

PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF THE ABORIGINAL RENIFORM SLATE SCRAPERS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

BY ROBERT EDWARDS

Summary

This paper places on record the results of an examination of 226 slate scrapers. The literature has been reviewed; typical forms of the implement described and figured, and their manufacture discussed. The preliminary survey shows that the implements appear to have had a limited South Australian distribution and to have been used exclusively to scrape skins when preparing them for making rugs and cloaks. Some scrapers are decorated with surface markings and in a few cases they are the only surviving art forms of the aboriginals of the area in which they were found.

PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF THE ABORIGINAL RENIFORM SLATE SCRAPERS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By ROBERT EDWARDS

Plates 27-29 and text fig. 1

SUMMARY

This paper places on record the results of an examination of 226 slate scrapers.

The literature has been reviewed; typical forms of the implement described and figured, and their manufacture discussed.

The preliminary survey shows that the implements appear to have had a limited South Australian distribution and to have been used exclusively to scrape skins when preparing them for making rugs and cloaks. Some scrapers are decorated with surface markings and in a few cases they are the only surviving art forms of the aboriginals of the area in which they were found.

INTRODUCTION

For many years various investigators have been collecting reniform or kidney-shaped stone implements from abandoned aboriginal camp-sites in many localities in South Australia (map, fig. 1). Each specimen found has increased our knowledge of these implements and widened the area of their known distribution. The collection now available is considered sufficient to enable the writer to make a preliminary survey.

Campbell (1924), Basedow (1925), Hossfeld (1926), Howchin (1934), McCarthy (1946) and Cooper (1959) have described and figured some of these implements and their findings will be considered with the additional knowledge gained from the survey of this considerably larger collection of specimens than was hitherto available.

Basedow (1925, pp. 173-176) described the implement as a skin scraper and from observations of its general form it seems reasonable to assume that it was so used, although no published record exists of any person actually seeing one in use.

TYPICAL FORM

A typical example of this slate implement is reniform in shape (plate 1, A and B) with an average length of 11 cm., 7 cm. in width and 0.7 cm. in thickness. The concavity of the reniform outline is reduced to a relatively thin margin to form the functional edge of the implement. Its size is such that it can be conveniently held in the hand and is sufficiently robust to provide support for the thin working margin when in use.

Measurements of the illustrated specimens are given at the end of this paper.

MATERIAL EXAMINED

This investigation revealed that at least 260 reniform slate scrapers have been found in South Australia and of this number it has been possible to examine 226 specimens; most of these are in the collection of the South Australian Museum, the remainder being in the possession of private individuals, including the author. The only specimens not available for this investigation are either in interstate collections or otherwise dispersed. These are 34 in number, but the localities where they were found have been recorded as South Australian by Basedow (1925, p. 173); Hossfeld (1926, p. 291); Howchin (1934, p. 79) and Tindale⁽¹⁾.

CLASSIFICATION

The 226 slate scrapers which comprise this survey vary widely in shape, size and thickness according to the particular quality of the material used (plate 29, A to H).

The various shapes can be tentatively classified into four groups. Eighty-three have a typical reniform outline (plate 27, A and B); thirty-eight are rounded, having almost the same width as length (plate 27, C and D); 18 are elongate, the length being approximately twice the width (plate 27, E and F), and 48 are of varied, irregular shape.

Many of the specimens examined were found to be damaged and only a small proportion have survived in perfect condition. Thirty-nine are recognizable fragments which are too small to allow even tentative classification.

(1) Mr. N. B. Tindale provided extracts from his unpublished journals on "Camp-sites and Implements" (vol. 1-3, 1940-1961) which refer to scraper finds.

It seems likely that this particular implement existed in greater numbers than present collections from camp-sites would indicate. The fragile material from which they were made makes them liable to damage by stock movement and other factors. Only by increased knowledge can the recognition and recovery of fragmentary specimens be effected.

DISTRIBUTION

Although Hossfeld (1926, p. 291) placed on record P. deS. Stapleton's discovery of four reniform slate implements near the Patawalonga Creek in 1898, the first specimens actually recorded were found by Campbell (1924, pp. 74-78) at Moana, south of Adelaide, where a large camp-site is situated in an area of red sand-hills near the mouth of Pedler Creek. Extensive field work, carried out upon this camp-site over a long period, has yielded a comprehensive series of stone implements.

