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A NEW AGE MYTH : THE KAIMANAWA "WALL"

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INTRODUCTION

In the May 4, 1996 issue of *The N.Z. Listener* an article appeared titled "Megalith Mystery: Are giant stones in the Kaimanawa Forest Park evidence of an ancient New Zealand culture?" (Chapple 1996:28-29). It centred on Barry Brailsford's contention that "the Kaimanawa wall" was "the best (physical) evidence so far" of the pre-Maori "Waitaha nation" which he alleges flourished in New Zealand over 2000 years ago. Shortly thereafter I was telephoned by Jim Mora (of TV1) and asked to give a "traditional archaeological perspective" on the matter as part of an item on the Holmes Show arising from Brailsford's contentions about the "wall. That phone call was the beginning of an amazing media frenzy which lasted for about a fortnight. The Department's Taupo and Tongariro based field staff and I received over 100 phone calls about "the wall", in addition to being asked to participate in several national and regional radio interviews (including three from Australia) and to appear on TV1 and TV3 news. During this time (mid May 1996) "the wall" was a major topic on talk-back radio. The issue drew a range of views right across the spectrum. This brief paper is simply to outline the Department of Conservation's response and conclusions.

Until the late 1980s, Brailsford, a then Canterbury-based archaeologist and historian, supported the generally accepted view that New Zealand was first colonised about 1000 years ago via a series of Polynesian canoe landings. He published two popular books, *The Tattooed Land* (1980) and *Greenstone Trails* (1983), which helped him gain an MBE for services to Maori scholarship. These books did not challenge the conventional theories of New Zealand's first settlement. But, according to Brailsford, at the invitation of some South Island Maori elders (with Waitaha connections), he went on to publish *Song of the Waitaha* (1994) and *Song of the Stone* (1995). A series of five books of similar ilk are in the offing. These books tell of "a Waitaha nation"- by his reckoning some 200 tribes reputed to have settled in New Zealand 2000 years ago, only to be obliterated some 700-800 years ago by the arrival of a warrior culture (Brailsford, in part, equates the Waitaha with

the "Moahunters" pers.comm. May 1996).

Criticism of Brailsford has revolved around his lack of evidence, beyond quotations from a few elders who claim Waitaha descent and recite a genealogy going back 70 generations, rather than the record of 40 generations or so claimed in most Maori accounts. He has continued to assert that certain hard evidence does exist, unrecognised, such as stone altars reworked from natural forms, "some of them over 100 feet tall". Others see them as natural formations (Chapple *ibid.*).

But the Kaimanawa wall according to Brailsford is the real clincher, "the best evidence so far", of a pre Maori civilization in New Zealand, partly because "in terms of Maori culture, there is nothing like this [in N.Z.]" (Brailsford quoted in Chapple 1996:29). From his observations he contended the wall was too old to be European, and the style was not Maori.

Not surprisingly, Brailsford's contentions, publicised for the first time in highly accessible national media (*The Listener* and the Holmes Show), sparked a considerable public interest with attention focused on the age of "the wall", whether it was built or natural, and the possibility of a major re-write of the history of human settlement in New Zealand.

Time Sequence (April-May 1996)

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| c28 April | Listener article appears (in <i>The Listener</i> dated 4 May 1996) |
| c1 May | Dr Harry Keys, DoC Scientist, Turangi & DoC Field Centre Manager, Taupo inspect "wall" with Kingsley Field, N.Z. Herald reporter. Keys confirms (through Dr P Wood, IGNS Wairakei) that "the wall" is made of local Rangitaiki ignimbrite, and not sandstone or some other rock quarried at a remote source and conveyed by some means to the "wall" site. |
| 3 May | <i>N.Z. Herald</i> article by Kingsley Field, p.3. Dr Keys, as quoted in the article, left open the possibility that it was a man-made wall which unfortunately resulted in heightened media interest and speculation. Dr Keys understandably erred on the side of caution. At this stage "the wall" was still obscured by vegetation and the overlying ash/soil had not been examined but the thickness of this overlying material was clearly much less than in adjacent road cuttings. |
| 3 May | N. Ritchie, DoC archaeologist, Hamilton asked by TV1 to give "a conventional archaeology" opinion on the wall. |
| 6 May | N. Ritchie inspected the wall along with other DoC staff. Found about 30 people at the site, wide variety of opinions being expressed. A small amount of obscuring vegetation was |

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removed to enable inspection. A small pit was dug in front of the formation to follow the fracture pattern, and another (of which the writer was unaware at the time) near the top of the outcrop. Ritchie adamant "the wall" is part of a natural ignimbrite outcrop with some displacement of blocks of the stone along natural fractures; apparent symmetry doesn't stand close inspection; Interviewed at site with Brailsford, and U.S. maverick archaeologist/travel writer, David Childress for Holmes Show. In summary: Ritchie states the wall is a natural feature, Brailsford unconvinced, stressed its Waitaha connections, and Childress claimed it had to be at least 2000 years old.

