

AN UNUSUAL WINNEBAGO WAR CLUB AND AN AMERICAN WATER MONSTER

By FRANCES EYMAN



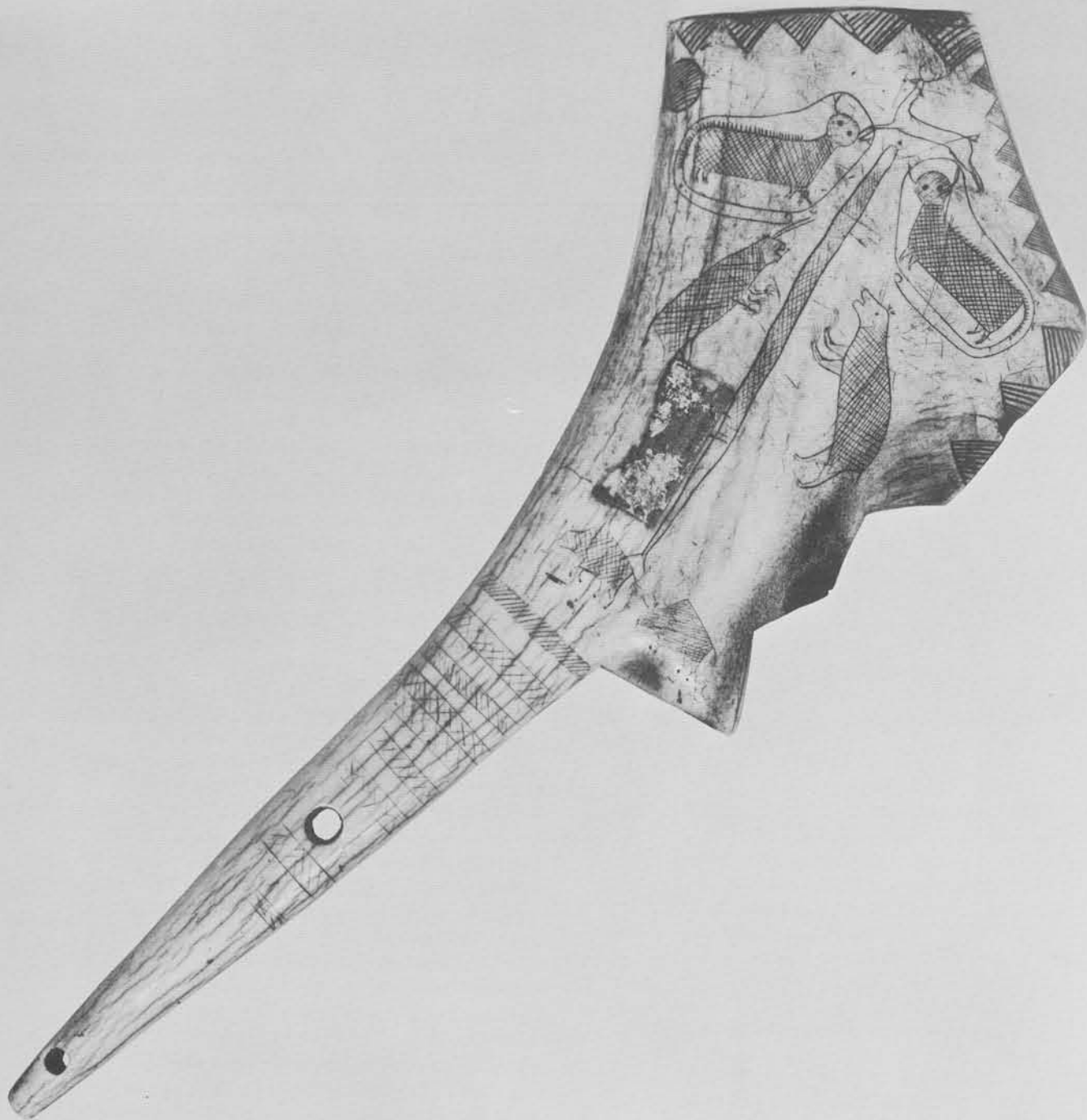
In 1839, Caleb W. Pusey, scion of a prominent Philadelphia family, was in the Winnebago country of Wisconsin, taking part in a land claim settlement between the United States and the Indians. At Fort Winnebago Mr. Pusey acquired an extremely interesting war club, which came into our possession just last year. We know far too little of Mr. Pusey or of the Winnebago of his time, but the eloquent symbolism of his war club speaks to us of the strange manners of a lost frontier.

The Winnebago, a Siouan-speaking village tribe, early took sides with other wilderness people against the French, French allies, and French successors. Their name, given them by the Ojibwa means "They live in filth" (Frederic Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language* . . . 1853). They were generally known by the Acadian French term *Les Puants*, usually translated as the more genteel "Stinkards." These were the names given them by enemies; they called themselves "Those who speak the real language." They were long involved in wars with the Ojibwa and the Europeans, and were noted for their military valor, treachery, and taste for soup made from Ojibwa captives. They were finally pacified with the crushing of Pontiac's Rebellion, and entered into a series of treaties with the Federal Government in the 1830's. These culminated in 1838 and '39 when Simon Cameron, a commissioner to the Winnebago, through an agent, purchased claim rights of nearly a hundred Indians at a fraction of their real value with notes from his own bank at Middletown, Pennsylvania. Then he attempted to collect the claims himself from the Government. The Secretary of War discharged Cameron and repudiated his negotiations. He appointed new

commissioners and attempted prosecution of Cameron; we suspect that Pusey was involved with this second commission. From then on, Cameron was branded with a satirical nickname, "The Great Winnebago Chief," much used by his political enemies. In 1840, the Winnebago were forcibly removed by troops to Iowa.

