

A SECOND UNDESCRIBED FORM OF WOMERAH
FROM NORTHERN AUSTRALIA.

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SURVEY OF N. S. WALES.)

(Plate III.)

Since I read a short Note to the Society on a Womerah from Northern Queensland,* Mr. Charles Hedley has been instrumental in obtaining for me the loan of a second form of this weapon from the Rev. George Brown, secretary to the Australasian Methodist Mission, presumedly undescribed, and believed by the latter to come from North Queensland.†

The history of the specimen is as follows:—It was collected about four years ago, by the late Captain Alex. Craig, of the ship “Princess Louise.” The ship was wrecked, the Captain killed on a subsequent voyage, and the log lost. On the voyage on which

* P.L.S.N.S.W. 1892, vi. (2), Pt. 4, p. 699.

† *Additional Note*—14/7/92.—Mr. Hedley and myself have found, since the publication of my Paper, a brief record of this womerah by the late John Macgillivray, who says:—“The throwing-stick in use at Cape York extends down the N.E. coast as far as Lizard Island. . . . It is made of casuarina wood, and is generally three feet in length, an inch and a quarter broad, and half an inch thick. At the end a double slip of melon shell, three and a half inches long, crossing diagonally, serves as a handle, and when used the end rests against the palm of the right hand, the three last fingers grasp the stick, and the fore finger and thumb loosely retain the spear.” (*Narr. Voy. H.M.S. Rattlesnake during the years 1846-1850*, I. 1852, p. 18.) This reference thus enables us to extend the range of this womerah throughout the Cape York Peninsula, the Gilbert River being situated at its extreme base.—R. E., JUN.

the womerah was obtained he made a trip from Sydney to the Torres Straits Islands, thence westward round Dutch New Guinea to the Admiralty Islands, and back to Sydney.

It, therefore, became of importance to determine from what part of the Continent this weapon came. One naturally turns in the first instance for information to the late R. Brough Smyth's fine work on the "Aborigines of Victoria;"* failing that to the excellent illustrations given in Governor Eyre's "Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia."† In neither of these works is any figure of the present womerah given; but on appealing to the valuable Macleay Collection at the University, with the aid of the Curator, Mr. G. Masters, three perfectly similar weapons were unearthed, and all labelled Port Darwin. So much for the district in which this form of throwing-stick is employed. Further researches amongst other works failed to find any description of such an implement as the present, but in Knight's "Study of the Savage Weapons at the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876,"‡ are two rough figures, without explanations, of "Spear-throwing Sticks, South Australia," one of them with a general resemblance to our womerah, but without any detail displayed. South Australia, with the light thrown upon the subject by the Macleay Museum specimens, must be an error, for the throwing-sticks of the southern portion of Australia are quite of a different type.

The womerah is lath-like and slightly curved, although for the first two feet from the handle it is straight, the curvature then becoming gradually marked, and the blade attenuating to a sharp point at the outer end. The total length is three feet nine inches, and two and a quarter inches wide at the lower or proximal end, and just above the hand hold. The blade is one-sixth of an inch

* The Aborigines of Victoria, 2 vols. (4to., Melbourne, 1878: Government Printer.)

† Two vols. (8vo., London, 1845.)

‡ Ann. Report Board Regents Smithsonian Inst. for 1879 [1880], p. 276, f. 117.

in thickness, and is quite flexible. The whole womerah has been stained red, except eight inches from the proximal and five and a half from the distal end, which spaces have been left uncoloured, and with the grain of the wood showing. At the proximal end the blade has been cut out to form a handle, and is terminated by a more or less shortly-pyriform knob-shaped mass of black gum cement, over which string has been spirally wound and interlaced in a highly finished manner, the whole smeared with a thin coating of gum-cement, and then coloured red like the blade. The string is at the edge of the gum knob wound three times spirally, occupying a space of somewhat less than a quarter of an inch, then passed along parallel to the length of the womerah for the space of an inch, and again following this for one and a quarter inches in a spiral direction. The carving of the handle is in the condition of very fine, regular, and beautifully executed incised lines, extending for three and a quarter inches up the blade. The first and widest band is of transverse or spiral lines, the second of oblique lines inclined to the right, the third transverse, the fourth obliquely inclined to the left, the fifth again transverse, the sixth oblique to the right as before, and the seventh and last again transverse, and the widest of all. It will be observed that the oblique lines alternately to the right and left produce a kind of herring-bone pattern divided by transverse bands.

I have not met with a precisely similar ornament in any Australian weapon or ornament, although the simple herring-bone pattern is not uncommon.

The attenuated distal end of the blade is mounted with a very neatly made hard-wood peg, somewhat bottle-stopper shaped, and lashed on by fine fibre or string.

The largest of the Port Darwin womerahs in the Macleay Museum, precisely similar in shape to this one, is three feet nine and a half inches long, and two inches and two-eighths wide at the base of the blade. It is an exact counterpart of the Rev. G. Brown's, but is coloured throughout the entire length. The second is three feet five inches long, and one and five-eighths at

the base. It is without carving of any description, wholly coloured, of much rougher workmanship, the knob at the end of the handle merely a ball of gum, and the peg and lashing at the distal end washed with white pipeclay pigment. The third example is three feet five and three-quarter inches in length, and two inches wide at the base. It is wholly coloured red, and the handle carved, but the carving extends a much shorter distance up the blade than in Mr. Brown's.

As I have before said, the only illustration in any way approached by this weapon is one of the two womerahs from "South Australia" given by Knight. The blade is very slightly curved, the cut-out portion of the handle very short, no carving, and the ball end of the handle circular and without sculpture.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE III.

Fig. 1.—Upper surface of womerah.

Fig. 2.—Handle; edge view.

Fig. 3.—Peg end; edge view.

(All the figures much reduced.)



Etheridge, Robert and Melo-Costa, Wanessa de. 1892. "A second undescribed form of womerah from northern Australia." *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 7, 170–173. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.part.26046>.

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