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A PREHISTORIC FRAME PACK FROM INLAND CANTERBURY

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(Editor's note: in this short article Beverley McCulloch is responsible for the introduction and Michael Trotter for the description of the frame pack.)

Introduction

Archaeological lecture series to Extension Study Groups of the University of Canterbury are usually rewarding. Classes generally comprise people who really want to learn, and they tend to be good recruiting grounds for the Archaeological Association - some of Canterbury's best members have initially had their interest stimulated by our annual courses. The 1983 Rangiora group was no exception, and one member, Mr Nick Ledgard, provided a real bonus. He discovered, and reported, a cache of material of probable Maori origin in the Broken River area of inland Canterbury. I have mentioned the lecture series because as a result of these, he had been impressed with the importance of not removing or even handling any such archaeological find before it was seen by experts; as a result, when he discovered the cache on a Sunday afternoon picnic with his family, he resisted the very real temptation to have a closer look. He stressed to his family the importance of not telling anyone about it; returned home and rang me. I would like at this point to express my appreciation of Nick and his friend Mark Belton whose responsible attitude resulted in a very rare, important and fragile prehistoric Maori relic being recovered in as good a condition as possible, and with no human disturbance to the site prior to Michael Trotter's visit.

Of course, even silver linings have to have a cloud. After the call, I arranged to visit the site with Nick and Mark. Unfortunately 24 hours before the trip I succumbed to the 'flu', and as a result had to ask Michael to stand in for me at the last moment. I thus lost the opportunity to be a party to this unique discovery. But I did feel that I should write this preamble because when things like this happen it points out so clearly the advantages of public education in the preservation of such a valuable find. So having had my say, I hand over to Michael who in the end did the actual work.

The frame pack

The frame pack, for such it proved to be, was left undisturbed on my first visit to the site with Nick Ledgard and Mark Belton, as I considered it desirable to obtain not only a permit from the Historic Places Trust and the permission of the land owner Hamish Innes, but also to invite the participation of representatives of the Maori community in its removal. This actually took some time to arrange, and it was not until April 1984 that I returned to the shelter to fully record and lift the cached artefacts.

The site was a weather-proof shelter in limestone rocks less than a kilometre off what is now the main Arthurs Pass route to the West Coast (see Cover). Other more usual Maori relics have been found in the area from time to time as well as rock drawings and positive evidence of moa hunting in the vicinity. After being placed there, the pack had been held down with pieces of rock and had remained remarkably undisturbed, the main damage being caused by a possum which had nested in the shelter and had chewed the woven flax fibre.

As I will be publishing a detailed description of the pack eventually, I will confine myself here to a broad general description of its construction and contents.

The structure of the pack can best be described as resembling a squat duffle bag with the base approximately 70 cm in diameter and sides some 30 cm in height (Figs 1 and 2). The base comprised a circular hoop of some flexible wood (possibly manuka) to which was lashed two sub-parallel strengthening pieces and a cross piece. This was covered with a length of finely woven fabric which was folded around the hoop and lashed to the strengthening pieces with a mesh of flax strips. The flat outer side of this would have rested on the wearer's back when the pack was carried, and two flat woven straps were attached on the outside to be slipped over the wearer's shoulders.

The body of the pack consisted of a cylindrical strip of woven fabric, one edge of which was lashed to the circular wooden hoop. The other edge (the mouth of the pack) was fringed with a series of loops through which a drawstring was threaded to pull the opening closed. When worn this would have been lying on its side, so to speak, rather than being carried upright like a modern duffle bag.

