the huts," he writes, "I saw a drawing of the moon done "with charcoal, upon the inside of one of the slabs of bark "which formed the hut: and regarding it as an evidence "of there being artists among them I cut out the piece, and "placed it carefully between two pieces of bark in my knap-"sack." He does not say why he thought the drawing was a representation of the moon, but I imagine it was crescent shaped and left little doubt as to its meaning.

Such then has been the extent of our knowledge of the artistic efforts of the Tasmanian aborigines, so scanty that Ling Roth goes so far as to say, "The whole question of the "existence of drawings by aborigines before European "advent is practically an open one for the evidence is not "satisfactory." "It should be mentioned," he continues, "that "Milligan in his vocabulary gives Depict—draw in char-"coal: 'macoolana.' This at first sight seems conclusive. "But in the same vocabulary, he gives other words for "objects not known to the natives in their wild state—e.g., "'bread,' 'spaniel,' 'gun,' and 'gunpowder.'"

Before discussing the carvings themselves it will be well to describe their situation. Where the Mersey runs into Bass Strait the western shore is prolonged into a rocky headland, known as the Bluff. This promontory, very low

where it joins the mainland, extends seawards for 633 yards, and runs up to a height of 74 feet. The remains of a fairly extensive midden in the south-west corner give ample evidence of aboriginal occupation. Until quite recent years the place remained very much as it was when the native aborigines frequented it. A sandbank covered with booby-allas afforded shelter from all winds, and behind it lay a little fresh water lagoon fringed with tea trees, while in front a bank of shingle provided ample material for their stone implements. The lagoon is now filled in, the tea trees have been cut down, and the sandbank is in part removed, leaving little of the original charm.

While it is impossible to say definitely what the carvings represent, they seem to fall into two classes, one depicting natural objects, the other signs and patterns. And, moreover, it is impossible to say whether what appears to us as a sign or pattern may not be a conventionalised drawing of some object well known to the aboriginal. The natural objects are a fish, a snake, a bird's head, a leaf, and a haliotis shell. The signs and patterns include circles, concentric circles, large ovals with smaller ovals set within, and ovals each with a salient which bears a striking likeness to a specialised type of aboriginal stone scraper. Occasionally, the artist has made use of a natural unevenness in the rock to make his design stand out the more, but cracks in the rock have not been used. In every design I have examined the natural cracks are transverse to the carvings. This is particularly noticeable in plate IV., figure 2, and plate VII., figure 2.

The rock of which the Bluff is composed is diabase, and it is in this hard, refractory material that the engravings are made. All are cut on horizontal faces of rock and are distributed over the whole area of the promontory. But although I have made a careful search of the north coast from West Head to Circular Head I have found none elsewhere. The number of carvings known to me is seventy-five, but there is ample evidence from remnants that at one time the number was much greater. The condition of those extant varies greatly. Some are little more than mere lines, while others are deeply incised. On the seaward face of the headland, swept by spray every storm, weathering is rapidly destroying them, and since I first saw them in February, 1929, five have, by the flaking of the rock surface, completely disappeared. Several others will disappear this winter. The effects of weathering are well shown in plate III., figure 1, and plate IV., figure 1.

A remarkable feature is the depth of some of the carvings in such hard material. In this respect they are in striking contrast with carvings found on the mainland of Australia, which are for the greater part cut in soft limestone, slate, or sandstone, and are not very deep. Of those found on the Bluff, the deepest, the haliotis shell, is 58 millimetres, another reaches a depth of 26 millimetres, another 22, another 21, another 18, two others 17, three others 16, and another 15 millimetres. The great depth combined with a comparatively narrow width is a remarkable feature of many of the carvings. What tools the makers of these figures used is a puzzle. A very careful search, however, has failed to reveal any tools of the workers; but they would seem to have been made, not by rubbing, but by a pointed piece of quartzite, breccia, or similar hard material driven by a stone used as a hammer.

That the carvings exist at the Bluff, and, to the best of our knowledge, nowhere else, is remarkable, but a possible explanation is that either this area was sacred, or was a place of assembly and consultation. For either purpose it is admirably adapted. Calder describes a meeting place and a ceremonial tree west of the Tamar, only some thirty miles away, and it seems that the Bluff was in some way of grave importance to the aborigines.

