

NOTES ON THE DISCOVERY OF ABORIGINAL REMAINS AT MOUNT CAMERON WEST TASMANIA

By

ROSS E. JONES

Geography Department, Matriculation College, Hobart, Tasmania

(With one plate)

ABSTRACT

The recent discovery of an incomplete skeleton initially identified as that of a Tasmanian aboriginal adds to the limited number of osteological remains of the extinct race.

INTRODUCTION

During the exploration and early settlement of Tasmania, scientific interest in the Tasmanian aboriginal was restricted in the main to mere description of incidental contact. The development of a more systematic approach to an understanding of this primitive people coincided with the extinction of the race. Present research is thus dependent upon such skeletal remains as have been preserved in collections or which may from time to time be uncovered in the field.

LOCATION

The present find was made in a large midden area situated on the immediate south of Mount Cameron West, an imposing diabase headland projecting into the Indian Ocean. The surrounding area is rich in aboriginal remains, including the aboriginal carvings two miles to the north of Mount Cameron West. Permanent freshwater streams, plentiful supplies of shell fish and native animals made the area attractive to aboriginal settlement. The midden site is contained within one of several large parabolic dunes in the area and appears to have been, prior to deflation, an area protected from the westerlies by a line of sand dunes.

The distribution of refuse heaps in the 'blow-out', which consist mainly of small mussel, haliotis and turbo shells with a scattering of marsupial bones and artifact material, shows the location was one favoured by the aborigines.

The remains were found near the top of a low conical midden to the north of the site. The body appears to have lain with the head directed to the south in a full prone position. The cranium, consisting of three large segments and several smaller pieces, was separated by several inches from the partially exposed maxilla and mandible. Sections of long bones were also partly visible, the arm bones on the right side lying parallel to the body but those of the left limb exhibiting some flexing. Both legs appear to have been fully extended together. Bone fragments were observed in the

upper part of the body and up to 5 feet away on the down slope of the midden. Blackened pieces of thin tabular bone-like material were found in the pelvic region.

Initial observation of the maxilla and mandible showed some fragmentation, apparently through natural weathering processes. Dentition appeared to be complete. Most teeth were in situ, the flat surface of the molars and lack of structural defect being readily noted.

Excavation and removal of the remains was carried out by Dr W. Bryden and Mr A. Dartnall of the Tasmanian Museum. Digging and screening of the immediate area revealed more bone remains; however none were found more than 6 inches below the surface. Long bones tended to display decay and weathering of upper and lower ends. The shaft of the left femur was broken in two parts towards the centre. No evidence of bones from the vertebral column was found. The flat bones were found to be extremely friable and moist. Initial work on the reconstruction of the cranium indicates that the greater part of the bones were recovered.

The excavated zone consisted of weathering shell material interspersed with sand and a half-dozen flints of inferior quality which did not appear to have been systematically placed. Two flat circular stones of approximately 8 inches diameter were found at the foot of the remains. They were similar to others found in the area.

An interesting note is made of the mobility of sand in the area. The introduction of grazing and subsequent removal of much of the native vegetation cover provides a plentiful supply of loose sand. Prevailing winds have built parabolic dune forms which continue to migrate inland. The finding, within the 'blow-out' portion of the dune, was made in the lee of a mound which had recently been exposed to strong easterly air movement. Prior to excavation on the third day (following discovery) the recurrence of westerly winds had reversed the sand flow to the dominant direction almost covering the remains. Thus repeated exposure and coverage might account for the poor state of preservation of the skeleton.

It might be inferred that little attempt was made by other aboriginals to dispose of the body in a traditional way. From Robinson's writings on the native inhabitants of the area it would appear

that the dead were promptly disposed of through the building of a ceremonial pyre. There is little evidence to suggest the possibility of flexed burial, or the wrapping or preserving of the remains as tokens—in particular the mandible. So one might conclude, taking into account the youthfulness of the specimen, that death was possibly due to trauma or disease.

The remains mentioned in this paper are now deposited in the Tasmanian Museum.

