



A Totem Pole in the British Museum

T. A. Joyce

The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 33. (Jan. - Jun., 1903), pp. 90-95.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0959-5295%28190301%2F06%2933%3C90%3AATPITB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3>

The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is currently published by Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/rai.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A TOTEM POLE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

[WITH PLATES XIX, XX.]

BY T. A. JOYCE, B.A.

THE Ethnographical Collection at the British Museum has recently been enriched by the acquisition of a totem pole from the Haida Village of Kayang near Masset, Queen Charlotte Island.

The pole (Pl. XIX) is 39 feet high, carved from a cedar trunk, and hollowed out at the back to reduce the weight. Unfortunately, it is somewhat weathered, and consequently all traces of the paint, with which it was probably covered, have disappeared. The value of the specimen is considerably increased by the fact that it is accompanied by a legend, taken down from the lips of the chief Weah of Masset, through the medium of the Chinook language, by Mr. C. J. Newcombe, M.D., to whom I am indebted for the story.

The interest attaching to this particular pole is further enhanced by the following fact. In 1898, the British Museum acquired through the agency of the Rev. J. H. Keen, missionary at Masset, a very finely made and complete model of an Indian house with its totem pole carved and painted in approved fashion by a native workman. With the model, Mr. Keen also sent the story supposed to be represented by the figures on the pole. By a peculiar coincidence, the pole of this model is an exact facsimile of the more recently acquired and full size pole from Kayang, with the exception of one small particular at the base. The difference is this. At the base of the large pole is the figure of an animal, of whose identity more anon, squatting on his haunches and holding in his mouth the tail of a whale, the head of which rests upon his two hind feet. In the model pole, immediately under the chin of this animal and cutting into his lower lip, is a circular hole forming the entrance to the house; there is no trace of a tail in his mouth, and between his hind feet appears the head of some small animal, somewhat similar to that of the frog (Tlamkostan).

It always seems worth while placing on record the legends connected with these totem poles, since, apart from their intrinsic interest, the introduction of civilization has given the natives of the North West Coast other ideas to strive after than the erection of carved columns to celebrate their names; the custom has almost, if not quite, fallen into decay, and the legends are being rapidly forgotten. In the present case, a comparison of the two legends illustrated by poles of almost identical design may afford additional interest.

I will first give the legend of the large pole from Kayang as obtained by Mr. Newcombe from the chief Weah.

Legend of the Totem Pole from Kayang, near Masset, Queen Charlotte Island, now in the British Museum.

1. Although the Raven (Yētl) had been originally the creator of all things, yet in after times he often had great trouble in procuring enough to satisfy his personal wants, and frequently had to go hungry. On one of these occasions, he imitated a friend of his, a famous wizard,¹ who was able to swim in the sea like a fish. He dived into the sea, and swam deep down until he reached the neighbourhood of a large village, where the inhabitants were fishing for halibut. Keeping himself well out of sight, Yētl commenced helping himself to the fish on the hooks as fast as they were caught. The fishermen became troubled at the constant loss, not only of their fish, but also of their hooks, which were of the ordinary type used for halibut, and at last one of them determined to try a hook of another shape, consisting of a straight wooden shank with a bone barb on each side (see Pl. XX, 3, a specimen from the Vancouver collection in the British Museum. Smaller hooks of this type are, according to Mr. Niblack,² used as jigs, when the fish are numerous. This form of hook is now almost entirely obsolete, though it is often mentioned in the old stories.) It was baited with a piece of the arm of a devil-fish, and let down with a stone sinker. Soon there came a strong bite; when the line was pulled, great resistance was experienced, and the line was dragged hither and thither for a long time. Several other fishermen joined in, and by their united efforts dragged the hook up as far as the bottom of the canoe but no farther, since Yētl (for it was he who had been caught) was holding tight to the sea bed with his claws. Suddenly the line slackened, and the men fell back. When they pulled it in, they found on the hook the upper part of the Raven's beak, but none of them could guess what it was. Later, when the fishermen were sitting together, Yētl, taking human shape, entered the house, and seated himself among the wise men, taking care however to conceal the lower part of his face. Trying to speak, all he could say was "Káguskünt," a word which is mere gibberish. Pretending not to know what the piece of beak was, he induced the wise men to let him have it, and keeping firm hold of it, replaced it. Directly it fitted, he flew away through the smoke-hole in the roof, and went to another village. Later, however, he again became hungry, so he concealed his nose, which had not yet healed, and once more took the shape of a man; then, armed with the chief's staff (Tüşkexiekina), he sat down among the head men, and ate with them, and proved his wisdom by his talk.

