

ON CIRCULAR AND SPIRAL INCISED ORNAMENT ON  
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL IMPLEMENTS AND  
WEAPONS.

By R. ETHERIDGE, JUNR., Curator.

(Plates i., ii.)

---

THE more or less rare occurrence of this form of sculpture on the implements and weapons of our Aborigines will probably render a notice of several instances interesting.

The late Mr. R. Brough Smyth remarked\* many years ago that—"Curved lines are rarely seen. Any attempt to represent a curve in all the specimens I have examined has been a failure." Mr. Andrew Lang even made a more sweeping statement† when he wrote that the patterns used by the Australian Aborigines are such as can be produced without the aid of "spirals or curves or circles."

Of the incorrectness of this statement, no better example can be adduced than the circular incised figures seen on the "Bull-roarers" figured‡ by the late Mr. Edward Hardman, from the Kimberley District, N.W. Australia.

A very beautiful instance is represented in Pl. i., Fig. 1 and 2, all the more interesting because it is a stone implement, and the only one of its kind that has ever come under my notice. It consists of a flat pebble (in all probability) of indurated shale, long-oval in shape, and incised on both faces; five and six-eighths inches long, and three and three-sixteenths wide, but is fractured at the lower end. On one aspect (Pl. i., Fig. 1) is a nearly central figure consisting of incised circles arranged spirally within one another. The figure is generally very slightly longer than wide, the greatest or longitudinal diameter being two and fifteen-sixteenths inches. On the right hand side there are thirteen incised grooves, and on the left twelve, the grooves becoming slightly wider towards the circumferential one. Immediately above, on the same face of the pebble, are two smaller figures, the incised grooves, three in number in each case, being however simply concentric within one another, and not spiral. That on the right is half-an-inch in diameter, and that on the left five-eighths.

---

\* Smyth; Aborigines of Victoria, i., 1878, p. 283.

† Lang; Customs and Myth, p. 279.

‡ Proc. R. Irish Acad., i., 1888 (2), No. 1, t. 2, f. 4, t. 3.



Both above these circles, and below the large spiral, is a series of horizontal grooves, starting from the edge of the implement inwards, and not meeting in the middle line, but leaving a clear median space, that below the spiral being wider than the upper one. The upper incisions are seven on the right, and eight on the left, the lower six on either side.

The reverse of this implement (Pl. i., Fig. 2) is differently incised. In the place of the large almost central spiral is a rather roughly executed series of circles concentric within one another; the longest diameter is two and two-eighths inches. Surmounting this figure is a three-quarters circular representation in which the grooves are very much finer, fainter, and closer together, leaving a large unincised space, the free end almost touching the circumference of the central group of circles. If completed, the figure would also be circular in form. There are, I think, ten grooves. The surface of the implement below the central circles is transversely grooved in a manner precisely similar to that of the front face, the grooves on the left hand numbering thirteen, but those on the right are too indistinct for enumeration.

This peculiar implement has been profusely ruddled, so much so as to almost fill up some of the grooves. Furthermore, the broken base shows traces of adherent gum cement, which extends on the fractured end. I infer from this either that it has formed a portion of a mounted implement, or when in the possession of its sable owner was fractured and possibly repaired. The colour is fast, and does not soil the hand.

This interesting implement was presented some years ago by a Mr. Dunlop, and is said to come from North Queensland, but the precise locality is unknown.

As having a possible bearing on the use of this instrument, it is necessary to refer to two others presented by the same donor, and at the same time. In both cases, however, there is no incised sculpture. One is a linear-oval flat pebble, four inches long and two wide, shaped generally like a "Bull-roarer." It is similarly ruddled, and the smaller end is covered with gum cement on both sides. The second specimen is a flat shale pebble, broad-oval in shape, eight and a-quarter inches long, by four and a-half wide, unincised, but profusely ruddled on both aspects, although the ruddle is lighter in colour than in the incised implement (Pl. i., Figs. 1 and 2. The surfaces are speckled over with magenta coloured dots or spots.

With regard to the use of these implements I can do no more than offer a surmise.—The care bestowed on the spiral and circular figures on the one hand, and the thick coating of colour on the other, at once place on one side the supposition that they might have been used for grinding stones, for which purpose the shape



and size of at least two, would admirably adapt them. Again, the entire absence of scratches favours this view. The general likeness to a "Bull-roarer" of the smallest and longest of the three pebbles, and the similarity of the sculpture of the incised implement to the circular ornament seen on some of these objects of Aboriginal veneration leads me to infer that these stones were employed in some of the Black's secret rites, but the precise use must still remain unknown.\*

One of the most beautiful examples of circular concentric sculpture with which I am acquainted is represented in Pl. i., Figs. 3 and 4, a "Bull-roarer" from the Urania Tribe, Linda Creek, W. Queensland. There are five circular figures on each aspect of the implement, merely differing in size and the number of contained circles, and similar to those seen on the stone implement already described; they occupy more or less the entire surface of this implement.

