NOTES ON SHIPBUILDING & NAUTICAL TERMS OF OLD IN THE NORTH

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NOTES ON SHIPBUILDING AND NAUTICAL TERMS OF OLD IN THE NORTH.

SHIPBUILDING is a term which, historically translated, means: the solution of the problem, how to turn the surface of water into a thoroughfare for man. In order to obtain as clear a view as the hazy outlook permits, of some, at least, of the experiences which brought man, through a very long and painful process, to the solution of this problem, we must go all the way back to the remote period of the stone age.

The child of nature, that we are self-conceitedly in the habit of calling the savage of the stone age, was, for all his savagery, especially considering his extremely limited opportunities, hardly a less deft scholar at the school of Necessity, the Mother of Invention, than at any time has been his descendant, the man of the bronze, iron, steel, and steam ages. At any rate, to the stone-age man is honour due for having made the discovery which I, at least, have no hesitation in describing as the everlasting mother of all inventions that have borne, or ever are likely to bear, on the practical purposes of human life. Like so many other discoveries, this one also arose out of antecedent causes, which originated in the conflict of man with the conditions of his environment. His life was one of ceaseless battle for existence. By a sad necessity, a pitiless law of life, he was obliged to maintain his own existence by the destruction of the existence of other living things. His self-chosen enemies were the poor

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animals whose fatality it was to rejoice in life within his environment. Some were too strong for him to fight at close quarters, others too swift for him to get to close quarters with. In both cases he had to improve upon his disabilities by the artificial means to which he gave a name that, probably, had a meaning similar to that originally implied in the word weapon, which possibly may be radically related to the Sanskrit root *vap*, to strew, to sow. If the stone-age man was able to form a collective term for the means of attack at his disposal, some term indicative of throwing was the most natural to employ, for most of his weapons, the bow, the sling, even the club, etc., were calculated for the action of throwing. Among the objects most eminently suitable for this purpose that his environment supplied him with none, probably, was more common or more readily at hand than the stone.

Of all the kinds of stone that man made use of for weapon, evidently the flint was the one to which he gave his most intelligent attention. This is amply proved by the fact that the flint industry, that is to say, the manufacture of a great variety of objects of flint usefully answering a corresponding variety of practical purposes, was really the one universal industry of the stone age.[1] All the stones that man made use of fell into two groups: the brakeable and the flakeable, the latter peculiarity being the exclusive property of the flint. He had been making use of the flint as weapon for no great length of time when he observed, not only that it did flake, but also that its flakeability had something interestingly curious about it. By knocking two nodules of flint together in

[1] I may mention that in Norwegian dialects the root *flis-* in "flin-t," the raw material, seems to assume the syncopated form *fl*, whenever the manufacture of the raw material is in question. We have thus: "Fli," f., a thin chip, a plate; "fl," n., implements, tools; "fl," wv., to manipulate, to make by hand, put to rights, put in order, ornament, adorn. I mention this, because, in my opinion, we have the same stem to deal with in the common modern Scandinavian term "fli-d," "fli-t" = industry, originally flint-industry, M.H.G. "vlî-z," O.H.G. "flî-z," mod. H.G. "fleiss."

a particular manner, he observed that one or both would flake in converging planes. Two such planes would sometimes meet in so acute an angle as to leave the line where they met as sharp as that of a razor's edge. No doubt our rash, unwary savage cut himself in the course of his first inexperienced handling of his new curiosity. The first cut was pregnant with progressive evolution.

The savage had, ages before this, ascertained the fact that the material objects he was thrown into contact with and was in the habit of handling, fell into two classes: the hard and the not hard. He was intelligent enough to conclude that his flesh was cut by the flint, not only because to his startled mind it was miraculously endowed with sharpness, and pre-eminently suitable for wounding and killing, but especially because the material it was made of was evidently much harder than the substance of which his own flesh was tissued together. This set him thinking, and he was led to the further conclusion that, as the sharp flint had cut his flesh, so, probably, it would cut to pieces any material composed of a substance softer than that of which itself consisted, and thus might be turned to other uses than the invaluable one of shedding life-blood and causing death.

