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A MAHIA PENINSULA SEA MAMMAL BUTCHERY SITE (N127/14)

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In January 1986 a violent south-easterly storm swept onto the coastline of Onenui Station on the Mahia Peninsula. It ripped a haybarn door into a giant corkscrew, blasted a vegetable garden to pieces and scoured the soft golden sand from the raised beach terrace.

One month later a large oven of greasy charcoal slabs and stones was exposed to view for two fortunate site-recorders. The oven stood on a pedestal of iron-sand above a pebbled beach terrace. Lying in front of it was a pile of teeth and bones. A block of obsidian lay with the debitage of tools that had been fashioned there scattered across the pebbles on the terrace.

Identification of the teeth and bones show that two seals and one sea lion were butchered there. Of the New Zealand sea lion (Phocarctus hookeri), elements from the head, trunk and both forelimbs are present implying a complete carcass at the site. One fur seal (Arctocephalus forsteri) was an adult male. All body parts are represented. One of the hyoid bones, which sit in the throat, shows cut marks demonstrating that this animal had been butchered. The second fur seal was a small juvenile, probably of two or three years age. It is represented by bones from all parts of the body. Two vertebrae show cut marks. The remainder of the material includes a femur from an ?elephant seal (Mirounga leonina) pup, two rats and a tuatara (Sphenodon punctatus). The heavy greasy charcoal had cooked all or some portion of this large feast.

Among the bones on this midden terrace, eight species of bird are represented. These are fairy prion (Pachyptila turtur), fluttering shearwater (Puffinus gavia), blue penguin (Eudyptula minor), black shag (Phalacrocorax carbo), weka (Gallirallus australis), kaka (Nestor meridionalis), red-crowned parakeet (Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae), bush pigeon (Hemiphaga novaezelandiae). The kaka, parakeet and the pigeon are birds whose habitat is often podocarp forest. One fragment of moa bone was recovered.

Mahia Peninsula is now mainly farmed grasslands but on the north-western side is a Department of Lands and Survey reserve of the last lowland podocarp forest on the east coast. In the deep inland gullies there are remnants of this forest where local people tell you their ancestors went fowling.

Remains of the toolmaking were the 100 x 100 x 10 mm block of green obsidian from Mayor Island and 106 flakes and pieces

of obsidian also recovered. Several flakes show edgewear. One small scraper of obsidian lay near the block.

After that New Year storm even sites less exposed to the direct onslaught of wind and rain, were laid open for inspection. These include many small open settlements. House floors with an L-shaped bank would provide a shelter wall for a summer sleeping-hut. Small pits, fireplaces and midden, mainly reef shells, were alongside these features.

Where the sea mammal site, N127/14, fits into the time-scale of the seasonal camps recorded on the Onenui coast is not known. But along this coast, inhabited today only by sheep and flocks of wild geese grazing and sheltering among the sites, the early Maori came to camp each summer. With fishing from sea and reef and birding in the forests, living there must have been pleasant indeed.

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