The central and largest disk (Pl. i., Fig. 4), in which there are sixteen circles, is separated from the others by a crossbar above and below it, each of four incised lines; these do not occur on the other or slightly convex face of the "Bull-roarer." The uppermost and smallest disc on this aspect (Pl. i., Fig. 3) differs from the others in that the concentric circles are fewer in number, leaving a plain and unincised intermediate area between the outer circles and a central nucleus of three. Between this disc and the second, and below the fifth, are two incised arcs of four and three lines respectively, and similar to that already described on the stone implement (Pl. i., Fig. 2). This "Bull-roarer" is sixteen inches long by two and a quarter wide, and is more acutely pointed at one end than the other. It is attached to a long cord composed of human hair and fine emu down, and is covered with ruddle and grease.

The second and third "Bull-roarers" are equally well incised with circular and other figures. They are said to be from South Australia, but are, I think, more likely to come from Central Australia. Taking the larger one first, measuring fourteen inches by two inches, we see on the more convex of the two faces (Pl. ii., Fig. 5), a central figure answering to the uppermost in Pl. ii., Fig. 3, a nucleus of circles within a circumferential set, five in both cases. Above and below this is an arc or semicircle

\* Since the above was written I have read the following passage in the "Horn Scientific Expedition Report" (Vol. i., Narrative, &c., 1896, p. 35), by Prof. Baldwin Spencer. Speaking of the *Churina* or "Bull-roarers," met with in Central Australia, he says—"Stone ones are still more valuable and sacred than wooden ones, which are usually spoken of as 'Irula,' the patterns on which are copied from the older stones, the history and origin of which are lost in the dim past." This rather tends to confirm the view I have taken of this incised stone implement.



similar to those already described in the first "Bull-roarer," and the stone implement.

On the flat side of this implement (Pl. ii., Fig. 6), the carving is very remarkable, consisting of indiscriminately scattered small circles, and arcs or semicircles in various degrees of completeness and position. Here and there are transverse short incised lines proceeding from the margins inwards, precisely as the larger incisions drawn in Pl. i., Figs. 1 and 2. These crossbars or transverse incisions are also seen in one of Hardman's figures\* of the Kimberley implements. On the convex face of the smallest "Bull-roarer" (Pl. ii., Fig. 8) are four discs, each one surrounded by two semicircles of concentric incisions, whilst the third from the top is separated off by crossbars. On the reverse of this implement (Pl. ii., Fig. 7) the ornamentation is again different, consisting of a central longitudinal serpentine figure looped on itself at the upper end, margined by bow-shaped figures of three or more incisions, and the re-entering angles between the latter occupied by short transverse bars. The execution of the incised sculpture on this beautiful little implement is of a much more finished nature than that on the preceding "Bull-roarer" (Pl. ii., Figs. 5 and 6), and more akin to that of the first described (Pl. i., Figs. 3 and 4). It is ten inches long by one and a quarter inches wide.

The question of this circular ornamentation or pictography seems to have engaged the attention of writers on the Australian Aborigines but little. It has been suggested by Mr. D. Brown, who obtained examples from Stuart's Creek, Central Australia, that these concentric rings indicate the practice of sun worship on the part of those who carved them.† On the other hand, Prof. R. Tate rejects the view that they are symbols at all, and believes the execution of them to be merely a matter of sport.‡ He further very much doubted if they could be regarded as the production of the untutored Aboriginal. It is, however, a curious coincidence that one of the principal localities for these circular incised "Bull-roarers" is Kimberley, where at the time of Mr. Hardman's explorations the Blacks had come in contact with the White-man possibly as little as anywhere. Without entering into the question of sun worship, although some of our Aboriginal tribes seem to have possessed customs and practices suspiciously like this form of adoration, even if they were unacquainted with, or had lost their esoteric meaning—it may be pointed out that the only published objects bearing this circular ornamentation are "Bull-roarers," and as everyone knows these are the most

\* Proc. R. Irish Acad. (2), i., 1888, No. 1, t. 3, f. 2.

† Trans. Roy. Soc. S.A., iii., 1880, p. xxiii.

‡ Trans. Roy. Soc. S.A., iii., 1880, p. xxiv.



precious and sacred of the Black's possessions, and only used in the mysteries of the Bora. I think, therefore, that unless Prof. Tate's view can be supported by stronger evidence than mere opinion, it must be dismissed, whatever the real significance of this circular incised ornament may be.

