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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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NEWSLETTER

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A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATIONS AT
SASOA'A, WESTERN SAMOA, 1966-1967

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INTRODUCTION

The unoccupied settlement of Sasoa'a, near the present-day Falevao, on the island of Upolu, was selected for investigation by Davidson and Green as one of the seven sites in the upper Falefa bearing on the problem of prehistoric settlement inland in Samoa. This particular site was chosen to establish an assemblage of excavated material from a site known to have been settled during the critical years of initial European contact in the earlier half of the 19th century. Although not appearing in village lists for 1840 A.D. or thereafter (Watters, 1958: 5), it is recorded that there was a missionary school in the village in 1838 (Mills, 1838).

The village is situated in the broad, fertile, well-watered valley stretching from Falefa to the Mafa Pass as described by Davidson (Davidson, in Green, *et al.*, 1967), and consists of 18 structures, mainly low rectangular mounds or platforms formed of water-worn boulders and layers of river gravel, or 'ili'ili', regularly paved, and outlined by a single row of boulders or curbstones. In the paved surface of each there is at least one oval structure outlined by a row of curbstones of a slightly smaller size than the perimeter stones, and of a size similar to that of a modern Samoan fale. The platforms are generally less than 50 centimetres high, but this is sufficient to raise the surface of each above the level of the ground-water of the surrounding flat, and often swampy, land, although the whole of the area is susceptible to flooding during periods of heavy rain.

During the 1966-67 excavations in Samoa, it was decided to excavate three of the structures in the village, and they have been designated SU-Sa-1, Sa-2 and Sa-3 respectively. Sa-1 had previously been tested by Davidson (Davidson, *pers. com.*) and had yielded an artefactual content clearly indicative of an early post-European occupation. The four student members of the team, Kisao Ishizuki (Doshisha University, Japan), and Kathryn De Nave, Trevor Hansen and J. R. McKinlay (all of the University of Auckland), had not previously worked in tropical Polynesia, and the work at Sasoa'a offered an opportunity for them to develop the necessary techniques to work in this area, and to accustom

SU-Sa - 1 Plan of post holes

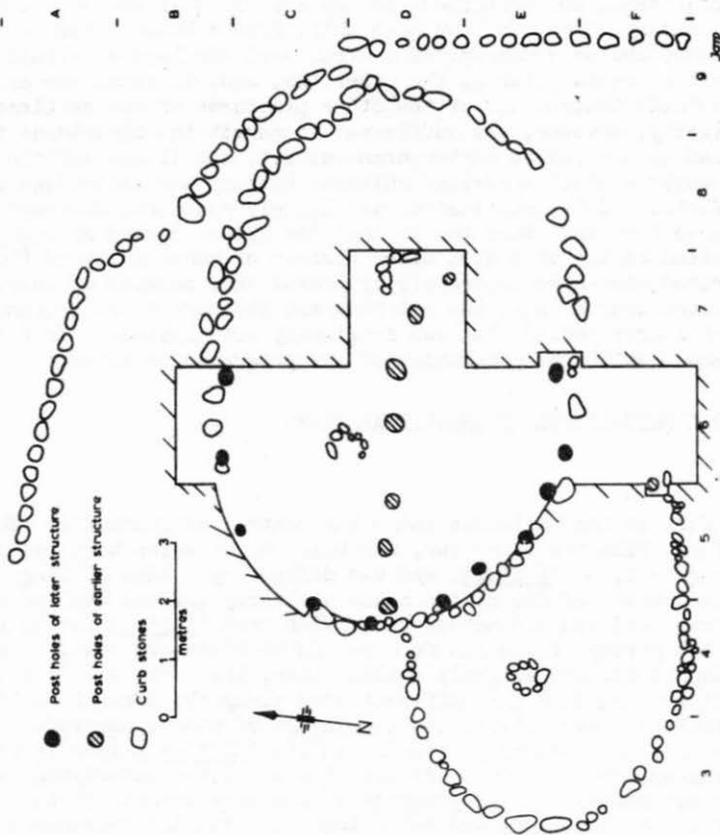


FIG. 1.

themselves to the new experience of controlling the work of untrained Samoan workmen with most of whom they did not share a common language. It was planned that, following this initial work, each of the student members should lead an individual excavation at a further site.