The figure on the summit of the pole represents Yētl disguised as a chief with the hat (Tadn Skillik) and staff (Tüşkexiekina). The second figure represents Yētl with his broken beak. (The flattened portion is actually a trifle larger, and the flattening a trifle more pronounced than appears from the sketch.)

¹ Possibly Txämsem, for whom see later.

² *Smithsonian Report*, 1888. "The Coast Indians of Southern Alaska and Northern British Columbia," Plate XXX.

II. Long ago, there lived in a large town a young man who was always gambling at Sín (the game played with a number of short sticks described by Niblack, *Coast Indians, etc.*, p. 343). He soon lost all his property, and thought to improve his position by marrying the daughter of a wealthy chief. In this project he was successful, but as he continued to gamble he soon became as poor as before.

One night, coming home very hungry, he took up a piece of dried halibut and commenced tearing pieces off with his teeth. This made a peculiar ripping sound, and his wife's mother, who was not fond of him, put him to shame before the whole house by saying that he was splitting himself by his greediness, just as men split a piece of wood with a wedge when making canoe thwarts. The man choked with vexation, stopped eating, and nearly wept. Early next morning he went off into the forest alone and ate "devil's club" stems (jítlínjaos, *Panax Horridum*),¹ just as the Haida eat fireweed (K'liēl, *Epilobium Spicatum*). After a prolonged course of this diet, he developed supernatural powers like a Shaman or S'haga. One night he went down to the beach and began to wish that a whale might come ashore, and soon this happened at the very place where he was sitting. He then rose up, cut a hole in the whale and got inside. The whale swam away and stranded opposite the centre of the town.

In the meantime, while this was happening, his wife's mother, who was herself a powerful Shaman, had a dream in which she saw a fine whale come ashore right opposite the village. In the morning she put on her Shaman's attire, took her magic rattles, *Klínunñ* (Pl. XX, 2).² She then called all her neighbours together,

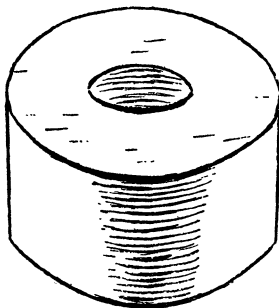


FIG. 1.—RATTLE OF UNUSUAL SHAPE.

told them of her dream, and they all drank warm seawater. They then went to the beach and found the whale; but when they were about to divide it amongst them, the woman said, "Do not cut it up yet, we must first dance upon it." This they did, the woman using her rattles, the others drumming with sticks, and all singing. When the dance was over they cut the whale, just, as it happened, over the part where the man lay hid. He stood up so that all saw him, and his wife's mother was so ashamed that she cried. The others were glad and kept the story, which has been handed down to this day.

The third figure represents the wife's mother with her Shaman's headdress and rattles.

The fourth figure is a crest showing the sea-bear (Cha^akun Huts) eating:—

The sixth figure, a young whale (Kūn).

¹ Compare *Tsimshian Texts*, Smithsonian Institution. *Publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Bull. xxvii. Prof. Franz Boaz. A chief drinks a decoction of Devil's Clubs to purify himself before giving a potlatch.

² Mr. Newcombe says the rattles held by the third figure on the pole are "of uncommon shape, made of two concentric cylinders of thin wood, covered above and below, and containing small pebbles between them" (Fig. 1). But after a study of the carving on the pole, I am inclined to think that they are of the old type, constructed of two concentric hoops of wood to which are attached a single or double row of puffin-beaks.

I have given the legend of the Raven Yētl in full, although practically the same story has been published by Professor Boaz.¹

In the latter case, the fishermen's hooks were plundered by a certain wizard named Txämsem, to whom reference seems to be made above—a rather comic character with a fondness for stealing. In this case, the object hauled up was Txämsem's lower jaw and beard. A still closer parallel is found in the story of the Raven or Crow *Hooyeh* and the Fisherman *Hooskana* related by Niblack.²

The story accompanying the model pole, collected by Mr. Keen, runs as under; I give it in full because it differs considerably in detail from that related above.

Legend of the Model Totem Pole from Masset, Queen Charlotte Island.

