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EXCAVATIONS AT THE DART BRIDGE SITE, UPPER WAKATIPU REGION:
A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Introduction

The Dart Bridge site, also known as the Paved Mound site (S122/1) has been known since the donation to Otago Museum of material recovered there early this century by Charles Haines. Test excavations were undertaken in January 1967 by David Simmons (formerly Otago Museum) but only brief results of these have ever been published (Simmons, 1967, 1969, 1973). Partly because of the interest generated by Simmons' broad interpretation of the site and partly because, last year, active erosion of the Dart River bank threatened part of the site (refer Ritchie, 1980:251), the authors decided to undertake an excavation (jointly directed) this last summer.

The site is located immediately downstream from the Dart bridge and is distributed over an area of 2500 m² lying between the Kinloch road and the Dart river. This area is situated at the toe of a shingle fan formed by Stockyard Creek, and on each side of the site as well as across it, there are remains of creek channels. Thickets of matagouri are scattered across the site today but originally it was probably under beech forest. Periodic flooding and fan rejuvenation, forest removal and the deposition of loess from the Dart floodplain no doubt account for some of the hummocky topography which complicates the present perception of cultural features upon the surface. Of the latter there were, in January 1981, the following visible:

1. Two large raised-rim pits (Plate 1),
2. Another large pit associated with a low mound and several slight depressions,
3. Some 4-7 areas of barely perceptible mound and depression features and,
4. Several patches of cobbles and boulders showing through the soil in conceivably cultural patterns.

Excavations

Our excavations totalled 145 m² (Fig. 1) and included both raised rim pits (Pit A and Pit I, Complex D), the pit and mound feature (Complex B), one of the low mound and depression features (Complex C), and an area of 80 m² beside the surface boulder patches where probing indicated the existence of sub-surface paving (Complex D).

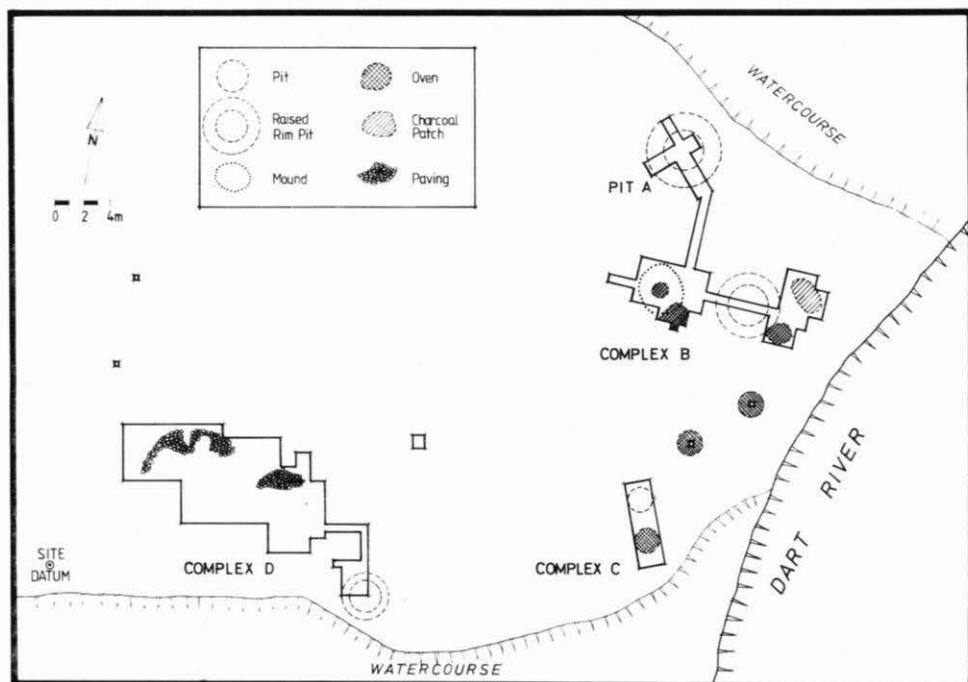


FIGURE 1. Excavated areas and features at the Dart Bridge site.

