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Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia.

Adelaide, Australia :Royal Society of South Australia,1880-

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v.62 (1938): <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/129831>

Page(s): Page 122, Page 123, Page 124, Page 125, Page 126

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ABORIGINAL MESSAGE STICKS FROM THE NULLABOR PLAINS

By C. P. MOUNTFORD, Acting Ethnologist, South Australian Museum

[Read 9 June 1938]

This brief paper places on record the description of six message sticks, five from the Nullabor Plains and one from Eucla. The significance of three out of the six sticks, *i.e.*, figures 1, 6, and 7, is also given.

I am indebted to Mr. Allen Musgrave for having, at my request, collected from the natives of the Nullabor Plains the sticks shown in figures 1, 5, 6 and 7, and having obtained the meanings of the above-mentioned three; also to Mrs. J. White, and Miss A. Lock for the loan of those shown in figures 10 and 3 respectively.

DESCRIPTION

Figure 1 pictures a message stick, which was a communication from the Karonie to the Ooldea tribe. The following is the meaning obtained from the possessor of the stick.

Column 1 (fig. 2) The small dots are the "spinifex" natives⁽¹⁾ who are travelling towards, and expected at Cook before many days. The concentric circles, H, J, K, and L indicate the water-holes on which the travelling party will depend. H is called Mulgeru; J, Nilida; K, Mulunga; and L, Wadiga.

Column 2 A group of natives who are camping at Tarcoola.

Column 3 The aborigines at Ooldea.

Column 4 A second party of "spinifex" natives, who are expected to arrive at Cook in advance of those indicated in Column 1. M, N, O, P probably refer to water-holes, although this was not specified.

It is interesting to notice that only those natives who are obliged to travel over the practically waterless desert of the Nullabor are associated on the message sticks with the water-hole symbols.

Column 5 A small party of both sexes who have already arrived and are temporarily camping at Cook.