REFERENCES

- CROWTHER, W. L.—On Two Tasmanian Crania. *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1929, pp. 123-127.
- Notes on the Habits of the Extinct Tasmanian Race. *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1933, pp. 22-25.
- CROWTHER, W. L.—On the Discovery of Tasmanian Aboriginal Remains at Mount Dromedary, Tasmania. *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1938, pp. 209-211.
- & LORD, C. E.—A Descriptive Catalogue of the Osteological Specimens Relating to the Tasmanian Aborigines Contained in the Tasmanian Museum, *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1920, pp. 137-152.
- LING, R. H.—The Aborigines of Tasmania, King, Halifax, 1899, 2nd ed.
- MESTON, A. L.—Aboriginal Rock Carvings in Tasmania, Part II, *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1932, pp. 1-6.
- PLOMLEY, N. J. B., Ed.—*Friendly Mission*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966, pp. 636-662.
- PERON, F. & FREYCINET, L.—*Voyage de Decouverte aux Terres Australes*, 2 vols. Paris. 1807-1816.
- SCOTT, H. H. & MCCLINTON, R.—A Note on the Burial Customs of the Tasmanian Aborigines, *Pap. Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasm.*, 1923, pp. 45-46.

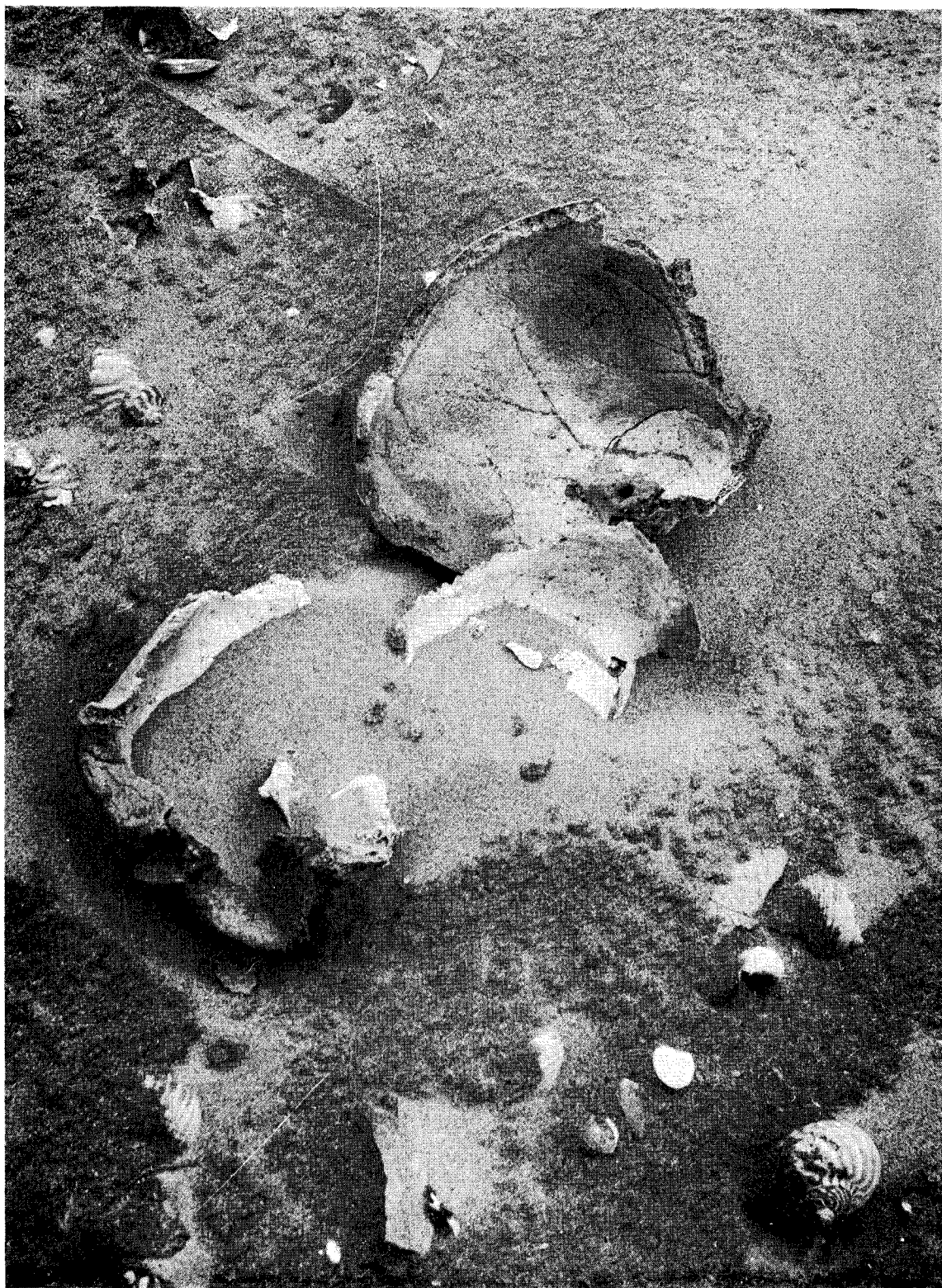


PLATE--Fragments of cranium, Mt Cameron West.

