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ARCHAEOLOGY ON A SHOE-STRING: EXCAVATIONS AT
HEAPHY RIVER MOUTH 1961-1963

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(This is a revised version of a paper given at the Association conference, Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, 18 May 1981).

The results of our investigations of the Moa-hunter Maori camp-site near the mouth of the Heaphy River at various times between November 1961 and August 1963 have already been published in the Records of the Canterbury Museum (Vol. 8, No. 3). I am concerned here largely with the human side of the dig, as many of the younger generation of archaeologists may not be familiar with results of the work on this important site, the first Moa-hunter site to be investigated on the West Coast of the South Island.

The Heaphy River is 12 miles north of the Kohaihai River, 21 miles north of Karamea (Plate 1). In those days the creeks and rivers were unbridged, so that they had to be waded. We had to carry all our equipment on our backs or in our hands. As we often stayed longer than we had planned, we sometimes ran short of food and lived off the land. Native spinach, which grew plentifully on the limestone ledges, is palatable, but boils down considerably so that it takes a lot to make a decent meal, and washing limestone dust from the reddish-purple, pulpy leaves takes time. Overgrown radishes, the size of white turnips, although woody, I found palatable when boiled, but they were not popular with the majority.

Breakfast was porridge. On one occasion I rose early, lit the fire, put the porridge billy on and went down the site about 6 a.m. to get an early start on an interesting square. When I returned to the hut at 8 a.m. I found a hungry - and very apologetic mob had eaten all the porridge, completely forgetting my existence - but they were a good team. Our bread soon ran out, and then we made camp-oven loaves. Occasional attempts at fishing were unsuccessful. I usually returned up to 10 lbs lighter than when I arrived which was probably good for me!

When I first saw the site in the early 1930's (Neil Christiansen and I had packed up on a horse, supplies for prospectors based on the hut - we went up one day and returned the next) there was a most beautiful expanse of nikaus - some in flower, some in bud, some in berry. But the 1929 earthquake silted the

river (last century tourist steamers used to sail up it) and several acres of land were subsequently washed away. Thus the original extent of the Moa-hunter site cannot be ascertained but it must have covered much more ground than was left to us. A considerable portion is still un-excavated.

Owen Wilkes and I went up on a caving trip in November 1960, after bird bones, as a few months earlier Owen and two Turner brothers had obtained good bird bones in some of the numerous caves and fissures on the south side of the river. On a second trip in November 1961, Owen Wilkes, Annette Jones, Herbert Harris and I went also for caving, but our archaeological investigations began when young Harris picked up a nice 4A adze on the river bed below the site, freshly washed out of the bank by a flood in the river. We learned subsequently that my cousin Trevor McNabb had also picked up several adzes washed out earlier. Owen, Annette and I excavated three 6 feet squares, our only tools being trowels, an ice-axe and a kitchen shovel. Herbert Harris helped us fill in and bank up the site with logs to protect it - Herbert was not interested in the dig, but was eager to go right through the Heaphy Track, which we did.

This first dig produced artefacts, oven hollows and a varied midden assemblage, so that in May 1962 we were back with an augmented team. Don Millar, Nick White, George Boraman and William Ryan joined us with a few shovels, etc. for a fortnight's dig (Plates 2, 3 and 4). I led the first two digs, Owen the subsequent ones, but in practice we were a partnership, consulting each other frequently. We extended our squares to 30 in number. On the last day when only Owen and I were left - the others had left, some to walk the Track - we decided to dig a test square inland from where we were working. Owen dug down through several feet of silt, then I took over and at the bottom found the corner of a stone pavement, with a piece of nephrite, flakes and chips of various stones.

This just had to be investigated, so in May 1963 Owen, myself and five other members of the Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society were back for three weeks. We got pavements, the first extensive pavements from a Moa-hunter site, although one or two bits had been found elsewhere. In February of this year (1981), at the Dart River site above Glenorchy in Otago (S122/1) Neville Ritchie and his team - of which I was one - also uncovered a very good pavement, similar to our Heaphy River ones, but with larger stones.

The May 1963 trip showed us that sometime in the past, a freshet in the hills behind had deposited several feet of silt and

numerous limestone boulders on the Moa-hunter deposits. This meant a lot of hard work before we got down to the occupation layers. Some of the boulders could be split but many had to be left in position and dug around and, where possible, underneath. A further trip in August 1963 of three weeks concluded our work.

To sum up: we found pavements, numerous adzes, chisels, minnow shanks, one whale-tooth neck or wrist ornament similar to the Wairau Bar ones, a teka (dart) head, numerous flakes of obsidian, white quartz, a stone anvil sunk into the 'natural', nephrite, an obsidian ulu and many pieces (some worked) of the silicified sandstone which Owen and I named Heaphyite, but only one one-piece Moa-bone fishhook. The source of Heaphyite is unknown, but probably north of the Heaphy River. Similar, but differently coloured material is known from Fox River and near Frenchman's Gully.

The faunal material was some small birds of various species, seal - most, if not all, southern fur seal, Arctocephalus forsteri, moa - nearly all Anomalopteryx didiformis, but a few fragments of Dinornis species. There was no rat although Rattus exulans was present in the caves. There was insufficient seal or moa in any one square for dating, but a shell sample which I prepared from a large mass from an oven - carefully removing the top and bottom of it to prevent possible contamination, and using only the clean centre - gave a corrected date of B.P. 570 ± 70 - in round figures, 1380 A.D. It was obvious that the site had been occupied, perhaps seasonally, for a long time.

After several days of heavy rain, the reason for the pavements became obvious. They stood out above the surrounding water. Postholes are notoriously hard to interpret, but those surrounding the pavements probably supported shelters. As far more flakes and artefacts were found in, or immediately, adjacent to, the pavements, we interpreted them as working floors. Nearly all the adzes and chisels were of argillite. The few pieces of nephrite were not of very good quality.



HEAPHY Plate 3. May 1962 excavations: left to right, Nick White? (beach), Ron Scarlett, Owen Wilkes, George Boramen.



HEAPHY Plate 4. May 1962 excavations: left to right, Owen Wilkes, George Boramen, Don Millar (rear), Ron Scarlett, Bill Ryan.



HEAPHY Plate 1. Heaphy River mouth.



HEAPHY Plate 2. Don Millar on photography stand, May 1962.