

SOME SHELL ARTEFACTS FROM NAURU AND OCEAN ISLAND

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INTRODUCTION

During a brief visit to the Republic of Nauru in May 1977 I was able to inspect a collection of eight shell artefacts which had been found at various localities on the island over many years. Prior to my visit, the only published record of a visit by an archaeologist was that of four days by Lampert in 1965, during which he recovered three shell adze blades as surface finds (Lampert 1968:2,12). This note describes the eight specimens inspected in 1977, and adds some information on shell artefacts from Nauru and Ocean Island in the collections of The Australian Museum, Sydney.

Nauru, situated in the central Pacific about 41 km south of the equator at 166° 30' E. Long., is about 300 km from its nearest neighbour, Ocean Island (Fig. 1). The island is about 19 km in circumference, with an approximate area of 22 sq. km. It is formed by uplifted coral reefs, with extensive deep deposits of phosphate in its interior plateau which reaches a maximum height of 70 m above sea level. A coastal flat of varying width surrounds the central plateau, and provides the main space suitable for housing and other facilities. Today, most of the population of 7,100 person, of whom 3,865 are indigenous Nauruans, live on this flat. A narrow fringing reef surrounds the island.

The wealth of Nauru, one of the richest islands in the Pacific, is derived from mining of the vast phosphate deposits. This mining and the concentration of settlement and development projects on the narrow coastal strip have probably destroyed or severely damaged the majority of archaeological sites on the island. Knowledge of the island's prehistory will probably always be restricted to information provided by chance surface finds or much-disturbed deposits. In view of this bleak prospect, the artefacts described here attract an importance not usually granted to a small collection of poorly documented surface finds.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTEFACTS

In the following descriptions, it is assumed that the outer shell surface represents the front of the adze blades. Unless otherwise stated, the adze blades are made from the ventral margin of valves of Tridacna Maxima (cf. Davidson 1971:56). None of the

blades incorporates the hinge portion of the valve. Artefacts A to H (Fig. 2) were inspected on Nauru in 1977, and their descriptions are based on sketches made at the time. Specimens I to K are from the collections of The Australian Museum, Sydney, and include two adze blades from Ocean Island.

(A) adze blade: this has a cutting edge formed by asymmetrical bevelling from both surfaces. Length: 61 mm; maximum width across cutting edge: 47 mm; maximum thickness: 15 mm. The blade is sub-triangular in plan, with a rounded poll, and a curved lenticular cross-section.

(B) adze blade: this blade has an asymmetrically bevelled cutting edge. The marked twist along the long axis suggests that the outer surface of the valve may have formed the back of the blade. The cross-section is irregular, but tending to a plani-lateral form. The overall plan appears to have been sub-triangular, with a straight cutting edge and possibly a pointed poll. Extant length: 65 mm; maximum width across cutting edge: 41 mm; maximum thickness: 14 mm.

(C) adze blade: this has a sinuous profile on its long axis. The cutting edge is more central than on the preceding specimens, with bevelling from both surfaces. The plan is intermediate between rectangular and triangular, with a strongly rounded poll and the point of maximum width located near the mid-point of its length. The cross-section was not recorded. Length: 76 mm; maximum width: 52 mm; maximum thickness: 18 mm.

(D) adze blade: this form is basically similar to (C). The poll is strongly rounded, the profile of the long axis sinuous, and the point of maximum width located above the cutting edge. The cutting edge is blunt and off-centre. Length: 184 mm; maximum width: 77 mm; maximum thickness: 20 mm.

(E) adze blade: this blade, found on Radio Hill at Meneng, has a bluntly pointed poll, with the cutting edge straight in plan. The point of maximum width is located at about the mid-point of the length. The cutting edge is markedly off-centre, with the point of maximum thickness at the start of the main bevel. The cross-section is curved with rounded margins. Length: 78 mm; maximum width: 59 mm; maximum thickness: 22 mm.

(F) adze blade: this has a sinuous profile along its long axis. Its plan is elongated, sub-triangular, with a rounded poll and lenticular cross-section. The cutting-edge is approximately medial, but is given an off-centre appearance by the asymmetrical bevelling and sinuous profile. Length: 87 mm; maximum width: 33 mm; maximum thickness: 14 mm.