In the bottom of Pit A was a thick layer of charcoal lying on a burnt loess floor. Immediately above it was a densely packed layer of fired boulders. These characteristics strongly suggest a *ti* (*Cordyline australis*) cooking pit. *Ti*, in fact, is abundant around the lower Dart valley today. The other raised-rim pit, in Complex D, contained no cultural material.

Complex B comprised a low mound, a pit with slightly raised rims, three ovens and a large patch of charcoal. The pit contained the same material and stratigraphy as Pit A and was probably also used for *ti* cooking, while the adjacent mound appears to be basically a natural feature into the top of which has been cut an oven (Plate 2). This contained a mixture of charcoal, fragmented ovenstones and small, heavily fired, pieces of moa bone. The remaining oven pits were similar and the large charcoal patch is probably from an open fire.

In Complex C there were two shallow pits: one contained no cultural material and the other was packed with ovenstones lying above a dense layer of charcoal. Although unusually shallow (less than 0.5 m deep) this may be another ti cooking pit.

Small quantities of fragmented and burnt moa bone were scattered around the ovens, and a few pieces of porcellanite and silcrete, several from large blades, were recovered from each of these excavations.

Under the topsoil of Complex D was a mottled yellow/grey layer of silt or loess (layer 2) lying above a generally flat surface of yellow silt. Most of the cultural material was located at the base of layer 2. In the main this consisted of numerous small flakes of porcellanite and some silcrete. In addition, there were fragments, some polished, of nephrite, Moeraki porcellanite and argillite, as well as a few boulder spalls and pieces of red ochre. Recognizable artefacts included pieces of polished nephrite and argillite adzes, a heavily damaged mid-section of a finished type 1 argillite adze, a portion of a slate ulu and a finned lure hook shank (Plate 3). The nephrite, in hand specimen, appears to be largely from the Routeburn source and flaking, rather than sawing, seems to have been the method of working it.

Structural evidence in this area consisted of two patches of stone paving (Plate 4). These, each a single layer of cobbles and boulders, do not appear to be paths, nor do they connect mounds or other structural features. To the north, and partly overlapping them, was a sheet of gravel and silt or loess which had no apparently cultural shape or origin and was of variable thickness. Probing indicated that this material extends at least 3 m north of the complex D excavation and has patches of boulders, possibly paving, beneath it. No postholes or any convincing hearths were located. There is a scatter of boulders immediately south of the paving which may, however, represent the results of fossicking in an area in which several hearths, referred to by Charles Haines, could have been situated.

Of the function of the paving we can presently say very little, except to note that much of the lithic material was found along or near its southern edge. There may be a parallel in this respect with the paving at the Heaphy River Mouth site (Wilkes and Scarlett, 1967).

Conclusions

Until the excavation notes and plans are examined and the lithic, faunal and other materials analysed we are reluctant to draw any definite conclusions about our investigations. Nevertheless, we do feel confident that the characterisation of the Dart Bridge site as a

greenstone workers' village of twenty houses connected by paved pathways (Simmons, 1969:12) is unlikely to be supported by our data. What we appear to have is a small and probably temporary Archaic phase settlement at which ti and moa cooking occurred and where, on a modest scale, there was manufacture of nephrite adzes and flake and blade implements of porcellanite and silcrete.

