

## ETHNOLOGICAL NOTES, No. 5.

By the late

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(Plates vii-ix.)

This paper was commenced by the late W. W. Thorpe shortly before his untimely death. It contains a description of two unusual types of ground stone implements of the Australian aborigines, in the collection of the Australian Museum, and also in the possession of members of the Anthropological Society of New South Wales, to whom thanks are due for the loan of the specimens. The petrological determinations by Mr. T. Hodge-Smith, Mineralogist, Australian Museum, are based on megascopic characters only.

### Ground-edge Knives.

(Pls. vii-viii.)

The series figured is extremely interesting, as these are the smallest ground-edge stone implements made by the aborigines. In the collection they are termed "skinning knives," "flaying knives," and "skin dressers." There is unfortunately scant information available in regard to the type of implement used by the aborigines for skinning and dressing. Where such are recorded for cutting flesh, they are almost invariably described as "sharp flints" or "chips of stone."

In some parts of Queensland the human corpse was skinned with a stone knife<sup>1</sup>; McDonald describes the flaying of a corpse on the Mary River.<sup>2</sup> For this process a metal knife was used, but obviously this had replaced a stone implement.<sup>3</sup> This operation takes place in other parts of Australia also.

Brough Smyth figures a "Chip dug out of a mirrn-yong heap . . . it has a tolerably sharp cutting edge, and appears to be a fragment of chert. It had not been ground or polished, and the fracture is semi-conchoidal. I was quite sure that it was an ancient chip that had been used in cutting open and skinning animals taken in the chase."<sup>4</sup> Dawson says of the Victorians:—"For skinning animals, marking rugs, and cutting the human skin to produce ornamental wens on the chest, back and arms, knives are made of splinters of flint, or of sharpened mussel shells. . . . For skinning the ring-tailed opossum and for dividing meat, the leaf of the grass-tree is used, and also the long front tooth of the bandicoot, with the jaw attached as a handle."<sup>5</sup> Amongst the Narrinyeri in

<sup>1</sup> Barron Field.—*Geogr. Mem.* 1825, pp. 71-76; Roth, North Queensland Ethnogr., Bull. 9, in *Rec. Austr. Mus.*, VI, 5, 1907, pp. 398-403.

<sup>2</sup> McDonald.—*Journ. Anthr. Inst.*, I, 1872, pp. 214-19.

<sup>3</sup> Curr.—*The Australian Race*, Melbourne, 1887, III, pp. 136-47, and p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Brough Smyth.—*Aborigines of Victoria*, I, 1878, pp. 361-2, 381-2, figs. 210 and 217.

<sup>5</sup> Dawson.—*Australian Aborigines*, 1881, p. 25.

South Australia<sup>6</sup> "opossum skins, after they were dried, were carefully scraped, then scored on the fleshy side with a sharp stone or shell to make them flexible." These are figured by Howitt.<sup>7</sup>

Spencer says "Sundry stone chips were collected. . . . In other cases I am obliged to rely on the diagnosis of our black tracker who referred them variously as having been intended for the purpose of skinning animals, scarring of the body, cutting one another in play, scratching marks on weapons and making of spears. The materials of which they are composed are sandstone-grit . . . jasper, chalcedony, quartzite, porcellanite, and bottle glass. . . ." According to Basedow "The old Adelaide Plains tribe were in possession of scrapers which they constructed out of thin slabs of clay-shale. The implement was more or less semi-circular, but had a concave surface on the inner side; occasionally its corners were rounded off, producing a reniform shape. On an average the diameter was something like four or five inches. This implement was used exclusively to scrape skins of animals. . . ." Small circular discs of silex sharpened at the edge, Buyoa, are used for tattooing, or making other incisions in the body. . . .<sup>10</sup> Van Gennep says stone knives were used for marking opossum skin cloaks.<sup>11</sup>

During a short stay at Bateman's Bay, New South Wales, the late W. W. Thorpe handed to an old native an *elouera*, a specialized type of knife-like scraper.<sup>12</sup> Without prompting, the old black recognized it as a skin scraper as used by the aboriginal women. He "had often seen his mother using them."