Basedow (1925, pp. 173-175) found 19 scrapers at Normanville, two at Woodville and suggested a distribution restricted to the tribes which originally occupied the area between Adelaide and the River Murray. Hossfeld (1926, pp. 287-297) extended the distribution to the Eden Valley and Angaston districts by finding a number of reniform implements when studying previous native occupation of that area. Thirty-nine specimens have been recovered from camp-sites in those districts.

The formation of the Anthropological Society of South Australia in 1925 gave added stimulus to collecting and studying local aboriginal relics. At a meeting of the Society in March 1927 Stapleton exhibited a slate scraper collected from a camp-site near Hookina Siding in the Flinders Ranges⁽²⁾. This specimen (plate 29, C) appears to be the first recorded from northern South Australia and was an early indication of the wider distribution now accepted after the collection of many additional specimens.

From 1927 until 1934, when Howchin (1934, pp. 79-82) reviewed the subject, a number of scrapers were added to the collection of the South Australian Museum⁽³⁾ by T. D. Campbell, N. B. Tindale, H. L. Sheard and P. deS. Stapleton. These scrapers had been found on the Adelaide Plains and in the Angaston District. This area Howchin defined as the limit of their distribution.

(2) Minutes of the Anthropological Society of South Australia 1926-1929.

(3) Register of the South Australian Museum.

McCarthy (1946, pp. 56-57) described the reniform slate implement as a specialized type of reniform scraper-knife and reiterated the general opinion that its distribution appeared to be limited to the Adelaide Plains. It is only since detailed field-work has progressed that the number of sites where they have been found and their spread has greatly increased. These finds have made possible the preparation of a map (fig. 1) co-ordinating all the known slate scraper localities. This map shows a far wider range of distribution than that recorded by Howchin.

MATERIAL USED

In the choice of suitable materials for the manufacture of his slate scrapers, the aboriginal showed his intimate knowledge of the qualities and texture of stone necessary for the successful production of his implements.

Most of the specimens examined are made from fine grained rocks such as siltstones, shales, phyllites and all the rocks commonly grouped under the term, slates. Besides being readily available, these rocks were admirably suited for producing reniform skin scrapers. In the case of shale it splits easily along its bedding planes into thin, regular layers, while slate separates in a similar manner, along its distinct cleavage planes. Once obtained, these thin, flat slabs were of convenient proportions to be fashioned into implements of desired shape and size while still retaining sufficient strength for practical use. When slate was not available, either locally or by trade, mica schist and occasionally gritty quartzite were used, but as these materials were not so suitable, the resultant implements were crude and unshapely compared with the typical reniform slate specimens.

MANUFACTURE

There is no published record of anyone having observed the manufacture of a slate scraper, but the procedure seems fairly obvious from the implements themselves. The author has a piece of slate from a camp-site at Edcowie, east of Lake Torrens, which had been roughly shaped to a reniform outline. The entire peripheral margin, including the concavity, appears to have been shaped by percussion with a light hammerstone. Most of the specimens examined for this survey still retain evidence of the removal of small flakes from the edges of their rounded sides.

It seems likely, therefore, that the entire edge of the implement was shaped at the same time until the desired reniform outline had