He put his theory to practical test; he tried his flint on a piece of bone, horn, or green wood, and found that what he had imagined came true. As he went on experimenting with the new wonder he realized with delight that in his manipulating hand it lent itself to fashioning certain forms and figures, which from life and nature were reflected in the mirror of his imitative mind. I am not romancing, I am stating a plain fact, when I say that now the primitive savage had come upon the most epoch-making technical discovery that man ever made. He had discovered the EDGE; that no less astoundingly simple than almost magically effective agent for good and evil in the practical affairs of life. For on the edge, ever since its discovery, has depended, and probably will depend to the end of time, the whole artistic and artificial

environment of human existence, in all its infinitely varied complexity. Look wherever we may upon the artificial surroundings of our life, their direct or indirect descent from the edge is a fact that stares any observant beholder in the face. By this discovery was broken down a wall that for untold ages had dammed up a stagnant, unprogressive past, and through the breach were let loose all the potentialities of the future civilization of mankind. It was entirely owing to the discovery of the edge that man was enabled in the course of time to invent the art of shipbuilding.

Directly, however, the discovery of the edge was not inductive to the invention of this great art. The experiences that, step by step, led primitive man to the conception of that invention proceeded from causes probably in the main independent of the agency of the edge, but intimately and vitally associated with the alimentary conditions of his environment—with his struggle for existence. By briefly surveying this environment we shall be able the more clearly to realize the under-current causation which ultimately brought reasoning man to the solution of the problem before him.

The stone-age man, generally speaking, was confined to a narrow strip of land, bounded in front of him by waters—rivers, lakes, straits, or open ocean—and in his rear by primeval woods standing deep in matted impenetrable jungle. He was ignorant of the kindly bounteousness of cultivated earth. He knew nothing of the sources of sweet nurture and comfort supplied by domestic animals; of these latter he knew only the dog, an invaluable ally on account of its capacity for hunting. In these circumstances he had to devote his whole energy to the pursuits of hunting, to fishing from bank and shore, and to the catch of what marine mollusks and crustacea the ebb-tide left within his reach in shallow foreshore waters. In proportion as man multiplied the supplies of his very limited dominion were bound to diminish. With his weapons,

the club, the spear, and above all the stone, and the hunting dogs, he destroyed the land animals, or frightened them away; fishing and the catch of crustacea were mostly confined to the warm season; clearing the ebb-shallows of mollusks was, in each case, only a matter of time. When one haunt was exhausted of supplies to such an extent that the community was reduced to short commons, the only chance of avoiding the impending famine was for the tribe to break up and thread its way along the water until a virgin tract was reached, where a halt was made, and a new temporary abode selected, or, which comes to the same thing, a certain spot was fixed upon where, it was agreed, the community should consume in common the proceeds of the hunter's and the fisherman's daily toil. This was a matter of necessity in a communistic society. The provider of food must know for certain where to take the proceeds of each day's labour; the whole community must be witness to the equal distribution of those proceeds among all its members. This process of intermittent migration is very clearly illustrated by the "køkkenmøddinge"—huge offal-heaps—in Denmark, which contain the remnants of the meals of the early stone-age folk, and are found at considerable, but varying, distances along the sea-shore. Here are found heaped together prodigious quantities of shells, bones of fish, and of a large variety of wild mammals, such as bear, wild boar, red-deer, roe, beaver, seal, urochs, fox, wolf, lynx, marten, etc., besides charcoal remains and rudely flaked objects of flint. In these heaps are stored, if I may be allowed the expression, the archives of the earliest history of man in the North.

Now we have seen enough of the environment of primitive man to come to the conclusion that existence within it must have been one of a very precarious character. Seasons then, as now, were good, bad, or indifferent. But a bad season then was an infinitely more serious matter than a bad season is now; and the stone-age man must, at times, have experienced famines so appalling that we