In getting photographs the chief difficulty was to prevent distortion, but this was overcome by using an optipod which enabled the camera to be focused from directly above the figures. Several when first seen were encrusted with lichens, which it was necessary to clear away with a brush.

The important question of the cause of the carvings remains to be discussed. It is generally recognised that art for art's sake is not known to primitive peoples. All art was utilitarian, and took its rise from a belief in magic. This is true of the prehistoric paintings of the caves of Altamira, of the drawings and sculptures in the caverns of the Cantabrian Pyrenees, of the Haute Garonne, and of the Dordogne. It is true of the natives of North-West Australia. All the pictures made by the Worrora tribe except those of the human being represent some article of food, and even those of the human being "the Wonjuna" are made to ensure that rain will not fail. "The belief is," writes Mr. J. R. Love, "that "wherever the picture of an object of food is preserved in a "picture cave, there that object will continue to flourish and "increase. An object that recurs not infrequently, and that "appears meaningless, till explained, is the liver of a sting-

"ray, a favourite article of food. When explained as the "liver it is seen to be quite a fair picture of a liver. So also "with some of the edible roots. But quite a number of the "pictures are conventional representations of some article of "food, or some part of the body, which do not to the Euro-"pean eye bear any resemblance to the object represented." If this material outlook is true of so many primitive races it is fair to suppose it true of our aborigines. To them art was not a means of self-expression, but a weapon to encounter and overcome the Great Unknown.

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Fig. 1. View of Bluff from the air.

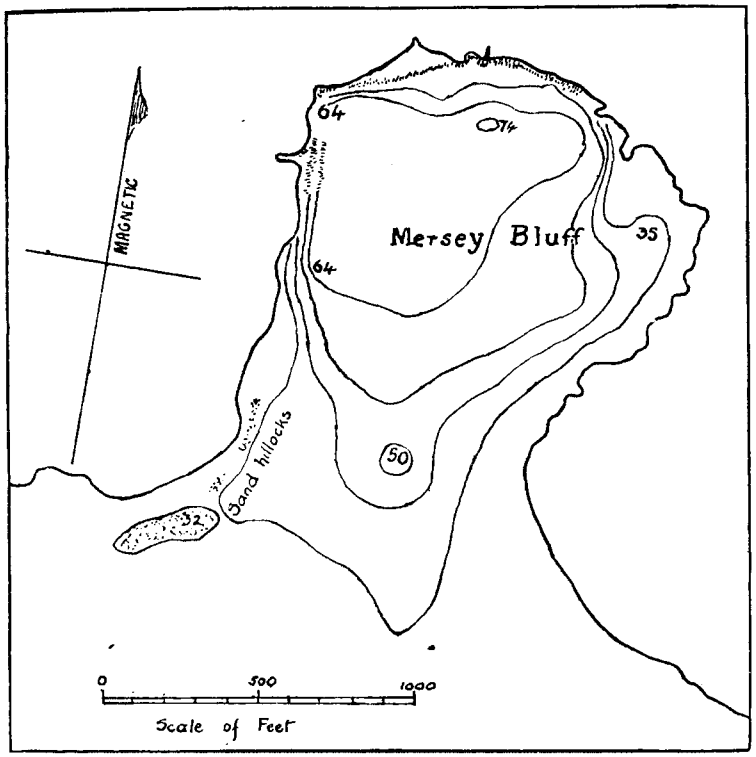
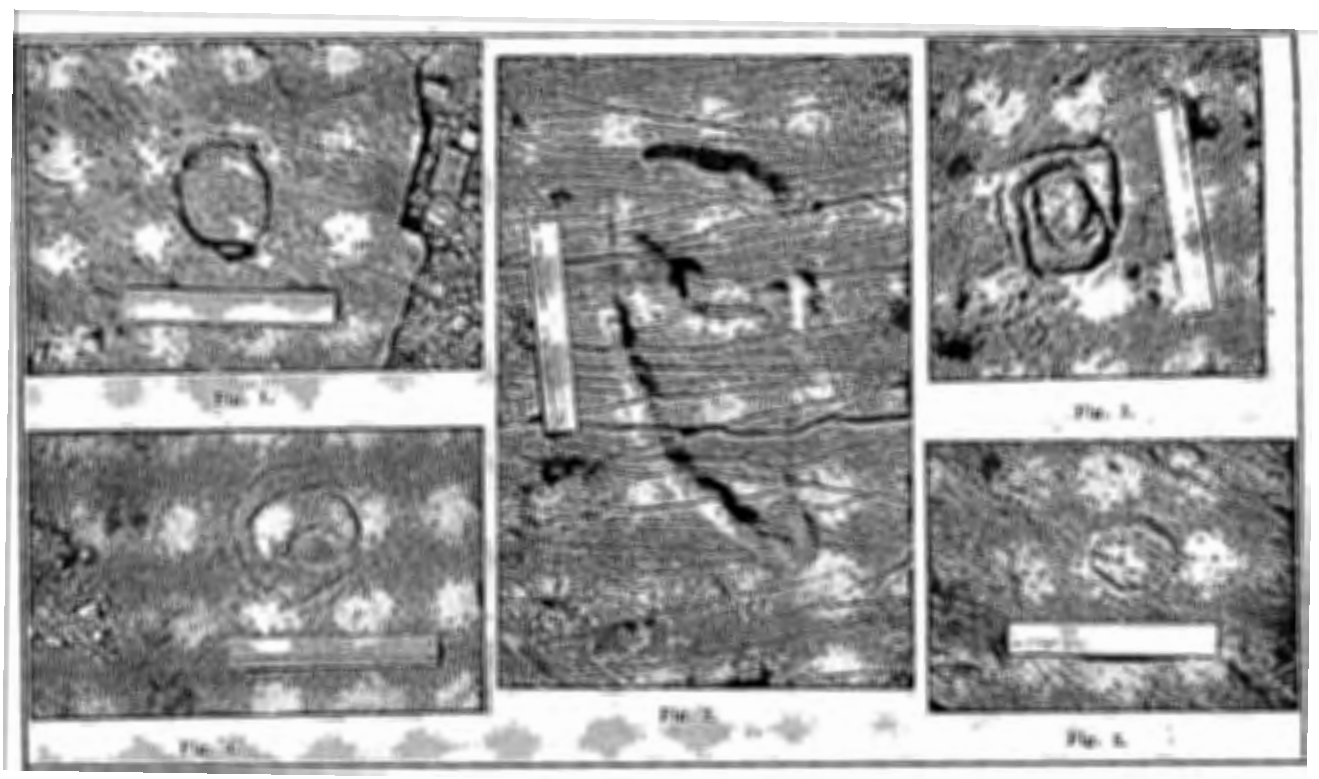


