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ETHNOLOGICAL NOTES MADE AT COPMANHURST,
CLARENCE RIVER.

I. AN ABORIGINAL ROCK-SHELTER WITH AN
INSCRIBED ROCKFACE; II. DISARTICU-
LATION OF ONE OF THE LITTLE
FINGER JOINTS.

By R. ETHERIDGE, Junr., Curator.

(Plate xxxiii.).

I.—ABORIGINAL ROCK-SHELTER.

The Rock-shelter partially represented in Pl. xxxiii. was brought to my notice by Mr. George Savidge, of Copmanhurst, a valued correspondent of the Australian Museum. In May last I had the pleasure of accompanying him to make an examination of the interesting petroglyphs scattered over the outer face of the shelter. In these lies the chief interest attached to the latter, from their peculiar and uncommon characters.

The shelter is situated in a low scarp of sandstone of the Clarence Group (Hawkesbury-Wianamatta Series), sixty-four feet long, running E.S.E. and W.N.W., at the head of a small gully, joining Nobby's Creek, a south branch of the Clarence River, immediately opposite Copmanhurst.

The scarp is between eight and ten feet high, overhanging above, and with a vertical face of two feet six inches (in its widest part) below, on which the petroglyphs occur, extending over a length of twenty-four feet. Immediately under this is the shelter, thirty-two feet long, nine feet six inches deep, two feet six inches high at the entrance, and three feet inside. The upper or overhanging part of the scarp is devoid of carvings, these being confined to the narrow vertical face as aforesaid. The floor inside is composed of hearth-refuse material of no great depth, consisting of ashes, charcoal, bone fragments, and pieces of calcined shell of the "fresh-water mussel" (*Unio*); the roof is well blackened by smoke. The whole aspect of the shelter clearly indicates that at one time it was a place of residence, and from its contiguity to the river—where a plentiful supply of shells and fish could be obtained—well adapted for habitation.

The petroglyphs on the vertical rock-face above the opening consist of parallel superimposed lines of vertical incisions, two to six inches long, and crown-like outlines about six inches in height by four inches in breadth. The vertical incisions follow one another in lateral series with some regularity along the entire face, and in places become confluent, forming vertical or longitudinal lines; this is noticeable on the right of Pl. xxxiii., and in their simpler form are conspicuous along the upper portion of the rock in Pl. xxxiii. The depth of the incisions varies from five-eighths to half-an-inch, but allowance must be made for weathering.

Interspersed with these simple gravings are the semicircular, crown-shaped, or horse-shoe-shaped petroglyphs. Two of these are very apparent along the lower edge of the rock face in Pl. xxxiii., the left hand one divided in the middle line by a vertical division. The same figures are again particularly noticeable at the extreme right hand of the rock face in Pl. xxxiii., both large and small, and close together. The rock surface circumscribed by these curved lines may be plain (*a*, Pl. xxxiii.), or with a subsidiary, smaller, and similar curved figure within the larger (*b*, Pl. xxxiii.); or, again, the within contained surface may be divided up by vertical incisions (*c*, Pl. xxxiii.).

Mr. Savidge believed he could detect an ill-preserved outline of a kangaroo or wallaby in the centre of the group, but although there did seem to be a faint representation of some kind, I could not, I must confess, satisfy myself of its nature. There are no hand imprints, white, black, or red on this rock face.

Petroglyphs of this nature are by no means common, as already stated, indeed, I know of no other instance of such a combination of markings. As a group the nearest akin is one described and figured by Mr. H. Tryon, on Pigeon Creek, between Tent Hill and Pilton,¹ Queensland, but many of the figures there are more complicated. Similarly these figures are petroglyphs, and not pictographs, and are on a rock face forming the face wall of a rock-shelter.

In Mr. Tryon's illustration we observe, without the slightest question, figures identical with *a* and *b*, Pl. xxxiii, repeated more than once, as well as simple linear incisions, although not arranged in regular lateral series, like those on the Copmanhurst rock-shelter. It is, at the same time singular, that semi-circular outlines similar to those of Pigeon Creek and Copmanhurst, do not occur, so far as I know, in any of the Port Jackson-Hawkesbury groups of petroglyphs.