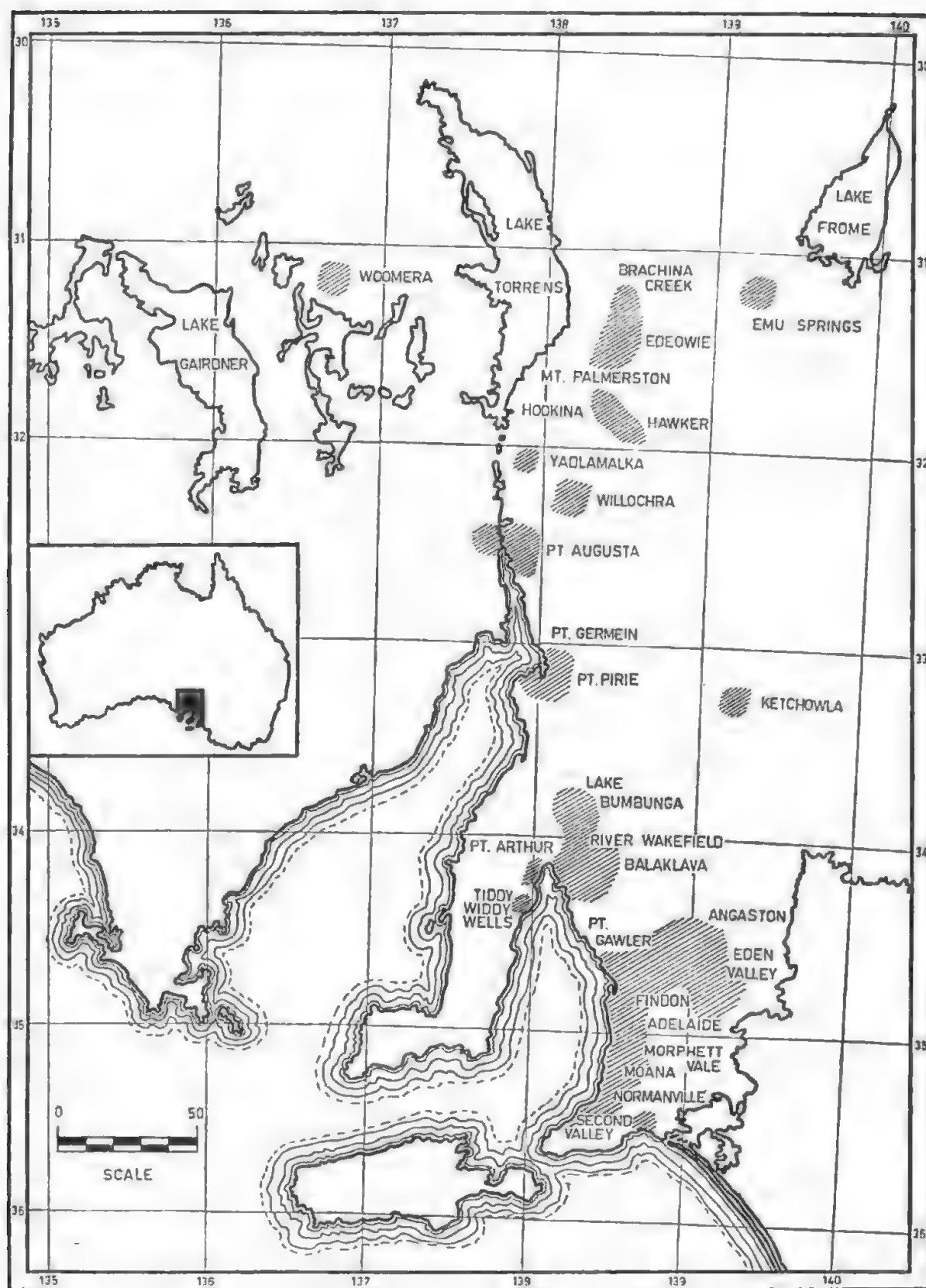


Fig. 1. Distribution of slate scrapers in South Australia.

been achieved. The concavity, after having been roughly shaped, appears to have been reduced by a rasping or rubbing action with some harder material to form a relatively thin, functional edge. Evidence of this smoothing down is indicated by the marks left on the flat surfaces of the implement. Some scrapers (plate 27, A and B) have had the entire peripheral margin finished in this way, so removing traces of the original trimming.

Cooper (1959, pp. 55-60, plates 4, 20 and 21), who has been largely responsible for extending the area of distribution of slate scrapers, suggests that many small pieces of slate, variable in shape, which he has found on a camp-site at Hallett Cove, show evidence of wear suggestive of skin scraping, and may be early equivalents of the slate scrapers described in this paper.

INCISED MARKINGS

As already shown, many of the incised markings on slate scrapers were obviously due to the method of fabrication of the implement. Other deeper markings however appear to have a deliberate purpose. These could be simple decorations or have some totemic significance.

It was the deliberate incised markings on the first specimens found by Campbell (1924, pp. 75-76) that led him to suggest they might be a simple form of tjurunga and Howchin (1934, p. 82) to suppose they were a "charm". These suggestions were not unreasonable as some years ago the author placed a similar interpretation on a number of small pieces of heavily incised slate which have since been recognized as definite portions of slate scrapers. At the time of their recovery on a camp-site discovered by Cooper at Willochra, far beyond the then accepted area of distribution of slate scrapers, the explanation that they were portions of some sacred object seemed a likely one.