Mr. K. G. Goddard, resident in the East Kimberleys, in a letter to his brother, Mr. R. H. Goddard, makes the following observations:—"The small ground knife (Pl. vii, fig. 13) is used in ceremonial work by the medicine men, and also in the preparation of water bags of wallaby, kangaroo, or opossum skins. The skin is turned inside out, and stretched out on sticks. It is then scraped carefully with the small stone knife to remove the fat and any flesh adhering, the extremities are cut off, and all the openings except one are sewn up. The vessel is now ready for use." The same informant has also seen the natives of the East Kimberleys using rough scrapers (Pl. vii, fig. 17) for skinning and cutting flesh.

Bonwick says the Tasmanians did not skin animals before cooking, but used a "sharp flint" to eviscerate them.<sup>13</sup> Ling Roth mentions "chips of rock" being used for the skinning of animals, and that the implement is held by the forefinger and thumb, and the arm, being extended, was drawn rapidly towards the body.<sup>14</sup> The Tasmanians however did not use ground-edge implements.

*Distribution.*—The ground-edge knives figured are from various localities in New South Wales and from East Kimberleys, but in a letter Mr. A. S. Kenyon, of Melbourne, states that they are found co-extensive with the ground-axe, and occur most thickly in the Lower Wimmera, Victoria, Lower Murray, and Lower Darling areas, N.S.W. They have been found in rock-shelters (in some instances associated with burial), in camping places, and on coastal kitchen middens. In section they are all very thin, as will be seen from the illustrations. Details of measurements and weight are given in the explanation of plates.

<sup>6</sup> Taplin.—Native Tribes of South Australia, 1879, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Howitt.—Native Tribes of South-East Australia, 1904, pp. 741-2, fig. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Spencer.—Report on the Horn Exped. to Central Australia, 1896, Pt. iv Anthropology, p. 98, pl. vi, fig. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Basedow.—Australian Aboriginal, 1925, p. 366, pl. xliii, fig. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robertson.—Brief Account of the Natives of West Australia—Sydney, 1879, 8vo.; Perth, 1879, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Van Gennep.—Publ. Mus. d'Ethnogr. Pays Bas, Leyde, 14, 1907, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Turner.—Mankind, 1, 2, July, 1931, p. 32 and figs.

<sup>13</sup> Bonwick.—Daily Life of the Tasmanians, 1870, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Roth.—Aborigines of Tasmania, 1890, pp. 157-8.

*Type I.*—Pl. vii, figs. 1-9a, are all flaked, either from a larger flake, or from a pebble. There is no uniformity in shape or pattern, each being roughly fashioned, and only on one is there provision for gripping. In some cases they are hafted, as in Pl. vii, fig. 22. Each has a very good cutting edge, ground on both faces, which may be restricted to one end, as in the majority, to one side as in Pl. vii, fig. 4, or may extend halfway round, as in fig. 15, until in fig. 16 it culminates in the cutting edge right around. Pl. vii, fig. 2, is evidently a chip from a ground axe, and has two cutting edges. Figures 10-14 of the same plate, in the collection of Mr. R. H. Goddard, are all waterworn pebbles, and have been ground at one end on both faces, to produce a perfect working blade, but none of them have been otherwise shaped. Of these Mr. A. S. Kenyon says: "The material is in general exceptionally good . . . they are found where chipped or flaked quartzite knives abound and are used. This may be considered true, to a large extent, of all these small forms. The Lower Darling (N.S. Wales) ones, which resemble the Kimberley forms, are from the method of grinding quite often faceted and sometimes have two or more working or cutting edges." Plate vii, figs. 18-21, are flakes ground on one edge, and are chisel-like in shape.

*Type II.*—These are from western New South Wales. They are made from a very fine-grained highly altered volcanic ash, which can be ground to a very keen edge, as in the specimens available. One (pl. vii, fig. 23) in the collection might be termed a chisel, as it measures  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{8}$  inches, and is ground at one end. Another,  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{8}$  inches, is ground at both ends, having four facets to each working edge.

*Type III.*—Pl. viii, figs. 1-6a consists of a series of thin-bladed implements of this type, but they are much bigger, attenuated, and more uniform in shape than the smaller ones, due perhaps to the type of pebble used. It is possible to arrange a series from the smallest specimen to one described and figured by Etheridge, of which he says:—"The general form of this weapon is that of an elongated parallelogram, the longer sides quite parallel, and one end ground to a small cutting edge on both faces. It is nine and a quarter inches long, two and a half inches wide, only three-eighths of an inch in thickness, and its weight is eight ounces. . . . It may have been used for skinning, and other similar purposes, as its obvious weakness would ill fit it for the heavy work to which the blacks put their tomahawks. . . ." <sup>15</sup> In some cases these are flattish pebbles, ground at one end, in others they are either flakes, or have been flaked down to the necessary thickness, as with the smaller form. Such a series is, however, purely incidental, as the small ground-edge knife is a distinct type of implement.