The pack contained a padding of springy plant materials, the fabric of another slightly smaller pack, an awl made from a kiwi leg bone, two broken dog leg bones - these three being in a small finely woven pouch - an unfinished pendant of

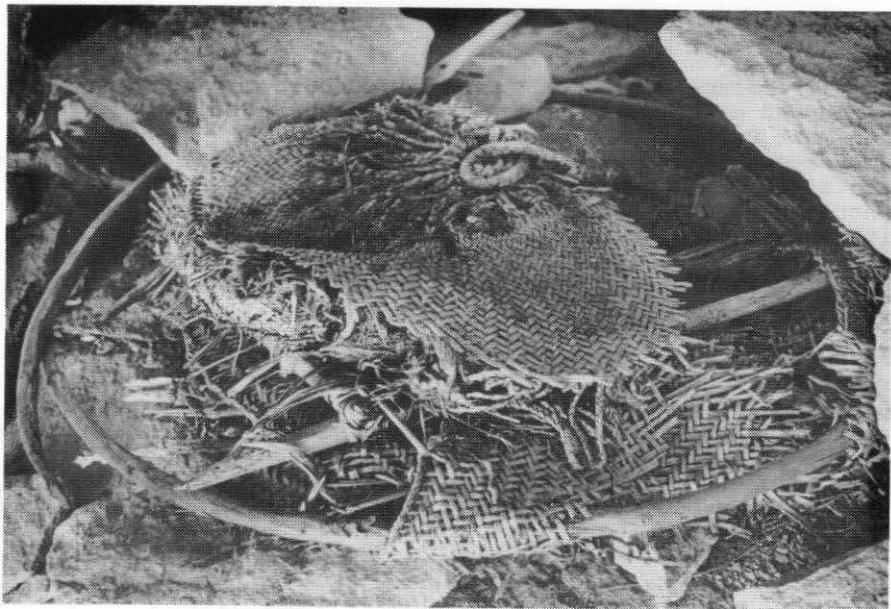


FIGURE 1. The pack as it was found.

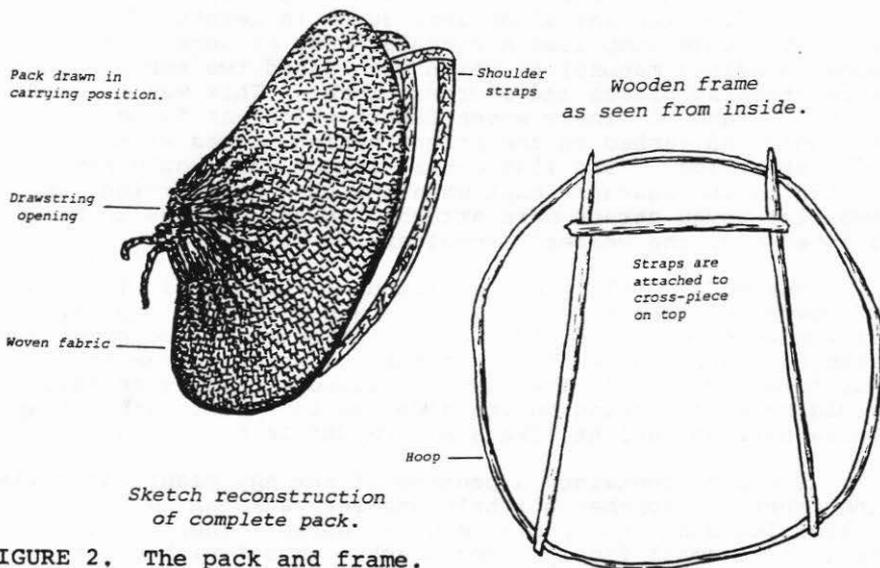


FIGURE 2. The pack and frame.

a kiwi leg bone, two broken dog leg bones - these three being in a small finely woven pouch - an unfinished pendant of paua shell, and a mass of prepared vegetable fibre from which a cord was in the process of being plaited. Beside it was a small bound coil of cord, some fresh-water mussel shells, another unfinished paua shell pendant, and some dry sticks - possibly firewood.

Because of its extreme fragility, the pack was photographed and sketched at all stages, both during its recovery and during the unfolding process back at the Museum. Samples of wood and fibre have been sent for analysis as well as bird feathers which were caught in the fabric in odd places. At this stage it is not possible to suggest an age for the pack as there is evidence of human activity in the area throughout most of prehistory.