

SOME ARTICLES USED IN BURIAL AND OTHER RITES BY THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES.

(With Four Illustrations.)

By R. H. MATHEWS, L.S.

Oval-shaped objects used in connection with native burials in the valley of the Darling River, New South Wales, were manufactured from burnt gypsum¹, reduced to a powder, and fine sand or ashes, well compounded with water, just as we would mould anything of the kind out of cement or plaster of Paris. The necessary shape could be given to the mass while plastic, and then allowing it to dry in the sun. These objects are in the shape of a large egg, varying in length from about three to nine inches, by a width, say two and a quarter inches for the smaller ones, up to double that width for the larger. (See block A and descriptive letterpress).

They are often approximately circular in a section through the middle part, but in other cases such a section would be ovate. Some of them are flattish on one or both sides, and are not unlike a cake baked in an elongated form. In a few of the flattened productions, one side is slightly concave, but whether this was intended by the maker it is difficult to say. Probably the wet mass assumed this shape while drying in the sun, because the heat would naturally cause the outer margin, which would dry first, to turn upward, similarly to the way a board warps toward the sun, when exposed in a free state. Nearly all the specimens I have seen were evidently manufactured in the way above described, but an occasional one consists of a piece of sand-stone, or shale, of a light colour, found in the bush, which required but little fashioning to bring it to the required shape.

An old aboriginal of the Ngunnhalgu tribe, known as Harry Perry by the white people, told me that these *kopai* objects, which he called *murndu*, were made out of powdered kopai and a little sand or wood ashes, much in the way we mix up flour when making dough for baking into bread. He said that when a native of either sex died and was buried, the relatives came to the grave and placed these kopai balls on top of the mound of earth. For example, if the body were that of an adult man, his widow would place a *murndu* on the ground above his head. The deceased's brothers would each place

1. Called *kopai* by the natives; often erroneously written *copi* and *kopi* by the European residents of that region.

one or more along one side of the grave ; his mother and sisters might also lay a *murndu* or two on the other side ; and so on.

An old man of the Murawarri tribe informed me that in his language the *kopai* ball or tablet is called *yurda*. When a man, woman, or young person beyond the age of childhood, died, leaves were strewn over the earth covering the grave, and on top of the leaves were laid the *yurda*. There might be only one or two *yurda* deposited, or there might be more, depending upon whether the deceased had few or many friends. Mr. E. J. Suttor writes me that he has seen a dozen or more of the *kopai* balls lying on a native's grave. They were put on as soon as the corpse was buried.

A Ngeumba blackfellow told me that in his tribe the name of the *kopai* balls is *dhaura*. The gypsum was collected, burnt and pounded fine by the women, and the men shaped the *dhaura*.

A resident informs me that gypsum is very plentiful on Yantara Station, near Lake Cobham, about 120 miles north-westerly from the Darling River, where tons of it could easily be obtained. Another correspondent, at Kallara Station, on the Darling, states that gypsum is quite plentiful there. In fact, gypsum and pipe-clay are both easily obtainable along the valley of the Darling, as well as in the hinterland, all the way from its junction with the Murray river up to Brewarrina. There is also a kind of slacked or rotted gypsum, which occurs in patches, resembling slacked lime.

Old Perry and others above quoted, said that the object of decorating the grave in the way described, was to induce the *bori* or spirit of the dead person, to remain in its place of sepulture, and thus prevent its roaming through the camp at night to do injury to anyone with whom the deceased might in his or her lifetime have had a feud. When the spirit saw that its owner's death had been properly mourned for in accordance with the tribal custom, it felt more friendly towards everybody. The spirit comes up during the night and sits on top of the grave, and commences licking or sucking one or more of the *kopai* balls.

Sir Thomas L. Mitchell is the first author to mention these *kopai* balls. He says, " It was on the summit of a sandhill where I fixed my depot on the Darling (Fort Bourke) that we saw the numerous white balls, and so many graves. The balls are shaped as in the accompanying woodcut, and were made of lime. . . . A native explained one day to Mr. Larmer (a member of Sir Thomas's staff) in a very simple manner, the meaning of the white balls, by taking a small piece of wood, laying it on the ground, and covering it with earth. Then laying his head on one side and closing his

eyes, he showed that a dead body was laid in that position in the earth, where these balls were placed above¹."

In 1901 Mr. G. Officer, of Kallara Station, described some kopai balls or cakes found at a grave on Curronyalpa run on the Darling River, about 15 miles above Tilpa. There were 39 specimens at the grave, some of which were lying on the surface, others were



BLOCK A —KOPAI BALLS

partially revealed, and the remainder were found by digging a little way into the sandy soil underneath.