The top figure represents NēngKilstlas,³ a mythical hero of the Haida, and nephew of a chief of the same name, who was the creator of all things. This young man could assume any shape he liked, but his favourite form was that of the raven (hence the raven's head and wings), but he sometimes made himself appear as an old man with conjurer's hat and staff as here represented.

The fifth figure on the pole is that of a young man, name unknown, who married and lived with his wife's parents. One day his mother-in-law (the third figure, with labret, *Staiie*, and puffin-beak rattles) heard him eating dried salmon in bed and reproached him with laziness. He was much irritated by her reproaches, and next day took a stone adze, went to the shore of a lake in the woods, and cut down a red cedar so that it fell into the lake. He then returned to the village, caught one of a group of children and killed it. Coming back to the lake, he made a rope of cedar bark and tied it to the body of the child. Then he split open the head of the tree which overhung the lake and wedged it, thus constructing a large fork, between the prongs of which he dropped the body of the child. Before long this human bait was taken by a huge mouse; this he drew up, and then knocked out the wedge so that the fork closed upon his prey and killed it.

After skinning it, he dressed himself in the hide and went out into the sea hunting for whales, several of which he caught and killed.

Meanwhile his mother-in-law had become a conjurer, and one day she saw her son-in-law in his mouse shape, swimming ashore with a whale which he had caught. The people of the village were alarmed, but the woman said she knew the animal since she was a conjurer.

When the mouse came to land out walked the man, and confronted his mother-in-law. In this way her false pretensions were exposed, and she was so overwhelmed with shame that she died.

The figure at the base of the pole represents the mouse; the second and fourth figures are the whales caught by the young man in the mouse's skin.

¹ *Tsimshian Texts*, p. 50. Txämsem seems to be identified with the raven.

² *Coast Indians*, etc., p. 323.

³ For legend of NēngKilstlas, see Boaz, *Indianische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Küste Amerikas*, p. 306.

With that part of the legend which deals with the capture of the mouse, it is interesting to compare the story of the poor little boy, Masemstiōntsē'tsk^u, related by Boaz. (*Tsimshian Texts*, p. 146 foll.) Here the hero is chased by a huge frog which comes out of the lake, and which he ultimately catches in a trap made of a tree split and wedged in the same fashion as that mentioned above. He then puts on the frog's skin, and catches fish in the lake, and later fish and whales in the sea. A similar trap is also mentioned in the story of Ts'ak (*ib.* p. 133).

Of these two legends, the first seems the more detailed and perfect; and though the introduction of the mouse in the second somewhat adds to the story, it seems very hard to believe that the artist intended the second and fourth figures to represent the same animal, since they are so very unlike both in form and in colouring.

Also in both poles the arrangement seems to suggest that the young man is shown inside the fourth figure. The idea of a man assuming animal shape in the water is found in the legend of the killer whale related by Niblack,¹ and is illustrated in the house post now in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford.²

With regard to the figure at the base. In the case of the larger pole it is said to be a sea-bear. In the case of the model it is said to be a mouse. The model house, however, is called the bear-house (Haida, *Hūj-nas*), and the owner's crest is the grizzly bear. On each of the corner posts sits an animal with grinning teeth, said to represent the latter; and inside is a small totem post representing the same animal, but with no teeth showing between his lips, sitting on the head of another creature said to be the frog. The bear inside the house resembles, to some extent, the animal at the base of the pole outside, and is coloured in the same way; his snout, however, is rather shorter and his mouth more of a straight line. It would be possible to suppose that the small head between the feet of the outside figure is that of the frog, certainly it is a miniature of the second animal inside.

