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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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A HEADACHE OR A PAIN IN THE NECK?
A SMALL-SCALE SALVAGE EXCAVATION OF A
MIDDEN/BURIAL AT OPITO BAY, COROMANDEL

Angela and John Calder

In July 1972 a small rescue excavation was undertaken to examine a beach midden (N40/16) at Opito Bay, Coromandel. The site had been re-exposed by contractors building a road along the beachfront. Over a metre's depth of sand had been removed, revealing the right side of a human cranium.

Previously the site had been reported by Green (1963) as an Archaic "non-concentrated midden". He based his claim on the location of several Archaic features, including the presence of Mayor Island obsidian, but added that further investigation was essential.

Unfortunately, Green's words remained unheeded and by the time the 1972 rescue operation was effected only a small portion of the site was available for examination.

Two $1\frac{1}{4}$ x $1\frac{1}{2}$ metre squares were prepared but only one was completely exposed. There were two distinct layers. Layer (1) was a dark sand with evidence of grass roots but no grass or topsoil above it. This contained a few bivalves, beach pebbles, and a small number of Tahanga flakes. Cut from this layer into Layer (2) below, was a basin-shaped hearth, over 50cm in diameter. This was filled with charcoal-stained sand, a burnt stone - identical to a *haangi* stone in appearance - and a few Tahanga flakes. Layer (2) was a golden brown sand and proved quite sterile throughout. Altogether the excavation reinforced Green's description of a "non-concentrated midden", with the hearth being the only structural evidence located.

Some 30cm away from the hearth in Layer (1) were the human remains noted above. A skull articulating with both a mandible and four cervical vertebrae were recorded. There was a full complement of

teeth, all in a good state of preservation with little evidence of wear. A superficial examination of these remains revealed a large fracture in the lambdoid region. The cervical vertebrae were articulating normally with each other and with the skull, but were laterally flexed towards the left side.

The inference taken was that a young adult had been hit over the back of the head, decapitated, and the head and neck deposited near to the hearth, gravity having flexed the neck downwards. The lack of any associated structures other than the hearth and the absence of any other human bones leaves little alternative to such a conclusion. However, a more detailed analysis of the bones should prove rewarding. In any event, the unfortunate individual was subject to a severe headache, and possibly also a pain in the neck.

REFERENCE

- GREEN, R. C. 1963. "Summaries of Sites at Opito, Sarah's Gully and Great Mercury Island", *NZAA*, 6 (1): 57-59.