*Conclusion.*—Etheridge refers to these implements as skinning knives,<sup>16</sup> but Kenyon and Stirling, in their "Suggested Classification of Australian Aboriginal Stone Implements," classify them as "knives or scrapers."<sup>17</sup> From the evidence available it is apparent that they are used for skin-dressing and scraping, and probably for the cutting of the *waribruk* scorings on skins used for cloaks (for which purpose shells were also used). However, the uses to which the aborigine applies an implement is limited only by its suitability for the purpose, and these implements are undoubtedly used for a variety of other purposes, such as cutting scars on the body or cicatrization, incised decoration on weapons, and numerous others, just as is the flaked quartzite knife in North and Central Australia, to

<sup>15</sup> Etheridge.—Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W. (2), v. 2, 1890, pp. 291-2, pl. xiii, fig. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Etheridge.—Rec. Geol. Surv. N.S.W., i, 2, 1899, p. 141 (figured pt. 1, pl. i, figs. 6-7; pt. 2, pl. xx, fig. 3).

<sup>17</sup> Kenyon and Stirling.—Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W. (2), xiii, 2, 1901, pp. 195-200.

which these implements might be compared. It seems desirable that they be termed Ground-edge Knives. Their use for circumcision is problematical; it was not practised in south-eastern Australia, throughout which area these implements are found. They have been referred to as "toy" tools, and "piccaninny's tomahawks," and while they may have been used by the boys their comparative rarity indicates a more important use, therefore these terms are not suitable.

## 2. Unusual Ground-edge Implements.

(Pl. ix.)

There are a number of specimens of this unusual type of ground-edge implement in the collection of the Australian Museum from various localities in New South Wales, as given in the explanation of plates. The side of the piece of stone has been utilized for the blade, instead of the end, as in the normal ground axe. In section they vary a great deal, but the majority taper from a thick back to the cutting edge. They are very irregular in shape, a series being figured. Some are flaked to the required shape, as in Fig. 1, but others are unworked (except the ground-edge), as in Fig. 3. Of the eighteen available some are of sandstone, others of basaltic and igneous rock.

As will be apparent from the localities given, they are not merely a local variation of the normal type of ground axe, but are, it seems, an implement made for a definite purpose. In the collection they are termed skin-dressers, a purpose for which they are eminently suitable, and which was their most probable use. Etheridge<sup>38</sup> suggests that they were used for skinning, otherwise no reference to them has been found.

### EXPLANATION OF PLATES.

#### PLATE VII.

##### *Ground-edge Knives.*

- Fig. 1.—Graytown, Victoria. Indurated slate.  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms.  $1\frac{1}{4}$  oz. E. 13680.  
 Fig. 2.—Between Lachlan and Darling Rivers. N.S. Wales Felsite.  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms. 1 oz. B. 8552.3.  
 Fig. 3.—Lake Lonsdale, Victoria. Basic igneous rock.  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{4}$  cms.  $1\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 34954.  
 Fig. 4-4A.—Between Lachlan and Darling Rivers, N.S. Wales. Felsite.  $5 \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms. 1 oz., B. 8552.4.  
 Fig. 5.—Newfoundland Holding, Darling River, N.S. Wales. Felsite.  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 4 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$  cms.  $1\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 27264.  
 Fig. 6.—Moora East, near Rushworth, Victoria. Lydian stone.  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms. 1 oz. E. 13668.  
 Fig. 7.—Coonamble District, N.S. Wales. Lydian Stone.  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms.  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 24410.  
 Fig. 8.—Newfoundland Holding, Darling River, N.S. Wales. Lydian stone.  $3\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{4}$  cms.  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 27265.  
 Fig. 9-9A.—Glenmore, Forbes, N.S. Wales. Basic igneous rock.  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 1$  cms. 1 oz. E. 34876.  
 Fig. 10.—Wollombi, N.S. Wales. Quartzose rock.  $6\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{4} \times 1$  cms.  $2\frac{1}{2}$  oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.  
 Fig. 11.—Bungaree, North Coast, N.S. Wales. Quartzose rock.  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{4}$  cms. 1 oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.  
 Fig. 12.—Broulee, South Coast, N.S. Wales. Quartzose rock.  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{3}{4} \times 1$  cms.  $1\frac{1}{4}$  oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.

