



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

AN INFANT BURIAL FROM OKAHU (OR REDHEAD) ISLAND,
BAY OF ISLANDS

Douglas Sutton and Wendy Gibbs
Anthropology Department
University of Auckland

On the afternoon of 1 September 1982 the Chief Ranger of the Bay of Islands Maritime and Historic Park, John Gardiner, drew Sutton's attention to some human bone eroding from a naturally cut section on a sandy beach on the south-east side of Okahu Island (N.Z.A.A. Site Number N12/102). Permission to excavate and study the material was obtained from Mr Mountain of Rawhiti and a permit (1982/24) was issued to Mr Gardiner by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

The bone represented an infant corpse which had been buried in a foetal position with its right side down, on a thin, natural layer of water-rolled pebbles 65 cm below the present ground surface. There was no evidence of a grave discernible in the section.

The section was cleaned down and photographed and then an area 65 x 25 cm around the burial was excavated with a small trowel. The infant was buried with its head to the west and feet drawn tightly up behind the buttocks. The knees were close to the ribcage. The arms were placed in front of the chest, rather than straight down the sides or behind the thorax. The hands were either at the head (as shown in Fig. 1), crossed over the knees or together in front of the body. The skull, jaw, brachial skeleton, vertebrae above the fifth thoracic, related ribs, the right scapula, all bones of both arms and the knees were lost in recent slumping of the section (see Fig. 1). The reconstruction of burial posture offered above is therefore incomplete.

There were three shell artefacts found with the burial. The first was a transversely broken valve of dog cockle (Glycymeris laticostata) with a square (2 x 2 mm) cut hole in the apex. It was found between the femora and the base of the rib cage with its convex or exterior surface on the thighs. This suggests that it was placed against the child's abdomen at the time of burial. The second shell artefact is also a dog cockle valve with a cut parabolic notch in each side of the valve. It was found with the concave surface capping the left hip suggesting that it was placed over the buttock at the time of burial. These two artefacts may have been attached to a fibrous waist band but no evidence of this survived.

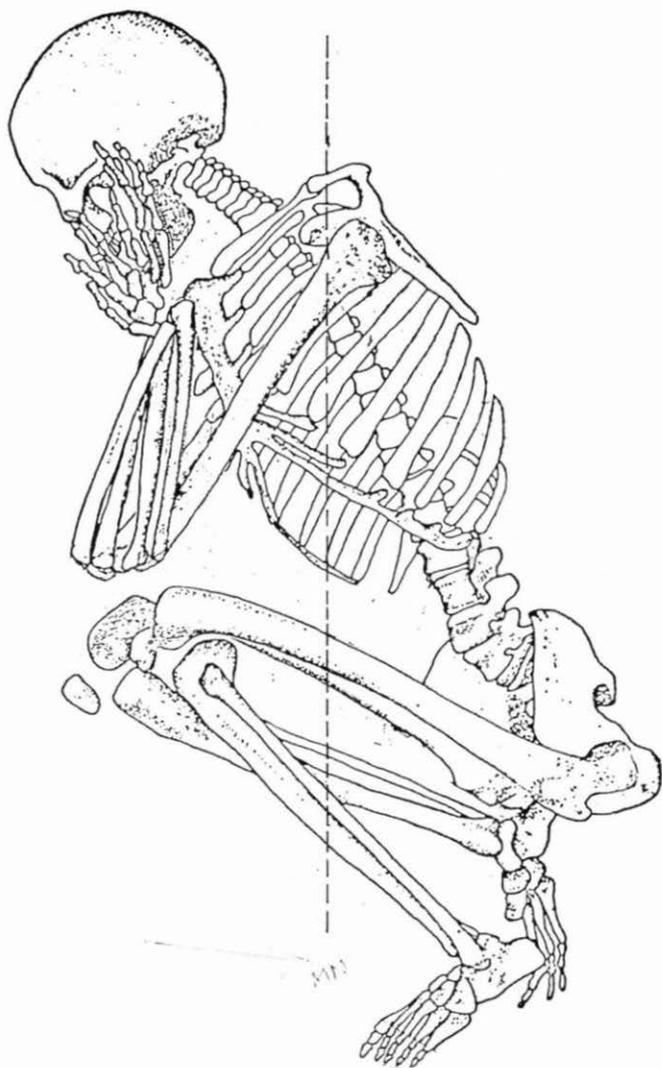


FIGURE 1. Reconstructed burial posture.

The third shell artefact was a 3.3 x 6 cm triangular fragment of a *Dosinia* valve, the longest edge of which appears to have been sharpened. It was found immediately above the left shoulder and is the only fragment of this shell found near the burial, although others have been seen in the section (Cassels, 1981:57). One possibility is that the shell was used in the scarification of a mourner and then buried with the corpse.

It is not possible to establish the sex of the infant. It is clear from the degree of epiphyseal fusion present in the skeleton, that this individual died when aged between 6 and 12 months. X-rays show a series of seven Harris lines in the distal left tibia. Each of these lines is the result of an instance of illness, dietary deprivation or trauma (see Houghton, 1980:113). No more specific diagnosis is possible without detailed analysis of the bone. In the present case the last of the Harris lines to be deposited is just 3 mm from the end of the shaft. The rest of the lines are in pairs where the lines of each pair are 1.5 mm apart and the pairs begin 5, 9 and 12.5 mm from the end of the shaft. It is likely that this infant died as a result of closely-spaced recurrent episodes of illness.

At least one other burial has been recovered from N12/102. It was excavated by Jan McKay in 1980 and is now under study in the Anatomy Department, Otago Medical School. Others may erode out there in future and a close watch should be kept on this site. Cassels (1981:57) described it as "a good example of cultivation soil" but there is much more to the site than that. Its protection by kikuyu grass and the generally slow rate of erosion of the beach section make it possible that one of the larger and more intact prehistoric coastal living sites could yet be found there.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Messrs Mountain, Gardiner, McKinlay. Special thanks are due to Shaughan Anderson, Park Naturalist/Interpreter, for help with the excavation and to Mr Albert Young of the Radiography Department, Greenlane Hospital, for the X-rays.

The bone was held in the Anthropology Department, University of Auckland, from 5 September until 22 October 1982. It and the associated artefacts have now been returned to Mr Gardiner. Photos of the excavation and artefacts are held at Park Headquarters, Russell.

