



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/>.

Artifacts and their Study

E. L. PHELAN

There was no full conference of the Association in 1961, but during the extended Annual General Meeting held at the Dominion Museum over Queen's Birthday week-end there was a series of seminars devoted to 'Artifacts and their Study'. Six sessions were held; an introduction by Mr Colin Smart, followed by four study groups, on adzes (Miss Janet Davidson), fish hooks (Mr Colin Smart), flake tools and ornaments (Mr Peter Gathercole), the series concluding with a general discussion period. As summaries of the conclusions reached in the study groups appear in this issue, this article will be confined to reporting the first and last sessions and to some general comments on the whole series.

At the first session a new form designed for the recording of artifacts was introduced. Mr Smart illustrated its use, and stressed the need for a more systematic recording of New Zealand artifacts. He said that while some artifacts, or features of artifacts, are known to be probable clues to culture differences, e.g. the *hei tiki*, or the presence of a grip on an adz, knowledge is still so scant that all the features

ARTIFACT RECORD FORM		FILE NO.
REPOSITORY:		ARTIFACT CLASS: ITEN No.
FINDER:		NEW ITEN No.
DATE FOUND:		CHANGE IN REPOSITORY:
PUBLICATION REF:		DATE OF CHANGE:
LOCATION (of site)	GENERAL:	
	SITE NO. GRID REF.	MAP No. MAP NAME:
POSITION (on site)	GENERAL:	
	IN POSITION: <input type="checkbox"/> yes-no-unknown- DEPTH BELOW SURFACE: SITE GRID REF.	
CONTEXT (associations) (descriptive)	OTHER ARTIFACTS:	
	STRUCTURES:	
	ECOLOGICAL: (soils, rocks, shell, algaen, etc)	
DESCRIPTION OF ARTIFACT (drawing or general measurements to be placed on back or on separate sheet)	MATERIAL:	CONDITION:
	INFORMATION ON FEATURES REQUESTED:	
	INFORMATION ON OTHER FEATURES DEEMED IMPORTANT:	
	RECORDED:	
RECORDED:		DATE RECORDED:

must be viewed as potentially important. This plea to look at all artifacts with a fresh eye recurred throughout the meeting, and while admirable and necessary in the study of a specific artifact, it leads as I see it, to some confusion of aims when applied to the recording of artifacts on the new form.

It is hoped that the form will be used for recording in a standard manner finds from organised excavations, listing random finds of sufficient importance, and cataloguing private collections known to members of the Association. Of equal importance is the fact that the provision in central and local files of copies of the forms would enable the research worker to locate, with far less effort than is required at present, many of the artifacts he is interested in studying.

The information asked for on the form requires little explanation. In the top box, 'Artifact Class' should usually be general, e.g. adze, fish hook, etc.; 'Item No.' refers to the number of the artifact within the collection being catalogued. All artifacts should be given a permanent number (in Indian ink, etc.) as they are recorded.

'Location' may be filled in from the Site Reference Form. Where no S.R.F. exists, or localisation is inexact, this space may be filled in with the degree of precision appropriate, e.g. 'left bank of X River Mouth' etc.

'Position' may vary from the entry 'Found in fresh rabbit scrape' for a random find, to a small sketch section and reference to the full drawn stratigraphic section for the find revealed under conditions of a controlled excavation.

'Context' requires no explanation beyond that supplied by the sub-headings.

'Description'. This section, the most important on the whole form, is discussed at length below by other contributors to this Symposium. 'Material' should usually be general, if only to avoid misleading statements, e.g. 'stone' rather than '?basalt' unless identification is certain. Even experts often find it difficult to define materials closely without detailed analysis, and the amateur may be incorrect in his well meaning, but misplaced, quest for precision. Similarly with 'Condition'; it is easy enough to see whether an artifact is worn or broken, but care must be taken before attributing these to human or specific natural agencies.