(G) chisel blade: this is made from the lip of a gastropod. The cutting-edge is hollow-ground, reflecting the form of the original shell lip, and is off-centre. The cross-section is sub-circular, with

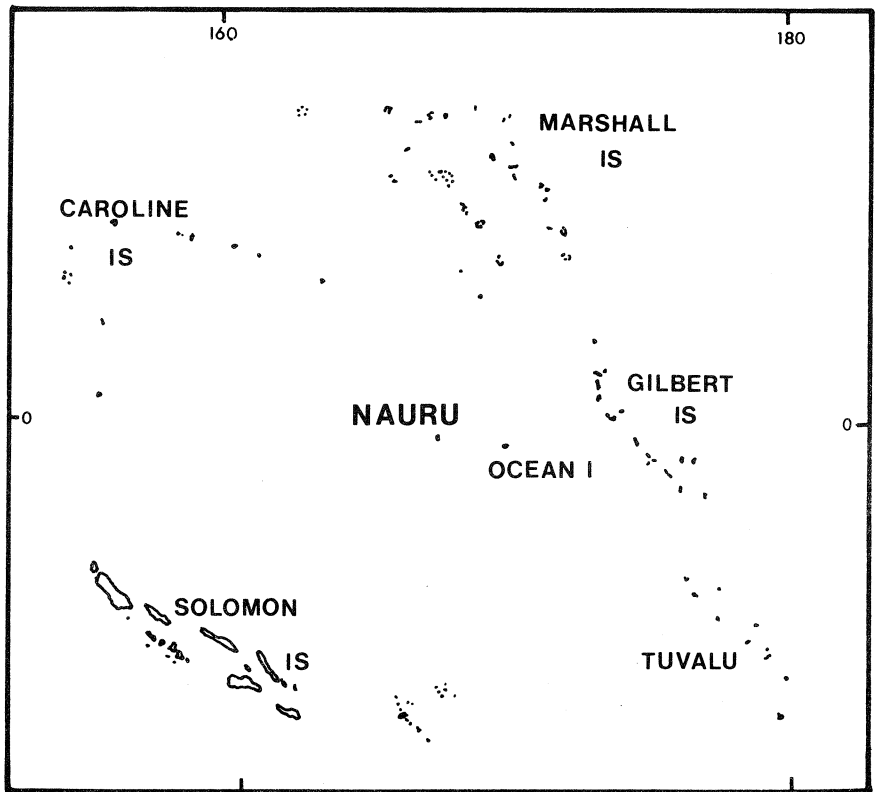


Figure 1. Map of eastern Micronesia.

