

VENDA DUG-OUT CANOE

by

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With One Plate.

The first information about a dug-out canoe in use in Vendaleland was supplied to this museum by Professor Percival R. Kirby, of the Witwatersrand University, early in 1935.

In October of the same year the National Museum organised an expedition to Vendaleland to look for the canoe. Enquiries were made at Chibasa from the Native Commissioner about the canoe, but he could supply no information at all. One of his native constables, however, knew of the existence of a boat made from the bark of a tree. The native boy was then commissioned to find this boat. On the way he told members of the expedition that the canoe, about which enquiries have been made, was washed away by flood waters the previous year.

When the party arrived at the spot pointed out by the native boy, about halfway between Chibasa and Chacoma on the Levubu River, they discovered, to their surprise, the boat made from bark as well as the dug-out canoe.

Both these boats were easily acquired for the museum at a fairly low cost.

As a result of a prevailing drought at that time, the river was very low, and to prevent the bark-canoe from cracking to pieces while not in use, the owner of the boat was very wise to submerge it entirely under water. The dug-out was still afloat.

The dug-out canoe was made from the stem of a large Marula tree and the owner told us that his only tool was a small hand-axe. It took him nine months to dig out the large stem. Unfortunately he opened both ends so that these had to be closed up with separate pieces of wood. This he did not manage very successfully, with the result that his boat leaked very much. To stop the leakages he used mud from the river banks.

The bark-canoe was made from one piece of bark cut from a Marula tree. Both the ends are bent upwards and fastened to the sides by means of wooden pegs, wire and nails. Three sticks are arranged transversely to prevent the sides from collapsing. This boat leaked even more than the first named dug-out so that a large reserve of mud had to be carried when crossing the river. No paddles or oars were used. The boats were pushed across the river with the aid of long barge-poles. At the same time these barge-poles served to frighten away the crocodiles which were still very numerous in the Levubu River.

To our knowledge the dug-out canoe is the first recorded specimen south of the Limpopo and the bark canoe is the first to be described from Southern Africa.