The club, in a very old and nearly unique style, was cut from a very large section of antler, probably from the righthand "brow tine" region of a moose. The first tine forms the handle, while two additional prongs and the tine base were sawed away to make very effective striking edges. All but the sawed areas have been polished. A square mirror was inset into the fore-face of the antler. Such mirrors in older Indian usage were magical in their function; the reflected image was correlated with the soul, the shade, the reflected self, as indicated by linguistic data in many native languages. Edges of the club were originally set with some seventy tacks, but these were lost long ago. Fragments which remain in the holes appear to be hand-forged square shanks of the kind made in the earliest 1800's and earlier. Some of the tacks were lost, their holes filled with lead, and new tacks set in during the earlier history of the club. In its present state, it appears that all of the tacks were forceably removed while the club was still in use. Some were broken off, some pulled cleanly, and some had rusted fast so that fragments of antler were torn out with them. The handle of the club has two holes, probably to hold a hand-strap.

The engravings are of the most interest. Decorative borders of lined triangles doubtless had some meaning, but this is beyond recovery. A series of ten compass-cut circles, eight of which



The war club engraved with the figures of mythical animals. The attached label reads "Indian war club of the Winnebagos, got by Caleb Pusey in 1839 at Fort Winnebago." The maximum length of the club is 15½ inches.

once held central tacks, contains geometrical patterns that suggest the markings on Indian basket-dice. Circular elements on Great Lakes war clubs are generally considered to be tallies, and to represent scalps. The life-forms drawn on the club are in an archaic style, possibly of the eighteenth century, and represent a group of supernaturals, of dream guardians.

Three bison, drawn in a geometrical style, resemble bison on a Mandan robe, prior to 1834, in the Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin. The bison on the mirror side of the club has several conventional lines at the eyes, standard symbols for communication with the animal. On the reverse side, the deer at the top is in a later style, formed of flowing lines cut more broadly into the antler; it would seem to have been added in the club's later years of use. Two badgers represent the underground animals of the earth, fellows of great magical power and of treachery. They, like the lone buffalo, have lines of communication coming from their eyes. All are grouped with a gigantic serpent with lines at the eyes and with a fish-like tail. This serpent is one of the underwater deities, a companion to the two "chimeras" who face his head. This pair are the most important, for they are the great gods of the underworld. The patterning of the group, with sacred animals paired with a serpent, is found on a few ancient specimens of the greatest supernatural importance. Painted on a model of a medicine lodge cover collected in 1846 on the northeastern plains and now also in the Museum für Volkerkunde, is a group much like that on our club.

The most interesting figures are those of the underwater monster, a major deity in many Eastern and Prairie cultures. Radin says that he is the most fearful and yet most desirable of the guardian spirits of the Winnebago and to wish for his help was to court death. First of all the deities created by "Earth Maker," he holds up the world. He has been identified as "their medicine animal" in the oldest sources and must have been extremely important to the Winnebago, for he was also the totem animal of a clan. However, Radin tells us that all traditional lore of the "War Clan" has been forgotten. He was named *wakceqi*, "the miraculous," a word cognate to the Dakota *wakonta*, "supernatural power," which today is the name used for the Creator. In the western Great Lakes area, he was the major subterranean deity and played central roles in the mythology of the Midewiwin, the Grand Medicine Lodge. Literature on the Winnebago Lodge is extremely philosophical and most, if not all, of the mythology and the pre-Christian symbolism has been

expunged from it. We must turn to other tribes, whose religion has been less displaced and deformed by mission efforts, to find any coherent account of this underwater deity's relationship to the origin myth of the Midewiwin.

Among the neighboring Ojibwa, long at war with the Winnebago, the Midewiwin was much like the Winnebago Lodge. Michibichi, the Ojibwa Underwater Panther, was second in the hierarchy of deities. A curious combination of cougar, rattlesnake, deer, and hawk, he is a central figure in an Orpheus myth which explains the origin of death, of the hereafter, and of the Medicine Lodge. Unfortunately, this most sacred Ojibwa myth has always been recorded in abbreviated and distorted forms, and it must be reconstructed from many different texts, accounts, and fragments. Most of these let slip only a few details of the full content carried in this myth. A reconstructed paraphrase like that given by Werner Müller in his recent studies of Woodland Indian religion, but with more detail, follows.

In the beginning, Nanebozo (Hare) and his three brothers were born; one of the brothers caused the mother's death by abnormal birth. Hare hunted down his guilty brother and transformed him into flint. Floating on the original land upon a great ocean, Hare and his brother Wolf worked as creators. Each day Wolf ran around the edge of the world in a counter-clockwise direction, magically producing its growth, while Hare shaped the landscape and made the plants and animals that live in it. All was new and bright, without death, violence, or frustration.

But the sea had its own ancient deities, formed as reptiles and amphybia, who lived in its deeps. Michibichi was the leader of these creatures.

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