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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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A LURE HOOK SHANK FROM SHAG RIVER MOUTH, OTAGO

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Last month Peter White (Sydney), Graeme Mason and I visited several of the north Otago sites and, at Shag Mouth, recovered a fine example of the stone minnow lure hook shank. This was lying on the surface of the sand at the edge of the lagoon close to a series of waterlogged ovens in an area, which, judging by Teviotdale's (1924:4) sketch map, has been heavily eroded in the last sixty years. As near as I can place it in relation to his map it lies towards the southern edge of the 'Swamp with moa bones'.

The shank (Fig. 1) is made of a pink tuff or phyllite, through which a black line runs. According to Graeme, material of this kind occurs in north Otago and south Canterbury and he recalls seeing something very similar outcropping in the Pareora gorge. Amongst the lure hook shanks in the Otago Museum is a fragment of one from Pounaweia (D48.311) which is in identical material.

Triangular cross-sectioned minnow lure hook shanks with fins, as in this example, are characteristic of southern South Island coastal sites of the early period, particularly of Shag Mouth. They, and stone lure hook shanks in general, are an interesting class of artefact worth a good deal more study than they have received hitherto, particularly because some of them, unlike the present Shag Mouth example, have attributes apparently inconsistent with a purely prosaic function as fishing implements. For example, of the nine complete and finished shanks of this kind from Shag Mouth in the Otago Museum collection (seven of which are finned), three have no point lashing grooves, two have no hook platforms and two have no 'eyes' drilled at the front. The hook platforms, on the seven which have them, are so small (6-12 mm long and 2-4 mm wide), that it is difficult to see how the points could have been securely lashed onto them. In the present example the grooves cut at the back of the hook platform may have provided some additional lashing support, but none of the shanks in the Otago Museum collection have these. Since points for these lures are quite rare and have seldom been found in close association with the shanks (e.g. Teviotdale, 1932:21), and since some shank fragments are of such a size that the complete specimens must have been 200 mm

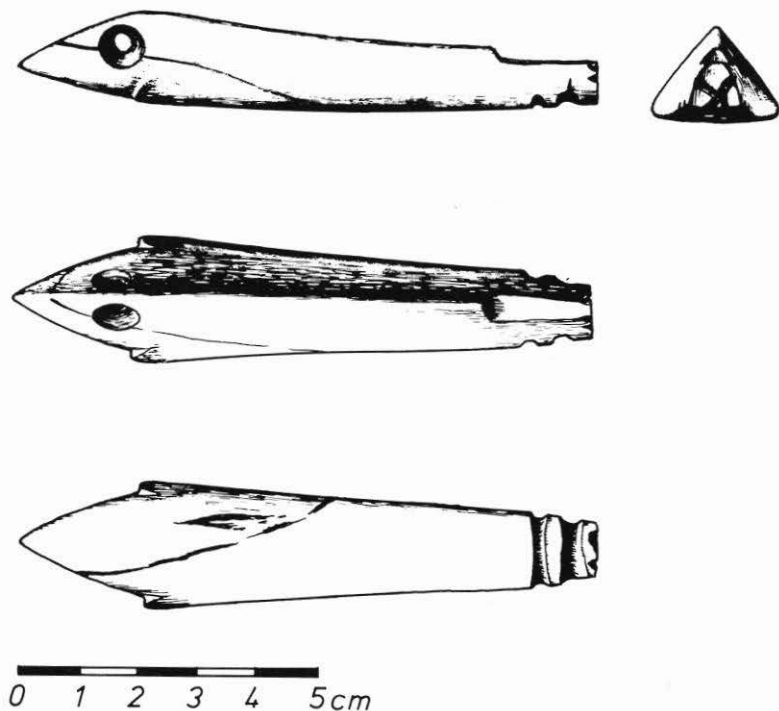


FIGURE 1. Stone lure hook shank from Shag mouth.

or more long, the case for a purely utilitarian function is not a strong one. It may also be noted that barracouta, the only trollable fish found abundantly in the south, was caught with wooden lures of a very basic design, some of which, and the simple bone points which were attached to them, occur in early South Island sites such as Moa Bone Point Cave (Skinner, 1923). The line was attached to these lures at the front, thus eliminating the section of line along the top of the stone lure which would have been in danger of being severed.

Duff (1977:202) suggests that several of the stone minnow lure shanks from Wairau Bar may have been used as pendants, and there is some evidence that lure hook shanks were used

elsewhere in the Pacific as pendants or necklace units (see, for instance, Leach and Ward, 1981:74). Closer investigation of the stone lure hook shanks in New Zealand is called for.

Acknowledgement Thanks to Richard Newell for the illustration.

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