Fig. 2. Contour Map of Bluff.

Fig. 1. Fig. 2. Fig. 3. Fig. 4.

Fig. 5. Fig. 6. Fig. 7.



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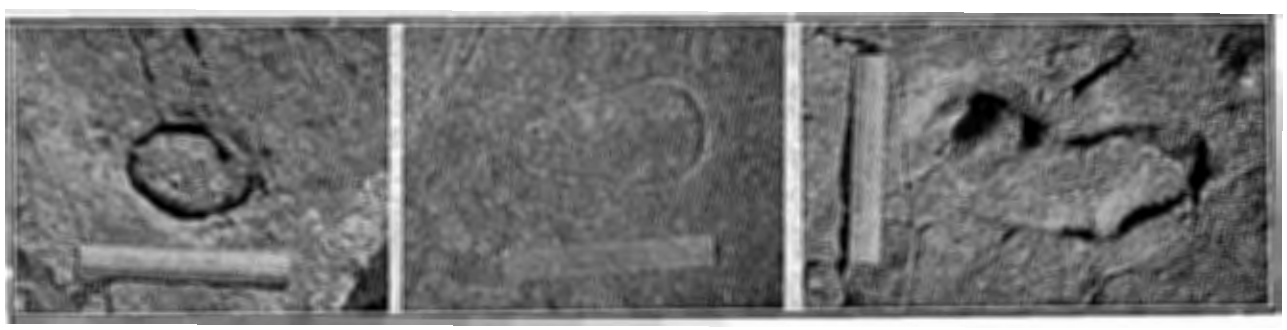
