Relationships of the Tasmanian Canoe-Raft

By

JOSEPH PEARSON

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Perhaps the most primitive type of floating craft still in use is made of bundles of bark or reeds which are tied together. Such a craft has a very short life, and can only be used within a very restricted range. This type was probably followed by the catamaran, (1) in which two or three logs of wood are tied together. The catamaran, which is still to be found in Southern India, Ceylon, and parts of the East Indies, is a more permanent type than the first, and has a larger range. Frequently a small triangular sail is used, which enables the catamaran to run before the wind at a considerable speed. The dug-out canoe, which might be regarded as the third stage in the evolution of the boat, is still used in many parts of the world, with or without an outrigger. It was succeeded by the planked boat, in which the planks were first stitched together and at a later period were fastened together by pegs or nails.

The object of the present note is to draw attention to the interesting distribution of the first of these types, which is so well-known to students of Tasmanian ethnology. It is not necessary to describe the Tasmanian canoe-raft since adequate descriptions in considerable detail have already been given by various writers, and our knowledge of this subject has been admirably summarized in this Journal (Meston, 1936). Fig. 1 depicts one type of Tasmanian canoe-raft, which consisted of three independent bundles of bark, a larger central

(1) Derived from a Tamil word which means literally 'tied-wood.'

one, to which were lashed two smaller lateral bundles. Such a craft was probably pointed at both ends. It is interesting to note that the *balsa*, a canoe-raft used in South America (fig. 2), has a marked

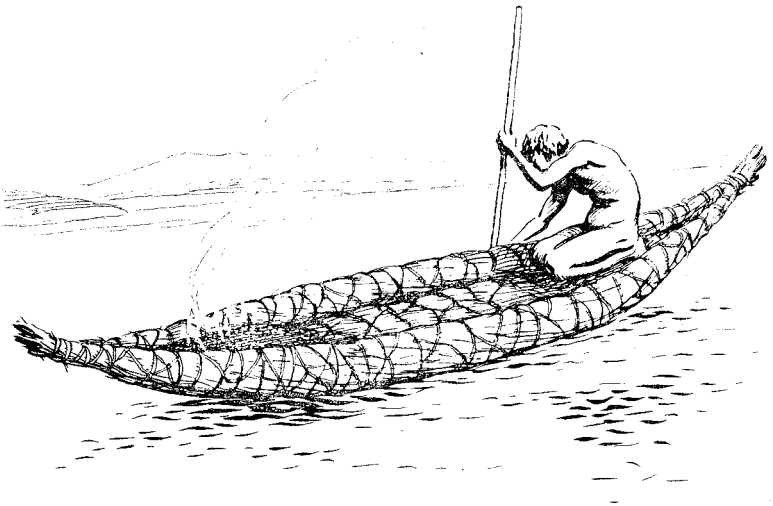

Fig. 1.—Tasmanian bark canoe-raft (after a small model in the Tasmanian Museum).

affinity with the Tasmanian canoe, though probably more seaworthy. H. Cary Gilson (1938) has given an interesting description of the balsa used on Lake Titicaca. The balsa is a raft consisting of huge bundles of sedge, known as *tortora (Scirpus tortora)*, which are tied together with ropes of plaited grass. These craft last for only about two or three months, after which they break up and are then eaten by the cattle. Gilson describes two types, a smaller craft 8 to 10 feet long, which carries one man, and a larger kind, used for general transport, which may be as much as 20 feet long, and which carries a matting sail made of tortora (shown in the stern of the boat, fig. 2). I understand that the balsa is also used in the sea along the Peruvian coast, but I have no confirmation of this.

A third type of craft which is used on Lake Tana, Abyssinia, is shown in fig. 3. I have been unable to obtain a precise description of this canoe, but it is apparently made of reeds, which are lashed together. This craft is probably somewhat similar to the one used on Lake Chad, Central Africa, of which a short description is given by P. H. Lamb (1921). The canoe-raft of Lake Chad is made of reeds, and Lamb states that the life of such craft is not more than one month. It is interesting to note that a somewhat similar type of boat was used by the Egyptians about 3500 B.C. The Egyptian type differed from the Abyssinian in having a high prow and stern, and was similar in this respect to one type of Tasmanian canoe-raft.

Thus, the same general type of canoe-raft is found in three widely separated parts of the world. What is the explanation of this discontinuous distribution?

In the field of Biology there are many instances of organisms bearing close resemblances to each other which are found thousands of miles

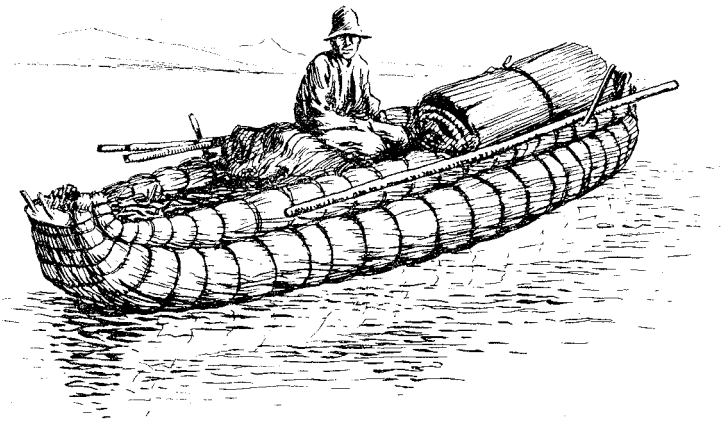

Fig. 2.—*Balsa*. Lake Titicaca (after H. Cary Gilson, by courtesy of the Editor, *The Geographical Journal*).

apart. In most cases this common likeness is due to a common descent (homogeny), and the broken distribution marks the outposts of what was once a large continuous area within which these related forms had arisen from a common ancestral type. In some cases, however, the resemblances are produced merely by the convergence of unrelated forms towards similarity of structure, due to the effects of similar environmental conditions (homoplasy).