¹ Tryon—Proc. Roy. Soc. Q'land, i., 3, 1884, p. 45, pl. xi.

The meaning of the Copmanhurst carvings is quite lost. No information can be obtained, notwithstanding there are several full-blooded Blacks still living there, indeed, it was one of these who first pointed out the shelter to Mr. Savidge; either they cannot, or will not disclose anything, probably the latter.

In North America petroglyphic gravings similar to *a* and *b*, Pl. xxxiii, occasionally occur. Thus, they are represented by Mr. G. Mallery in one of the Owen Groups, in Owen Valley, California,² and in another near the San Marcos Pass³ in the same State. "They are not understood by the inhabitants of the vicinity who generally hold them in superstitious regard."⁴

Speaking of petroglyphs in general the same author remarks:—"It must be admitted that no hermenutic key has been discovered applicable to American pictographs, whether ancient on stone, or modern on bark, skins, linen, or paper. Nor has any such key been found which unlocks the petroglyphs of any other people. Symbolism was of individual origin and was soon variously obscured by conventionalizing; therefore it requires separate study in every region. No interpreting laws of general application to petroglyphs so far appear, although types and tendencies can be classified."⁵

I am indebted to Mr. G. Savidge for the loan of the negatives from which the plate is reproduced.

II. DISARTICULATION OF ONE OF THE LITTLE FINGER JOINTS.

This is a very wide spread practice throughout Australia on the part of the women, and has been commented on by many writers.

There is a Blacks' camp at Copmanhurst, and I noticed that one at least, of the old gins, known as "Eliza," had lost the first joint of the left little finger. As I was anxious to ascertain the reason for this mutilation, if not accidental, Mr. William Campbell, of Copmanhurst, a *grata persona* amongst the resident Blacks, kindly undertook the necessary enquiries, when he obtained the following details from some of the oldest gins:—

On a young gin, or girl, becoming promised or betrothed, say between the ages of twelve to fourteen years, to a lad, through the parents, or tribal head-man, a feast was given by the parents or

² Mallery—10th Ann. Rept. U.S. Bureau Ethnol. for 1888-89 (1893), pl. i., f. l., pl. ii., f. m.

³ Mallery—*Loc. cit.*, p. 63, f. 22.

⁴ " " p. 31.

⁵ " " p. 35.

guardians, when the oldest gin present took the girl and tied cobwebs round the finger in question. The girl was kept isolated for a month—from full moon to full moon—by which time the finger joint had dropped off. From thence onward all other young Blacks knew that the girl was allotted, or “engaged,” and on no account to be tampered with, under severe penalties to be inflicted by members of the tribe.

It will be apparent from this that in this part of the country, at any rate, disarticulation of a little finger joint was a sign of betrothal. Mr. Campbell added that the custom is now nearly extinct.

From accounts that have come down to us from the early colonists, the practice of disarticulating a little finger joint appears to have been common amongst tribes living on or near the sea coast. In the Port Jackson District, the operation was called *malgun*.⁶ The first writers to comment on this custom were Surgeon J. White,⁷ and the historian of Governor Phillip’s Voyage.⁸ The former mentions its occurrence both in Port Jackson and north to Broken Bay, and says that both old and young women were so operated on. Captain John Hunter not only confirmed the above, but also stated that infants were similarly treated,⁹ although not all females of the tribe in either case.

Lieutenant-Colonel D. Collins informs us that the two first joints of the left little finger were removed, the removal being accomplished by ligature,¹⁰ confirmatory of Mr. Campbell’s statement, and gives as a reason for the mutilation “the idea that these joints of the little finger are in the way when they wind their fishing lines over the hand.”

Sir T. L. Mitchell suggested¹¹ that in common with the ceremony of knocking out one or more incisor teeth,¹² little finger joint forfeiture was a remnant of early sacrificial rites.

On returning to the sea coast it may be noticed that Captain J. Lort Stokes, R.N., described¹³ a similar custom existing at

⁶ The Hebrew word *malgun*, says G. F. Angus, signifies a cutting off in order to protection (Savage Life and Scenes in Austr. and N. Zealand, ii., 1847, p. 225, *f. n.*)

⁷ White—Journ. Voy. to N. S. Wales, 1790, pp. 132 and 204.