Acknowledgements

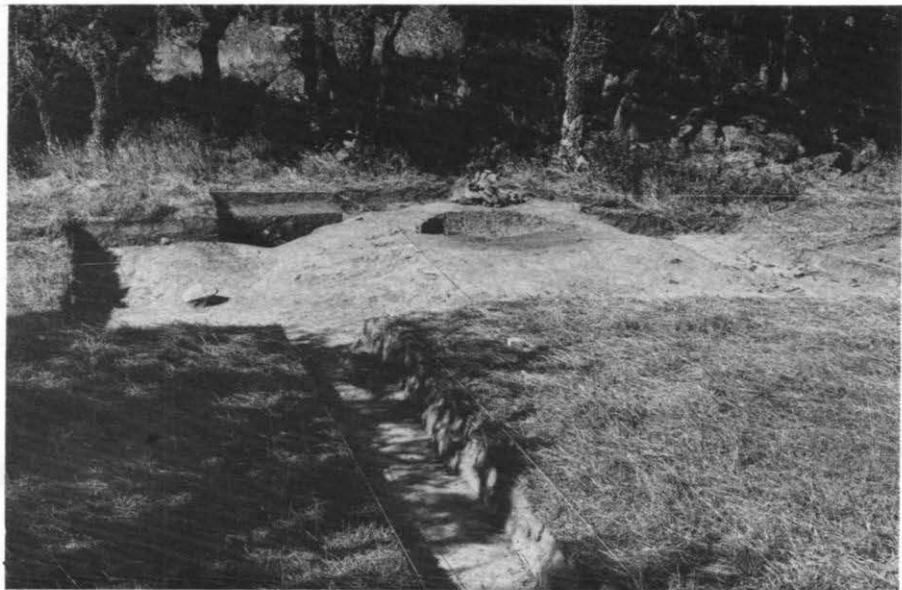
We wish to thank the landowner, Mr Russell Hamilton (Routeburn Station) for his permission and the Huirapa Maori Committee (Puketeraki) for their approval. John (Bouncer) Stevenson was most tolerant and hospitable in allowing us all to stay at the Dart Valley Homestead. We thank the following people who assisted in the excavation: Rosanne Anderson, Pam Bain, Sheridan Easdale, Karl Gillies, Sara Gilman, Anna Harrison, Chris Jacomb, Dilys Johns, Scott Mataga, Nicki Rawle, Ron Scarlett, John Stevenson, Moira White and Lyn Williams.

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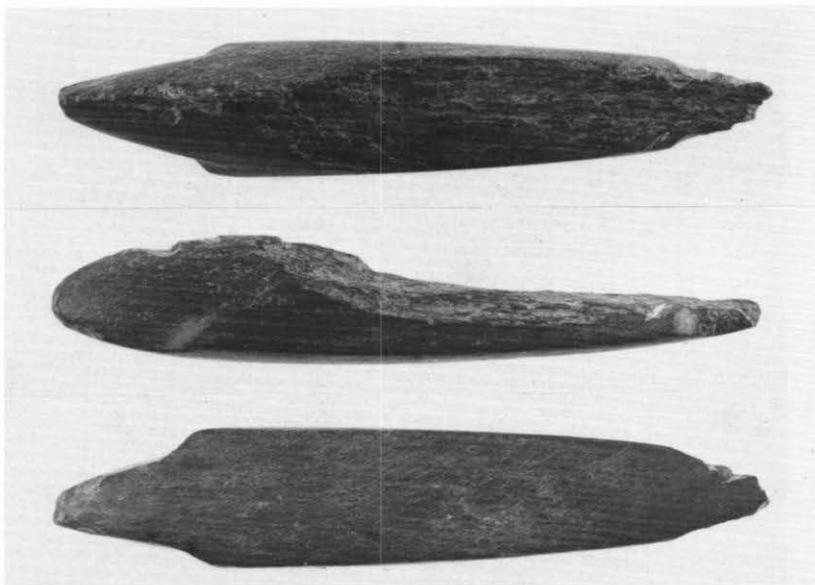
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DART BRIDGE SITE Plate 1. View up the Dart valley with Pit A in the foreground.



DART BRIDGE SITE Plate 2. Mound with oven, Complex B.



DART BRIDGE SITE Plate 3. Lure hook shank (natural size).



DART BRIDGE SITE Plate 4. Paving (Complex D) during excavation.