- 7 May Main story breaks on Holmes Show
- 8-15 May Media frenzy, dozens of phone calls, radio interviews, everyone talking about it, much public speculation.
- 9 May Ngati Tuwharetoa spokespersons' claim the wall is an important kohatu, one of their "special places". Want a total access ban and no excavations.
- 10 May Brailsford, in a public meeting in Auckland, claims "the wall" is a place of special significance to the Waitaha, regardless of whether it is natural or built.
- c11 May Illicit digging by persons unknown exposes a lot more of the formation.
- 13 May am Meeting held at Taupo FC to discuss plan of action: Despite Tuwharetoa's desire for a total ban on access, this option was considered impractical because of the site's position beside a public road, but a rahui would be feasible.
pm. Dr Peter Wood, geologist, IGNS Wairakei available to go to the site and give an expert geological opinion on the wall. Coincidentally TV3 crew at location. Dr Wood states to TV3 that the wall is a natural feature and explains why.
- 14-15 May Newspapers and other media carry the story that the Department of Conservation's studies have confirmed that "the wall" is a natural formation. Media and public interest wanes rapidly.
- c15 May Tuwharetoa proclaim rahui on "the wall".

THE SITE

The "wall" is located at the toe of a relatively steep spur on the south side of Clements Mill Road within the Kaimanawa Forest Park (NZMS 260 map sheet U19 Kaimanawa, GR 864457). It is almost at road level and about seven metres back from the road. It is visible without leaving one's car.

The ignimbrite outcrop, of which the "wall" forms part, is covered with soil

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composed of a clay-coloured ash and fine pumice overlain by 30cm or more of humus. The composition and depth of the overburden was determined from the soil composition evident in a single small test pit excavated on the upper slopes of the spur. Without recourse to extensive testing, the average depth of the soil-ash-pumice appears to be about one metre. Nearby road cuttings have exposures, up to four metres thick, of layered pumice deposits from the AD 185 Taupo eruption. Therefore some form of preferential non-deposition or erosion process, probably attributable to local topography and the steepness of the spur, has resulted in the relatively thin soil-pumice veneer over the outcrop. The test pit in front of the wall revealed a similar clayey pumice soil. A large red beech (*Nothofagus fusca*) estimated to be at least 70 years old is growing on the outcrop immediately above the "wall". Its roots have caused some displacement of the blocks which make up the "wall".

RESEARCH, INSPECTION AND ASSESSMENT BY N. RITCHIE

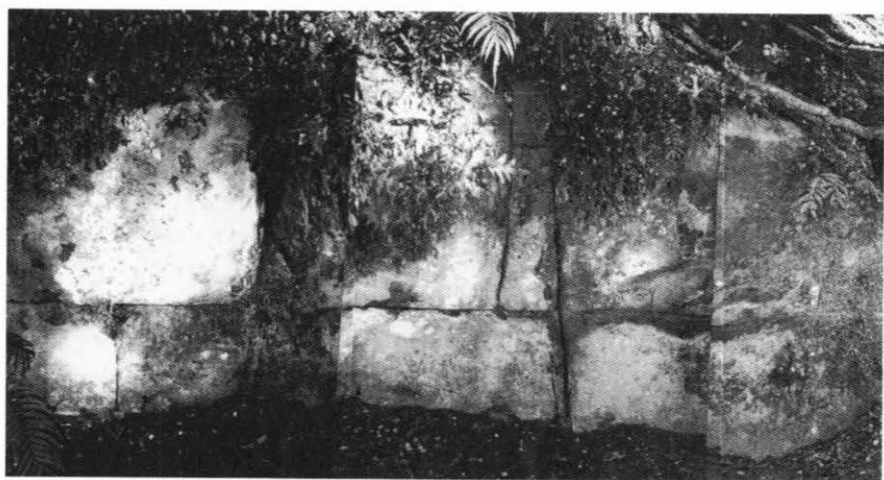
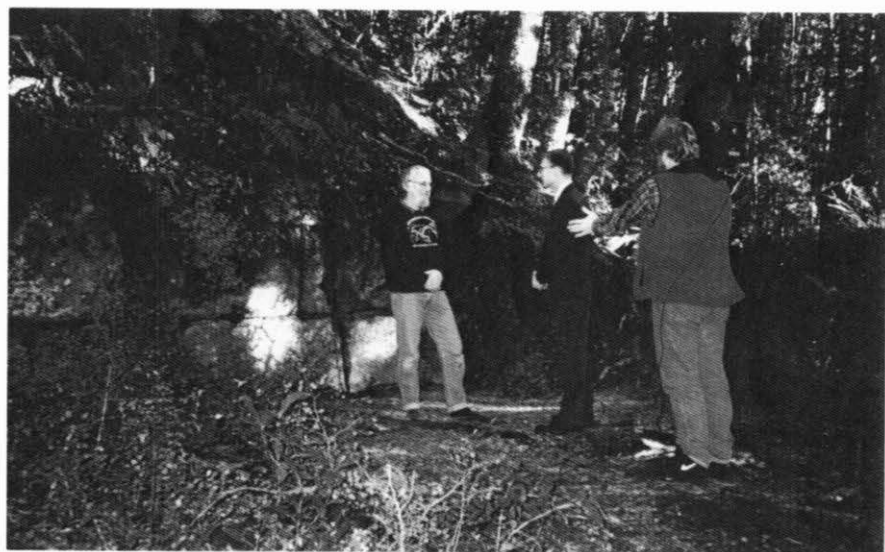
Following the request from TV1 to comment on "the wall" and having read the *N.Z. Herald* article (3.5.96), I undertook preliminary research prior to inspecting the site itself.