Owing to the unusually large number of pieces on this grave, I am inclined to believe that the greater portion of them had been carried from other graves in the neighbourhood to this spot and hidden for the purpose of protecting them from the vandalism of the white men, who were in the habit of carrying them away as curios. Mr. Higgins, a long resident of the Darling region, writes me, that two old blackfellows had stated to him that when the natives observed that the white people desecrated their burying places in this way, they themselves buried the kopai balls in the ground to keep them out of sight. Possibly nearly all the specimens recovered by Mr. Officer had originally been concealed with earth, but the violent winds of that district had blown the

1. Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia (London, 1838), Vol. I., 11. 253-254. Seven kopai balls are illustrated in the woodcut referred to.

sandy soil away and left them visible. The grave was on a sandhill about three miles back from the river, and was therefore out of the way of the white men, whose principal traffic lay along the course of the stream.

EXPLANATION OF BLOCK A

This picture exhibits three medium-sized balls, and one small one, all of which are made from gypsum (kopai), as above described. I shall call them *murndu*, their native name in the Ngunnhalgu tribe, which occupied the country from about Wilcannia up to near Louth, being the tract from various parts of which my specimens were obtained.

Fig. 1. The *murndu* numbered 1 in the picture is $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length, by a maximum width of $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The thickest part, at right angles to the width, is $3\frac{7}{8}$ inches. The weight of the article is 2lbs. 9 ozs.

Fig. 2 measures $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in length, by a mean thickness of $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Weight, $4\frac{1}{2}$ ozs.

Fig. 3 has a length of a trifle over $7\frac{7}{8}$ inches, and its greatest breadth is $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches. It is oval in section, with a thickness of $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Weight, 2lbs. 14ozs.

Fig. 4 is $6\frac{9}{16}$ inches long, with a maximum breadth of $3\frac{1}{16}$ inches. It has a practically circular section through the middle. Weight, 2lbs. 8ozs.

Scattered here and there through the composition of the *murndus* are pieces of gypsum as large as gravel, showing that the mineral was not very well pulverised, a fact which does not surprise us when we remember that the natives had to burn the gypsum in a camp fire. For the same reason the powder became mixed with small quantities of wood ashes.

MOURNING CAPS.

Helmet-shaped objects called *kurno*, known to have been worn on the heads of widows as a sign of mourning, were made from gypsum, burnt and pounded fine, and mixed with water. A fibre or rush net was first placed on the woman's head to protect the hair, and the soft mixture applied outside until it resembled a cap, hence called "widow's caps" by the Europeans. (See blocks B and C). The mixture was not all put on at the same time, but by a series of additions extending over a few weeks. The marks of the meshes of the net are distinctly visible in the interior of some of the caps of this kind, which have been preserved by white men. When the mourning cap had been worn the customary time, it was taken off and placed by the widow upon the grave of her late husband. When

the deceased left a plurality of widows, each wore an emblem of mourning, and disposed of it in the same way. If the net was firmly embedded in the dry gypsum, it was left in it, but if the net could be readily detached it was taken out of the cap for future use. In some cases, portions of the women's hair had to be cut to get the cap off. When the net was left in the cap, it rotted away, but its imprint remained. I have seen "widows' caps" weighing from about half a dozen pounds up to twice as much.

A station owner who has resided on the Darling river for more than thirty years informs me that he has occasionally seen black-fellows, as well as black women, wearing mourning caps of this description.

Sir Thomas L. Mitchell reports that on the Darling River he found "casts in lime or gypsum, which had evidently been taken from a head, the hair of which had been confined by a net, as the