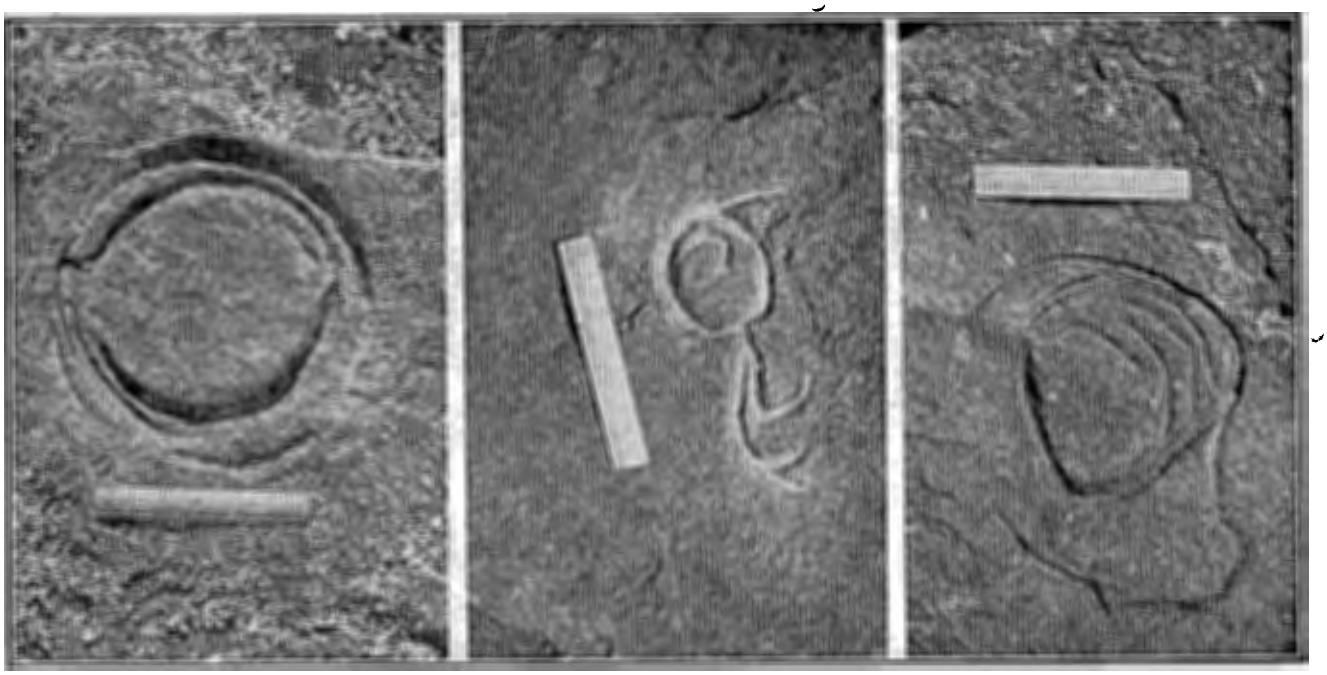


Fig. 4. Fig. 5. Fig. 6.



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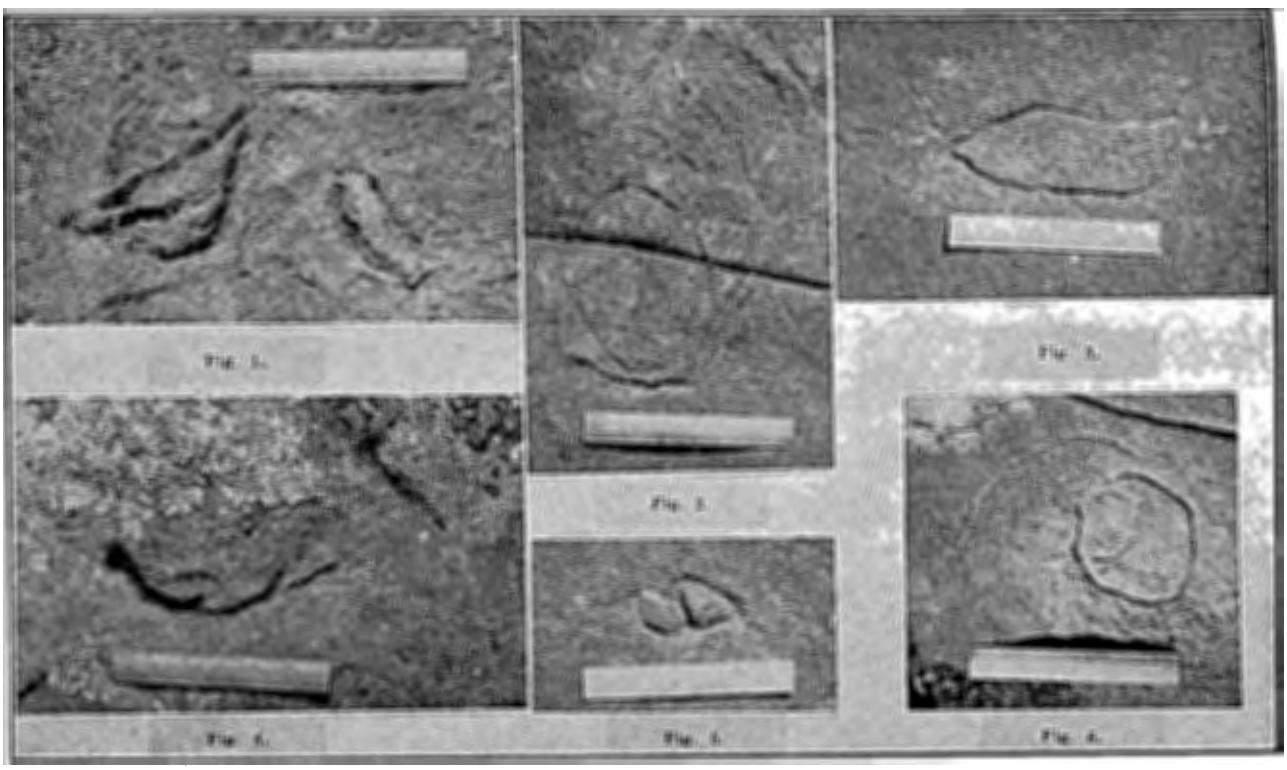