That research took two forms:

1. looking at available geological literature on the area, particularly with regard to ignimbrite and the nature of jointing in the rock.
2. research on past human activity in the area, in both pre-European and more recent times. As a first step in the process, the possibility that "the wall" was in any way connected with the nearby site of Clement's sawmill had to be eliminated. The mill was established in 1937 by Jack Clements, a timberyard owner in Hamilton. It closed in 1963.

I first examined the wall on 7.5.96. I was accompanied by Owen Wilkes (now with DoC Historic Resources in Hamilton), several Tongariro Conservancy field staff, and the TV1 news crew. Anticipating meeting only with Barry Brailsford, David Childress and N.Z. Archaeological Association's Taupo filekeeper Perry Fletcher, at the site, we were surprised to find about 30 people gathered there. It soon became apparent that many of those present, following the media publicity, had come to see the "wall" with their own eyes. At times it was difficult to see the rock for the people milling in front of it. About 50% of those present believed the feature was a wall or were unsure because "they couldn't see how nature could create such perfect blocks" (symmetrical fractures).

The size of the "wall" varies depending on how one measures it. Brailsford



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(quoted in *The Listener* article) states "that the four visible stones in the front were a uniform 1.9 metres wide by 1.6m tall, and one metre wide [deep].

"In one place you can insert an arm into a root ridden cavity and feel the back-face and the front face of the next tier".

Brailsford surmised, based on surface probing, that the wall was part of a stepped pyramid-like structure made of cuboid blocks stepping back up the hillside. He contends the "blocks" are evident (by probing) to a height of 6-7m above the base of the wall (i.e. the structure is at least 4-5 blocks high).

When I first saw the formation, I had no doubt that "the wall" was a small portion of a natural ignimbrite outcrop based on its general configuration and size, although I would be the first to agree that the remarkable symmetry of the blocks exposed at ground level at the front of the outcrop look very "wall like" at first glance, especially when the jointing pattern was obscured, as it was initially, by ferns, mosses and other vegetation. However, it didn't stand scrutiny. Close inspection immediately revealed several "natural features" such as perfectly matching micro-irregularities along the joints. In most instances, it was obvious (without recourse to measuring) that most of the fracture planes between the blocks were neither straight, nor truly horizontal or perpendicular. In other words the "blocks" which make up the supposed wall were not regular in size, nor perfectly worked building blocks as Brailsford implied (measurements taken by O. Wilkes confirm the discrepancies). On the contrary, the formation overall, not only looked natural, there was nothing to suggest it had been modified, that the stone was stacked (with one exception the joints are not staggered) or that it had been used for any human purpose such as a platform, altar, retaining wall or loading ramp.

A GEOLOGIST'S OPINION

Because the issue was unlikely to settle down or be resolved to most people's satisfaction without further research, Dr Peter Wood, a geologist with a specialist knowledge of local ignimbrites, employed by the Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences, Wairakei, was commissioned by the Department of Conservation, Tongariro Conservancy, to give an independent professional opinion on the "wall". By the time Dr Wood visited the site on Monday 13th May 1996, a much larger area of the outcrop had been exposed through an illicit excavation in front of the formation by persons unknown during the weekend. I quote from his report (Wood 1996):

"In my opinion the so-called "Kaimanawa Wall" in the Kaimanawa Forest Park is a natural rock formation. It is an outcrop of jointed Rangitaiki

ignimbrite, a 330,000 year old volcanic rock that is common in the Taupo Volcanic Zone.

The apparently regular block shapes are produced by natural fractures in the rock. These fractures (joints) were initially produced when the hot ignimbrite cooled and contracted after it had flowed into place during the eruption. Near vertical and horizontal joints are common in welded ignimbrites of this type. The forces of erosion, gravity, earthquakes and tree growth (roots) probably have all contributed to the movement and displacement of the blocks over time.