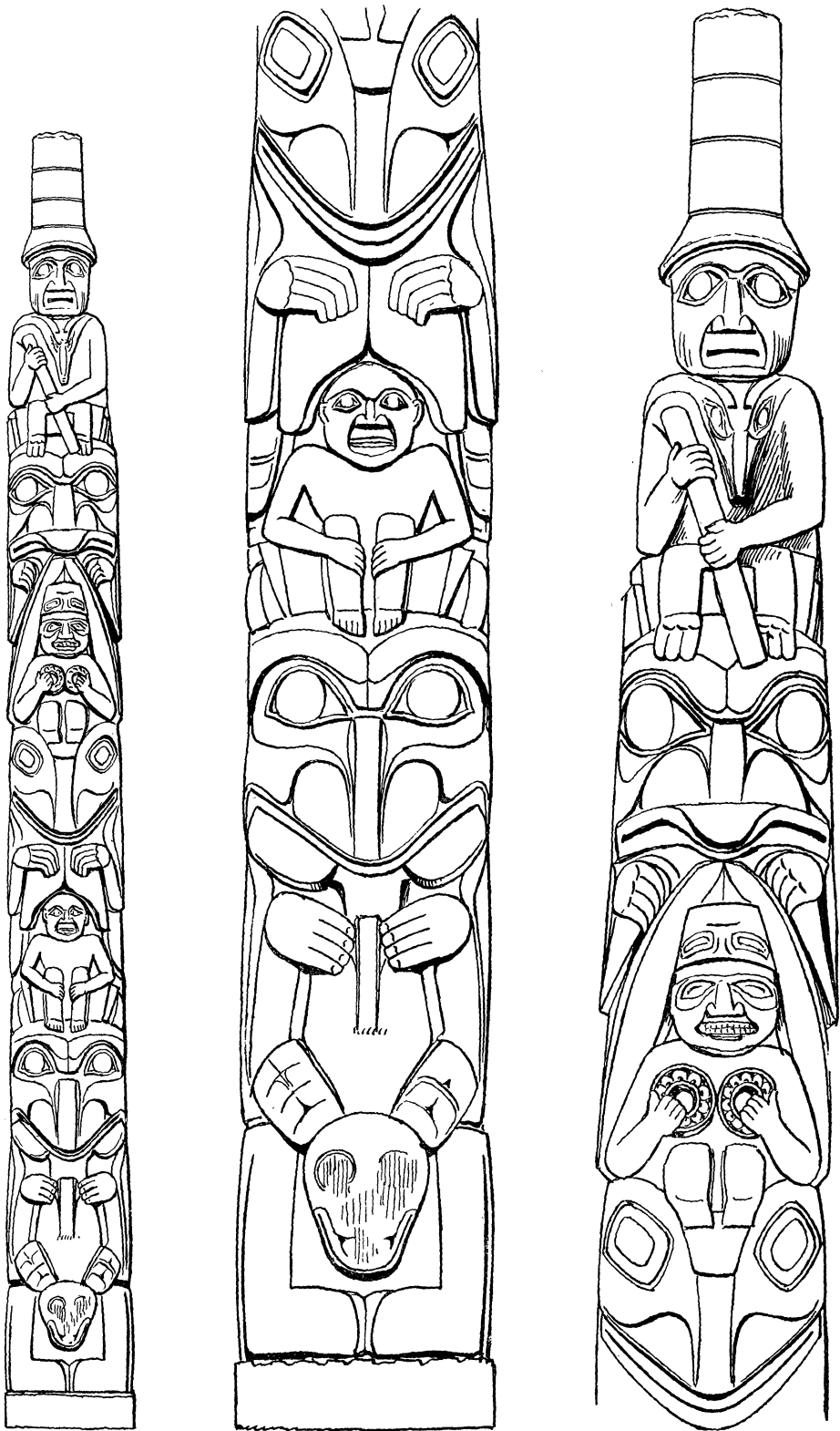
On the other hand the animal at the base might conceivably be identified as a mouse, in the case of both the large pole and of the model, this would explain the whale he is represented as holding in the former. Then the small head in the latter would also be that of a whale, the body of which has disappeared owing to the necessity of constructing a door in the pole. We then might suppose that the legend originally represented the young man as assuming, for the purpose of confronting his mother-in-law, the form of one of the whales he had caught in his mouse-shape, and this would explain the fourth figure.

The difficulty of the question is only increased by a reference to the totem pole at Fox Warren. In this case the animal at the base appears from the photograph recently published in this Journal³ to resemble exactly the figure on the Kayang pole, even to the tail of the whale, which he holds in his mouth.

¹ *Coast Indians, etc.*, p. 322.

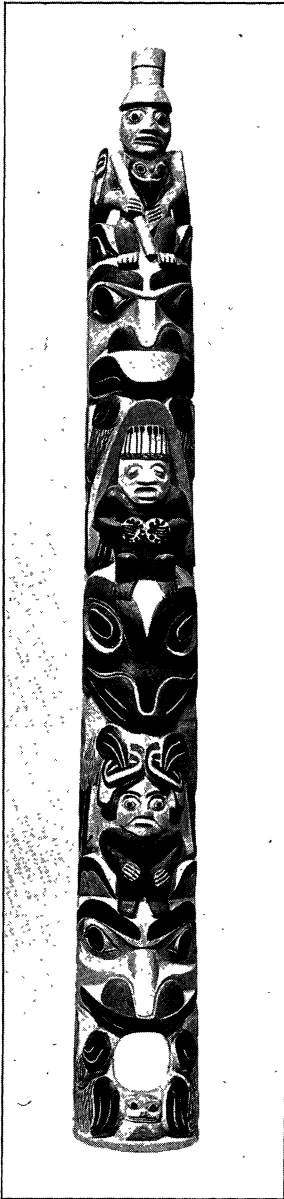
² *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xxviii, "On the Totem-post from the Haida village of Masset, Queen Charlotte Islands," p. 133. Prof. E. B. Tylor.