If it is legitimate to make use of this biological parallel in the present case, it would appear either that these primitive canoe-rafts had a common origin, scattered and broken though their distribution has become, or, on the other hand, that they may have arisen independently in several widely-separate parts of the world in response to similar requirements in a similar set of circumstances.

The solution of this interesting problem has an important bearing on another question, viz., the route by which the Tasmanian aborigines reached Tasmania. If, as it is widely believed, they came by slow stages down the east coast of Australia after having reached that continent from the neighbouring islands of the West Pacific or the East Indies, then it is reasonable to suppose that they brought with them, as part of their primitive culture, the art of making bark canoe-rafts—an art which they retained to the end of their days. If such were the case, the Tasmanian canoe-raft was probably a homogenetic structure

and came from the same common stock from which the African and American canoe-rafts arose. It is conceivable that these products of an early and primitive culture were evolved near the cradle of the human race, which is said to have been somewhere near the south-western part of Central Asia. From that focal centre the primitive craftsmanship would radiate in all directions where the absence of geographical and climatic barriers permitted, either by the actual migration of races who carried with them their special ethnological characteristics, or by means of the actual diffusion of culture from one race to another. Both influences were undoubtedly at work, and it is not difficult to visualize how the use of the canoe-raft would spread in may directions for a considerable distance from its point of origin and ultimately would cover a very large geographical area. In course of time this area would tend to become broken either through the abandonment of the handicraft by some races, or because, in the hands of a race possessing a relatively high degree of intelligence, it would be changed into something quite different. Biologically speaking, this may be regarded as a reasonable homogenetic explanation of the occurrence of the bark or reed canoe-rafts in three isolated parts of the world far removed from their probable centre of origin, and would incidentally explain how the canoe-raft came to Tasmania.

On the other hand, Professor Wood Jones (1935) has written strongly in favour of the view that the aborigines reached Tasmania direct by sea from their earlier home somewhere in the West Pacific.

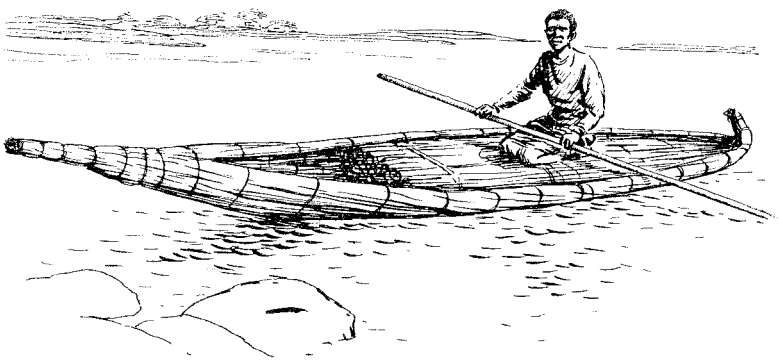

Fig. 3.—Primitive canoe-raft, Lake Tsana, Abyssinia (after a photograph published in *The Auckland Star*).

Such a view postulates the possession by the early Tasmanians of ocean-going canoes and not the primitive unseaworthy canoe-raft which we know they possessed in their last years. In support of his thesis that the Tasmanians once possessed the art of making sea-going canoes, which at a later period they lost, Wood Jones wrote as follows (1935, p. 8.) 'we know quite well that a race that has come

by sea to a new home may, in the end, forget the craft of boat-building, *when ocean voyages are no longer required* (1). Even if the Tasmanians had possessed no knowledge of boat and boating during the period of European contact, the claims for their seacoming would not necessarily have been invalid.'

I have italicized part of the above quotation because therein lies the crux of the position. Tasmania is surrounded by numerous small islands which are separated from the main island by stormy seas and fierce currents, yet there is undisputed evidence that the aborigines visited many of these islands. Obviously, then, there was a definite need for seaworthy boats, and, if the aborigines had possessed such boats when they first arrived, there is every reason to believe that out of sheer necessity they would have retained the important art of boat-building.

If Wood Jones is correct, it would follow that the Tasmanian bark canoe-raft was probably evolved independently in Tasmania and had no relationship with similar types of raft in other parts of the world, and was, in fact, a remarkable example of convergence.

It does not come within the scope of the present paper to examine critically the various arguments which Wood Jones has put forward in support of his view, particularly as this has already been done to some extent by Meston (1937), or to weigh the evidence regarding the homogenetic or homoplastic origin of the canoe-raft.

It may be said, however, that not one shred of material evidence has been adduced in support of the view that the Tasmanians once possessed the art of building sea-going canoes. My personal opinion is that the primitive canoe-raft of the Tasmanians was a homogenetic cultural product brought by them from their original home and retained by them throughout their long and protracted journey eastward along the islands of Southern Asia and southward down the eastern coast of Australia to their final home in Tasmania.

I am indebted to Captain D. Colbron Pearse for the figures which illustrate this paper.

(1) The italics are mine.

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