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CHIEFS AND FORTS: A COMPARISON OF HILL FORTIFICATIONS AMONG
NEW ZEALAND MAORI AND IN IRON AGE BRITAIN

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Both Celts and Maoris were organised into small, stratified societies headed by chiefs, and both built and used hill fortifications, constructed usually from earth, timber and occasionally stone. These fortifications (which in speaking of Celtic Britain we call hillforts, and which the New Zealand Maori called pa) have been taken to indicate frequent inter-community raiding and violence, during which both people and their portable food reserves had to be protected behind defensive ramparts. More recently, attention has focused on the role of these sites as fortified food stores and the part they played in a redistributive economy, in which a conical social structure moved resources towards an allocative centre and out of it again. The physical similarities between hillfort and pa are reasonably clear (ramparts, emphasis on storage structures, organised internal plan) and have been noted by a number of authors (Best, 1924 and 1927; Firth, 1927; Fox, 1976).

The major difference, accepting British archaeological terminology, is one of classification in that pa (Davidson, 1984:181ff) include types of sites that would be categorised with either hillforts, or small fortified enclosures or raths in Britain and Ireland. It now seems that the physical similarities between hillfort and pa reflected similar social structures among the Celts and Maori. Both societies were characterised by conical social structures that fostered fighting and stimulated a redistributive economy long before the appearance of fortifications. Fortified sites only appeared in numbers when pre-existing social trajectories were constricted by growing ecological crises.

In examining the nature of conflict in both societies it appears that paramount importance should be given to the pyramidal social structure and to the relationship between chiefs and warriors. Both societies were dominated by head-strong chiefs and warriors who sought prestige through fighting, feuding, feasting and head-hunting. The differences lie in the political and technological levels of the two societies. There is some evidence to suggest that Celtic society was more hierarchical, and more aristocratic than its Maori counterpart. Links in Celtic society were established more through patronage and clientship than through kinship. The use of metals in Britain promoted the development of more sophisticated weapons

such as war-chariots. On the scale of political development of chiefdoms, the Celtic chief seems to have possessed more powers of command than his Maori equivalent.

The social structures of Celts and Maoris, the latent rivalries between chiefs and warriors, the emphasis on prestige and aggressive defence, all promoted the practice of fighting and feuding, principally in the form of retaliatory raiding. The proximate cause of hostilities was grounded in the desire to overawe rival, neighbouring communities, not to win new territory. Altercations at this level preceded for a lengthy period the appearance of fortifications. Clashes between communities became endemic when the demands for surplus to fund inter-community rivalry began to conflict with the subsistence needs of an expanding human population exploiting a declining resource base. Fortifications were constructed at this juncture as an adjunct to feuding and fighting, and as a material expression of the concern with aggressive territorial defence. Fighting still predominantly took the form of transitory raids but now sometimes escalated into warfare proper, involving entire political units, pitched battles, sieges of forts, longer campaigns and territorial annexation. The ultimate cause of such warfare was ecological pressure.

The origins of the redistributive economy were founded in the social relations of production of both societies, long before 'real' Celts and 'classic' Maoris had appeared. In Britain the starting point seems to have been the inherent stratification of Bronze Age society, while in New Zealand the point of origin lies in the nebulous Ancestral Polynesian Society of Melanesia. The emergence of fortified allocative centres secured the continuing functioning of such an economy, in an ecological situation characterised by an increasing pressure of population on declining food resources. Parts of Celtic Britain were in regular contact with the major powers of the Mediterranean, and developing trade opportunities seem to have elevated some of their redistributive economies to the level of 'mobilisation', where tribute to the chief was, in reality, a form of taxation. Among the more isolated Maoris, redistribution was broadly at the level of 'share-out', by way of feasts held in and between communities (Earle, 1977).

In parts of both Celtic Britain and Maori New Zealand fighting and warfare were endemic and chronic. Both social and ecological factors conspired to prevent the two societies from overcoming the potentially destructive results of such widespread conflict. The failure of the societies to evolve peaceful mechanisms for solving disputes and feuds was exacerbated by a growing ecological crisis in a fragmented and curtailed terrain. Whether the societies of the Celts and

Maoris would have developed solutions to this particular social malaise cannot be known. The arrivals of Julius Caesar in Britain and, some eighteen centuries later, James Cook in New Zealand truncated indigenous developments and set in train radically different trajectories.

Footnote

The author's full address is Clwyd County Council, Shire Hall, Mold, Clwyd CH7 6NG, Wales. This note is a summary of a thesis of the same title submitted to the University of Manchester in 1987 for an MA (Econ) in Social Anthropology. Copies of the thesis are held in the University of Manchester and in the Piddington Reading Room Library, University of Auckland, New Zealand. The author wishes to record his gratitude to Dr.T.Ingold for comments on the thesis prior to submission.

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