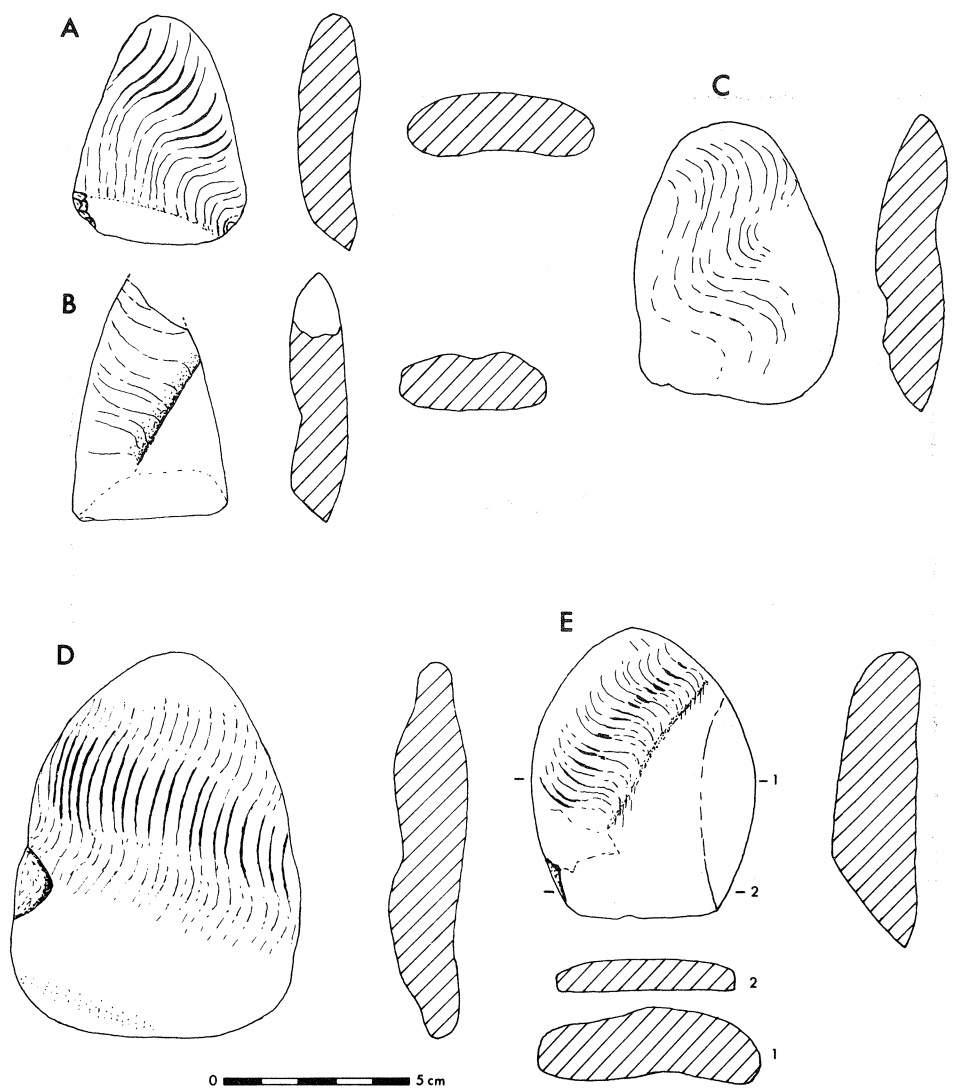


Figure 2. Shell adze blades from Nauru.

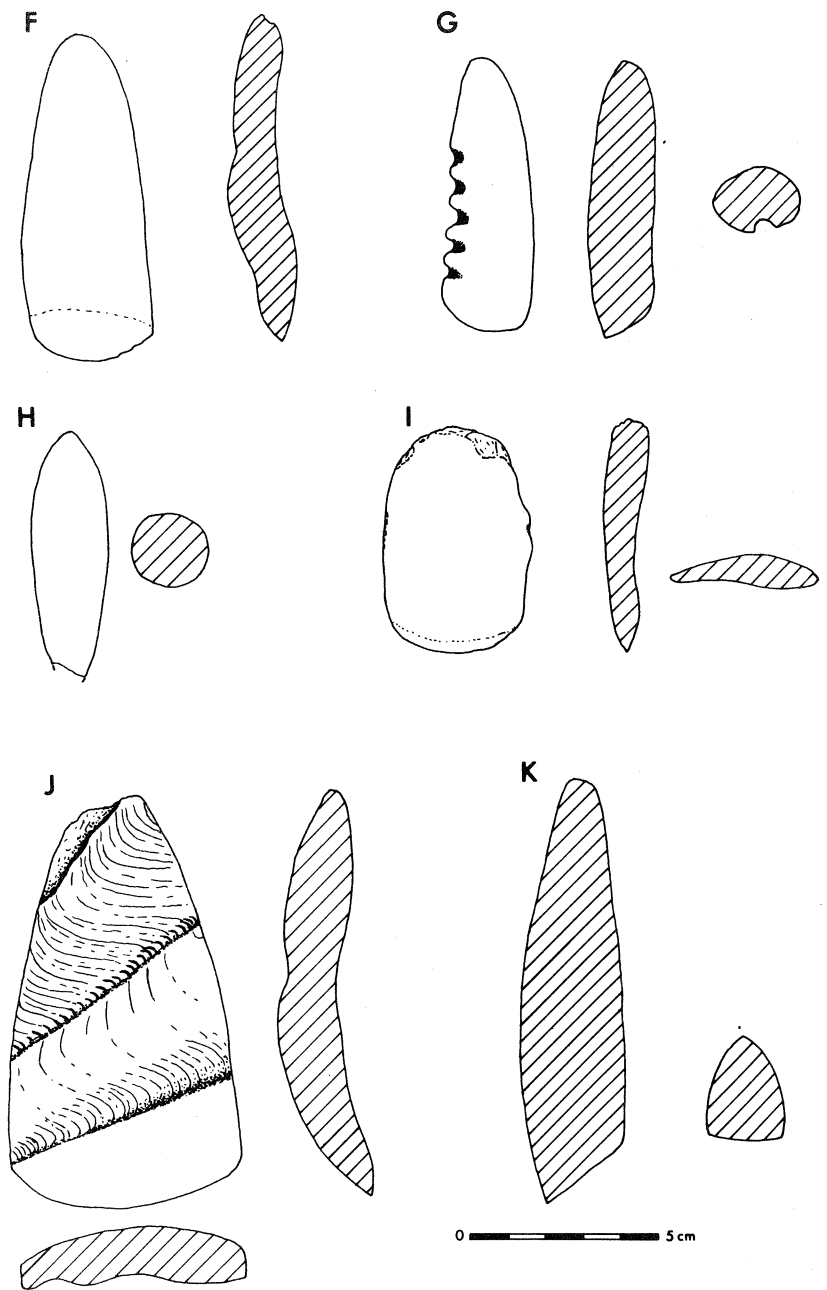


Figure 3. Shell adze blades from Nauru (F-I) and Ocean Island (J,K).

a groove running along the inner surface. The poll is rounded. Length: 74 mm; maximum width: 24 mm; maximum thickness: 17 mm.

(H) cylindro-conical form: the possible function of this specimen is unknown. Its form, basically a cylinder tapering towards each end, suggests it was not a cutting tool. The cross-section is circular. One end is broken. Extant length: 65 mm; maximum diameter: 20 mm.