A comparative study of the collection of slate scrapers now available showed that, while over 60 per cent have surface striations, only 10 per cent or 22 specimens appear to have a definite pattern formed from straight lines of varying length and degree of complication; some others suggest dog and emu tracks. Plate 28, A to F, illustrates both surfaces of three of the best examples of deliberate surface markings on slate scrapers. It is possible that the incised markings on other specimens could have been obliterated by weathering.

Cooper (1947, pp. 292-298 and 1954, pp. 97-103) has recorded small, flat, water-worn pebbles from northern and north-eastern South

Australia bearing somewhat similar markings to those found on slate scrapers. In the case of Cooper's finds, however, the incised markings have a regular pattern formed by a series of more or less parallel straight lines. The origin and meaning of these markings is unknown.

USE

Basedow (1925, p. 176) was the only person to describe and illustrate reniform slate implements as skin scrapers. Although he gives the following detailed account of their use to scrape fat and fleshy tissue from opossum skins whilst preparing them for making rugs and cloaks, this was not a personal observation. His informant was an old aboriginal of the "River Murray" tribe whom he considered reliable.

"The freshly removed skin was laid, fur downward, over a cylindrical rod and drawn tightly around it with the fingers of the left hand. The implement was then gripped by the opposite hand in such a way that the convex edge was against the palm and the flat surfaces between the fingers and thumb. Holding the rod in a vertical position, the concave (or straight) cutting edge was placed against the skin over the rod and worked at an angle downwards, the cutting edge shaving off all adherent pieces of fat and other soft tissue in doing so. The position of the skin, relative to the rod, was frequently changed and the process continued until the whole inner surface of the pelt had been prepared and cleaned in a similar way.

"The advantage of a concave cutting edge obviously was that by an accommodation of the two curves, presented by the implement and the rod, respectively, a greater area of skin was scraped with every downward movement of the hand; and the process was performed without so much risk of cutting the skin as would have been the case with the ordinary convex or straight-edged stone scraper or a plane surface."

DISCUSSION

Mountford (1960, pp. 505-508, 1963, pp. 525-543) has shown that the Australian aboriginals, over a wide area of southern Australia, employed a number of different methods in dressing skins of animals for making rugs and cloaks. Mountford describes and illustrates (1963, plate 33, C), a large stone flake being used for this purpose in the Northern Flinders Ranges. This is outside the area of known

distribution of reniform slate scrapers. Schürmann (1879, p. 210) describes how the aboriginals of the Port Lincoln Tribe, South Australia, gently pulled or shaved off fleshy substances adhering to skins, with a sharp-edged piece of quartz. In the south-east of Australia, Howitt (1904, p. 742) records that skins were not dressed but merely dried and made pliable by cutting marks on them with mussel shells.

As far as the present investigation shows, the occurrence of slate scrapers appears to have been somewhat circumscribed and limited to the central area of South Australia, its southern and eastern boundary being the River Murray, and its northern approximately at Lat. 31° South (map, fig. 1).

A description, recorded in Adelaide in 1842⁽⁴⁾, of the manner in which skins were prepared for making garments, shows that the large, coarse skins had their inner layers shaved off with a digging stick, club or the handle on which stone adzes were mounted, while the smaller ones were rubbed slightly with stones to make them loose and flexible.

It is suggested that the reniform slate implements were specially designed and ideally suited for scraping the smaller and more delicate skins, such as those of the opossum. The smooth, relatively soft, use-polished functional edge enabled them to be scraped effectively without damage.

Flanagan (1888, pp. 56-58) states that the Australian aboriginal, when making his rugs and cloaks, his only articles of clothing, showed a very distinct preference for the skin of the opossum because it was of superior quality for his particular purpose. If this is so and the reniform slate scrapers were, as has been suggested, a specialized implement for scraping these delicate skins, this may indicate that the number and area of their distribution has some relation to the production of these garments in those areas.

In the design, choice of material, manufacture and use of reniform scraping implements the aboriginal again illustrated his skill and craftsmanship in the art of converting simple, basic materials into efficient tools.