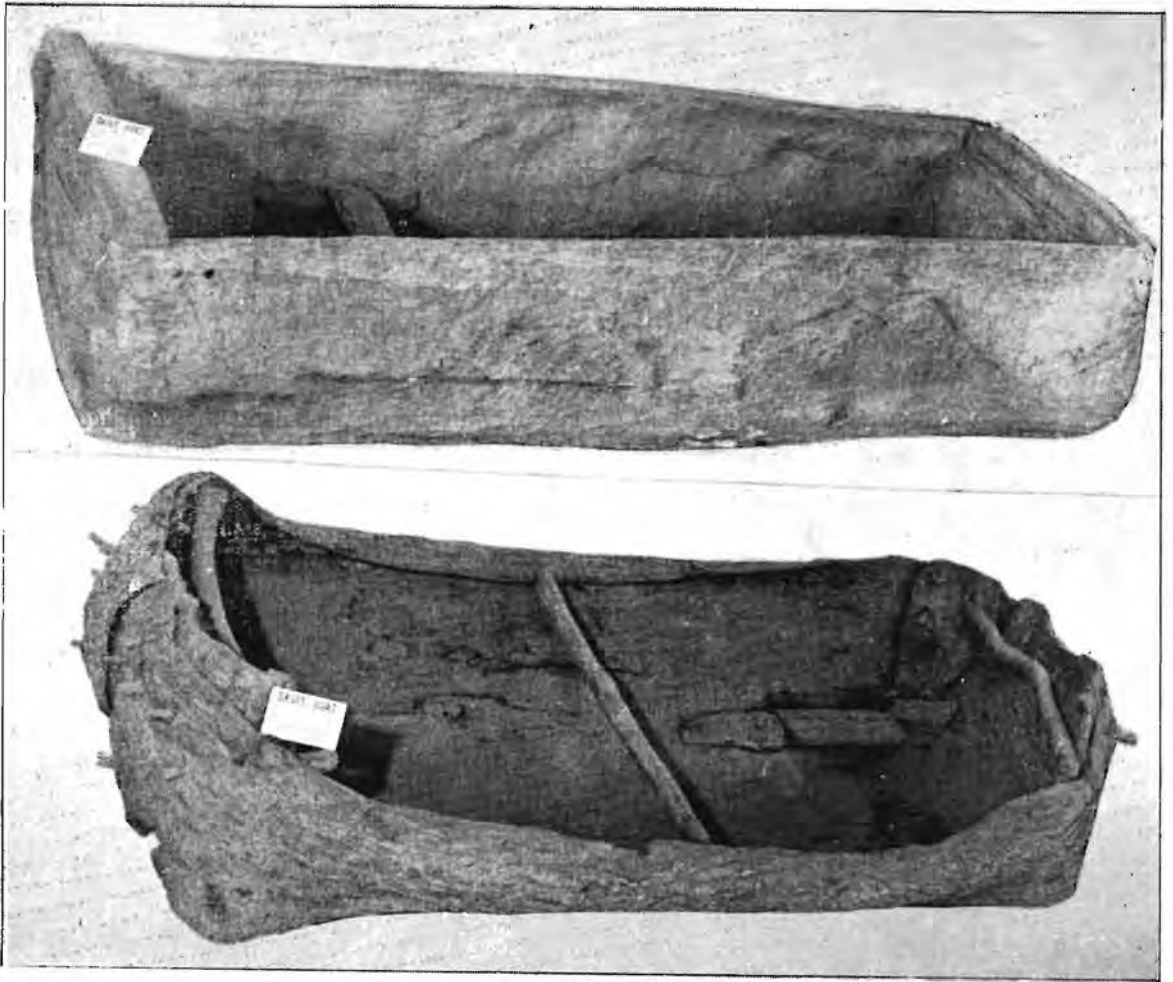


PLATE I. Above, dug-out canoe. Below, bark canoe.

MEASUREMENTS:

Dug-Out (Nas. Mus. No. O.2862)

Length: 6 ft. 10 ins.

Width: 2 ft. 5 ins. to 2 ft. 9 ins.

Height: 21½ ins.

Thickness of wood or bark: 1½ to 2½ ins.

Length of barge-pole: 13½ ft.

Bark Canoe (Nas. Mus. No. O.2864)

6 ft. 5 ins.

3 ft. to 3 ft. 6 ins.

10½ ins. to 15 ins.

¾ to ½ ins.

12 ft.

Judging from the above measurements it would appear that the bark used for making the bark canoe was probably derived from the same tree trunk from which the dug-out was made.

DISCUSSION

Paintings of fish and fishing scenes in rockshelters are known to occur in the Ladybrand and Rouxville districts of the Orange Free State (H. Breuil ¹) and W. W. Battiss ²), but Battiss' record (1944) of a fishing scene near Himeville, Natal, where men in boats are harpooning fish in a large expanse of water, is probably the first discovery of boats depicted in rock paintings.

In 1949 Goodwin ³) describes the second fishing scene in boats from East Griqualand. After comparing the two copies from the two different sites Goodwin states: "Unhappily I cannot suggest what type of boat is depicted. It seems to be neither a true dug-out nor a balsa of reed bundles, but it seems to have had sufficient stability to permit standing and balancing when spearing fish"

To my mind the boats shown by Battiss are very clearly dug-outs—the fishermen are standing actually knee-deep in them. The projecting lines (or "bowsprits" suggested by Goodwin) probably represent the pointed ends of a true dug-out similar to the type used by natives on the Zambesi and on the Central African Lakes.

In two of the figures shown by Goodwin the boats also appear to be dug out deeply, while the two boats with the lady-like figures on them appear to be rather shallow.