(I) coconut scraper: this specimen, registered number E 22935 in the collections of The Australian Museum, is described as a coconut scraper. It was acquired from an officer in the Royal Navy, Lieut. H.N. Hardy, in 1915, and is attributed to Nauru. It is flaked to form, and the outer shell surface has been removed by grinding. All four margins are rounded, with the point of maximum width located at about the mid-point of the long axis. Length: 62 mm; maximum width: 50 mm; thickness: 13 mm.

(J) adze blade: this specimen, registered number E 50378 in The Australian Museum, was acquired from S. Derrin in 1942 and is attributed to Ocean Island. The poll is damaged, and appears to have been bluntly pointed. The cutting edge is rounded, and the lateral margins have been ground flat just above the cutting edge to give an irregular plani-lateral cross-section. Extant length: 109 mm; width: 71 mm; thickness: 17 mm.

(K) hafted adze blade: this hafted specimen from Ocean Island is registered E 24734 in The Australian Museum. It was purchased from the Rev. R.E.G. Grenfell in 1917. The blade is long and narrow, with a rounded triangular cross-section, apex to the front. The cutting edge is not hollow-ground, but is formed by the point of the apex. This tool appears to be made from a fossil shell, and is smoothly ground all over. Length: 112 mm; width: 21 mm; thickness: 27 mm.

DISCUSSION

The Australian Museum also holds two other hafted shell adzes, one each from Nauru and Ocean Island. That from Nauru, registered number E 22934, comes from the same collection as specimen (I) above. It is similar in form to specimen (A) above, but much longer: 121 mm. The Ocean Island specimen, E 24733, is from the same collection as specimen (K) above. It appears to be made from fossil shell, and resembles specimen (F) in plan form, but its long axis profile is more closely related to that of specimen (E). Its length is 98 mm.

The adze blades from Nauru, specimens A to F and E 22934, can be divided into three groups based on poll form, position of point of maximum width, and general cross-section form:

group 1: rounded poll, maximum width at cutting edge, and lenticular in cross-section (blades A, D, F, E 22934);

group 2: pointed poll, maximum width at cutting edge, plani-lateral cross section (blade B);

group 3: rounded poll, maximum width located near mid-point of the long axis, lenticular cross-section (blades C, E).

Museum specimens E 24733 and E 24734 from Ocean Island do not fit these three categories.

Hambruch (1915:76-7) describes ethnographic shell adzes from Nauru and illustrates one blade found in the 'bush' (Fig. 146) which appear to match group 1. A second blade found in the 'bush' (Fig. 147) resembles group 2. Lampert (1968:fig.4 i, j) illustrates two examples of group 1. His third specimen (Fig. 4 h) is made from the hinge portion of a large bivalve, possibly Hippopus or Tridacna, a form not represented in the museum collection or among those inspected in 1977.

Although none of the surface finds from Nauru can be dated, the similarities between group 1 and the ethnographically recorded blades suggests a possible late date for this form, though its wide distribution through time and space in the Pacific prevents a strong argument in favour of this view. The triangular cross-sectioned blade E 24734 is of a form not previously reported from Ocean Island, nor does it appear to be recorded from Nauru or from the Gilbert Islands (cf. Koch 1965:150).

The coconut scraper I from Nauru differs from the kind described by Hambruch (1915:65 and Fig. 126), who illustrates a scraper with a serrated working edge made from a pearl shell. The basis of the identification of the museum specimen E 22935 is uncertain, and we must assume that it was from information given to Hardy by a Nauruan. In form, and size, this specimen is unlikely to be an adze blade, and does not match the hollow-ground forms of the chisels of Nauru (Hambruch 1915:77, Figs. 149 and 151). Specimen G appears to be of basically the same form as those illustrated by Hambruch, but of a different kind of shell. Lampert (1968:13, and Fig. 4 g) reports a tool from Ocean Island made from the lip of a Cypraeacassis cornuta which resembles the Nauru specimen G.

The paucity of published information of ethnographic shell tools and virtual absence of archaeological specimens from Nauru prevent further discussion of these forms at this stage. With the progression of phosphate mining over the remainder of the island's central core, and with increased development activities on the coastal flat, it seems likely that knowledge of Nauru's past will always be extremely fragmentary and uncertain. Like the Ocean Islanders, the Nauruans will never have a prehistory written from archaeological sources. At best, comparative linguistics may yield some clues, but until studies of their rapidly changing languages are conducted, even this line of enquiry can offer little hope. The destruction of cultural resources by developmental activities of all kinds is proceeding in

the Pacific Islands, particularly on the smaller islands, at a pace which far exceeds that experienced on larger land masses. It is not, perhaps, too pessimistic to predict that by the end of this century many dozen Pacific communities will know of their past only through oral traditions and linguistic reconstructions. The tangible evidences will have been destroyed.

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