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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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CAVES AND SHELTER SITES AT VATUKOULA, FIJI

Bruce Palmer

These notes serve to put on record what is known at present about three sites in the Vaukoula area on Viti Levu, which is a short distance inland on the northern side of Viti Levu. The Vatukoula Basin lies at the foot and to the north of the high escarpment which borders the mountain region. There are numerous small creeks leading from the escarpment and side valleys into the basin itself. Many of these are reduced to a trickle in the dry season, and in some cases are completely dry. The following sites VL 1/16 and VL 1/17 were visited in 1964 when they were dry and were reached on horseback from Basala Estate, then occupied by the Mason family. The large defended cave VL 1/15 which is the third site described in these notes, lies halfway between Vatukoula and the Ba River, and possibly is linked with middle Ba Valley settlement in former times. As it was reached from Vatukoula on the occasion it was recorded by Eric Smit, it has been described as being in the general Vatukoula area for convenience only.

The first of the shelter sites (VL 1/16), like the other one, was situated some 200' below Nabotini trig station, and commands a fine view to the north and east over rolling hill country. It is within fifty yards of the Basala Stream and consists of a floor some 31 ft long and 19 ft wide, with a compacted narrow ledge as an extension of its outer margin (see Fig. 1). There is sufficient head-room at this point to stand upright, but at the inner level it is possible to crouch only. The floor comprises rock fragments which have become fire-shattered and mixed with dust and ashes, giving the whole a very black, dusty texture.

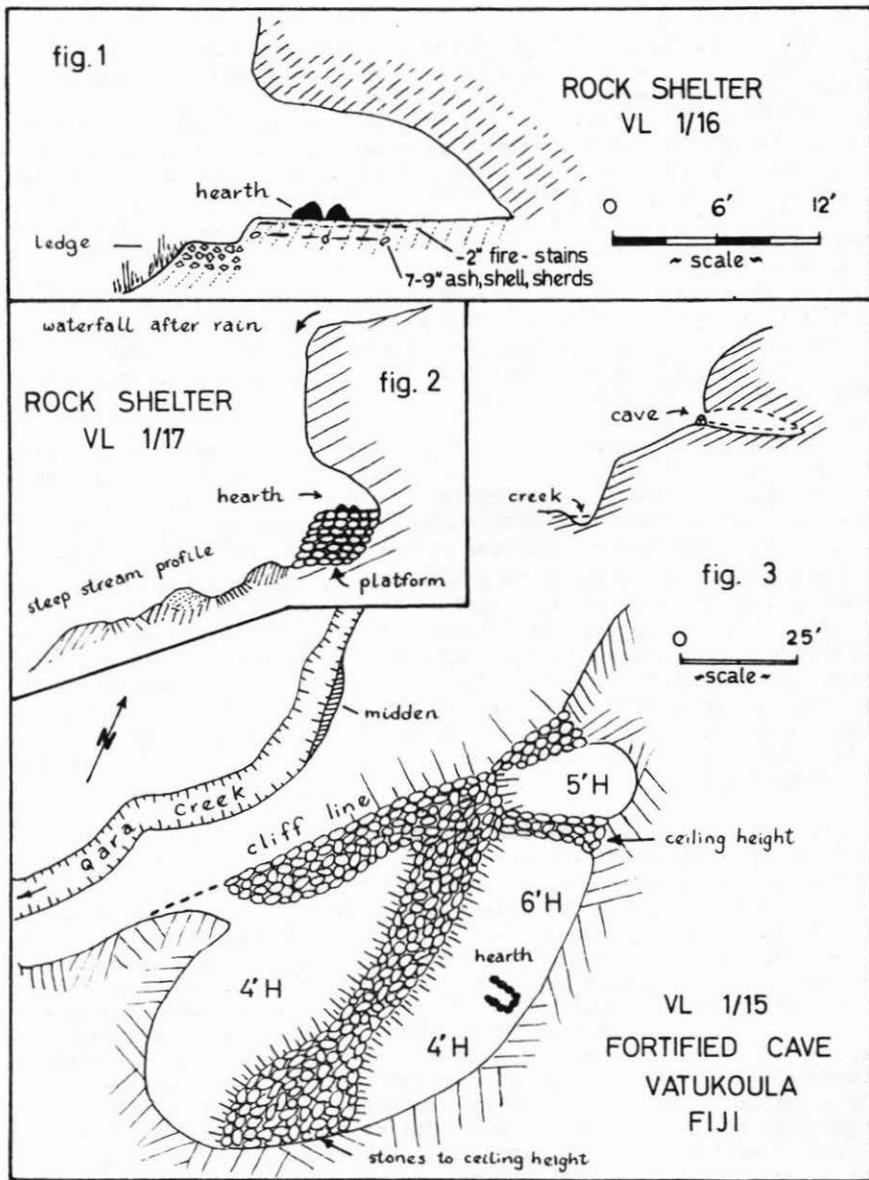
There are some stone hearths on the present surface with pottery fragments of the Kuro or cooking pot form, together with part of a water jar. All this pottery was incised in the late Ra style. There were also some shell fragments scattered about. A one-metre-square test pit was dug by trowel, and at 2 ins. below present surface there were distinct fire patches which seemed to mark individual fire sites. At a depth of 7 ins. there was a black layer of burnt fibres said by the estate owner, Geoffery Mason, to resemble bamboo when burnt. This gave the impression of a vegetation layer for sleeping purposes that had subsequently been burnt. Shells and a few plain sherds came from this level together with charcoal, candlenut and two small unidentified bones. Mollusca identified by Walter Cernohorsky included Cardium unedo Linnaeus, Arca (Modiolus) nitida Reeve, Cardium exiguum Reeve, Mactra complanata Gmelin, Subulina octona (a land shell living near streams and looks like Terebra), Nerita porcellana Linnaeus and a fragment of oyster too small for identification. All these specimens, apart from Subulina, are representative of present-day mollusca available to Fijians. The presence of these shells a half-day walk from the present shore-line suggests that the inhabitants obtained their shellfish before retiring to the site. Alternative explanations are that they obtained them from an intermediate village or were desperately harried to risk a whole day's journey in the open during which they ran the risk of detection. If the site was occupied in peacetime, then the shelter may simply have been a temporary resting place and the food the remnants of provisions taken on the journey.

