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**Susan Bulmer, Garry Law and Douglas Sutton (eds), *A Lot of Spadework to be Done: Essays in Honour of Lady Aileen Fox***

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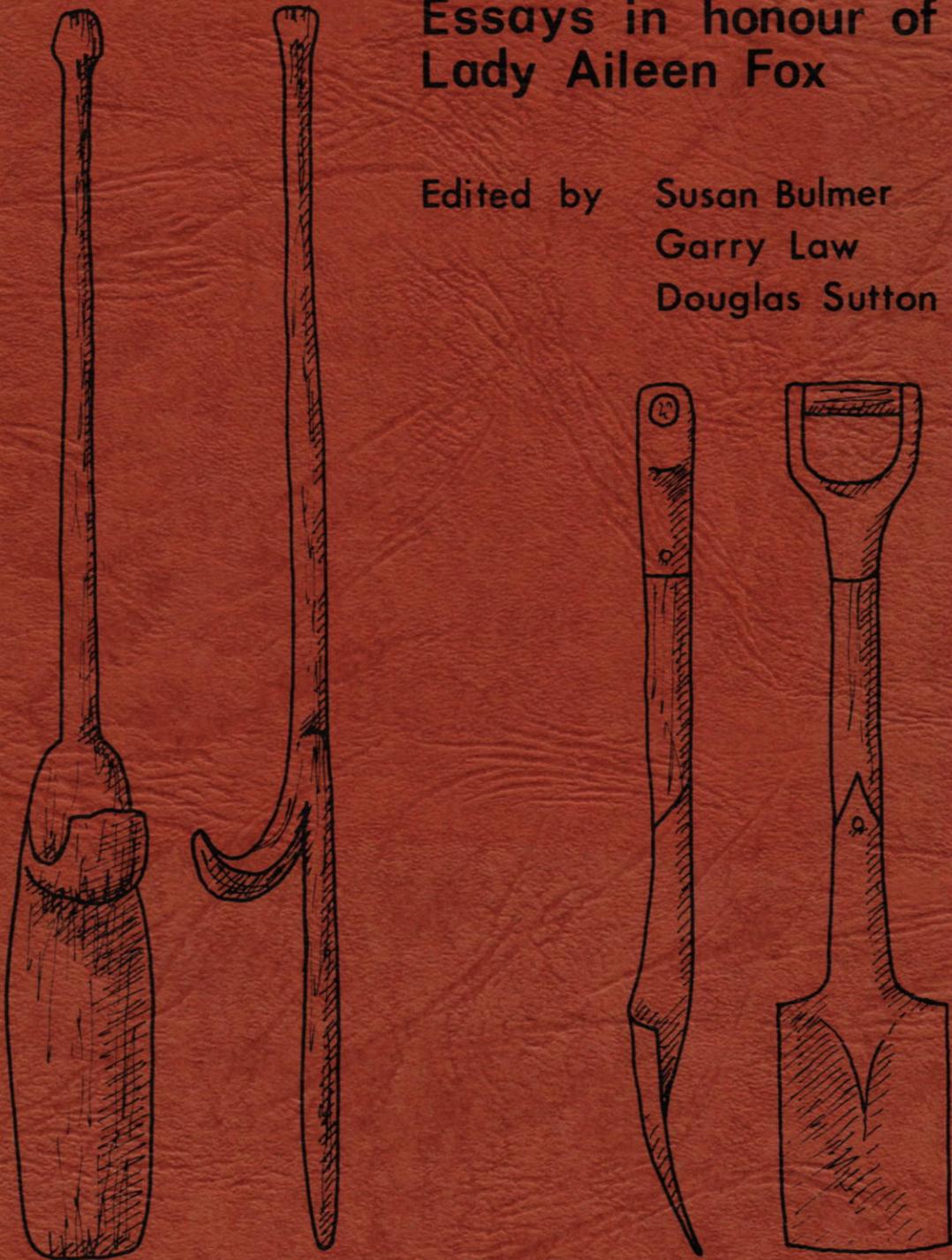
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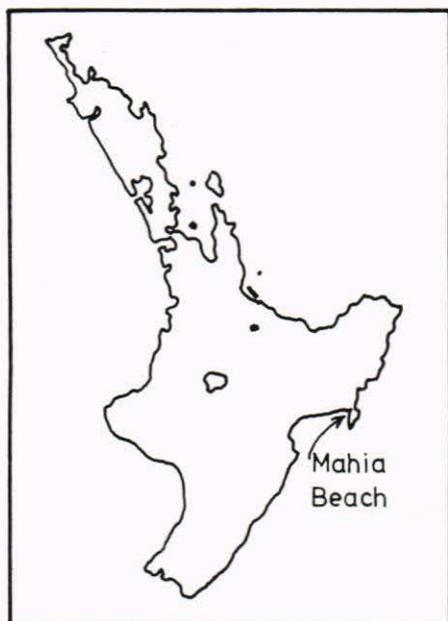
# A LOT OF SPADEWORK TO BE DONE

Essays in honour of  
Lady Aileen Fox

Edited by Susan Bulmer  
Garry Law  
Douglas Sutton



# A PUMICE CARVING FROM MAHIA PENINSULA, HAWKES BAY, NEW ZEALAND



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Napier Art Gallery and Museum.