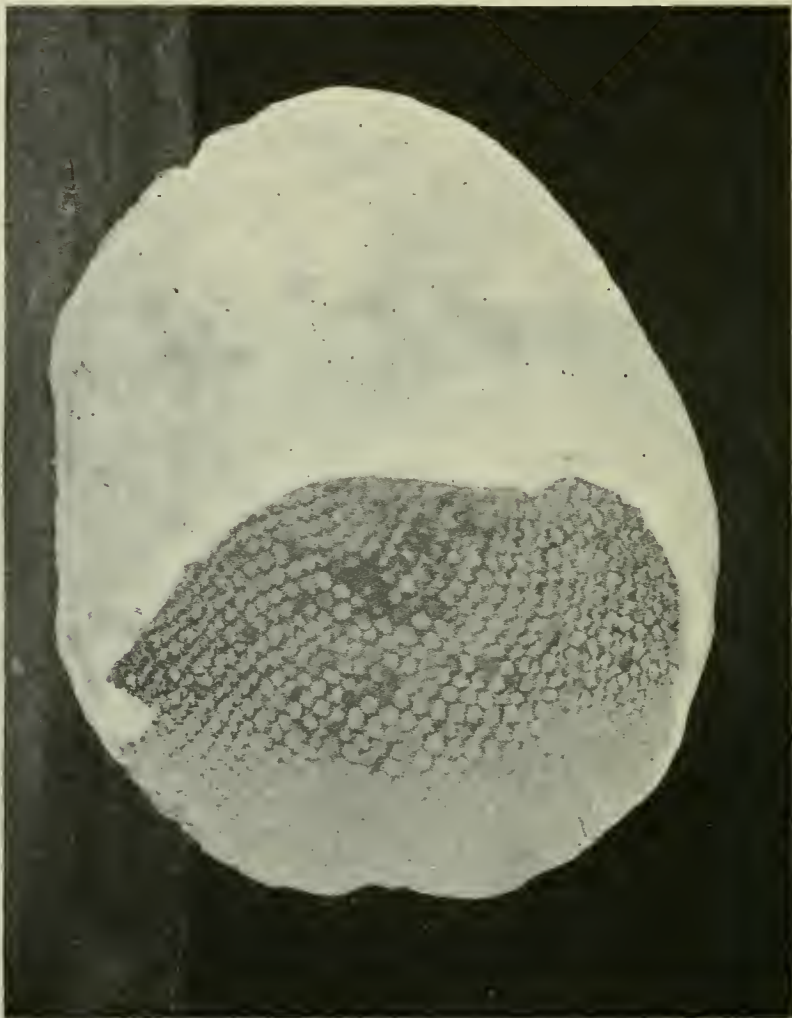


BLOCK B.—MOURNING CAP, OUTSIDE VIEW.

impression of it, and some hairs remained inside." The same author states that, on the Murray, some distance above its confluence with the Darling, he saw some native graves with mounds of earth raised over them, on which were laid the "singular casts of the head in white plaster," which he had before seen at Fort Bourke. In some cases the casts of the head were found lying beside the gypsum balls. He

gave illustrations of two of these casts, showing also the marks of the net inside¹.

In 1838 Mr. Joseph Hawdon observed some skull-shaped caps, made of white plaster, which he thought was obtained by burning shells and grinding them into powder. They were laid on the grave of a native near Lake Bonnie on the Murray River. He says that inside the cap was a network of twine. Mr. Hawdon states that he also noticed a great quantity of crystallised lime or gypsum in the locality; it was in masses some tons weight².



BLOCK C.—MOURNING CAP, INSIDE VIEW.

Mr. E. J. Eyre gives an example of the “Korno, or widow's mourning cap, made of carbonate of lime, moulded to the head.” The specimen illustrated by him weighed $8\frac{1}{2}$ lbs.³

1. *Op. cit.*, Vol. I., pp. 253-254, and Vol. II., p. 113.

2. Diary of an Overland Journey from Port Phillip to Adelaide in 1838. (MSS).

3. *Journs., Expeds., Discov. Cent. Australia* (London, 1845), Vol. II., p. 509, Plate I., fig. 17.

Block B is an exterior view of a *kurno* or widow's cap ; 1 being the front or part fitting over the forehead, whilst 2 represents the back of the head.

Block C shows the interior of the cap, with the marks or impression of the net and the size of its meshes plainly discernible. This cap weighs 7lbs. 1oz., and has been formed of *kopai* or gypsum in the way already described. The specimen was found on a native grave on the Lower Budda run, Darling river. For the two photographs, taken at my request, I am indebted to Mr. F. W. Beattie.

CEREMONIAL STONES.

The following is a short description of some remarkable stones which were used in the secret ceremonies and incantations of the aborigines in the northern portion of New South Wales. This region may be approximately defined as lying north of latitude 34 degrees, and west of longitude 148 deg. The objects referred to have been observed by squatters and other residents of the bush in different places for many years past, but like most other matters connected with the aborigines, very little attention has been paid to them. They are now found lying on the surface of the ground, or only partially exposed, on the flanks of sandridges which have been old camps of the natives or perhaps places of ceremonial gatherings. They had probably been hidden away when not in use, or at the death of the owner, and had since been exposed by the removal of the loose sandy soil during the violent gales which sweep over that district in dry seasons. Specimens have also been found below the surface when digging for other purposes.

