

CASSOWARY-HORN NATIVE ORNAMENT FROM ARNHAM LAND

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In Australia the Cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius* Mueller) occurs along the eastern coast of Queensland from Cape York to a little north of Townsville. It is confined to rain forest areas and obtains its food under the shelter of the gloomy forest trees.

Aborigines at Cape Grafton and elsewhere, from time to time, kill the adults. Sometimes when the gaily striped young ones are caught they may tether them for a few days, and feed them, until they become tamed. Such birds live about the camp, competing with native dogs for food scraps, until they are nearly full-grown, when they are invariably killed and eaten at one of the feasts usual during the wet season.

There are no firm records of any cassowary in the Northern Territory.

It has recently been noticed that, in the ethnological collection of the South Australian Museum, there is a head ornament from the coast of Arnhem Land adjacent to Milingimbi, which is on the Crocodile Is., Northern Territory. It is made from the dense bony cranial protuberance underlying the horny casque or helmet of a cassowary.

The specimen (No. A. 21953) was collected and presented by Mr. H. U. Shepherdson in February, 1935, being described in the original entry as "head ornament, bone of fish, pendulous part [worn] over forehead."

All Mr. Shepherdson's collections were from the one area about Milingimbi and relate to members of the Barera and Jandjinung tribes.

The ornament takes the form of a large triangular pendant 8.5 cm. high and 14 cm. wide, held to the forehead by a loop of string composed of four strands of red-ochred, two-ply vegetable fibre, knotted at the back of the head. The cassowary bony casque has been filled with wax where porous and is painted on both sides with a design in red ochre, yellow and white clay. The similar designs on the two faces are characteristically those painted by North-Eastern Arnhem Land people.

The roughly triangular casque with its bowed and expanded front margin has been severed from the bird's skull, and the base trimmed with a straight cut at right angles

to the back margin. It thus assumes a symmetrical shape. A hole 7 mm. in diameter has been drilled at the lower posterior angle, and this becomes the point of suspension for a neat pendant. The hole has been drilled, possibly with a stone drill, from two sides, the resulting aperture being constricted to 5 mm. in the middle of the substance of the casque.

Apart from its intrinsic interest as an ethnological object, the ornament raises the question whether its presence may not indicate the existence in Arnhem Land, either to-day or formerly, of the cassowary.

The ornament itself may be old. The method of drilling of the hole suggests the use of stone. It must be remembered that although the natives of North-Eastern Arnhem Land were for some time prior to about 1920 a very isolated group, and were then using stone implements, they had formerly, and for at least a century and a half prior to about 1900, been in contact with Malays from Macassar, who visited the Arnhem Land coast. These Malays came yearly to Australia in sailing praus, while the north-western monsoonal winds were blowing, and spent their time fishing for trepang and pearl shell, returning to Macassar with laden ships about September or October before the end of the south-eastern monsoon.

It is just possible a cassowary head ornament such as this could have been brought to Arnhem Land from one of the Aru Islands, but it is more likely to be of Australian origin.

It does not seem likely that a cassowary head shield could have been traded from tribe to tribe around the Gulf of Carpentaria from Cape York on the Eastern Coast. There is little community either of material culture or of language between the two areas, and there are at least fifteen tribal groups separating the people of Milingimbi from any place where cassowaries occur in Queensland.

A solitary find of this kind is no more than an indication, although it does hint at the possibility of the presence of the cassowary in Arnhem Land. Naturalists should keep the cassowary in mind when they have opportunities of visiting any of the small rain scrub areas which exist in Arnhem Land.