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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## ENCOUNTERING WILFRED SHAWCROSS

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University appointments and student enrolments in prehistory expanded rapidly during the 1960s. Graeme Clark's Cambridge Department was remarkably successful in reproducing itself in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. The combination of the Clarke-Higgs approach to economic culture history and the promulgation of the "Idea of Prehistory" was clearly right for the times (White and Murray 1981: 256–7). The appointment of Cambridge graduates Jack Golson, Peter Gathercole, Charles Higham, Peter Bellwood, Wilfred Shawcross and Richard Cassells to New Zealand universities was a measure of this success.

The University of Sydney was also a Cambridge stronghold. Doing my BA (Hons) there it was with some interest that I observed Rhys Jones' and Richard Wright's assessment of Wilfred Shawcross' article 'An investigation of prehistoric diet and economy on a coastal site at Galatea Bay, New Zealand.' From a Cambridge point of view, Wilfred had scored two hits. Firstly, the article was published in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*. Secondly, it incorporated the aims and methods of economic analysis as used by Graeme Clark at Star Carr, Yorkshire (Shawcross 1967a: 107).

My subsequent encounters with Wilfred Shawcross have followed a double trajectory. The first is social, the outcome of meetings generally in Australia. The second represents an assessment of Wilfred Shawcross' contribution to New Zealand archaeology made after I was appointed to a lectureship at Auckland. These strands, one personal and the other academic, do not always mesh well together, but I feel it is important to attempt both. The idiosyncrasies of the man and the individuality of his archaeology clearly go together.

Following graduation from Sydney University I undertook doctoral studies at the ANU supervised by John Mulvaney. While I was excavating at Lake Mungo a field visit by the Orientalists to Mungo station saw the New Zealand contingent, including Wilfred, avoid the flies by locking themselves in a walk-in meat-safe.

Wilfred Shawcross made a subsequent visit to Western New South Wales and astounded the singlet and thong clients at the Pooncarie Hotel by requesting a round of jugs.

There has been a certain symmetry between Wilfred's career and my own. I left Australia to take up a lecturing position at the University of Auckland, while Wilfred followed Peter Bellwood to John Mulvaney's newly-established teaching department at the ANU. After a near disastrous episode in the Channel Country, when he was rescued from certain dehydration by a party of Aborigines equipped with VB cans, Wilfred Shawcross also took up research at Mungo.<sup>1</sup> One of his articles on Australian archaeology (Shawcross and Kaye 1980) discussed the interdisciplinary nature of the work at Mungo. He confided that, apart from my own work with Jim Bowler, precious little interdisciplinary cooperation had occurred.

Following my arrival at Auckland in 1973 our paths separated. Wilfred Shawcross ceased research in New Zealand, while my work took me to the Northern Territory and Indonesia. As a result my further appreciation of Wilfred Shawcross has come from his publications. It is clear that over a period of twelve years (1961 to 1973), Wilfred Shawcross made a distinctive contribution to New Zealand archaeology, one that was firmly located within Cambridge traditions of archaeology but also shows the emergence of a local approach.

### **An economic approach to New Zealand prehistory**

Archaeologically the Hauraki Gulf Islands was not virgin territory, even in 1965 (Davidson 1963, Nichols 1964).<sup>2</sup> The initial reason for the Ponui Island research was to test the place of shell middens in late prehistoric settlement patterns rather than any explicit economic goal (Terrell 1966: 144, 1967: 31). Both Shawcross and Terrell had expressed scepticism regarding artefact based cultural sequences for New Zealand and the excavations at Galatea Bay confirmed Terrell's pessimistic view of culture historical and settlement pattern archaeology (Green and Shawcross 1962, Terrell 1965, 1967:65). If applying the methodology of Star Carr and the California School of midden analysis to Galatea Bay was something of an afterthought on Shawcross' part, there was also the realisation that the conventional approaches then available (midden analysis, settlement

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<sup>1</sup>This sense of symmetry somehow seemed lost on Wilfred, who raised considerable objections to Reg Nichol's proposal to re-excavate the midden at Galatea Bay.

<sup>2</sup>The decision by John Terrell and Wilfred Shawcross to carry out excavations at Galatea Bay on Ponui Island was not everywhere welcome. Wilfred Shawcross maintained that pressure for an Easter Break field trip came from the AU Archaeological Society.

patterns, culture history)<sup>3</sup> were incapable of utilising the Galatea Bay information (Shawcross 1967a).

Ambrose (1967) notes that midden analyses of the Galatea Bay type work in terms of an argument that the amount of food in a midden = population  $\times$  time, and thus attempt to control two unknown variables, either population, or the time over which the midden accumulated.<sup>4</sup> Wilfred Shawcross fully explored these possibilities in a series of papers (1967b, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1975) where he made use of a variety of methods—ecological studies of living shellfish populations, radiocarbon dating, midden analysis, ethnography, genealogy, commercial fishery statistics, and White’s thermodynamics—to study human populations and population growth, time, dating, carrying capacity, ecology, economic energetics, efficiency, seasonality and the impact of prehistoric predation on fish and shellfish stocks.