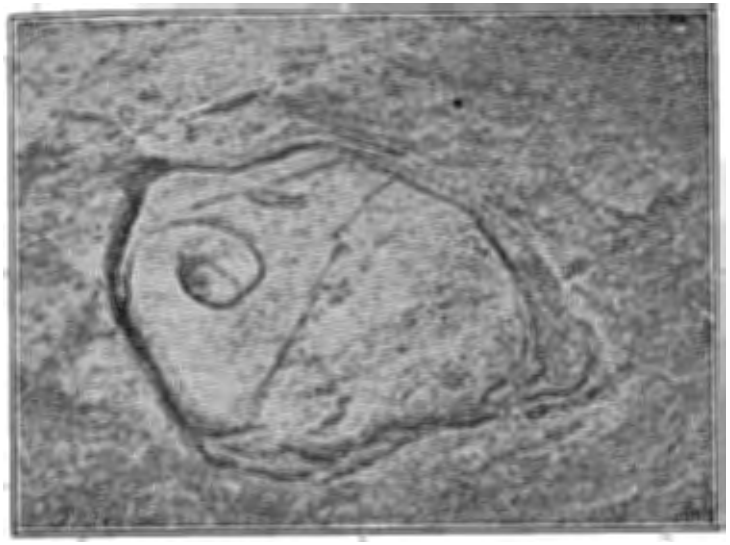

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

EXPLANATION OF PLATES.

PLATE II.

The rule shown is 6 inches long.

Fig. 1.—A view of the Mersey Bluff from the air showing its relation to the surrounding country. The part now appearing as fields was originally a dense tea tree (melaleuca) scrub. The midden is behind the sandy beach at the base of the bluff, at the bottom of the picture. In the middle background is seen the R. Mersey, and part of the town of Devonport.

Fig. 2.—Most of the carvings are on the step northern face of the headland or within the 64 feet contour. It is on the northern face that weathering is most pronounced.

PLATE III.

Fig. 1.—Major axis 14.25 cm.: greatest depth, 15mm. The effect of weathering is clearly seen.

Fig. 2.—This and fig. 7 are on the same rock within a few feet of each other.

Fig. 3.—Length, 12 cm.; greatest width, 9.9 cm.; least width, 6.3 cm.; greatest depth, 10 mm., fading away to zero at narrowest part.

Fig. 4.—Larger oval, 8 cm. long, 6.45 cm. wide; smaller oval, 5.9 cm. long, 4 cm. wide. Greatest depth, 3 mm.

Fig. 5.—Major axis, 6.8 cm.; minor axis, 4.3 cm.

Fig. 6.—Length, 10.2 cm.; breadth, 5.59 cm.

PLATE IV.

Fig. 1.—Major axis, 9.85 cm.; minor axis, 8.15 cm. This is uniformly deep, and varies in depth from 16 to 21 mm. The extent and manner of weathering are clearly seen on the right of the carving.

