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EXCAVATIONS ON MOOREA, FRENCH POLYNESIA

By Janet Davidson

During the summer, two members of the Auckland University Archaeological Society, Mr. R.C. Green and Miss Janet Davidson, conducted excavations in the Opunohu Valley, on the island of Moorea, French Polynesia, sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History. Mr. Green had previously made a survey of the numerous archaeological remains in the valley and excavated one site, and it was hoped to learn more about the history of settlement in the valley by further excavations.

In the course of eight weeks work the sites of two large round-ended houses were excavated and smaller excavations were carried out on several of the numerous stone marae in the same general area, where the greatest concentration of ruins in the valley is found.

The two major sites investigated proved to have almost identical sequences of occupation. Before the excavations began each site was seen to consist of a round-ended house of more than 50 feet in length outlined in stone curbs, with an associated stone pavement and terrace wall, and a smaller square house, also outlined in stone, apparently superimposed upon and later than the larger house. Excavations verified these two periods, and revealed two earlier occupations on each site.

In the first period a number of circular, often slightly bell-shaped pits were dug, presumably for storage. On one site drains were associated with these. They were then deliberately filled, and a black habitation layer accumulated on the site, associated with postholes. In the third period the sites were enlarged, by cutting back on the uphill side and redepositing the material down the slope, thus creating a larger flat area on which the large round-ended house and pavement were built. Posthole patterns and other features of these houses were recovered, and one appears to have been rebuilt at least once. A large cooking area consisting of numerous large ovens cut into one another was found at one site, associated with the round-ended house. After the abandonment of the oval house in each case, the site was used at a later date for a smaller house. It is interesting to note that traditional evidence suggests that quite late in its history the powerful Opunohu Valley was conquered by the neighbouring valley Haapiti to which the ceremonial and political centre then shifted, leaving only a remnant of population in the Opunohu.

Time did not permit a very extensive investigation of the numerous marae in the area. The main problem is to establish a sequence. Charcoal samples were obtained for radio-carbon dating, but dates are of course not yet available. Several marae were found to be built on sites with previous occupation evidence in the form of pits and fire-pits, but the marae show no evidence of more than one building phase. Excavation of features within the marae was disappointing. However several skeletons were found which appeared to be associated with the building of marae walls.

Ten adzes, one pounder, some adze fragments and a number of sling stones were recovered from contexts on the two house sites. Faunal remains were disappointingly meagre. Sufficient traces of bone and shell were found to prove that the people had access to the coast, and that they possessed pigs and dogs, at least in the period of the round-ended houses, but no refuse deposits were found. This may be due to the high acidity of the soil in the valley.

At present the data recovered await detailed analysis, and no radio-carbon dates are available. It is not therefore possible to draw any but tentative conclusions. However an interesting and similar sequence has been established for two sites. The data from these and from the marae have already suggested some theories and should provide some interesting conclusions.

Reference

- (1) Green, R.C. 1961. "Moorean Archaeology: A Preliminary Report". Man. Vol. LXI, p200.
(This publication gives a brief account of work previously carried out in the Opunohu Valley by Mr. Green.)