A small pumice carving (Figs. 1 - 4) was recovered at Mahia Beach, Mahia Peninsula, Hawkes Bay, during the digging of house foundations in 1950. According to Mr. Frazer, the finder of the carving, it was found at a depth of about 2.5 feet (76 cm) below the ground surface. Shells and oven stones were also recovered from the same context. This suggests that the carving was recovered from a midden site. Mr. Frazer retained the carving in his own possession until he gifted it to the Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum in 1981.

## Description

The carving is roughly rounded at the right, top and upper left sides, while there is a slight concave curve on the lower left side and the base is flattened. Maximum height is 10.2 cm and maximum width is 9.2 cm. Carving is present on one side only and is an anthropomorphic form carved in the square east-coast style, more specifically in the wood carving style of the Ngati Kahungunu of Wairoa. Simmons (1977, lecture 8:3) notes that this style derives from the Gisborne style, 'though it is sufficiently distinctive to stand on it's own'. The eyebrows are rounded and curve down beside

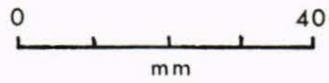


Fig.1 Frontal view of pumice carving.



2



3



4

Figs. 2-4

2 and 3 (above): views of left and right sides.

4 (below): rear view.

the eyes. The mouth is rounded with the inverted 'Y' process between the eyes. The mouth has a wide shortish tongue and has three rounded teeth, one at the centre and one at each side on the upper surface. Arms emerge from the centre of the figure and extend up to where the hands display four fingers level with the eyes. The arms have a looped double spiral surface decoration, as does the right leg and the left side of the lower torso, while the left leg is undecorated. The eyebrows, sides of face and lower right torso have a variant of the rauponga pattern as surface decoration.

On the left hand side of the carving at the midpoint there is a complete hole, while on the opposite side the hole is no longer intact.

The relief of the carving can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. The curved back is shown in Figure 4.

#### Interpretation

Simmons (pers. comm. 1982) has suggested that the Mahia Beach pumice carving was probably made for an individual of high status, and probably functioned as a lid for a small container. The holes on each side suggest that it was tied to something. There is some evidence that pumice containers had lids that were tied on (Fairfield 1941:97-102; Graham 1951:160-1). It may have been a lid for something other than a pumice container. This carving would fit into the wooden funnel of the type used on large gourds. However reference to no such practice can be found in the ethnological literature and it is unlikely that the carving would have been used in such close association with food if it did belong to a person of high status and was a prized personal possession.

Other possible functions include use as a marker of ownership on a net amongst other pumice floats, or for suspension in a house or some other place as a warning of a tapu. Another

possibility is that the carving is a practice piece in the easiest worked material to hand; used before proceeding to put the ideas into practice in wood.

At present however it appears most likely that this carving was the lid for a container used in some tapu ceremony such as tattooing, haircutting, or the retention of the afterbirth or the umbilical cord.

The archaeological literature does not document any finds of this type to date. Nor are there any close parallels in the four metropolitan museums in New Zealand. Further research may discover artefacts of a similar type in the smaller regional collections.

#### Conclusions

More research is required on the spatial and temporal exploitation of pumice by the prehistoric and protohistoric Maori. The Mahia Beach carving described in this paper adds another artefact type to the long list of little known and little studied pumice artefacts recovered from archaeological sites or kept in museum collections. The carving appears to be the lid of a small container though this cannot be stated with absolute certainty at present.

#### Postscript

Having recently taken up the position of museum curator at the Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum, Napier, I am very much aware of the contribution made by Aileen Fox towards understanding the archaeological landscape of the Hawkes Bay region. It is largely due to her efforts that we are able to offer the general public here in Hawkes Bay at least a little archaeological literature relating to their own region.

### Acknowledgements

I thank Mr. Herbert Frazer for gifting the Mahia Beach pumice carving to the Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum and for discussing with me the details of its discovery more than thirty years ago. I also thank Mary Jeal, Don Millar, and Dave Simmons for discussions and correspondence while researching for this paper. The following museum curators provided detailed information about pumice artefacts in their collections:

Betty McFadgen-National Museum, Wellington.

Michael Trotter-Canterbury Museum, Christchurch.

Wendy Harsant-Otago Museum, Dunedin.

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