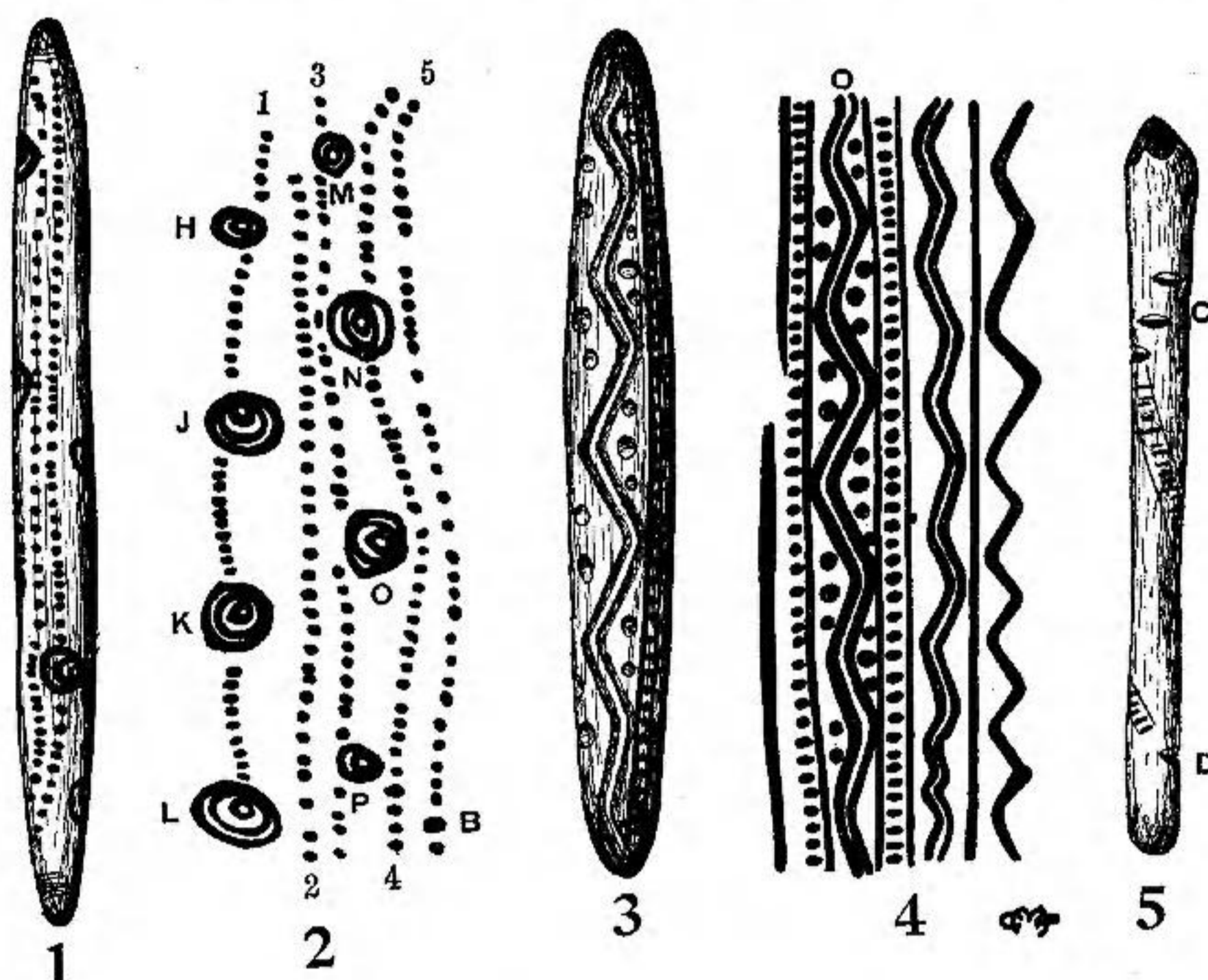
The stick was 21 cm. in length and 2 cm. major diameter. It was circular in section, tapering down to a blunt point at either end. When received it was wrapped in a fragment of old clothing, and bound with European string. The pattern had been incised with an engraving tool about 2 mm. in width.⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ Aborigines who live in the inhospitable and unexplored northern part of the Nullabor Plains.

⁽²⁾ The natives, unaffected by European contact, used the front incisor tooth of the opossum, still in place in the skull of the animal, as an engraving tool. This is used in a similar manner to that employed by a European craftsman, except that the aborigine, not having a handle on his tool, that can be rested against the palm, has to exert the necessary engraving force with his finger tips. The writer has observed an aborigine of the Ngada tribe of the Warburton Ranges of Western Australia, whilst he was engraving a design on the back of a spear-thrower, and the regularity of the design and the skill displayed in the handling of the small awkwardly-shaped engraving tool was remarkable.

Figure 3 was collected by Miss Lock while in charge of the Ooldea Mission Station. The engraved design, the meaning of which was, unfortunately, not obtained, is shown in figure 4. The stick was 20 cm. in length, somewhat cigar-shaped, with a major diameter of 21 mm. Mr. N. B. Tindale showed me an aboriginal drawing from the above locality which was almost identical with O, figure 4. The meandering line in this case represented the ancestral snake, *Kanba*, and the dots, placed symmetrically on either side, the eggs of that reptile.

The message stick depicted in figure 5, had been engraved with a spiral pattern of transverse marks which started at the three cuts at C, and terminated at the two cuts at O, X. When received, the design was completely obscured by



a wrapping of woollen thread of European manufacture. This example was 11 cm. in length, 6 mm. maximum diameter and had been cut and smoothed from a twig of circular section by means of a steel tool.

Figure 6 was obtained from a locality on the Trans-Australian Railway Line approximately on the border of South and Western Australia. Three tribal groups are indicated: one from Laverton, a town some 200 miles north, one belonging to the Muramul tribe, and the other, the people whose territory is adjacent to the Karonie Mission Station, which is situated adjacent to the railway line and some 60 miles east of Kalgoorlie.