A purpose of this paper is to give an account of this interesting implement so that it will be correctly classified among the implements of the Australian aboriginals. It is also hoped it will encourage their

(4) Transactions of the Statistical Society published in *South Australian News*, 15 October, 1842, p. 46.

collection, so enabling a more comprehensive survey to be made and the area of distribution further defined.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express appreciation to the following:—

The Board of the South Australian Museum for permission to work on the Museum Collection and for publication of this paper.

Mr. Norman B. Tindale, Curator of Anthropology of the Museum, who expedited the examination of the collection and supplied extracts from his personal journals which contributed greatly to the completion of the distribution map.

Drs. P. S. Hossfeld and W. I. North; Messrs. R. D. J. Weathersbee and R. E. Teusner made their private collections of slate scrapers available for examination.

Special acknowledgment is made to Dr. T. D. Campbell, Messrs. C. P. Mountford and H. M. Cooper, all of whom gave assistance by supervising the preparation of this paper. Mr. Mountford also helped with the illustrations.

REFERENCES CITED

- Basedow, H., 1925: *The Australian Aboriginal*. Adelaide.
- 1925: Slate Scraping Implements of the Extinct Adelaide Tribe. *Man*, London, 25: No. 106.
- Campbell, T. D., 1924: An Account of a Hitherto Unrecorded Type of Aboriginal Stone Object. *Trans. Roy. Soc. S. Austr.*, Adelaide, 48.
- Cooper, H. M., 1947: Incised Stones of South Australia. *Mankind*, Sydney, 3(10).
- 1954: Incised Stones from South Australia. *Rec. S. Austr. Mus.*, Adelaide, 11: No. 2.
- 1959: Large Archaeological Stone Implements from Hallett Cove, South Australia. *Trans. Roy. Soc. of S. Austr.*, Adelaide, 82.
- Flanagan, Roderick J., 1888: *The Aborigines of Australia*. Sydney.
- Hossfeld, Paul S., 1926: The Aborigines of South Australia: Native occupation of Eden Valley and Angaston Districts. *Trans. Roy. Soc. of S. Austr.*, Adelaide, 50.

- Howchin, Walter, 1934: *The Stone Implements of the Adelaide Tribe of Aborigines*. Adelaide.
- Howitt, A. W., 1904: *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia*. London.
- McCarthy, F. D., 1946: *The Stone Implements of Australia*. Sydney.
- Mountford, C. P., 1960: Decorated Aboriginal Skin Rugs. Rec. S. Austr. Mus., Adelaide, 13(4).
- 1963: Australian Aboriginal Skin Rugs. Rec. S. Austr. Mus., Adelaide, 14(3).
- Schürmann, Rev. C. W. 1879: The Port Lincoln Tribe. *The Native Tribes of South Australia*. Adelaide.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PLATES 27-29