The excavation began on 15th December, 1966, with the clearing of vegetation from the site, and the sweeping down of the stony surfaces of the platforms, and continued, in the case of Sa-1 and Sa-2 until 10th January, 1967, and for Sa-3 until 22nd February, 1967. The three platforms chosen demonstrated a structural similarity, although Sa-3 was not as rectangular as the other two, and, in fact, had an extension on one side towards one of the other platforms of the settlement. The similarity, however, was sufficient to permit the structures to be grouped as a possible contemporaneous set, and it was anticipated that each would exhibit a similar cultural history and assemblage of artefacts. This anticipation was largely realised, although Sa-3 differed from the other two in that the latest period of occupation was sited on top of a much older horizon of human activity (to be described elsewhere separately by Green) and, because of this, the excavated area at Sa-3 was extended and the work there continued for a much longer period than was originally anticipated. In fact, it continued until the conclusion of the programme in Samoa.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF INDIVIDUAL SITES

Sa-1:

Work at this site was under the control of Ishizuki. This platform, like the other two, was built up of water-worn boulders and river gravel, or 'ili'ili, and was defined by a line of large stones. On the surface of the platform was a clearly defined oval of curbstones, 9 metres long and 6.5 metres wide, with only 'ili'ili paving within. When the paving of the platform was further cleaned down, a second oval, overlapped by, and slightly smaller than, the first was discovered. The first structure was half-sectioned along the line of Davidson's original test excavation, and the layers of stones removed. It proved impossible to identify post-holes in the 'ili'ili layers in which they originated, and they were not isolated until the underlying clay base layer was reached. The pavement of the more obvious structure overlay the fill of the other, and this, together with the overlapping, confirmed that the more obvious structure was the later of the two. The post-holes found were directly on the line of the stone ovals, indicating that the curbing stones had been put in place after the erection of the posts and then the interior filled by the layer of river gravel in much the same way as is practised today. Near the centre of each oval was a rectangular 'fire-pit' outlined by stones (see Fig. 1).

-Sa-2 Site plan and postholes alignments.

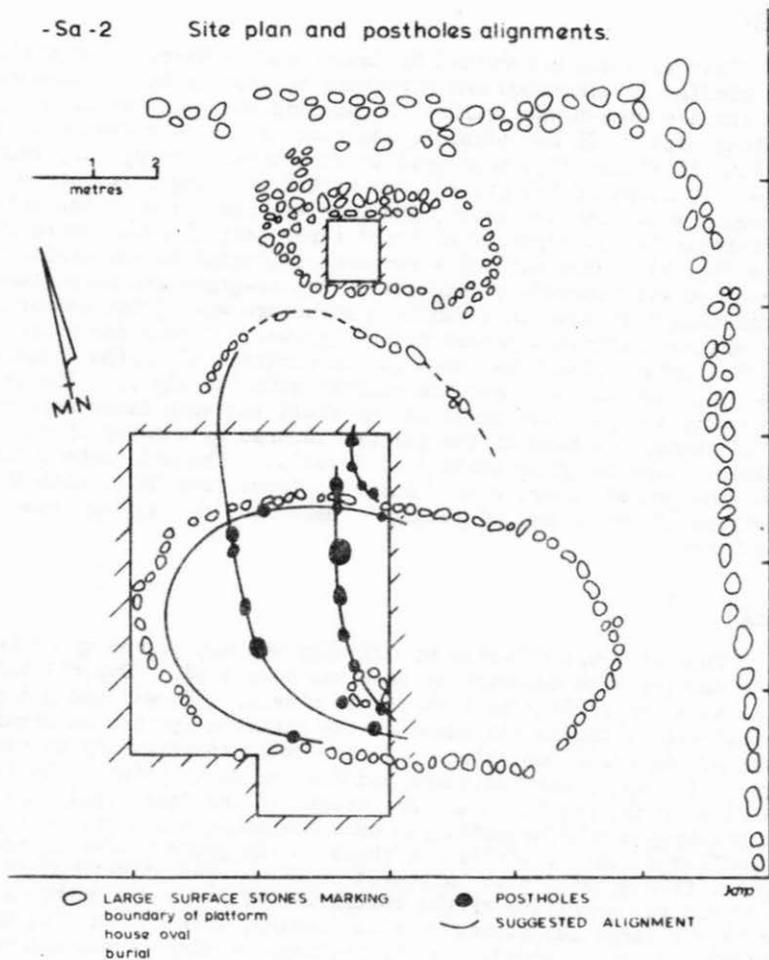


Fig. 2.

Some items of European origin (beads, glass, flint and clay pipe fragments) were found, together with two adze fragments and a piece of a grinding stone, both on the surface of the platform and from within the layer of gravel.