Wilfred Shawcross’ first paper on New Zealand archaeology (Green and Shawcross 1962) pointed out the deficiencies of artefact sequences as the basis for a culture historical framework for New Zealand. In his work at Ongari Point Pa, he extended his critique of typological systems to include storage pits. The initial reasons for the excavation at Ongari Point included a search for Te Whanake’s Pa, a Christian settlement that was attacked and destroyed by Taraia in 1842, and, secondly, the need for larger, open-square excavations to determine functional relationships between pa features (Shawcross 1964a, 1966: 53). The pa proved to have a complex history, but little evidence of association with events of 1842. Ongare Point, as a late-prehistoric pa, had multiple examples of most pit forms. This enabled Wilfred to test Parker’s (1962) sequence of pit forms which it was claimed could match structural evidence with Golson’s Archaic / Classic phases. A comparison of Ongare Point with other sites revealed that Parker’s sequence had little validity (Shawcross 1966: 67).

### **Wet sites and the Cook Collection**

Why Wilfred Shawcross in 1961–62 decided to excavate the small mire next to the Kauri Point Pa is known. He wanted a part of the Kauri Point project that was not under the control of other site directors. This was not the full answer, his choice also demonstrated Wilfred’s nose for a good thing. Relative to the finds that emerged from it, the small wetland adjacent to Kauri Point Pa is an

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<sup>3</sup>Janet Davidson’s MA thesis (part published as Davidson 1967: 222–3) explored the usefulness of shell middens for cultural sequences.

<sup>4</sup>Subsequent understandings, some of which were explored by Shawcross, revealed that the amount of food in the midden also represents a partially known quantum, due to differential preservation, site formation processes and the difficulties of sampling.

insignificant feature. The excavation covered an area of 15 square metres, but most of the artefacts, i.e., 75% of the 14,000 obsidian flakes, 187 complete wooden hair combs (334 large fragments), wooden agricultural tools, gourds and ochre, two wooden figures and evidence of a hut structure, came from an area of 1.5 m<sup>2</sup>, and a depth of 30–100 cm (Shawcross 1964c: 383, 1976).

In 1963 Wilfred Shawcross advanced a contextual rationale for the artefacts found in this small area, noting (Shawcross 1963: 55): “the significance of the site lies, not in the assemblage of artifacts ..., but in the relation of the site to the occupations of Kauri Point *Pa*.” By 1976, however, Wilfred attached other meanings, arguing that the site was a sacred spring (*wai tapu*) and that the combs represented archaeological evidence for a formal change in Maori art styles, from rectangular to round-topped forms (1976: 293). Despite considerable exploration of wetland sites since 1962 (Johns 2001) the evidence from Kauri Point swamp remains unique.

Wilfred Shawcross also studied the obsidian flakes from the Kauri Point swamp in terms of their typology, functional classification and method of manufacture (1964b). He concluded that, outside of the South Island, New Zealand stone artefact assemblages were generalised, lacked formal types and had edges which reflected random processes of use or sharpening. While New Zealand was preserved from the idea that edges could substitute for whole artefact typology, Shawcross’ conclusions had a dampening effect. Outside of studies of adze-flaking, few attempts have been made to utilise flake stone artefacts in archaeological frameworks since then (Davidson 1984: 104–6).

The excavation at the Ngaroto Swamp *Pa* followed those carried out by the Waikato Archaeological Group. Shawcross excavated the site to gain chronological / stratigraphic controls for the Classic Maori culture, defined in terms of artefacts from Kauri Point swamp, Oruarangi and Paterangi (Shawcross 1968: 4–6, Shawcross and Terrell 1966). Secondly, the mound was composed of a succession of human-built floors and living platforms (Shawcross 1968: 9, 15). At Ngaroto Shawcross identified 6 platforms and 37 floors, which he interpreted as separate clusters of houses, or communities, living on the mound at the same time. This was a situation that did not conform with either Groube’s or Green’s ideas concerning prehistoric settlements (Shawcross 1968: 24–6).

Finally, taking Groube’s (1969) conclusions to heart, Wilfred Shawcross went to the Cook Collection at Cambridge University to secure a baseline of material evidence to measure the rapid changes of the early 19th century (cf. Bedford 1996). This move also reflected the fact that Wilfred’s interest in defining the Classic had shifted away from durable artefacts, settlement patterns and (dryland) structural evidence to the organic items preserved in wetlands, and, in this case, to the Cook Collection. He concluded that Groube’s rejection of 19th

century ethnography had been overlaid and that this evidence could still be used to define prehistoric Maori culture, a fact borne out in Kath Shawcross' work (1967).

## Discussion

Wilfred Shawcross' work contributed to the development of the wider field of economic archaeology internationally, and, in New Zealand, to the work of Reg Nichol (1989) and others. In the wetland excavations he utilised the richness of material culture to include Maori social and artistic phenomena and contributed to the development of a distinctive wetland archaeology and conservation practice (Irwin 2004, Johns 2001). Many graduates in archaeology remember his skills as both a teacher and a raconteur. Finally, his theoretical explorations contributed to the emergence of a 'new' archaeology for the North Island of New Zealand through the methodological breakthroughs of Irwin (1985) and Sutton, Furey and Marshall (2003).

The effectiveness of Wilfred Shawcross' New Zealand research came from a consistency of approach and his dedication to finding ways of testing the results of New Zealand archaeology. In demonstrating the deficiencies of conventional approaches to archaeology he moved New Zealand archaeology towards the realisation that such methods were incapable of apprehending the New Zealand past. However, he did not fully articulate an alternative approach. As a result many of the creative aspects of his research have been re-integrated into frameworks he had already rejected. A generation after Wilfred Shawcross left New Zealand the field is still grappling with these problems.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to speculate on the further impact Wilfred Shawcross might have had on New Zealand archaeology had he not moved his research focus and his imagination to the Australian desert.

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<sup>5</sup>As late as 1987 Sutton was attempting to deconstruct the concept of the Archaic as being terminally deficient (Sutton 1987).

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