



MESSAGE-STICK FROM SW AUSTRALIA IN THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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Among people broken into many independent groups there is always the problem of maintaining inter-group relationships to be solved. One of the ways in which these relationships are kept is the exchange of messages and news. Given the fact that the people under consideration here, i.e. the Australians, are illiterate, it means that the messages have to be handed over through personal contact. In plain language: a member of one group must go to the other group and communicate his news to one or more of its members. In such a procedure there are always two possible dangers hidden — on the one hand the personal danger to the messenger in a foreign territory and on the other the danger of the message being corrupted through the lapsus of memory, inadequacy of speaking etc. The Australians who have to keep a relatively complicated mechanism of inter-group relationships with the help of relatively simple means prevent the first of these dangers usually: 1) by sending a messenger who is personally known to the members of the other group (which is possible only within the smaller territory); 2) by choosing a messenger whose affinal ties guarantee his personal safety in a foreign territory; 3) by endowing the messenger with a visible symbol or emblem of his status (cf. Maria Frank, *Botenstäbe in Australien*, *ZfE* 1940, 330—1; A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East-Australia*, London 1906, 689; 693—4, 698; e.a.). The messengers bearing such a symbol must

not be hurt, killed or in any way prevented from fulfilling their task.

The third point, i.e. the use of emblems, is connected also with the second above-mentioned danger, the possibility of a message being corrupted. It was prevented either by choosing as an emblem an object which by itself symbolizes the contents of the message in some way or other (e.g. bull-roarers, headbands, men-skirts etc. were used by messengers inviting to an initiation ceremony, see M. Frank, *op. cit.* 331) or by making a so-called message-stick or stick-letter and giving it to the messenger as an emblem. This message-stick, made usually of wood, with engraved symbols, is not only an "aide-memoire" in the sense that it reminds the messenger of the details of his message, but usually the message itself, because the symbols are comprehensible not only to the messenger, but also to the receiver (P. Hamlyn-Harris speaks about an interesting case when the message stick was handed over by an European and still easily deciphered by the receiver: — Message Stick, *Mem. Queensl. Museum*, 1918, 30). The message-sticks are known from the majority of the Australian tribes and were formerly used throughout the whole territory of Australia. Some authors suppose, that they represent a foreign element in the Australian culture; the bare fact that they are so widespread seems to disprove this opinion.

In the collections of the Náprstek-Museum in Prague there is one of these message sticks: No. cat. A 4001. It consists of a cigar-shaped piece of light-brown wood with engraved pictures of five ships, trees, two unidentifiable motives symbolizing probably encampment and a gun. Length of the stick: 156 mm, \varnothing : 19 mm. (see Fig.).

The message-stick was obtained by a Mr. Josef Polák, who was employed as an official at the lawcourt in Perth (West-Australia) about 1880. In the year 1883 he sent it to the Náprstek Museum, stating that it was obtained during one of the expeditions the court in Perth organized to the neighbouring territories. In the accompanying letter he wrote: "When we landed the natives living on the shore immediately sent the messengers to the inland, to warn all the tribesmen of our expedition. No doubt they believed we came to punish them for stealing sheep, about

which the white settlers often complained at the lawcourt in Perth. The messenger with such credentials can freely move in the territories of other tribes. After several months of our staying and officiating I found this letter on one native prisoner some two hundred miles from the shore. The message speaks about our encampment under the trees in the estuary of the Gascogne-river and it says that we are strongly armed."

It must be noted, that the symbols engraved on this message-stick differ from the commonly used ones (see M. Frank, *op. cit.*, Fig. between 344 and 345) especially in their graphic clarity and comprehensibility. This fact could be perhaps explained from the contents. The usual messages contain invitations to ceremonies, demands for help in war, reports of the number of casualties, news about deaths, demands for some goods etc.; all that is concerned with traditional goods or data and can be put in very simplified symbols. The above-mentioned warning had to explain an event which was neither common nor in any way traditional, therefore the usual simple symbols were not sufficient here. Consequently the clear, graphic pictures had to be used.