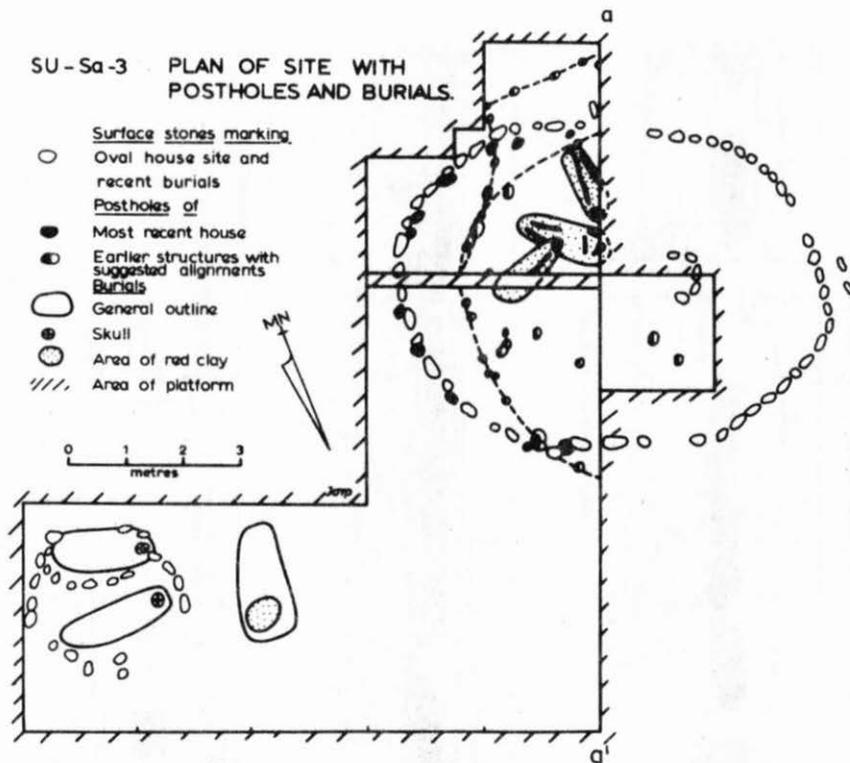
Sa-2:

This site was supervised by Hansen and De Nave. The platform was similar in dimension and structure to that of Sa-1, and once again the surface showed the outline of one complete stone oval, and part of another oval. In addition, to one side of the main oval was the outline in stones of a much smaller structure, 3.25 by 1.25 metres in size. Removal of the gravel from within the larger structure revealed more than one layer, and this was confirmed by the pattern of post-holes found, parts of at least three sets of holes being found. (See Fig. 2) When part of a pavement belonging to the earliest structure was removed, a fragment of bottle-glass was found beneath it, indicating that even this earliest structure was of the contact period. The smaller structure proved to be a grave. It was one metre deep and, as the surface stones had been put in position after the filling in of the pit, they did not coincide exactly with its edges. The skeleton was badly decayed, but parts of the skull and some teeth were recovered. In addition, the base of the pit was covered by a layer of red clay, a feature found in other burials at Sasoa'a. The artefacts recovered from the gravel layers were similar to those from Sa-1, with the addition of two pieces of metal. There were no funerary pieces with the burial.

Sa-3:

This site was directed by McKinlay who was joined by De Nave on 10th January when her work at Sa-2 was completed. Superficially, this site was similar to each of the others. It was bounded by large curbstones, although the shape of the platform was not as regular as that of the other two sites. It was built up primarily of river gravel with a few water-worn boulders and was regularly paved. On the surface of the platform was the outline of one large oval, with a centrally-placed 'firepit', 7.5 by 6 metres in size, and to the side, a smaller structure similar in shape to the grave at Sa-2. (See Fig. 3) Again, it was decided to half-section the larger structure and to investigate the nature of the smaller. With the discovery of pottery in fairly large quantities on 12th January, work on the site was reoriented and extended. As the pottery-bearing layers underlay the whole site and were quite distinct from the layers containing material

SU-Sa-3 PLAN OF SITE WITH
POSTHOLES AND BURIALS.