The apparent regularity and "artificial" aspect of the jointing is spurious. Most of the joints are not cuboidal. The eye is deceived mainly by one prominent horizontal joint which can be traced almost continuously along the outcrop into an area (recently excavated) where it is but one of an interlocking series of irregular joints. Even where the joints are most "block-like", detailed inspection of the joint surfaces showed they were natural, with small matching irregularities in opposing surfaces which would not be produced by artificial block laying."

PREVIOUS REPORTS AND EVENTS INVOLVING "THE WALL"

Despite the publicity Brailsford's recent claims about the "wall" have engendered, it has been the subject of at least one earlier non-conventional investigation. In 1990 Bruce Cathie, a former Air New Zealand pilot, who uses mathematical calculations to explain UFO phenomena, and the relationship of ancient sites, e.g. Stonehenge, the Great Pyramid etc, and world wide cosmic energy grids, contacted the Taupo area filekeeper Perry Fletcher after being shown photographs of the wall (Fletcher 1990). Cathie is the author of several books on harmonics and related topics. According to Fletcher (*ibid.*), Cathie checked the "wall's" location (grid coordinates N103 650056) against his grid system and concluded "that the place had significance, and was of a much older time than that of any known civilizations". Further discussion of Cathie's contentions are beyond the scope of this paper.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The conclusions of the Department of Conservation investigation into the "Kaimanawa Wall" are straightforward and unambiguous. The "wall", despite its remarkable symmetry at first glance, is a small part of a large ignimbrite outcrop created some 330,000 years ago. It is not a megalith. Neither "the wall", nor its parent outcrop, appear to have been modified by human activity, but the possibility that some loose blocks have been removed from the front of the "wall section" (most likely in European times) cannot be

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totally ruled out. The "wall" is not a unique natural feature. Similar block-like jointing patterns are known to exist in other ignimbrite outcrops in the Kaimanawa-Taupo region.

Despite contentions by some visitors that "the wall" is aligned directly north-south, and therefore its orientation is or must be significant, accurate measurements revealed that it is orientated in a general east-west direction (trending 93 to 98 degrees true), making the face c5 degrees off true north. While some might invoke divine providence to account for its position and general alignment, the more prosaic scientific explanation is that the proximity of the "wall-face" to true north is a coincidence; the result of natural processes (outlined earlier) and the topography which existed when the ignimbrite outcrop was formed.

The "stepped pyramid" form of the structure which Brailsford deduced from probing, merely reflects the natural steep ridge-like profile of the outcrop (as far as could be ascertained without extensive excavation). It is broad at the base and narrows towards the top of the spur. The Department of Conservation has no plans for further investigations at the site and no further research will be undertaken.

Brailsford's original contention that the formation is a wall (part of a structure) built by the Waitaha (pre Maori settlers) is wishful thinking based on surmise and spurious extrapolation of the physical, if not the historical, evidence. There is still no substantive archaeological evidence that New Zealand was settled by anyone other than the Polynesian antecedents of the Maori c1000 years ago.

In media statements, representatives of Tuwharetoa, the tangata whenua, stated they had "strong oral traditions" associated with the place. Such places are called kohatu. They refused to reveal more.

The public debate engendered by the "wall debate" resulted in the widest range of views being expressed publicly. Many (including a few Maori) were adamant or hopeful that "the wall" was evidence that an earlier people (i.e. non Maori) settled these islands first. At the other end of the spectrum, the rock formation is regarded by some (of New Age persuasion) as a "power node" or special place in a greater universe.

As in other instances where maverick researchers have suddenly burst into print with extreme or poorly researched claims, the "Kaimanawa wall incident" highlighted a number of difficulties which arise for scientists when they are expected to draw quick and under-researched conclusions on the spot for the media. Likewise, the presence of the public before a scientific

assessment has been satisfactorily concluded (or started in this case) is also an added pressure most scientists can do without. Laypersons can get the wrong idea about removing overlying vegetation, sampling, test pitting or similar activities which are often perceived as destructive. The tangata whenua's expressed disapproval of any further excavation would have been a major constraint in this case, if it had not been possible to confirm or refute Brailsford's contentions without more extensive subsurface testing. However, one remains optimistic that had more subsurface investigations been deemed necessary to resolve the matter, the tangata whenua following further explanation and discussion about the situation, would have approved such actions as were required to set the record straight.

The "Kaimanawa Wall incident" is a classic example of a modern media "beat up". The story had all the right ingredients: A maverick researcher challenging conventional theories of the human settlement of New Zealand, and a claim that he had at last found a site ("the wall") which was proof positive of the settlement of New Zealand (and by implication the Pacific) by a pre Maori people. Within the space of a week it was a major news story, although interest waned rapidly, once the contention that "the wall" was a natural feature was independently corroborated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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