PLATE 27

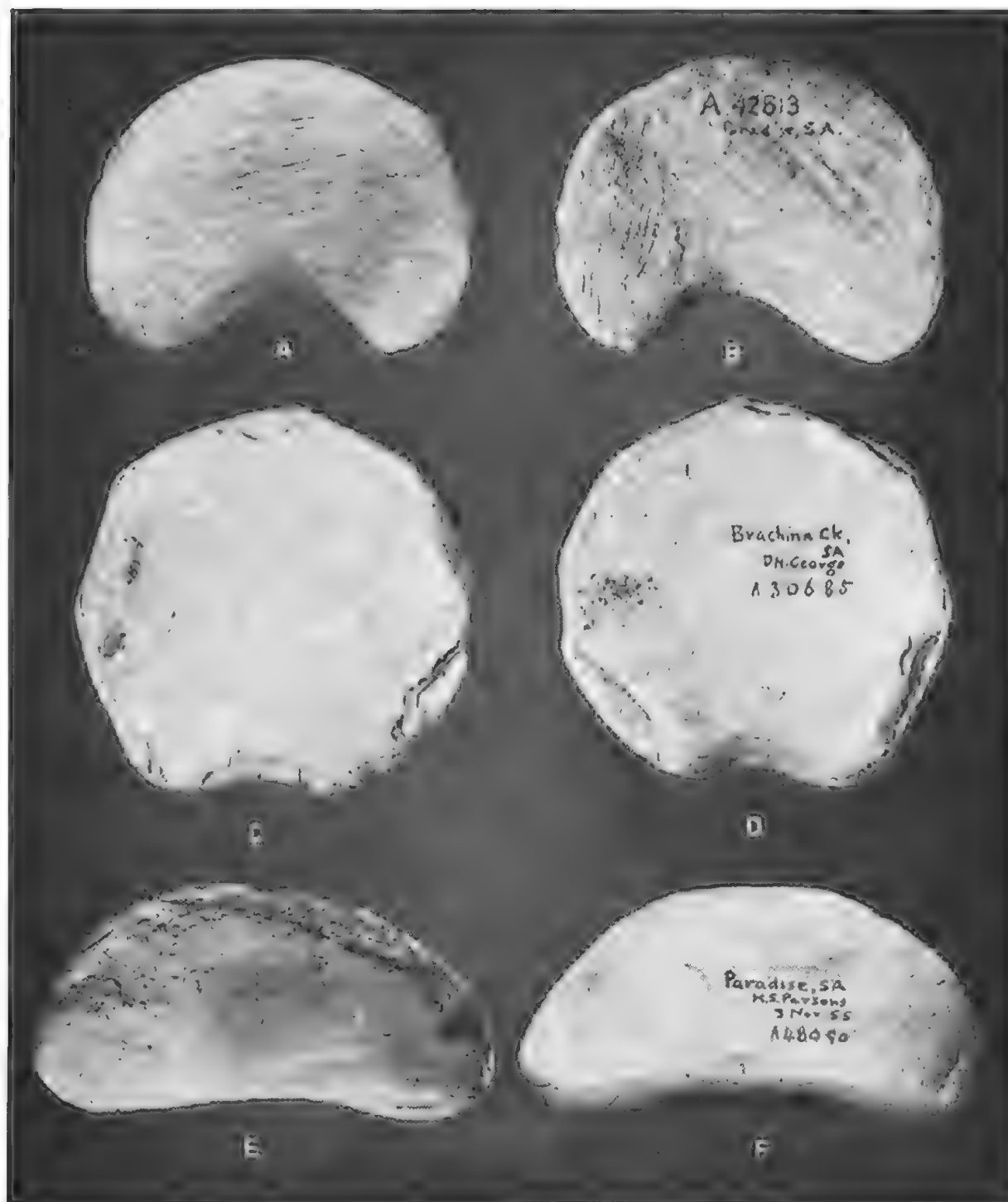
- A-B. Slate scraper. Paradise, South Australia, K. S. Parsons, collector, length 10.8 cm., breadth measured from notch, 6.7 cm., specimen Reg. No. A.42813 in S. Austr. Museum.
- C-D. *ditto*. Brachina Creek, S. Austr., D. N. George, length 9.8 cm., breadth 9.0 cm., A.30685.
- E-F. *ditto*. Paradise, S. Austr., K. S. Parsons, length 11.5 cm., breadth 5.5 cm., A.48090.