SU-Sa-3 PRINCIPAL N-S SECTION SQUARES D 6-16

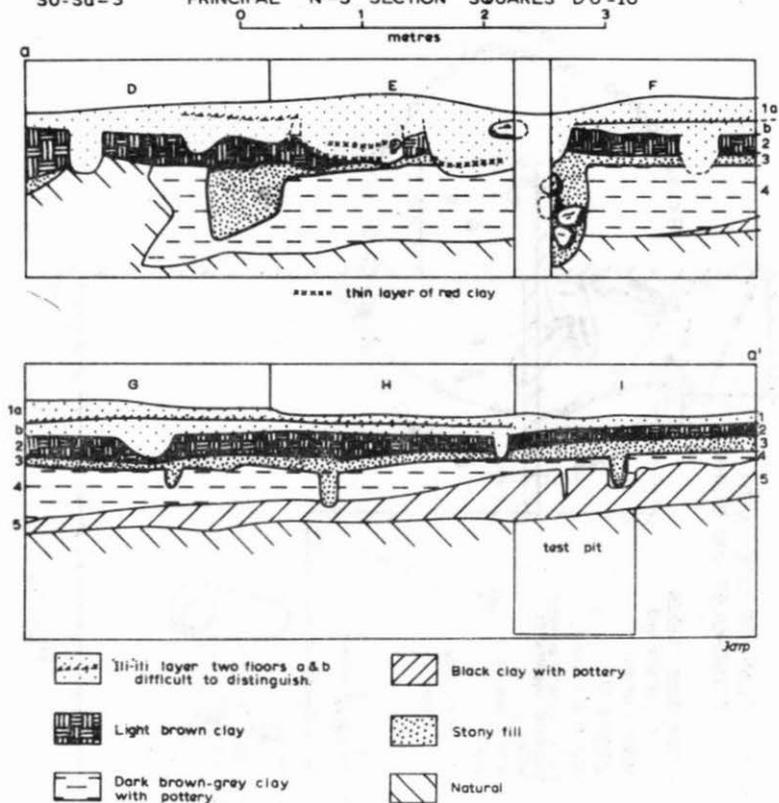


Fig. 4.

from the contact period, and as the excavation of the site was completed by Green after McKinlay returned to New Zealand at the end of January, the present report is limited to the later contact phase, leaving the description of the earlier phases to Green.

Although this site was structurally similar to each of the others, with at least two overlapping structures having been built, it showed a somewhat more complex stratigraphy (see Fig. 4). It was possible to distinguish two layers of gravel infilling within the stone oval, located on top of a layer of clay similar to the base layer at each of the other two sites. However, inside the oval, three burials had been dug through this clay layer from the gravel, two being associated with the later floor, and one with the earlier. These graves penetrated the underlying occupation layer and revealed the pottery.

The bodies had been buried in an extended position, but the bones had almost completely decayed. Again, a layer of red clay was found at the base of each burial, a piece of evidence that was sufficiently clear to enable the identification of a further burial in a pit outside the line of the oval structure even though all of the bones in it had completely decayed.

The smaller structure outlined by stones on the surface proved to mark two burials, although, as at Sa-2, the stones did not coincide exactly with the side of the pit. These graves did not contain any of the red material. As these two burials were clearly one of the latest features on the site, this omission is probably significant.

Portable artefacts again indicate contact with Europeans. All of the categories found at the other two sites were present, with slate and a piece of brass being added to the European inventory, and three pieces of obsidian to the pre-European. Again, each of these items was found in each of the 'ili'ili layers, and again, the European and indigenous items were found in association at all levels.

The layer of clay material on which the infilling of the latest structure lay, probably represents a period when there was no occupation of the site and the clay was built up during periods of flooding. It completely sealed in the lower pre-historic and pottery-bearing layers. If this layer of clay is interpreted in this manner, then the site can be more easily understood, and the division as made in this report is in no way artificial, but in fact represents the realities of the human occupation of the site.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The platforms:

The three excavated platforms, which are representative of the others in the settlement, exhibit a sufficient similarity of form to enable them to be seen as a structurally discrete group. The manner in which the perimeter of each is defined by a line of large boulder or curbing stones, the uniformity of the surface paving, the placing of the oval structures centrally upon them, all indicate a unity of function as well. It would seem reasonable to interpret them as artificially constructed living platforms, providing a surface above the level of the ground water and of most of the floods. Each is composed of more than one layer of river gravel, and the evidence of several alignments of postholes suggests that there was rebuilding of the structures, leading to the inference that use of the site persisted over some time. Particularly was this the case with Sa-3, but here it is necessary to consider the two levels as being independent and probably separated by some considerable temporal distance.

The structures

The large oval structures seem to have been the reason for the construction of the platforms. As the following table shows, the oval structures are of comparable size and proportion, with those at Sa-1 being rather larger, and that at Sa-3 being rather rounder.