These stones vary in length from about half a foot to two feet, and the more common lengths are from 9 to 15 inches. They are widest at the base and taper upwards to the other end, which terminates in a blunt point. Some of them have a large number of marks cut into the surface with a sharp stone, shell, or piece of bone; some have but a few such incisions, whilst others are quite plain. A characteristic of this type of native implement consists in the presence of a depression worked into the base in the following manner. In nearly all the specimens, instead of the proximal or large end of the stone being flat, the central part has been picked out with a sharp-pointed stone, and afterwards ground fairly smooth. These hollows are deepest at the centre, gradually decreasing outwards all round to the margin, forming a concavity resembling a shallow saucer or trough, the shape of the concavity depending upon whether the base is round, or is longer in one direction than in the other.

In the majority of specimens which have been recovered, the longitudinal axis is practically straight¹, and a transverse section through any part of the shaft would have an almost circular outline. There are other specimens, however, in which a section at right angles to the length would have the form of a considerably elongated oval; in some cases the longer diameter of such section is more than three times the length of the shorter one. In the present monograph I have prepared an original plate illustrating four specimens of the oval or flat variety of stone, because they are more uncommon than the round or cylindrical ones. Examples of the latter will be described by me in another paper.

The diagrammatic drawings in the accompanying plate represent the exterior or bounding lines of each stone with strict accuracy. For example, No. 1 is a front view, and No. 2 is the edge of the same stone. The outline only of the stone is given in each case, without any shading, because it is thought that this will give the reader a sufficiently clear idea of what the article is like. I have not thought it necessary to supply drawings of the bases of the stones, showing the concavity, but in Nos. 1, 5, and 7, I have stated the depth of the hollow in each case. I have selected specimens consisting of different kinds of stone; for example, soft sandstone, hard sandstone, clay slate, and quartzite, for the purpose of showing that the natives made use of whatever material was available. I have included a stone, No. 5, which is profusely inscribed, and another, No. 3, which is without the usual hollow in the base, the latter being rather uncommon.

