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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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EXCAVATION AT SITE N40/74. OPITO BAY.

R.G.W. Jolly

Shortly before Christmas 1967, B.M. Jolly brought to my notice the fact that someone had been vigorously digging in a foredune midden at Opito, leaving the place in a most untidy state. I examined the area and found a section of an adze, what appeared to be a good hammerstone and many large flakes. Altogether it seemed to me to be a place where people had worked if not lived and certainly merited further investigation.

In March 1968, with Mr. Neil Amos, I set out a 6ft. square to the west of the fossicker's debris and proceeded to excavate. The surface had some dune grass on it and a few loose stones. In a weathered dune surface the loose material had to be removed before anything like stratigraphy becomes apparent, and this was done.

At a depth of about a foot a large stone was revealed and a hearth was uncovered. Almost no flakes were within this layer and the occasional shells usually consisted of Amphidesma australe, or A. subtriangulatum and portions of Struthiolaria papulosa. There were some heat affected stones and odd pebbles in addition to the stones of the hearth. The presence of the hearth would suggest that no disturbance had taken place for some time. Layer 1 is about 6 inches thick.

Layer 2 consisted of a "branny" sand, rather coarse in grain, about 15 inches thick. Again hearths appeared and there were definite colour changes apparent. There was a yellow earthy layer over what amounted to a quarter of the square. One hearth was immediately on top of this. The branny layer continued down and two very large stones were revealed. One was long and narrow and set on edge. The second could have been brought to the site, because it would have been a simple matter to fashion an adze from it.

Some soft patches in layer 2 were investigated, but it was difficult to determine whether they were really pits or not. There was a lens of earthy material near the stone set on edge. Some faecal material was encountered, possibly dog. A very obvious pit appeared, which on excavation was found to be about 8 inches deep. The fill was much darkened branny sand. Some charcoal in odd small pieces occurred.

Thinking that we had reached natural, and having drawn and photographed the section, Mr. Amos commenced to shovel back spoil while I probed the floor and also the yellow earth-covered area. The latter obviously contained stone, and on investigation I found a roughout adze, some large flakes and a most interesting shank of a shell fishhook. This was of an entirely different type to any I had hitherto found, and it was in good order.

The principal finds are listed in table 1. Stone flakes were found throughout the deposit, and these, together with the hammer stones and adze blanks, suggest the site was principally an adze working area. A few small pieces of obsidian were present. One piece had a particularly useable sharp edge. Almost all were olive green against the light, i.e. probably from Mayor Island.

The bone was nearly all fish, mainly snapper, but with other species represented. There were four bird bones and several tiny pieces of mammal bone, probably dog. No carbon occurred in sufficient quantity to provide a suitable sample for dating.

Discussion

Most work at Opito apart from Skipper's Ridge (N40/7) and more recently Bellwood's excavation (N40/73) has been done on adze making or moa bone hook making sites. Jolly and Murdock's excavation at site N40/2, which contained both moa and shell hook pieces, produced material in some ways similar to this one. There was a marked difference in economy between the two sites, however.

Site N40/74 warrants more investigation. Accurate estimation of its area is well nigh impossible on account of the nature of the dune. The similarities that exist between the shell fishhook shank from this site and the shell fishhook pieces found at N40/2 incline one to think in terms of a middle early date. This is further suggested by the fact that one small adze roughout has a triangular section.

My thoughts on soil horizons in old consolidated dunes have been much disturbed. The "branny" sand was fairly stable and I am beginning to be of the opinion that mats were extensively used on sand. Although so far I have no actual evidence to support the idea, there is much evidence of the use of matting in Murdock's Hauraki Plains sites and probably at Te Awamutu. Mud and moisture are kinder to organic substances than the bacteria that flourish in sand.

I owe thanks to Neil Amos for hard work and friendship, to Beryl Jolly for typing, and to the Davidson-Green editorial service for patience and good re-arrangement. Mr. Calder was as ever sympathetic and helpful.

Table 1. Principal finds. N40/74.

- 1 shank of composite hook, in paua shell (Haliotis sp.)
- 3 unfinished adzes: no. 1, 90 mm x 37 mm x 15 mm, quadrangular section
no. 2, 138 mm x 47 mm x 32 mm, quadrangular section
no. 3, 88 mm x 35 mm x 22 mm, triangular section.
- 2 broken adze roughouts, partly ground.
- 9 broken pieces of adze roughouts.
- 1 red hammer stone.
- 1 rounded stone with extensive hammer dressing.
- 1 unworked rounded stone.
- 2 small pumice abraders.
- 11 obsidian flakes, 10 green, 1 grey (?).
- 62 stone flakes from layers 1 and 2.
- 32 stone flakes from layer 3.
- 2 stone flakes and 2 natural spalls with traces of red staining.
- 1 bone needle.
- 4 pieces of Cookia sulcata shell, possibly from fishhook manufacture.