The boats in both paintings represent very small vessels, because all of them are manned by a single person. The dug-out from Vendaland, described above, is big enough to carry at least four persons, and its shape is certainly entirely different from those depicted in the rock paintings shown by Battiss and Goodwin.

Goodwin states that he could discover nowhere in history that Bantu vessels were used down the east coast of Natal and the Transkei. Unfortunately the early history of those regions of the sub-continent is not well known—the early travellers seem to have concentrated mostly on the western and north-western areas of Southern Africa.

To my knowledge the most authentic work on the history of the Zulu people is that of Bryant ⁴). According to Bryant the Zulu people had once been acquainted with a dug-out because they have in their language a word "umkümbi" meaning "dug-out-trough", but strangely enough in modern times this word is applied by them to the European "ship".

Bryant states further ". . . . it seems pretty certain that the raft preceded the canoe in human culture, and secondly, that the Bantu were still in the Raft Age until comparatively recent (that is to say, our medieval) times."

Johnston ⁵) informs us that he and Grenfell were quite accustomed to the canoes in the more sophisticated parts of Bantuland—the Congo. When in 1885 he discovered that "Pigmy-like natives were living in an earlier stage of culture than that which produced the canoe—they did not employ canoes but rafts or catamarans" he was surprised to meet with Bantu actually still in the raft stage. This did, however, not surprise Bryant at all, because "that was precisely the stage in which the Zulus also were; for the only river craft they know of, even today is a thick reed-float (isiHlenga)." (Bryant has never heard of a "log"-float among the Zulus, in spite of the fact that he lived over 50 years among them.)

Kirby ⁶) in his "Diary of Dr. Andrew Smith" tells us that Smith often mentions a great lake in the Kalahari. On page 279 it is stated that the Bamangwato resided at this lake. Sibitwani's people killed many of these people and took their cattle. "They have a wooden thing called coro." Kirby gives the translation for koro as "a canoe." Unfortunately Smith does not give a description of this "wooden thing."

If this “wooden thing” had been a true canoe or dugout, would Smith not have called it a “boat” rather than a “wooden thing?”

Smith, however, learned from various informants that far to the north there is a great lake (Lake Ngami) “on which natives sailed on boats.” Smith never got as far as this lake—it was left to the later Livingstone (Kirby, page 49).

On page 193 of his book “In the Heart of Bantuland” Dugald Campbell ⁷⁾ describes fishing habits of the Bantu on Lake Bangweulu. He states: “I have seen scores of children in canoes on Lake Bangweulu fishing for carp and other fish with small barbless hooks.” Later he also describes the spearing of fish from canoes. “Fishing is carried on in a larger variety of ways than in Europe.”

On page 124 Campbell gives a detailed description of the digging of canoes. It is “an occupation that requires experts. Some canoes are small and intended for the owner only. Others are big and can hold a hundred men.”

Coming back to the painted boats of Himeville and East Griqualand, two very interesting facts are here revealed. The people of Lake Bangweulu have used canoes (dugouts) for fishing purposes and they have also made one-man boats. The question now arises whether such one-man boats were ever used on the rivers of Natal. If not, where did the artist of the fishing scene get the idea from, especially if he had been a Bushman? If he had been a Bantu there is the remote possibility of an early contact which existed between the Bantu of Natal and the people of Lake Bangweulu.

Campbell further tells us that “bark canoes are made sometimes by hunters” and he gives a detailed description of the cutting of the bark as well as of the making of the boat.

Here we see a definite connection between the boats of Vendaland (described above) and those of Campbell’s “Bantuland.” The bark canoe of Vendaland, is therefore not unique.

What was the position with the Hottentots, Bushmen, Corannas and Griquas; have these people used boats or dugouts for fishing or for crossing the big rivers? Again we have to resort to the early travellers and missionaries for information.