³ *loc. cit.*

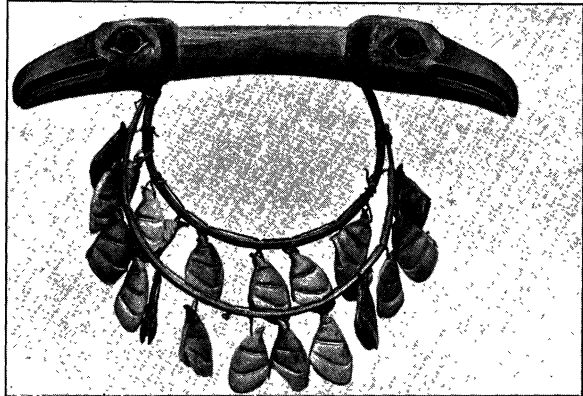


Totem Pole, village of Kayan, near Masset, Queen Charlotte Island. (Height 39 feet.)

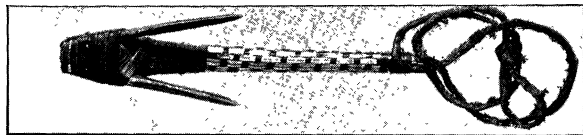
A TOTEM POLE IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.



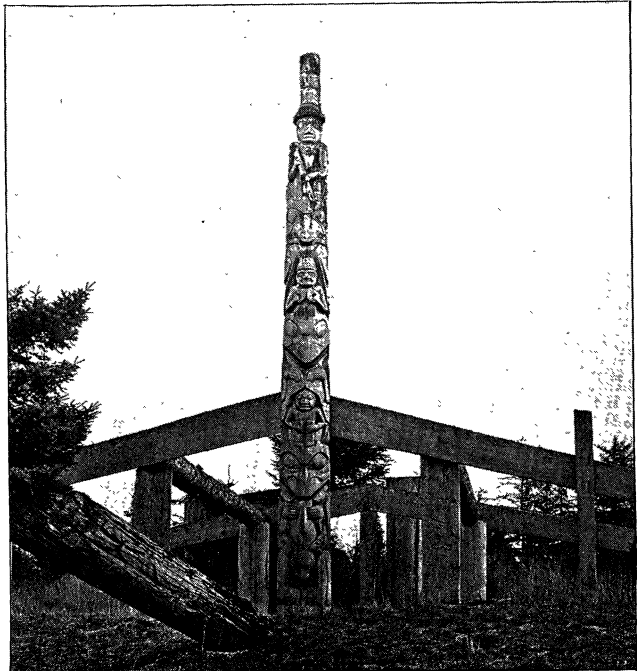
1. Totem Pole of a Model House, now in the British Museum.



2. Rattle of Puffin Beaks, N.W. Coast of America; Christy Collection. (Breadth 24 cm.)



3. Hook with two points, N.W. Coast of America; Vancouver Collection. (Length 16.5 cm.)



4. The Totem Pole, with remains of house, on the shore at Kayan.

And this animal is said to be the Wolf! Personally, I am inclined to the first theory, that the bear or sea-bear is the animal represented, chiefly because that animal is, in both cases, the totem of the owner of the pole. The fourth figure would then be the whale, and the two elongated marks appearing under each elbow would be fins. The story of the raven seems quite sufficient to account for the peculiar flat face of the second figure, and also gives additional point to the figure at the top.

The decline, in the native estimation, of the importance of these totemic columns has doubtless led to a similar decline of the interest felt in the stories which they embodied. The original forms have undergone further alteration by improvisations on the part of the story-teller, and by confusion with other legends. This naturally renders the identification of the more obscure types of animal in the totemic carvings and paintings a matter of considerable difficulty, and it is to be hoped that, as opportunity arises, as many legends as possible relating to totem poles and similar carvings will be placed on record for purposes of comparison with the stock already published.