Table 1: Dimensions of the structures

<u>Site</u>	<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Ratio width: length</u>
Sa-1	(a) 9 x 6.5 metres	1:1.38
	(b) 9.5 x 5.25 "	1:1.8
Sa-2	(a) 7.5 x 4.5 "	1:1.87
	(b) 7 x 4.5 "	1:1.66
Sa-3	(a) 7.5 x 6 "	1:1.25

Each of the structures had been built by placing the posts in position, outlining to oval with stones and then filling the floor area with river gravel. The surrounding pavement area was then surfaced with evenly-sized stones. Each of the structures contained a small firepit outlined by stones, similar to those described in earlier historical accounts. Although they did show some evidence of burning, such as discoloured stones, none of the pits yielded any quantity of charcoal. It would seem then that these oval structures might reasonably be interpreted as living houses, as in the above details they are very similar to the houses of a present-day Samoan village, or those in historical accounts (see also Buck, 1930).

The smaller structures outlined on the surface of Sa-2 and Sa-3 are undoubtedly burials, and they are undoubtedly late features on the sites. The presence of red material in the base of the grave at Sa-2 and its absence at Sa-3 would seem to indicate that this practice was not always being followed in later years. All of the earlier and unmarked burials at Sa-3 had this feature. In addition, the earlier burials were much shallower (30-50 cms) than the later ones which were approximately 1 meter deep, they were unmarked, and they were generally within the floor of the house, a practice noted also at Folasa-a-lalo (Ishizuki, 1968: 53). In view of the fact that the much later burials at Vailele contained grave goods (Davidson, 1965), the absence of such items at the Sasoa'a burials is important.

A tentative sequence based on grave typology might be as follows, although further details would be needed from other excavations:

Up to early 19th Century: graves shallow, unmarked and in the floor of the house; base of grave contains red material; no grave goods.

Early to mid-19th Century: grave deeper, on the platform and marked by stones at the surface; red material not always used; no grave goods.

Later 19th Century: use of grave goods.

Portable artefacts:

The following table summarises the artefacts recovered by site, and in total. Artefacts were found both on the surface and within the gravel layers in a rather indiscriminate association, and because of this no attempt is made to list them according to layer. In fact, there was only one significant layer, that representing the period of European contact in the area, and the successive reuse of the sites does

not require any more elaborate explanation.

Table 2: Distribution of artefacts

<u>Artefacts</u>	<u>Sa-1</u>	<u>Sa-2</u>	<u>Sa-3</u>	<u>Total</u>
Glass beads	1	2	2	5
Bottle glass pieces	8	5	30	43
Flint	2	1	1	4
Clay pipe fragments	3	1	12	16
Metal pieces	-	2	1	3
Slate pieces	-	-	4	4
Adze pieces	2	1	5	8
Grindstone pieces	1	2	2	5
Obsidian	-	-	3	3

Note: The rather large number of pieces of bottle glass at Sa-3 is partly accounted for by the fact that one larger piece was broken into a number of smaller pieces by a workman's spade.

It can be seen from the table that the range of items of European origin is fairly constant and reasonably representative, and as such provides a satisfactory check-list to determine the chronological setting of a site in relation to early years of the contact period. It was interesting to note that some of the pieces of clay pipe stem show clear evidence of re-use after breakage. The rough end had been smoothed, and teeth marks showed clearly even on small pieces of stem. The ultimate in re-use was shown by a piece that had been re-used even though the length of stem remaining to the bowl was less than 10 cms! This would seem to indicate that the pipes were not in plentiful supply, or that their exchange value was too high to allow of their extravagant use.

The fact that items of European origin were found at all levels in association with items of local manufacture is not unexpected, for even today any Samoan village seems to yield its quota of adzes lying

on the surface of the house platforms or in the gardens alongside the debris of the European-influenced living of today.

CONCLUSION

The excavation of these three structures at Sasoa'a has provided a body of material that can be used to determine the chronological setting of other sites in Samoa. We see from it that the form of house or living structure has not changed significantly in the last century and a half, except for the disappearance of the fire hearth in the house.

We have been able to compile a checklist of items of European origin resulting from the trade of the contact period. Some indication is seen that these items were not in plentiful supply, or that their relative value was high, so as to make it necessary to obtain the utmost use from them. Work at sites of a later period should reveal a different collection of items, making it possible to determine further the temporal location of sites.

The graves appear to be significant. They fall into two groups. First, those located under the floor of the structure at Sa-3. These were unmarked and shallow, and were characterised by a layer of red clay material. Secondly, there is the group of burials separate from the actual structures, and marked at the surface by stones. These burials can again be subdivided into those having the red material in the base (as at Sa-2) and those without (as at Sa-3). The outline at the surface clearly indicates that these burials come late in the sequence at the site, and a reasonable inference from the use of the red material is that it is an early feature and that its use was being discontinued in later years. Finally, it would seem that the burial of grave goods is a much later feature.

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