Robert Moffat ⁸⁾ who travelled extensively in the western and north-western areas of the sub-continent makes no mention of boats, canoes or rafts in spite of the fact that he had to cross several rivers.

On page 138 of his book “Travels in South Africa” John Campbell ⁹⁾ mentions “three Matchappees (Bantu) who had been drowned in crossing the Great Orange River on a raft. . . .” (These people were on their way to Graaff-Reinet to attend a big sale arranged by Landdrost Stockenstrom). Campbell never came across boats or dug-outs on the Orange River.

Shaw (quoted by Bryant) saw only swimming logs being used by Hottentots (?) on the Orange River in 1820.

In the descriptions of his travels Wikar ¹⁰⁾, on page 114 of his book, states that he crossed the Orange River on a big raft. And he tells us that the Bushman also made rafts, but “. . . in plek om haare vlotte deur te roeyen zwemmen zy die deur, aan elken vlot is gemeenlijk 8 man of 10 man.” On page 115 Wikar informs us that he has seen a Hottentot using a swimming log (eene stuk hout) in crossing the river.

In the Journal of Linschoten Vereniging 1916 (Reizen in Zuid-Afrika, Deel II. Tochten naar het Noorden 1686-1806) none of the following travellers have ever seen or described canoes on the big rivers of South Africa: . . . Starrenburg, Hartogh,

Rhenius, Janszen, Hop, Roos and Marais (1705—1762); Willem van Reenen (1791—1792); Sebastiaan van Reenen (1793); Lichtenstein (1803); H. van de Graaff (1805).

It therefore appears that the Hottentot, Coranna and Bushmen peoples were living in an earlier stage of culture than that which produced the canoe — they did not employ dugouts, but rafts and swimming logs. The Bantu seems to be the only race which knew the art of manufacturing dugouts.

The boats from Vendaland unfortunately are of too recent origin to help in solving the problem whether Bantu made their own dugouts in the most southern part of the African Continent before the arrival of the Europeans. And they can probably throw no new light on the paintings of Himeville and East Griqualand.

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- 10) Wikar, H. J.: "Reisverhaal van den Landreis van Goeverneur Joachim Baron van Plettenberg, 1778-1779 vanaf den Caap tot aan de Plettenbergs- en Groote Visch Rivieren." *Linschoten Vereniging*, 1916.

POSTSCRIPT

After my paper had been completed I received Professor Kirby's article "The Swimming Log of the Hottentots" which appears in "Africana Notes and News, Vol. IX, No. 4."

According to Kirby's very extensive researches it appears that Nama, Koranna, Bushmen, Hottentot and Griqua never made use of boats or dugouts on the Vaal- and Orange Rivers. They knew only the swimming log or the raft. On these two rivers the boat was introduced by the Europeans.

With regard to the boats in the National Museum and to Battiss' prehistoric rock painting, Professor Kirby states: "Professor C. van Riet Lowe, however, thinks that now that actual boats have come to light in South Africa, there is a possibility that the picture may be approximately dated. The locality where the painting was observed is not far from the area to which the Griquas migrated in the early years of the nineteenth century, and it is not impossible that some of those people may have been responsible for the practice which was so graphically depicted by the the primitive artist?"

I think it has been sufficiently proved by both Kirby and myself that the Griqua never used boats on the Vaal and the Orange. Why should these few who migrated

towards Natal be “responsible for the practice which was so graphically depicted by the primitive artist?”

The boats of Vendaland have no connection whatsoever with any of the Griquas of “the early years of the nineteenth century.” The only primitive people definitely known to have made boats is the Bantu. It is therefore much more possible that the Bantu was responsible for the practice depicted by the primitive artist.

Was this “primitive artist” a Bushman, a Griqua or a Bantu? This question opens a new line of research, because some people seem to believe that the Bantu never painted.