⁸ Voyage of Gov. Phillip to Botany Bay, 2nd Ed., 1790, p. 67.

⁹ Hunter—Historical Journ. Trans. Port Jackson and Norfolk Isd., 1793, pp. 59, 205.

¹⁰ Collins—Acc. English Colony in N. S. Wales, 1788-1801, 2nd Ed., 1804, p. 359.

¹¹ Mitchell—Three Expeditions E. Austr., ii., 1838, p. 339.

¹² This we now know to be a portion of the youth’s initiation ceremony, or in some tribes the whole of it—“the making of young men.”

¹³ Stokes—Discoveries in Australia, 1837-43, i., 1846, p. 92.

Baskerville and Beagle Bays. At the latter several natives had lost one finger joint, but Stokes does not say of which hand, nor whether those so deprived were males or females.

At Halifax Bay, on the contrary, according to E. M. Curr,¹⁴ the females lose a joint of the first finger of the right hand, and amongst the Larrakia of Port Darwin, and the Woolna of the Adelaide River, North Australia, "some of the finger joints" are amputated, according to Inspector Paul Foelsche.¹⁵

Confirmation of Mr. Campbell's information is found in the statement of Mr. J. F. Mann,¹⁶ who says that in the coastal districts of New South Wales, the betrothal of a young woman to a man, who followed the occupation of a fisherman, compelled her to lose the first joint of the little finger of the left hand.

The only tribe referred to by Dr. W. E. Roth, performing this mutilation in Queensland, is the Kalkadoon: "female infants are said to have the top joint of the little finger amputated."¹⁷

Mr. R. J. Flanagan¹⁸ likens the custom to a practice described by Catlin amongst some of the North American Indians, the men removing a finger as an act of sacrifice to the Great Spirit. It is not only in North America we find traces of this peculiar disarticulation, as the following instances will show. The historian of Governor Phillip's Voyage remarks¹⁹ on its occurrence amongst a tribe of Hottentots at the Orange River, South Africa. Here, says Mr. O. Peschel,²⁰ amputation of finger joints is effected during youth and "seems to be superstitiously regarded as a charm." The same custom is known to exist amongst certain of the Kaffirs,²¹ whilst the Bushmen sacrifice the ends of their fingers on occasion of illness.

In the Friendly Islands Captain James Cook, R.N., observed the severance of finger joints "designed as a propitiatory sacrifice to the *Eatooa* to avert any danger or mischief to which they might be exposed."²² On the other hand Captain J. Lort Stokes says²³ that this mutilation at the Friendly Islands was

¹⁴ Curr—*Australian Race*, i., 1886, p. 74.

¹⁵ Foelsche in Curr—*Loc. cit.*, p. 252.

¹⁶ Mann—*Proc. Geogr. Soc. Austr. (N.S. Wales and Vict. Br.)*, i., 1885, p. 39.

¹⁷ Roth—*Ethnological Studies*, 1897, p. 184.

¹⁸ Flanagan—*Aborigines of Australia*, 1888, p. 126; Tylor—*Primitive Culture*, 2nd Ed., ii., 1873, p. 401.

¹⁹ Voyage of Gov. Phillip to Botany Bay, 2nd Ed., 1790, p. 68, *f. n.*

²⁰ Peschel—*Races of Man*, 1876, p. 462.

²¹ Peschel—*Loc. cit.*, p. 462, *f. n.*

²² King—*Voyage to the Pacific Ocean, &c.*, 1776-1780, iii., 1804, p. 162.