The rest of the form is self-explanatory. Change of repository and other information will be filled in where necessary by the file keepers.

The back of the form or attached sheets may be used for a tracing, sketch or photograph of the artifact, together with a scale or list of dimensions, and an amplified written description of the object. At least two forms should be completed, one for the local file and one for the central file; a third form for the owner of the collection may be necessary.

In general, only one artifact should be recorded on one form, but caches, or materials found in close association could be entered on one form when they belong to a single artifact type.

The leaders of the seminars which followed dealt with their special artifact types from a descriptive and morphological point of view, with no attempt at typological classification. The aim was to teach people how to describe artifacts clearly and unambiguously and not to impose a uniform terminology, but, naturally enough, discussion of nomenclature played a large part in all sessions. The majority of those present felt that concentration on morphological description will pay a dividend in the future, and is indeed a necessary preliminary to further work in classification. Many of us found that the concentration on morphology led to new insight into the artifacts as objects.

In the final general discussion three things emerged. Firstly, we had all learnt a lot more about artifacts. Secondly, we had begun to learn how to describe them clearly and accurately to other interested people. Thirdly, the Artifact Record Form had met with general approval in principle, although it was clear that the difficulties in operating a recording scheme needed to be investigated further. The meeting concluded by recommending the provisional adoption of the form, and several workers throughout the country agreed to use it in pilot schemes. It is hoped that the results obtained in these trials will give sufficient data for a final decision to be reached at next year's conference,

Although this year's meeting was stimulating, and on the whole successful, I think personally that it attempted too much in too short a time. The introduction of the Artifact Record Form was made with no prior warning, and many of us were only starting to see the implications of its use in a recording scheme near the end of the meeting. I felt that it would have been better either to have circulated the proposed form and details of its use before the conference, or delayed its introduction for a year, when the morphological knowledge obtained this year could have been put to better use in discussing any proposed scheme.

The concentration on morphology at this meeting tended to fix attention on the uniqueness of each artifact. Morphological analysis leads to consideration of detail, and too much detail on the form will make any recording scheme unworkable in terms both of time and bulk of paper involved. It would have been better to have held a conference concentrating on morphology and description alone, and to have introduced the form at a later meeting, perhaps entitled 'Information from Artifacts'.

The Artifact Recording Scheme, whatever its final form, will contain in its files much useful information. Many of the artifacts in museum collections are lacking in details of their history such as finder, previous owners and provenance, and the record forms would perform a useful task in diminishing these areas of uncertainty for objects found in the future. The scheme will be a useful guide for the research worker wishing to locate certain classes of artifacts and obtain preliminary data about them. But it will be a recording, rather than a research tool, for the research worker must work with the artifacts themselves, and not with bits of paper. Obviously, if he is interested in fish hooks, he will want to handle as many as possible, and the forms will tell him where to find them. From the forms he should also discover if they are one or two piece, and barbed or unbarbed; he should be told the position of barbs, the relation between point and shank limbs, the type of snood attachment, and so on, but he should not expect much more. The form enables him to make a preliminary assessment of the resources of an area, and to follow up accordingly.

What is needed now; therefore, is an adequate definition of the scope of the scheme, which will prevent us from trying to take it too far, and from thinking that it is more accurate than it is. Some Auckland workers have suggested the use of a series of shorthand categories, which may be ticked off, or referred to by number on the record form (see, for example, the adze cross-sections in the next article) and such a system may be the answer, allowing the forms to be filled in quickly, and with sufficient but not illusory accuracy.

The contributions which follow are based on the discussions at the meeting, and have been extended and modified by further discussion in various local groups. They are intended as guides for use with the Artifact Record Form and will no doubt benefit from testing in the field. It is hoped that they will also stimulate discussion on morphology. Especially does this apply to the article on fishhooks, artifacts fundamental to Polynesian archaeology as a whole; which I view as a pioneering effort in a field which, although apparently simple, contains many problems when studied in detail.