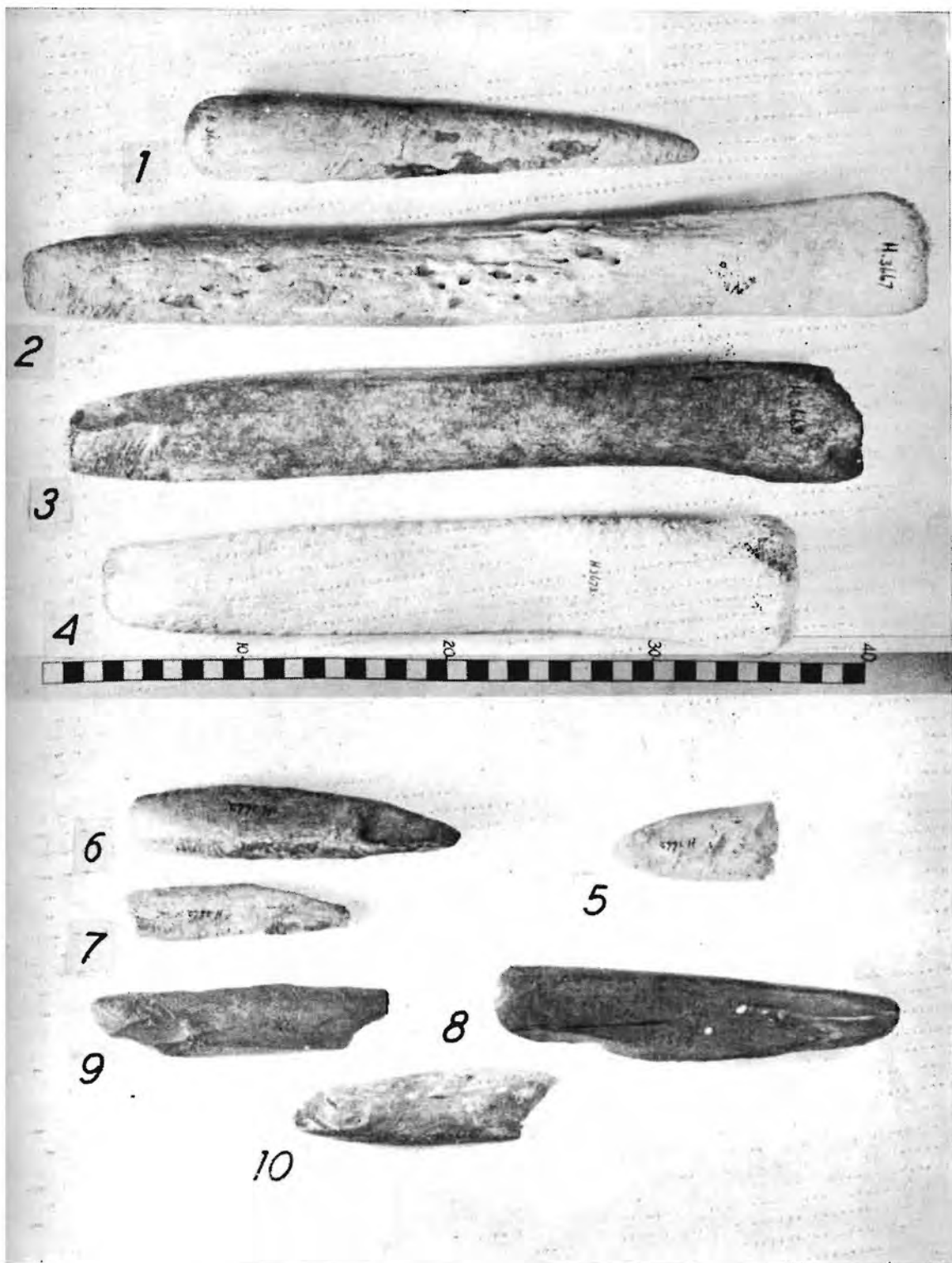


PLATE 1. Polished bone implements. Blocked scale represents 40 cm.