The meaning, as obtained from the sender of the stick, is as follows:—

B, figure 7, is the sender of the stick, and A the Karonie railway dam. (The use of the U-shaped symbol for a dam is noteworthy.) The line of dots, 1 E, represents the aborigines who reside permanently at the Mission Station; line D, the end of which terminates at one limb of A, those who "sit down along railway line," *i.e.*, camp beside the railway line. The group of natives from Laverton is indicated by the line C, while G refers to the Muramul tribe, which sometimes visit the Karonie Mission Station. M symbolizes the above Mission.

The stick (fig. 6) is circular in section, 25 cm. long, and 13 mm. major diameter, tapering to a blunt point at both ends. The lines of dots, which are arranged spirally, had been burnt in, probably by a heated piece of metal, although the glowing end of a small fire stick is used for a similar purpose by the tribalized natives who live to the north in the Mann and Petermann Ranges. When collected, the stick was carefully wrapped in a discarded piece of clothing and bound with string.

In figure 8 the cuts above F (fig. 9) are the aborigines at Ooldea. The long incision F is the Ooldea soak,⁽³⁾ while those below this symbol indicate unspecified individuals, as do the marks above symbol G. The latter refers to the Mission Station at Ooldea, and the symbols below that point are a message to the recipient of the stick that the missionary at Ooldea only gives one meal a day, and that only of wheat porridge.

This stick is of circular section, and slightly curved, and is 25 cm. long and 17 mm. diameter. The cuts forming the pattern had been made with a steel knife.

Figure 10 originally belonged to an aborigine whose tribal country was adjacent to the now deserted Eucla telegraph station. The stick resembles those collected on the Trans-Australian railway line, and for that reason is included.

This specimen is somewhat longer than the other examples described and has a mass of spinifex gum attached to one end of the stick. The length is 25 cm., and the diameter 16 mm. The design consists of more or less parallel engraved lines, and rows of dots, which extend the whole length of the stick. A steel tool had been used to produce these marks.