Mr. W. W. Froggatt, when in Kimberley some years ago, paid considerable attention to the practices of the Aboriginal inhabitants. He observes\* that during initiation "men are stationed round whirling flat-oval sticks, on which are carved *curious symbols*." The italics are mine.

We know that amongst some ancient peoples, and even amongst the remnant of some existing, the circle or disc was symbolic of the sun. Our acquaintance, however, with the beliefs and esoteric mysteries of the Aborigines is too limited to hazard a suggestion that the figures on the "Bull-roarers" and stone implements bear a similar reference—but it is possible.

One of Mr. Hardman's "Bull-roarers" bears five sets of concentric circles, separated by groups of vertical incisions, and horizontal marginal ones, as in our Pl. ii., Figs. 6 and 7. A second implement bears irregular concentric semicircles at the apices, one on each side, and four sets of quadrangular figures concentric within one another. Two of the implements now figured are said to be from South Australia, but the correspondence in every way with Hardman's Kimberley figures† causes me to suspect that they must in reality come from the same district, or at any rate high up in Central Australia.

A few other cases of circular ornament in Australia may be mentioned, such as the circles, and ovals as well, carved on the trees surrounding the larger circle of a *Bora* ground near Gloucester, N.S. Wales,‡ and the numerous figures found by Mr. Richard Helms, during the progress of the Elder Exploring Expedition from South to West Australia. On a cave-shelter pictograph at Arcoellinna Wells, S.A.§ are several of these concentric circles in red. Mr. Helms says these "are of very frequent occurrence, and have undoubtedly a symbolic meaning." Others were met with at Wa-Wee Rock Holes in another Cave-shelter, and at Mount Illibillie on white pigment.|| The most complete ones, however, were found in a similar situation near "Camp 6," Everard Ranges. Here is a circle in red of seven rings, a black nucleus, and radial bars passing from the centre

\* Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W., (2), iii., 1888, Pl. 2, p. 652.

† Proc. R. Irish Acad. (2), i., 1888, No. 1, t. 2, f. 4-5A, & t. 3.

‡ Fraser; Aborigines of N.S. Wales, 1892, pl. opp. p. 11.

§ Trans. Roy. Soc. S.A., xvi., 1896, Pt. 3, t. 9.

|| *Loc. cit.*, t. 10A & 11.



to the circumference.\* The circular incised sculpture is very common on many petroglyphs, particularly in America, such as Bald Friar Rock, in Maryland; Girao, in Brazil; Cipreses, in Chili, and on the Colorado River, Utah,† and it is certainly curious to find this form of ornamentation whether on implements, as pictographs on the walls of Cave-shelters, or as petroglyphs, so widely distributed. It is curious and even startling to find the close general resemblance there is between this circular and spiral incised ornament on our Black's weapons, and in their Cave-shelters, and those curious petroglyphs found in odd quarters of the globe, and known as "cup-sculptures," both with and without a radial groove. Many of these were described by the late Mr. George Tate, occurring on Northumbrian (England) rocks, both circles and ovals, mostly with a radial groove.‡ Mr. Tate regarded them as the work of a Celtic race, and "symbolical most probably of a religious nature." Dr. B. Seemann has figured precisely similar closed concentric circles from the rock surfaces in Veraguas, New Granada, and believes them to have been produced by a very ancient people of that country, and to be "symbols full of meaning" to those who executed them.

I have lately seen a number of single circles on the petroglyphs of the Hawkesbury country around Narabine Lagoon, between Manly and Pittwater, both separately incised and forming portions of compound figures.

---

### A SPEAR WITH INCISED ORNAMENT FROM ANGELDOOL, NEW SOUTH WALES.

BY R. ETHERIDGE, JUNR., Curator.

---

A remarkably ornamented spear has been received from Angeldool, on the Narran River, by Dr. James C. Cox, who has been kind enough to present it to the collection. It is made from a sapling of light coloured hardwood, eleven feet nine inches long and two and a-half inches in its greatest circumference, tapering at both ends to a point. Unlike a very large number

---

\* *Loc. cit.*, t. 13.

† Mallery; 10th Rep., Bureau Ethnol., U.S., 1893, pp. 86, 120, 153, 160.

‡ Tate; *Anthrop. Review*, iii., p. 293.



Etheridge, Robert. 1897. "On circular and spiral incised ornament on Australian Aboriginal implements and weapons." *Records of the Australian Museum* 3, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.0067-1975.3.1897.1113>.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/31166>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.0067-1975.3.1897.1113>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/16205>

**Holding Institution**

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

**Sponsored by**

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: NOT\_IN\_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.