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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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APPENDIX

A NOTE ON BIRDS AND "BIRDMEN" DRAWINGS IN SOUTH ISLAND ROCK ART

A. Fomison

In highly stylised examples of Maori wood carving, the manaia profile seldom looks like a birdhead, but the presence of "birdmen" in the most naturalistic style of South Island rock art is beyond dispute. The most immediately identifying characteristic of these "birdmen" is a profile bird's head in place of the usually frontal rendering of the human head; wings usually replace arms, and often there is a bird tail. The one figured here (Fig. 14, upper left) from Frenchman's Gully, South Canterbury (Site S.111/6) has been copied and reproduced several times in the last 20 years, and it is still the most detailed representation of a "birdman" on record - even the wing feathers are shown - and until recently it was the only one appearing in such a specific compositional relationship with birds, five of which have been drawn along the ground-line formed by the "birdman's" wings. The illustration here is from an area-tracing on polythene which I made in 1960 and I remember that, although the drawing had evidently been retouched in Indian ink, traces of the original colouring were visible beneath both the ink on the "birdman" and on the birds.

Final confirmation that the Frenchman's Gully drawing was not only genuine but something more than an isolated fantasy occurred this year with the discovery of a further two examples of the type. On 29-30 June 1968 I was taken by the Committee members of the North Otago Scientific and Historical Society on a tour of recent discoveries made by the site survey suggested and encouraged by M. M. Trotter and described by him in this issue. At Site S.127/66 I was able to identify and trace a hitherto problematic area of lines as a bird with its wings extended on either side in order to include three, possibly four, smaller drawings of birds. And on 5 August I traced a "birdman" with two birds, likewise arranged, at Site S.101/20, Hazelburn, South Canterbury. In this case one of the birds had, in fact, gone unrecognized for twenty years on T. Schoon's painted copy, E.150 332.

In Fig. 14 (Site S.111/6, Frenchman's Gully, South Canterbury) the row of birds of particular interest to this note vary sufficiently in treatment to suggest that they may have been added by different hands or at different times. These differences are minor variations in the use of a style; they are not attempts to differentiate between species of birds. In all five renderings the convention used is too generalized to allow for any identification more specific than perhaps "ground-bird".

Similarly, the small size of these bird-drawings does not necessarily indicate that they had a small species of bird, or immature birds, as their subject. The "birdman" drawn in conjunction with the birds has profile head turned right; the left leg of the drawing joins that of the dorsal fin of a fish, possibly shark. Below it is another "birdman" with profile head turned right and with an internal blank running the full length of the body. Most of the head of the birdman drawn on the right, with partial body-blank, has now flaked off. When first recorded, the head was more complete (Skinner, 1933: 195). When sketched by R. S. Duff in 1946, it was still in that condition (R. S. Duff field book No. 2, p. 103, Canterbury Museum). A complete reconstruction is given in Schoon copy E.150 463, Canterbury Museum (reproduced by R. Duff 1950: 9). In this type of head form, two lines often extend up or down from either side (e.g. Fig. 12); in the Frenchman's Gully instance the two projections had evidently been carefully terminated in a curve within the sweep of the arms.

"Birdmen" drawn together are often regarded as scenes or compositions, although this approach may be too literal; perhaps they are to be interpreted as a collection of symbols of the "bird-man" concept rather than illustrations of men "dressed up" as birds.

Fig. 15 (Site S.101/20, Hazelburn, South Canterbury) shows a black "birdman" with profile head drawn facing right, and two birds drawn in outline along its wings. The right wing is in superimposition with a human figure of the bi-triangular convention, but I have been unable to determine the sequence. The figure drawn on the other side of the "birdman" is joined to it by the arm. This figure has the head projections already noted. White lines are chalked with limestone below the tail of the "birdman".

To conclude this note, mention of the distribution of "birdmen" is made necessary by M. R. Dunn's article, "New Zealand Rock Shelter Art" (Dunn 1966) which confines them wrongly to Craigmore. Other "birdmen" occur at the three sites touched on above, and they are also recorded for most South Island localities of rock art.

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