<sup>38</sup> Etheridge.—Rec. Geol. Surv. N.S.W., I, 1, 1889, p. 12, pl. i, figs 4-5; pt. 2, 1889, p. 144, pl. xx, fig. 4; *ibid.* I, 2, 1889, p. 292, pl. xiii, fig. 12.

- Fig. 13-13A.—East Kimberleys, Western Australia. Quartzose rock.  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{4}$  cms.  $1\frac{3}{4}$  oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.
- Fig. 14.—Nandewar, N.S. Wales. Felsite.  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 3 \times 1\frac{1}{4}$  cms. 1 oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.
- Fig. 15.—No locality.  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4} \times 1$  cms. E. 20504.
- Fig. 16.—No locality.  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{3}{4}$  cms. E. 20503.
- Fig. 17.—East Kimberleys, Western Australia. Chalcedony.  $3\frac{1}{2} \times 3 \times \frac{3}{4}$  cms.  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. Lent by Mr. R. H. Goddard.
- Fig. 18.—Avalon Station, Eugowra District, N.S. Wales. Lydian stone.  $6\frac{1}{4} \times 2 \times \frac{3}{4}$  cms.  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 34139.
- Fig. 19.—Liverpool Plains, N.S. Wales. Lydian stone.  $7 \times 3\frac{1}{4} \times 1$  cms.  $1\frac{1}{4}$  oz. B. 4545.
- Fig. 20.—Between Lachlan and Darling Rivers, N.S. Wales. Lydian stone.  $4\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times 1$  cms.  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. B. 8552.7.
- Fig. 21.—Mundadoo, Brewarrina District, N.S. Wales. Lydian stone.  $2\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{3}{4}$  cms.  $\frac{1}{4}$  oz. E. 26958.
- Fig. 22.—N.S. Wales (1885). Highly altered volcanic ash.  $5\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{8} \times \frac{3}{8}$  inches. B. 5930.
- Fig. 23.—Lachlan and Darling Rivers, N.S. Wales. Basalt. Length (including handle),  $8\frac{3}{4}$  inches.

## PLATE VIII.

*Ground-edge Knives.*

- Fig. 1.—Gilmore, Tumut District, N.S. Wales.  $4 \times 2\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{4}$  inches. 7 oz. E. 29258.
- Fig. 2.—Cairns, Queensland.  $4\frac{3}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$  inches. E. 2839. Ground on both faces of three edges.  $8\frac{1}{2}$  oz.
- Fig. 3.—Rock Shelter, Kanangra Walls, N.S. Wales.  $3\frac{3}{8} \times 1\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{3}{8}$  inches. 2 oz. E. 34950.  
The curious markings on this specimen resemble those on some of the cornute and cylindro-conical stones of Western N.S. Wales.
- Fig. 4-4A.—Queensland.  $5 \times 2\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{5}{8}$  inches.  $7\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 20481.
- Fig. 5.—Holbrook, N.S. Wales.  $3\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{3}{4} \times \frac{5}{8}$  inches.  $3\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 12286.
- Fig. 6-6A.—Mt. William, Victoria.  $3\frac{3}{4} \times 2 \times \frac{1}{2}$  inches. 3 oz. E. 32628.

## PLATE IX.

*Skin Dressers.*

- Fig. 1.—Shellharbour, N.S. Wales. Basalt.  $11 \times 6 \times 2$  cms. 7 oz. Lent by Mr. A. E. Ivatt.
- Fig. 2.—Lower Murray River, South Australia. Quartzite (?).  $10\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{4} \times 1$  cms.  $2\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 20499.
- Fig. 3.—Bulga, Singleton, N.S. Wales. Basalt.  $12 \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 2$  cms. 8 oz. E. 25985.
- Fig. 4.—Rock Shelter, Mangrove Mountain, N.S. Wales.  $11 \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$  cms.  $6\frac{1}{2}$  oz. E. 33475.

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Other N.S.W. localities of specimens not figured are:—E. 30958, Shellharbour, Basalt; E. 33474, Rock Shelter, Mangrove Mountain, Porphyry; E. 33475, Rock Shelter, Garie, Basalt; Mulgoa, E. 35194, Sandstone; Richmond River, Olivine Basalt, E. 10708.