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QUEENSLAND HARPOONS AND THEIR DISTRIBUTION.

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Harpoons were in use amongst the native tribes of Queensland for the capture of dugong and turtle, before the white man arrived. Cook (1773), King (1827), Macgillivray (1852) and most other early voyagers made special reference to them. Later, competent investigators like Roth (1904), and Thomson (1934) described the technology of harpoons, and the latter recorded the magic and ritual connected with their use.

In comparing these reports it becomes apparent that there were differences in the harpoons employed in different localities, and that these differences were great enough to warrant study. In the present paper these variances are noted, and the distribution of each indicated.

Harpoons, were, and are, in use in many parts of the world, but are specifically an implement of the Pacific Basin and the North American continent. Their original source and distribution centre, as far as the Pacific is concerned, appears to have been Japan, where harpoon heads are common in archaeological assemblages dating from the Middle Jōmon Period of the Neolithic (Kidder, 1959). At this time dugout canoes made their appearance in Japan, and salmon became a main source of subsistence. No doubt the harpoons were used in taking the latter.

The nearest locality to Australia where harpoons were employed is the islands of Torres Strait, where they were made at, and distributed from, the island of Muralug (Haddon, 1912). The Torres Strait Islanders were in constant contact with the natives of Cape York Peninsula (Moseley, 1879), and it is possible that the Queensland harpoon was greatly influenced, if not introduced, by them.

Harpoons consist of a pointed head loosely inserted in a terminal hole scooped into the thick distal end of a tapering shaft about 12 or 15 feet in length. At the present day this head is lashed on to a long rope, or running line, the other end of which is made fast to the canoe. When near enough to the quarry the hunter jumps into the water towards it, and adds his weight to the thrust, while transfixing his victim. Upon being struck the animal dives, the harpoon head penetrates its flesh and becomes dislodged from its socket in the shaft, which is still held by the native, who then regains the canoe after his dip. The head being lashed to the canoe holds the animal until safely secured.

In the old days, however, according to early navigators' records, the end of the line was lashed on to the shaft, or a small wooden shield, and not to the canoe. This enabled the shaft, after the head left it, to act as a float, thus indicating the underwater position of the dugong or turtle. The canoe was then paddled after the float, and upon the animal coming to the surface to breathe it would be despatched with an ordinary spear. The new method was apparently adopted with the change-over from the wooden barbed head to the European wire head devoid of barbs, which is now in use. The change in method became necessary because the unbarbed head would not allow for any great pull, and the hunter being in the water, was often able to tie an extra line onto the quarry, or even lay hold of it. It is interesting to note that the new method was the one in general use in the Torres Straits (Haddon, 1912), while the old was the one used by the Eskimo and other northern peoples.

In Australia, harpoons were not employed by the tribes on the southern and most of the eastern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria (McCarthy, 1957). McConnell (1953), who worked in this area, states that multi-pronged spears were used. The absence of harpoons in this locality is strange, especially as they do occur on the Western coast of the Gulf (Tindale, 1925), and on the Batavia and Pennefather Rivers on the northern part of the eastern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Roth, 1904). Here the head consisted of a hardwood shaft, about 12 inches long, to which a wallaby or kangaroo-bone barb was lashed in such a manner, that it would also form the piercing point. This method of barbing is well known, and was used in many of the single barbed spears. Roth (1904) claimed that the bone barb occurred only in this locality. In later years, however, Thomson (1934) found it also at Princess Charlotte Bay.

Travelling north from the Batavia River, Cape York is reached. Macgillivray (1852), who supplies the information for the locality, states that "about Cape York and Endeavour Strait" the harpoon used "consists of a slender peg of bone, 4 inches long, barbed all round, and loosely slipped into the heavy, rounded, and flattened head of a pole, 15 or 16 feet in length". This type of head is similar to the wooden one described by Haddon from the Torres Straits. Haddon further stated that the head brought back by Macgillivray, now in the British Museum, is of a pale brown, close grained wood, and not of bone, thus conforming with the wooden heads collected by him on the Islands.

Rounding the Cape and proceeding southwards, localities from which harpoon heads were collected are: Lloyd and Princess Charlotte Bays (Thomson, 1934), Barrow Point and Flinders Island (Hale and Tindale, 1933), Cape Bedford (Roth, 1904), Endeavour River (Cook, 1773), and Bloomfield River (Roth, 1904). In all these localities harpoon heads are of the same type as those obtained from the Pennefather and Batavia Rivers, with the exception that the single barb is made of wood instead of bone. At the Flinders Islands, and the Endeavour and Bloomfield Rivers, Roth also collected three-pronged heads, each fitted with a single wooden barb. These were fashioned after the style of the multi-pronged fishing spears. Information is lacking from points further south, until Whitsunday Passage is reached. Roth also stated that from here south to the Keppel Islands, as well as the single barbed type, natives used heads with two barbs, their position on the head being "bilateral and opposite". South from the Keppels the New South Wales border is reached, and the multi-pronged spear comes into its own.

Upon placing the different types of harpoon heads encountered in Queensland on a map, a certain distribution pattern is visible. Beginning from the extreme north, and working south the following are noted:

- (1) The Torres Strait type. A. At Cape York and Vicinity.
- (2) The Single Barb. B. As far south as Bloomfield River on the East, and the Pennefather River on the West Coasts of Cape York Peninsula.
- (3) The Multi-pronged Head. C. At the Flinders Group and at the Endeavour and Bloomfield Rivers.
- (4) The Double Barb. D. Between Whitsunday Passage and Keppel Islands.

When this pattern is compared to the distribution of spears (Davidson, 1934) or fish hooks (Massola, 1956), the sequence is clear.

