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A MUSEUM UNDERFOOT

Trevor Hosking
Taupo

This story begins about 1941 when I was old enough to use a .22 rifle and explore the sand dunes from Foxton Heads to Hokio Beach in search of rabbits. It was not long before my attention was drawn to the great heaps of seashells exposed by wind behind the dunes. A thousand questions crowded in as more and more heaps were found. Here and there a stone fragment or a tiny piece of nephrite, granules of what I now know to be kokowai, and a telltale section or two of broken bottle with obvious flaking. Little or no obsidian and no hangi stones. One fragment of bottle base had the letters "...bello" embossed on it and the other piece was an early square gin bottle of the 1860s. Years later my research into bottle makers uncovered the story of the bottle. In the base there is "COOPER & WOODS Portobello." Cooper and Woods, who initially ran separate glass works, amalgamated in 1859. In 1868 the partnership broke up, so that the bottle's age is between 1859 and 1868, thus dating the midden it was found on. Information on bottle manufacture subsequently proved invaluable in dating sites found during my archaeological involvement in the Tongariro Power Development Project.

A huia is heard

In 1949–50 Brydon Speedy formed the Palmerston North Polynesian Discussion Group, consisting of a small group of people interested in researching Maori History. We met once a month at the Speedy home where there was a vast library of books on things Maori. Members researched a topic and presented a paper at the next meeting. We were fortunate to have a Maori member, Matenga Baker of Otaki, who was able to give advice and correct our errors.

On one occasion the police passed on to Brydon Speedy a collection of bones unearthed when bulldozing work struck them in the course of adding a few furlongs to the track at Awapuni Racecourse. I was delighted to investigate and found that about a metre of overburden had been levelled during the half-circle extension to the track. The resulting two corners had been disc'd for planting potatoes. From the direction of the discing I was able to ascertain how the bones had been transported and traced them back to their likely origin. Due

to my voracious reading on archaeology I realised there was a lot more to it than digging a pit to see what one could find. One book conveyed the idea of stratigraphic excavation and careful recording. Here was an opportunity, in 1953, to try it out, probably for the first time in New Zealand.

For a carpenter it was a simple matter to lay off a grid of regular squares and set up a datum level. All this well before the advent of the NZAA, pre-Jack Golson as well. Using small trowels and brushes we cleared the spoil away and carefully collected up the scattered bones. In the end we exposed four burials, two of which were below disc level and two that had been struck, providing the scatter of bones on the surface. Photos were taken as we progressed, and we had a visit from Matenga Baker. He stood for a while, then pointing to the left hand, undamaged burial, said "That one is a rangatira, I can feel him." Then began the dismantling of the skeleton for passing on to the correct iwi. In the process of dismantling the vertebrae of the skeleton indicated by Matenga we found the skull and neck of a male huia, which had been on the rib cage and eventually fallen into the cavity between the upper vertebrae. Matenga was receiving the message loud and clear. A folded length of hoop iron had been placed between the woven cloak and the flax mat that wrapped the body. The weave of both was preserved as rust on the surface of the metal. At the feet were a number of hand made iron nails in a position indicating that they were a gift of value from a tribal member to the departed.

I conveyed the remains to "Doc" Tatere, a Dannevirke elder, whose reaction at first was hostile, but he calmed down eventually when I explained that our actions had prevented his ancestors being used as fertiliser for the potato crop. At that stage the billy was boiled and I was accepted as a friend.

Tapu at full voltage

Another adventure, around 1952, involved the mapping of an old pa at Takapu on Oruawhoro Station. Permission was given by the station manager, and I went next to Takapau elder George Herepi and asked for his approval. I especially asked if we would be infringing on any tapu area. He replied that all his people were buried three miles further east, and we had his full consent to map (see Bayliss 1975: 153).

The following weekend I returned with Chas Borlace and began the job. We used a plane table and alidade, a 66' steel tape and a scale rule 1/16" to 1 foot. We made good progress and were plotting in a row of hollows indicating heavy stockade posts. Chas pulled the tape out to the centre of the next hollow. We had just one hollow to go when Chas stopped at mid point, totally motionless. A shout to get on with it had no effect, so I went to him and asked what was wrong. He pointed to the last depression, the post of which would have held the

right hand entry to the pa. I discovered years later that the right hand gate post is the same to Maori as the Union Jack was to English settlers. I suggested that Chas move away and asked what he was getting. He said, “There is something very bad there and it feels like ice water poured down my back.” Chas Borlace was in fact only $\frac{1}{4}$ Maori, but was picking up tapu at full voltage. I felt nothing whatever.

So archaeology took over. Careful excavation exposed a slab of limestone about 20" square and 4" thick. This was removed exposing the top of a skull on a site where we had been told there were no burials. Rather than digging down I opened up a pit in the undisturbed soil along side and then proceeded to expose the skeleton with trowel and brush in half section. The post had been erected with arms and legs wrapped around it. On the floor of the hole was the skeleton of a baby beside the mother's right foot. I carefully packed the two jaw bones and took them to my dentist in Palmerston North, who identified the adult jaw bone as that of a woman aged 30–45 and the baby $1\frac{1}{2}$ –2 years. The following week I returned the bone to the site and replaced the slab and turf.

The tradition of burial in the stockade post holes has also been recorded in the Whakatane area, the thinking being that the spirit of the dead would hold up the post for ever.

Correct technique at last

The next archaeological event in New Zealand was the arrival of Jack Golson in Auckland and Peter Gathercole in Otago. Jack soon gathered a band of enthusiasts around him and eventually the story reached Taupo. All were welcome and it wasn't long before my Xmas holidays were spent on Golson digs learning the correct methods of stratigraphic excavation. It is impossible to sort out the better digs from the fantastic digs—we were constantly breaking new ground.

At Ongare Point at the northern end of Tauranga Harbour we were a bit overwhelmed by the public interest and visitors trampling all over our excavations. The flow was reduced by a sneaky trick. We borrowed a few steel fence standards and a roll of cyclone mesh from the land owner and erected a short fence across the paddock between us and the road, hung a borrowed Hydatid Dosing Strip sign on, the people returned to the road and we got on with the job. It was on this site that I took two high profile elders from Taupo on a visit. We had exposed a very old hut floor covered by later defensive works. On the floor of the hut was dog excrement in some quantity. The elders were incredulous—“You dig down all that way with trowel and brush and all you get is tūtae kuri!!” Jack pointed out that this material would give us knowledge of what the kuri fed on hundreds of years ago, new information to pass on to the mokopuna. On the

way home I ensured that archaeology was explained to the kaumatua in terms they understood. I believe I was able to convince them that without archaeology we would know nothing about the ancient races of the Mediterranean or the Pacific and New Zealand. The people may have some, but their history is held by Papa the Earth Mother.

References

- Bayliss, W.J., 1975. *Takapau: The Sovereign Years, 1876–1976*. Hart Printing, Hastings.
- Hosking, T., 1953. Archaeological site records. Unpublished Reports, Palmerston North Library Archives.