PLATE 28

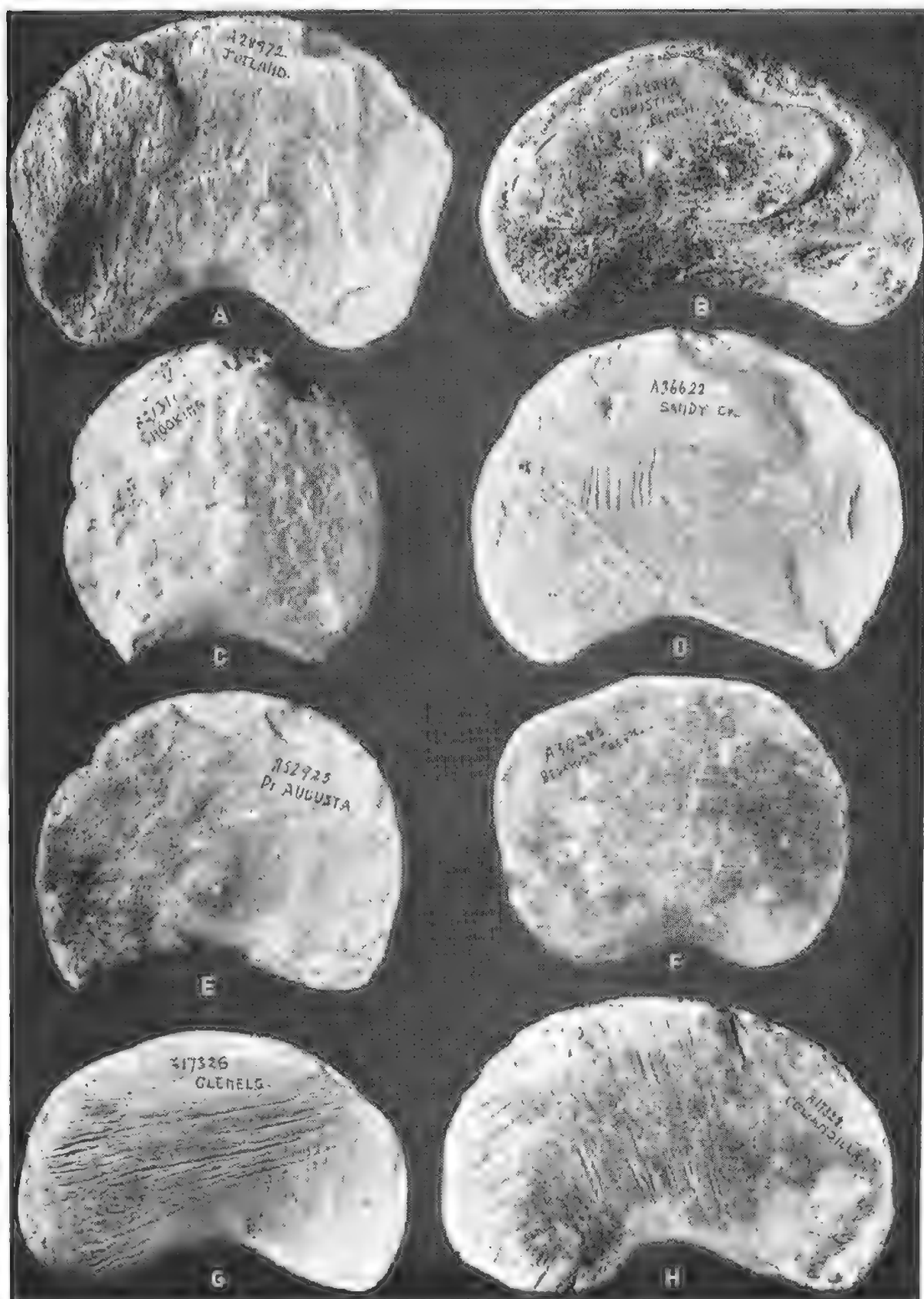
- A-B. Slate scraper. Findon, S. Austr., E. J. Copley, length 12.0 cm., breadth 6.0 cm., A.21339.
- C-D. *ditto*. Paradise, S. Austr., K. S. Parsons, length 11.2 cm., breadth 7.5 cm., A.42814.
- E-F. *ditto*. Findon, S. Austr., E. J. Copley, length 11.8 cm., breadth 6.3 cm., A.21340.

PLATE 29

- A. Slate scraper. Jutland, S. Austr., N. B. Tindale, length 10.4 cm., breadth 6.3 cm., A.28972.
- B. *ditto*. Christies Beach, S. Austr., N. B. Tindale, length 12.0 cm., breadth 6.5 cm., A.28898.
- C. *ditto*. Hookina, S. Austr., P. Stapleton, length 7.2 cm., breadth 6.6 cm., A.21311.
- D. *ditto*. Sandy Creek, S. Austr., Adelaide Bushwalkers, length 11.0 cm., breadth 7.5 cm., A.36622.
- E. *ditto*. Port Augusta, S. Austr., H. K. Bartlett, length 9.2 cm., breadth 6.7 cm., A.52925.
- F. *ditto*. Brachina Creek, S. Austr., D. N. George, length 9.8 cm., breadth 7.3 cm., A.30686.
- G. *ditto*. Glenelg, S. Austr., P. Stapleton, length 12.0 cm., breadth 6.9 cm., A.17326.
- H. *ditto*. Cowandilla, S. Austr., P. Stapleton, length 13.0 cm., breadth 7.3 cm., A.17328.



A-B Reniform. C-D Rounded. E-F Elongate.
Slate Scrapers—Typical Forms.



Slate Scrapers—Typical Forms and Variations.