The second site inspected in the vicinity of this cave was another small shelter at the junction of the Basala and a small creek joining it from the north. There is a waterfall 30 ft high at this point, and at the base of this there has been natural undercutting resulting in a shallow shelter. The unusual feature of this site is that an artificial platform has been built up which is now moss-covered on its outer surface. It stands 5 ft 6 ins. high, is made up of river boulders and has a slight batter. No more than 7 ft wide, this platform has just enough head room for a man to stand up at the outer edge (see Fig. 2). Over most of the extent of the platform, however, there would be room only for sitting.

The surface is composed of fine stones, ash and dust with a hearth still to be seen. Charcoal, some unidentified shell, one piece of plain pottery and ash were noted at the time of the visit. It is possible that during the wet season the site would be hidden by falling water which would form a natural screen at its outer edge, protection from which could be easily obtained by vegetation or matting. The present stream banks are lined with light bush and scrub which may have been thicker in former times. This apparent refuge would be difficult to see from even a short distance away if it were shielded by water and spray. There is no logical explanation for its construction unless it provided refuge for a small group of people. Energetic dry-season travellers may have gone to the trouble of building the platform for overnight camping but, in view of other nearby shelters not needing any building up, one can only conclude that this site is a specialised type of refuge. It was first found by Geoffery Mason of Basala Estate who also reported two further caves at the same level further to the east on the Waitotu Stream.

The largest and most important cave with artificial features is VL 1/15 which lies near the banks of the Qara Creek, a minor creek which eventually feeds into the Ba River. It is situated close to an abandoned village in a rather pleasant valley. As seen in Fig. 3, there is a stone barricade across the mouth of the cave with only a narrow entrance left. Beyond this, another 3 ft high stone formation has been constructed to screen the occupants from view through the entrance. The space created by this barricade has been used for habitation since there is a stone hearth still in position. At the northern end of this space there are two short sections of stone wall, the interior one reaching to the roof of the cave. The small chamber formed by these short stone formations is only 5 ft high, but the main habitation area has a more comfortable 6 ft height which is sufficient to allow some freedom of movement. A narrow gap of 2 ft between the top of the main stone formation and cave roof is sufficient to permit an alternative exit.

Defended caves with stone work are known in the upper Sigatoka Valley where they were used by mountain people in their stand against Government forces in the campaigns of the 1875 period. The cave defenders are said to have retired with food, and in many Viti Levu caves in the wet season there is either a runnel of water or a constant drip from the roof and sides which would be sufficient for a small group's needs. The advantage would not always be with the besiegers in the pre-firearms era, because exposure and lack of assured food supply would be factors to be considered. There is no denying, however, that dark, damp caves, pungent from bat habitation, must have been miserable places, even for short periods. The presence of candlenut at VL 1/16 suggests that some form of illumination was obtained by using such nuts.



Beyond the cave and on the banks of the river there is an 18 ins. thick deposit of midden, mainly shells, but some human bones were amongst this. Unless the midden is related to the nearby village site, it suggests that the cave may have been in use over a much longer time than is thought at first. Human leg bones were also seen inside the cave next to the hearth, and a hand-carved wooden pipe-bowl with metal lining was found close to this. A test pit 12" x 6" was dug at one end of the hearth and for a depth of 7 ins. the soil was black with some wood and charcoal present. Below the 10 ins. level, the soil was still black with one shell being noted. Surface pottery from various parts of the cave floor were late Ra style, and sherds and shell were present to a depth of 16 ins. on the northern side of the hearth. The two limited test pits showed that there is sufficient depth of occupation deposit and some degree of stratification to warrant further investigation of these sites.

In Fig. 3, the heights from floor to ceiling of the cave are shown as 5 ft H etc. It will be seen that over most of the floor area there was insufficient room to stand upright. Despite this, there is occupation deposit over the entire floor and in the make-up of the central stone barricade. In view of the limited clearance between the latter and the ceiling which is a mere 2-3 ft, the presence of this material suggests that it was obtained from the floor of the cave itself. This would give some support to the possibility that the cave had been occupied over a fairly long period to account for (a) the accumulation of such a deposit, and (b) the extent of the midden outside the cave, assuming that these two are linked. The stone defences, then, represent the last phase of the cave's occupation except that hunters and weatherbound travellers have probably used it from time to time since then.

The presence of late Ra incised pottery does not preclude the existence of early paddle-impressed ware in a cave such as this. At Sigatoka and Walu Bay in Suva, sherds of the latter type have been found several feet below the present floor surface of caves in both localities. A recent reconnaissance by a Fiji Museum party has shown the presence of these sherds in a cave forty miles up the Sigatoka Valley. It would seem a distinct possibility that future investigations will reveal such early pottery in lower levels in some major inland caves. This would imply early settlement of mountain areas of Viti Levu and help to explain some of the cultural differences between coastal and inland peoples on this island. At present, it is only possible to record the surface features of each cave and hint at a longer life history in some cases. The main purpose of these notes is to draw attention to cave refuges with artificial stone work and place them as relatively late in the chronology of Fijian fortifications.