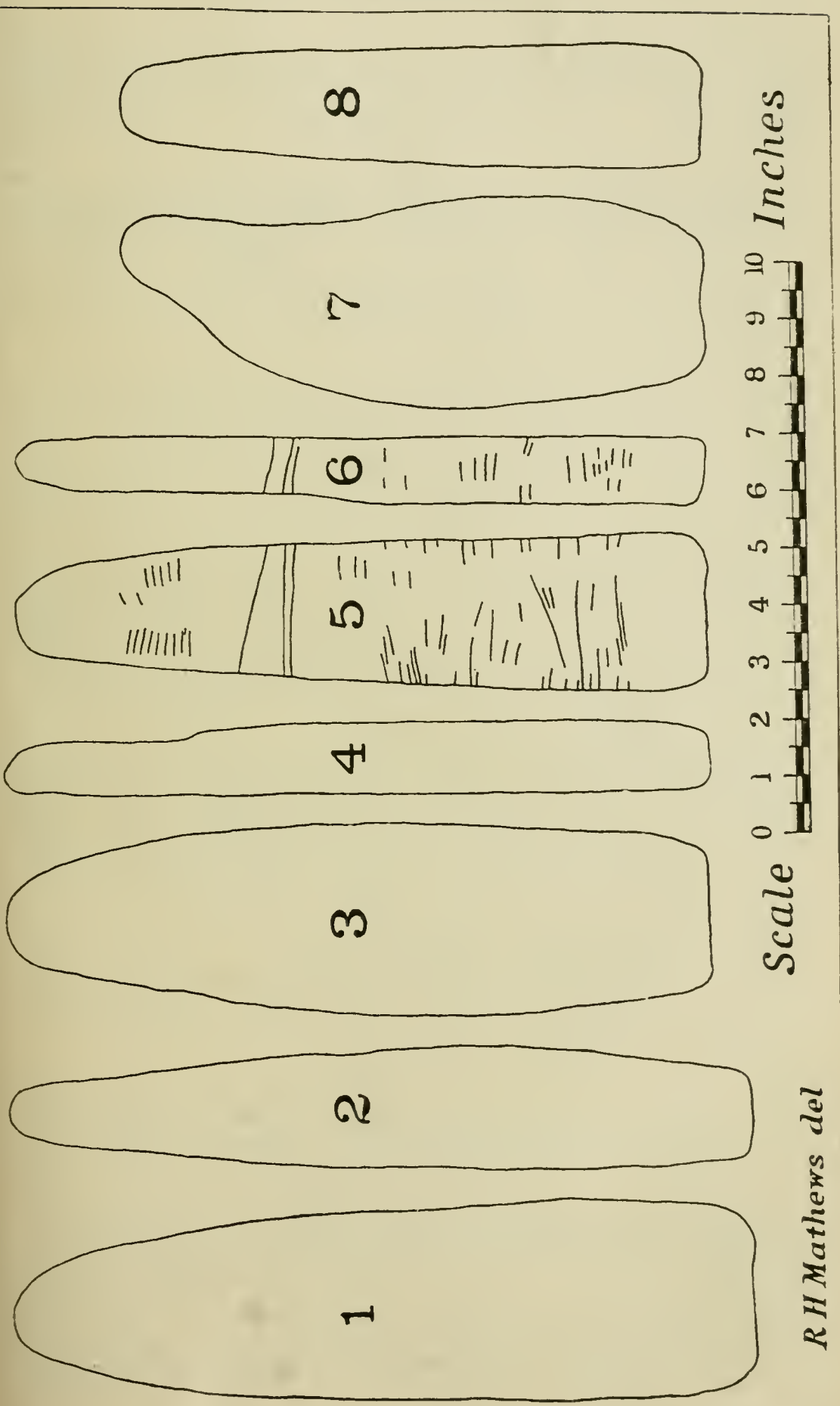
EXPLANATION OF BLOCK D

No. 1 is a fine-grained sandstone, $12\frac{1}{8}$ inches in length, and a maximum width of $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. No. 2 is a profile view of the stone, standing edgeways in front of the spectator, the thickness of which is $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches, or less than two-thirds of the width. The base, or large end, has the characteristic concavity or trough ground into it to a depth of $\frac{1}{10}$ of an inch. Three well defined incisions appear on the opposite or invisible surface of the stone, but on the face shown in No. 1 there are only a few obscure scratches which I have not re-produced. The specimen, which was found on the eastern side of the Warrego river, weighs 3lbs. 8ozs.

No. 3, a coarse-grained, hard sandstone, is $12\frac{1}{8}$ inches long, and $3\frac{3}{10}$ inches wide.

No. 4 shows the profile, the transverse measurement of which is $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch, being only a little more than a third of the breadth. The

1. Some specimens, instead of being straight, are bent over to one side, giving the shaft a very pronounced crescentiform outline.



BLOCK D.—CEREMONIAL STONES.

base of the stone has been ground smooth, but there is no concavity. There are no marks cut into any part of the surface of this specimen, which weighs 3lbs. 0 ozs. It was picked up on Tankarooka run, Darling river.

No. 5 consists of dark-coloured clay slate, a trifle under a foot in length; and the greatest breadth, which is near the base, being $2\frac{4}{5}$ inches.

No. 6 is a side view showing a thickness of $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch or slightly more than half the breadth. The stone was found on Tankarooka run and weighs 2lbs. 6ozs.

The face of the stone shown in the illustration is slightly convex, whilst the reverse is practically flat, but rounded off towards the edges. Both faces contain a large number of marks cut into the surface with some sharp instrument, such as a mussel shell, a sharp flake of stone, or a marsupial's tooth. Some of the best defined of these marks are cut to a depth of about a sixteenth of an inch.

No. 5 exhibits 72 of these incisions, and No. 6 shows 22, in addition to an irregular spiral cut which extends round and round the implement in three folds or laps. The terminal ends of the spiral incision are on the reverse face, and consequently do not appear in the drawings. There are also a large number of incisions on the reverse face, similar to those illustrated.

The base or larger end of the stone is in the form of an elongated oval, and has three of the usual trough-like concavities chipped and ground into it in the direction of its longer diameter. The larger of these depressions is $\frac{3}{40}$ ths of an inch deep, but the other two are very shallow, although easily discernible. The present is the only case in which I have seen three of these concavities in one stone—a single depression being the general rule.

No. 7. This peculiarly-shaped specimen consists of a hard pebble of quartzite—having a length of $10\frac{1}{8}$ inches, by a breadth at the widest part of $3\frac{5}{8}$ inches.

No. 8 is a profile view, the greatest thickness of which is $2\frac{2}{5}$ inches. The face given in No. 7 is almost flat, and so is the reverse face, both being in their natural state as originally found by the native workman. The sides were then chipped in places to bring the implement into its present pointed form. A transverse section through the middle of the stone would give an irregular four-sided figure, with the four corners rounded off—a shape not often observed.

The specimen was discovered on Tankarooka run, and weighs 4lbs. 7ozs. A saucer shaped concavity is chipped into the base to a depth of $\frac{3}{40}$ ths of an inch.