Fig. 2.—Apparently a conventionalised fish. The manner in which the natural cracks of the rock run transverse to the carvings is clearly shown. Length, 32.4 cm.; greatest width, 15.4 cm. At this point there are two deep pits that may have been intended for eyes. Distance between them, 5.55 cm. Greatest depth, 16 mm., is at the top of the figure. Depth of deepest eye pit, 15.5 mm.

Fig. 3.—A very fair representation of the appearance of a Tasmanian snake when coiled. Length along the top, 7.8 cm. Width of the top of the groove at its deepest

part, 5mm., tapering to 1.5 mm. at the bottom. Greatest width of the part representing the head, 2.3 cm.; length of head, 6.35 cm. Length of figure, 10.35 cm. Greatest depth, 17 mm. A great part of this figure is from 15 — 16 mm. in depth.

Fig. 4.—Diameter of the whole carving, 10.65 cm. Major axis of large inner oval, 7 cm.; of small inner oval, 3.8 cm. This is a common form.

Fig. 5.—Major axis, 6.9 cm.; minor axis, 6 cm. Depth, 3 mm.

Plate V.

Fig. 1.—A group of carvings, one of which bears a striking resemblance to a bird's head. The deepest figure possesses the characteristic salient of many carvings. Two feet away on the same rock, is another carving, not shown in the photographs, smaller but of similar design. Length, 13.5 cm.; greatest depth, 17 mm.

Fig. 2.—A deeply incised carving reaching a depth of 26 mm. This seems to be of the same type as Figs. 1 and 4, plate III., with part of the circumference incomplete. Greatest length, 20.8 cm. Length of small oval, 10.2 cm.; width, 6.35 cm. Greatest depth, 26 mm.

Fig. 3.—The only carving that assumes a cup and ring shape. Major axis, 17.8 cm.; minor, 12.7 cm. Greatest depth, 12.5 mm.

Fig. 4.—An incomplete oval. Major axis, 10.8 cm.; minor, 7.5. Uniformly deep. Greatest depth, 13 mm.

Fig. 5.—Length, 15 cm.; greatest breadth, 8 cm. This carving is very close to sea level. Deluged with spray every storm, it is rapidly becoming fainter.

Fig. 6.—Length, 22.85 cm.; greatest width, 8.9 cm. Greatest depth, 13 mm.

Plate VI.

Fig. 1.—Diameter of outer ring (incomplete), 24.4 cm., 22.85 cm. The direction of the natural cracks is clearly shown. Breadth of groove at top, 21 mm.; at bottom, 4 mm. Greatest depth, 16 mm.

Fig. 2.—Greatest length, 20.3 cm. Major axis of oval, 8.9 cm.; minor axis, 7.6 cm.

Fig. 3.—Length of whole figure, 27.95 cm.; width, 20.8 cm. Major axis of pear-shaped figure, 18.3 cm.; minor axis, 15.75 cm.

Plate VII.

Fig. 1.—A leaf-like carving on the left, an irregular oval on the right; both deeply incised. The leaf is 18 mm. in depth, the oval 17 mm.

Fig. 2.—An excellent example of the way the natural cracks traverse the carvings. This carving is greatly weathered. Major axis of bigger oval, 24.1 cm.; minor axis, 14.6 cm. Major axis of smaller oval, 14 cm.; minor axis, 11.45 cm.

Fig. 3.—The salient is clearly shown. Length, 17.55 cm.

Fig. 4.—A deep crescent-shape groove. Distance from tip to tip of horns, 15.3 cm. Greatest depth, 22 mm.

Fig. 5.—A small weathered carving somewhat similar to fig. 2, plate V. Total length, 8.3 cm.; length of irregular oval, 5.95 cm.

Fig. 6.—Major axis of larger oval, 9.1 cm.; of smaller, 5.8 cm.

Plate VIII.

Both photographs are of the same figure. This is the largest and deepest of the carvings, and seems to be a conventionalised haliotis shell, the haliotis being a common article of food for the natives of this district. When found, the greatest part of this carving was covered with earth. This is the deepest carving yet found, reaching in the top left hand corner a depth of 58 mm. The width of the groove at the top of the widest part is 31.5 mm., but it tapers rapidly. The curl in the left hand segment reaches a depth of 40 mm. Major axis of curl, 15.8 cm. The figure is 58.4 cm. by 57.6 cm.