²³ Stokes—*Discoveries in Australia*, 1837-41, i., 1846, p. 93, *f. n.*

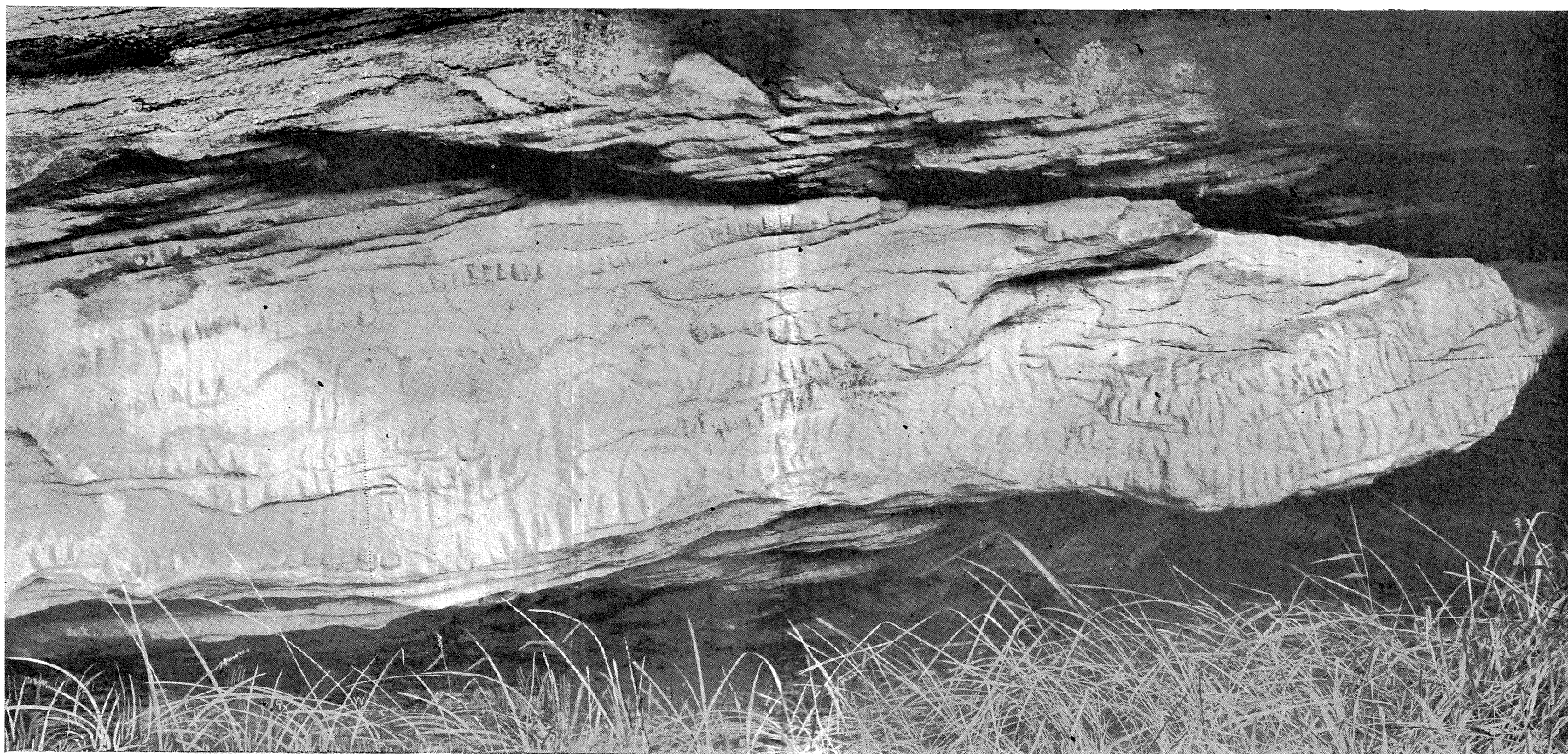
intended as an expression of grief for the loss of a friend. Amongst the Feejians a similar operation was a mark of mourning for the dead.²⁴ Interesting remarks and further references will be found in Dr. E. B. Tylor's "Primitive Culture,"²⁵ especially on the Nicobar Islanders, Tonganese, and Dravidians.

²⁴ Pritchard—Mem. Anthropol. Soc. for 1863-4, i., 1865, p. 203.

²⁵ Tylor—Primitive Culture, 2nd Ed., ii, 1873, pp. 400-401.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE XXXIII.

Petroglyphs on a portion of the outer face of a Rock-shelter, Nobby's
Creek, Clarence River, Copmanhurst, N. S. Wales.



a

c.

b.