NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

ARE RUAS SMOKE-HOUSES?

Reg Nichol
Anthropology Department
University of Auckland

To begin with, can I say how pleased I was to read, in a recent issue, Atholl Anderson's suggestion (Vol 27,p.198) that the Newsletter should serve as a vehicle for archaeologists' perennial debates. What I want to argue about here is the function of rua pits. This is in response to a suggestion in the recent monograph by Bruce McFadgen and Raewyn Sheppard on the excavations at Ruahihi, Bay of Plenty. "The rua appear to have been repeatedly used for smoking and storing the fruit" (McFadgen and Sheppard, 1984:23). Also "It appears likely that the rua were small, re-usable 'smoke stores' for the preservation and storage of fleshy fruit" (p.59).

This seems a most unlikely interpretation. What seems to me to be the telling piece of evidence is that one of the more common of the seeds in the rua identified as coming from "food plants" (McFadgen and Sheppard, 1984:Table 12) are from Coriaria. Though tutu was unquestionably a food item (Best, 1977:49-53:) it is important to remember that almost all parts of the plant are poisonous, and that the Maori were very careful to strain out the seeds when squeezing the ripe berries for the juice, in which form Coriaria was consumed.

The point is, of course, that this procedure would almost certainly be carried out when the berries were fresh. It would be peculiar, to say the least, to preserve the material for any time before processing, and it would be extremely dangerous to store the berries, with seeds still in, with quantities of fruit of other species - the results could be fatal.

So, why were so many seeds found? The obvious answer is that the rua act as traps, and accumulate seeds after abandonment. Many of the species represented, including Coriaria, are scrubby plants likely to appear in regenerating bush. McFadgen and Sheppard reject this possibility, however, and point to the absence of Leptospermum pollen in any of the samples, even though there are abundant carbonised remains of its twigs and seeds. It is, however, clear that the Leptospermum is avilable somewhere not too far away (or else why are there any of its woody remains?). Perhaps this material is being brought to the site from a little distance as general purpose fuel, but the very non-dispersive pollen (McGlone, pers. comm.) is not travelling as far.

Other objections could be raised to the "smoke house" suggestion. One is that Elaeocarpus dentatus (hinau) are apparently processed fresh to remove the inedible seeds from the mealy coating (Best, 1977:37) or else stored whole in water rather than in pits (Best, 1977:38). Another is that the berries of Podocarpus spicatus and Dacrydium were apparently eaten fresh (Best, 1977:54). It should be noted that this leaves none of the food species in McFadgen and Sheppard's Table 12 that have been recorded as being treated in the way they suggest, and this leads to another important objection - where are the ethnographic accounts of the use of rua pits as smoke houses? Finally, why is it thought that fermentation is "undesirable" (McFadgen and Sheppard, 1984:59) when hinau seeds and tutu juice (Best, 1977:51) were sometimes fermented before use, and fermentation was later adapted to the processing of European introductions such as maize?

Though not strictly required by the disputatious approach, the existence of a more plausible interpretation would further weaken the smokehouse hypothesis, and fortunately there is another option.

On the evidence presented in the report, the rua often have abundant charcoal. A few of them were filled with stones (McFadgen and Sheppard, 1984:23, Appendix 5) - these may have been stores of oven stones. Most of the rua were found in the cooking area, and they are grouped as one of the classes of features found there. One of them even contained a layer of shellfish on top of a layer of oven stones (McFadgen and Sheppard, 1984:23) - evidently a meal was abandoned for some reason.

So perhaps the biggest mistake in interpreting the rua as smoke houses is in calling them rua in the first place - they sound to me like a variety of cooking pit. On the evidence presented in the Ruahihi report it seems clear that the features called rua were not used as smokehouses, so that idea at least can be laid to rest, certainly until someone produces rather more convincing evidence that they were.

References

Best, E. 1977 Forest Lore of the Maori. Government Printer, Wellington.

McFadgen, B.G. and R.A. Sheppard 1984 Ruahihi Pa. National Museum of New Zealand Bulletin, 22, and New Zealand Historic Places Trust Publication, 19.