

MODIFICATIONS OF THE *BILLETTA* OR *GNALEALING* WOMERAH.

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(Plate XI.)

The comparative study of the weapons and implements of our Aborigines reveals to the student, more and more, how intimately connected are the questions of form and local distribution; and by none is this better exemplified than the Womerahs.

We have seen how the "Lath-shaped" Womerah, for the want of a more correct name, is distributed (and perhaps confined?) in the Cape York Peninsula*; and the "Sword-like" Womerah in the Port Darwin District.† I am now able to extend the range of this weapon, thanks to information supplied by Mr. Harry Stockdale, to the Port Essington District, where it is called by the Aborigines *Orrok-orrok*.

I now purpose bringing under your notice some notes on the *Billetta* Womerah, as it is termed by the Port Essington natives, or *Gnalealing* by the Kimberley blacks, derived from examples in the Macleay Museum, to which I was obligingly given access by the Curator, Mr. G. Masters, thus showing the use of this womerah to have existed from Port Darwin to Derby and King's Sound.

In addition to general shape, the *Billetta* is chiefly distinguished by the emarginated handle at the proximal end for the reception

* Proc. Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales, 1892, vi. (2), Pt. 4, p. 699.

† Proc. Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales, 1892, vii. (2), Pt. 1, p. 170.

of the hand of the spearsman. It is a narrow, rigid, lath-like womerah, seldom exceeding three-quarters of an inch in thickness, either plain, simply coloured, or ornamented with a coloured design, and made of hard or soft wood, more usually the former. The proximal end, as before stated, is cut out for the reception of the hand, but the grasp, like that of so many other Aboriginal weapons, is much too small with comfort, for the fingers of an ordinary white. The spear when shipped lay along the flat face of the womerah, as in the *Orrok-orrok*, and not along the edge as in the "lath-shaped" weapon.

From Port Darwin there are two specimens. One is $3' 3'' \times 2'' \times \frac{1}{2}''$, made of soft wood, and is wholly stained with red ochre, although otherwise unornamented. The grasp is lashed round with native twine, and affords room for two fingers. The peg at the distal end is dog-tooth shaped, of a light coloured hard wood, and is lashed on with string and secured by gum-cement.

The second example from Port Darwin (Pl. XI. fig. 1) is $3' 3\frac{1}{2}'' \times 2'' \times \frac{1}{2}''$, and is precisely similar to the last, but highly ornate on one face of the blade only, which is again stained red. The design is a serpentine band in yellow, margined by white pipeclay dots. The string lashing at the grasp is also covered with white pipeclay, but a second lashing at the distal end is yellow. The gum-cement holding the peg in place is covered with pipeclay also. This specimen was collected by Mr. Spalding, now Taxidermist to the Queensland Museum.

The third *Billetta*, from Derby, is rough, and much shorter than the others, measuring $2' 7'' \times 2'' \times \frac{3}{4}''$. It also is of soft wood, quite unornamented or even stained, and the grasp is bound with sinews and cord and secured with gum-cement in the usual way. The peg resembles that of the preceding womerachs. It was collected by Mr. W. W. Froggatt.

The fourth and last example is from King's Sound, and quite similar to the last, except that it is a little shorter, but at the same time a trifle wider.

The *Billetta* has been figured certainly four times, but without any details, and once with an entirely erroneous locality. The

first undoubted illustration is that by the late Governor Eyre, who in his "Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, &c.,"* figures a *Billetta* simply with the remark, "Throwing-stick of north coast, 3 feet 1 inch." It is, however, differently ornamented to either of those in the Macleay Museum, having two zones at the proximal end, one bearing a cross and the other consisting of two double curved lines, placed back to back, diverging from one another, rather like the letter *x*. At the distal end, just in front of the peg, is a longer zone, longitudinally lined. But previous to this the late Admiral P. P. King figured† a womerah from Hanover Bay, which is apparently the present one, although the illustration *might* pass for the *Orrok-orrok*. No description is given. We next come to the late R. B. Smyth's figure.‡ This represents a plain and unornamented weapon similar to Pl. XI. fig. 2, but having a much wider double emargination for the grip. Smyth merely says "throwing-stick in common use amongst the natives of the north-west coast."

The illustration§ given by Dr. E. H. Knight is a very rough one, and ascribes the *Billetta* to South Australia, as also the *Orrok-orrok*, an assumption which is quite erroneous. This figure in no way affords any indication of colouring or ornamental design. Lastly, the *Billetta* is given by the late Edward Hardman as *Gnalealing* amongst his illustrations of Kimberley weapons,|| and states that it closely resembles the *Gurreik* of the Yarra Tribe in Victoria, but on appealing to Smyth's work as the best authority on such a question as this, one is surprised to find that there is no more resemblance between the Yarra weapon,¶ spelt *Gur-reek*, by Smyth, and that from Kimberley, than one would expect in a purely generic sense; specifically speaking, they bear no relation at all to one another.

* Svo. London, 1845, ii. pl. 6, f. 7.

† Survey of the Intertropical Coasts of Australia, &c., 1827, ii. 1st pl., f. 4.

‡ Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 338, f. 147.

§ Study of the Savage Weapons at the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876. *Smithsonian Report*, 1879, p. 276, f. 117.

|| Proc. R. Irish Acad., 1888, i. (3), Pt. 1, p. 66, t. 2, f. 15, 15'.

¶ Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i., p. 309, f. 88-93.

The distribution of these north coast Womerahs, therefore, so far as we now know them, is as follows:—

1. Lath-shaped,* mounted with *Melo*.

Cape York; Agate Creek, Gilbert River; Cape Grenville; Herbert River; Batavia River, Gulf of Carpentaria.

2. *Orrok-orrok*, or Sword Womerah.

Port Essington; Port Darwin.

3. *Billetta* or *Gnalealing*.

Port Darwin; Derby; King's Sound.

I am much indebted to Mr. C. Hedley for the accompanying drawings of the *Billetta*.

EXPLANATION OF THE FIGURES.

Fig. 1.—*Billetta* from Port Darwin showing ornamented side. The ground-work is red; the serpentine band yellow, margined with white dots. On the handle the right lines are yellow, and the dots white as before. The lashing round the double emargination white; that at the distal end in front of the peg yellow. The gum cement is also white.

Fig. 2.—*Billetta* from King's Sound, quite unornamented or stained.

The figures are greatly reduced.

* The native name of this is much needed.



Etheridge, Robert and Melo-Costa, Wanessa de. 1893. "Modifications of the billetta or gnalealing womerah." *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* 7, 399–402. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.part.26067>.

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