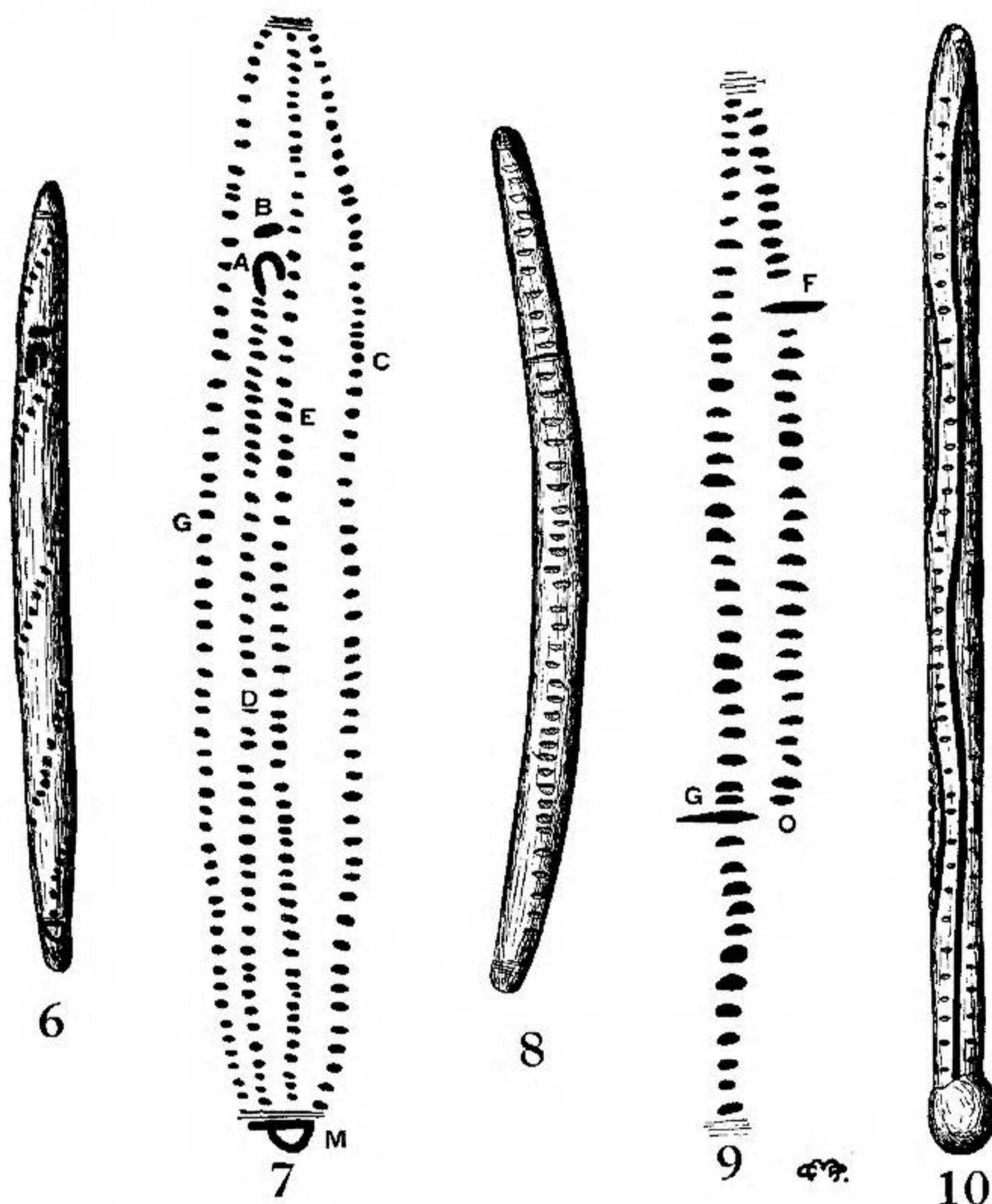
DISCUSSION

Message sticks are known over the greater part of Australia. Roth (1) figures fourteen message sticks obtained from the aborigines of north-western Queensland. The associated meanings were given for the majority of those figured.

Love (2) writes of the message sticks of the Worora tribe of North-West Australia. He mentions that the sticks are crudely made and appear to act more as passports than actual conveyors of messages.

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The writer has been shown carved message sticks by the aborigines of Melville Island which, according to the aborigine possessing them, figure the locality from which the stick originated, a request for provisions, and the mark of the sender himself.



Spencer and Gillen (3), however, claim that message sticks of the type described in this paper, and also by Roth and Love, are not used by the aborigines of Central Australia. The extent of the area in which message sticks are not used is unknown, but it seems likely that Spencer and Gillen's observation would only apply to the Central parts of the continent.

Although one often hears of cases where natives have received and deciphered message sticks, conveyed to them by Europeans who themselves were unaware

of the significance of the symbols, the writer has been unable to locate any one such case, even after considerable correspondence. Roth describes in detail the methods in use in his area for the transmission of the message, and both Love and Roth agree that the engraved design is no more than some kind of mnemonic aid, or form of passport.

It is likely, however that certain standard designs are used for specific purposes, such as notifications or invitations for forthcoming ceremonies. The significance of such sticks, even when presented without a verbal message, would be apparent to the recipient.

SUMMARY

This paper places on record the details of six aboriginal message sticks, five from the Nullabor Plain, adjacent to the Trans-Australian railway line, and one from Eucla.

REFERENCES

- (1) ROTH, WALTER E. 1906 North Queensland Ethnology. Bulletin No. 8, 9, pls. i-iv
 - (2) LOVE, J. R. B. 1936 "Stone Age Men of Today," 189
 - (3) SPENCER AND GILLEN 1899 "Native Tribes of Central Australia," 142
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