The several types of harpoons, spears, and fish hooks, arrived in Queensland from New Guinea, via the Torres Strait Islands. The first were probably the solid multi-barbed heads, which, however, have not been historically recorded for Queensland, but are still in use in Arnhem Land. The oldest of the existing types are presumably the ones now found furthest south. In the case of the harpoon, these are the double-barbed and the multi-pronged heads. These conform with the multi-barbed spear, with the barbs cut out of the solid, and the simple shell fish hook.

It is noteworthy that neither the double-barbed, nor the multi-pronged heads had the barbs cut out of the solid like the spear. This peculiarity shows a blending of two traditions, the ancient, original harpoon heads having, no doubt, solid barbs, but later giving place to the newer, lashed-on technique. The multi-pronged head is a variant of the double-barbed head and was, no doubt, copied from the fishing spear.

Following the double-barbed and the multi-pronged heads in time sequence came the harpoon head with the single bone or wooden barb lashed on. This conforms with the similarly barbed spear, and the composite fish hook with the bone or wooden barb lashed on to the wooden shank. It is interesting to see the single barbed heads occurring in the same localities as double-barbed and multi-pronged heads, as this shows infiltration of the newer ideas and the lingering of the old.

Finally, the Torres Strait type of harpoon head arrived. It had just made its appearance in the extreme north, and so had the bow and arrow, and the "bent pin" fish hook, when the introduction of wire and iron by Europeans and others, and the destruction of native culture, prevented their further spreading.

In later years Queensland natives used harpoon heads made of iron with the barbs cut out of the solid, or single or multi-pronged unbarbed wire heads. The distribution of these types does not follow a pattern, but they occur at random, no doubt dictated by availability of materials and by European introduction of natives from distant localities. The study of this acculturation does not come within the scope of this paper.

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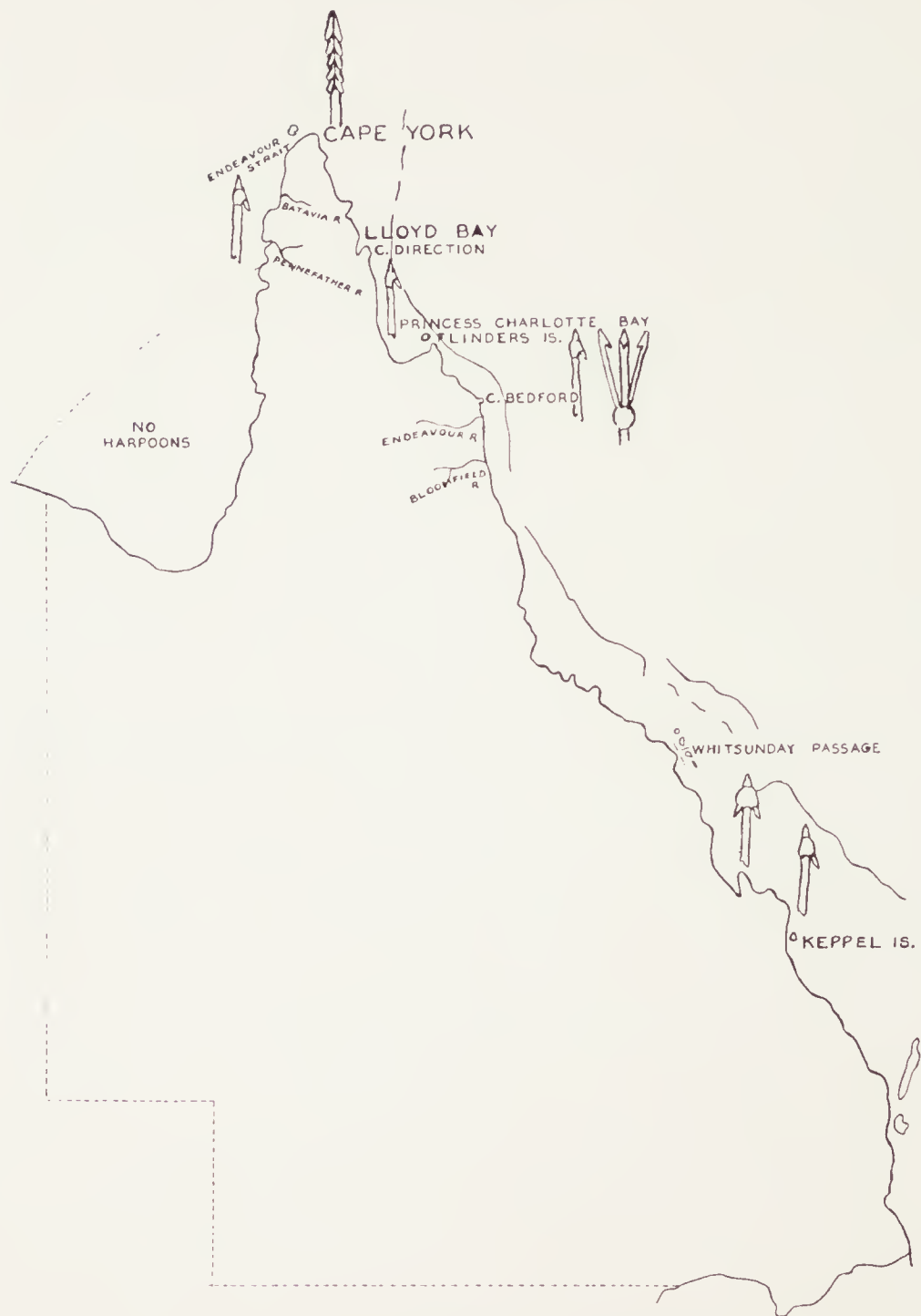


Fig. 1. Recorded Distribution of Queensland Harpoons.



A. The Torres Strait type.



B. The Single Barb type.



C. The Multi-pronged head.



D. The Double Barb type.