



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

yielded a quantity of obsidian and an adze. The depth of the deposits was shallow, seldom more than eighteen inches deep.

The internal consistency of the pa in this area is the most striking result. Eventually it may be possible to define these as a type distinguishable from those elsewhere, but it will require at least more extensive study.

The amount of time needed for covering a small area is very deceptive; an area like Kaipara may take many days of recording before it is finished. We covered on the day no more than twelve square miles, the five parties surveying a little more than two square miles each. From this small area, twenty-four sites were recorded, fourteen of them pa sites. This high concentration of sites in South Kaipara is surprising - but on close field investigation, many other areas will probably yield greater concentrations. We hope the results of our activity will lead to other such expeditions, for, as we all know, sites are rapidly disappearing all over the country.

#### EXCAVATIONS ON THE COROMANDEL PENINSULA

by J. Golson

If you look at the distribution in the North Island of the distinctive types of adze, ornament and fishing gear which South Island archaeologists have been able to show as characteristic of the culture of New Zealand's earliest inhabitants, the Mōa-hunters, there are some areas where their occurrence is more frequent than others. One of these is the Coromandel peninsula, particularly the east coast from Cape Colville to Waihi Beach. It was on this general area that field exploration was concentrated when the Auckland Society set itself the task of discovering and excavating a North Island Mōa-hunter site with the aims of :-

(a) comparing Mōa-hunter culture in its North Island form with the form well-described for the South Island, and

(b) testing the generally accepted hypothesis that in the North Island with its fewer mōas, man was the contemporary merely of a remnant mōa population consisting of two species at most waning through the operation of environmental and/or genetic changes.

#### Sarah's Gully:

The area finally selected for excavation was the small beach at Sarah's Gully, just north of Mercury Bay. Sarah's Gully did not

appear to be an extensive site, nor was it environmentally as favourable a place for prehistoric settlement as many neighbouring beaches. But archaeologically it produced evidence exposed in the eroded sea bank of stratified layers of occupation in a relatively undisturbed state, some of which appeared to be early by reason of the "hogback" adze and one-piece fishhook of moa bone with incurved point, picked up there. In addition, the bay at large contained other evidences of prehistoric occupation, particularly a small head-land pa which will be described below. Finally, the remoteness of the site and the interest and helpfulness of its owner made it an ideal spot for extended summer operations.

Excavation was begun in the Summer of 1956-7 with the intention of establishing the nature of the occupation on the marine terraces where the cultural material was exposed. Three areas were excavated, revealing evidences of camping and cooking, accompanied by tool manufacture, especially the fashioning of one-piece bait hooks of moabone. Moabone was not plentiful on the site but the recovery of a fragment of pelvis from a small moa in the charcoal of a haangi suggests that at least some of the bones used for manufacture belonged to birds contemporary with the manufacturers. At the same time subfossil moabone is present in the consolidated sands underlying the cultural deposits. Dog and seal bone was abundant in the excavated layers.

Two of the investigated areas call for special comment. In one of these stratification to some depth, though of no great extent, was found and traces, midway in the stratified deposits, of a structure with sunken floor and postholes. The badly decayed remains of a post were found in one of the holes. In the other area, the cultural deposit, though thin, was rich and produced a number of complete adzes and one piece fishhooks of bone, as well as the unbarbed unperforated bone point of a lurehook and beads of cut bird-bone and dentalium shell.

The evidences, though not as rich and varied as the classic Moa-hunter sites, were all distinctly within the Moa-hunter tradition. It was because of this that a return to Sarah's Gully was planned for the summer of 1957-58, with the hope of adding to our knowledge of Moa-hunter culture in one of the respects in which it is at present most sadly deficient, that of house plans and settlement type.

No surface indications existed in the immediate vicinity of the beach deposits to suggest a village site, but immediately behind the area of the first season's richest finds was a long flat terrace

running by the side of the creek which suggested itself as a likely spot. Since excavation here was exploratory, it had necessarily to be extensive. The area was gridded into 12 ft. squares and 9 ft. squares excavated within these, leaving 3 ft. baulks intact between squares for access and section drawing, until a late stage in excavation.

No village site was found on the terrace, but instead a number of channels running athwart the terrace, petering out at the one end on top of the natural bank above the creek and beach, starting at the other end at the base of the ridge slope by which the terrace is backed. Because few artefacts, and these not diagnostic, were found, the dating of the channels had to be made by way of stratigraphic connections with the beach section excavated the previous year. Though much work remains to be done on soil samples collected for mechanical analysis with the question of the validity of these stratigraphic connections in mind, the provisional conclusion is that the channels are Moa-hunter in view of the fact that they were sealed in by a sand blanket that also sealed in the cultural deposits on the beach section below.

When the terrace had been adequately investigated, attention was directed to the low ridge top above it, where again in the absence of surface features extensive excavation on the grid pattern was employed. A line of five pits was uncovered, all of them filled to the brim with earth before the material of the modern surface layers began to form. Two of the pits were deep square bin-like structures with ledges as though for the fitting of a cover. The other three were larger (8 ft. by 4 ft.), rectangular, in all cases with drains leaving them by a V-shaped cut at the level of the floor. Two of the drains ran out to the top of the scarp at the bottom of which the terrace channels originated.

A slender case could thus be made out on grounds of functional interdependence for the contemporaneity of ridge pits and terrace channels and thus of ridge pits and Moa-hunter cultural deposits on the beach. No artefacts were found on the ridge top to date this area independently, while efforts to achieve a stratigraphic link between ridge top and the terrace by trenching the scarp proved abortive.

Because of the negligible information available on Moa-hunter structures, it became a matter of some importance to date the ridge top pits in relation to the Moa-hunter occupation of the beach. This was all the more important because the pits, too small for and with no traces of habitation, seemed best interpreted as food stor-

age pits: and if food pits, what was the food that was stored? The orthodox theory that Moa-hunters were non-agricultural is open to many objections and the Sarah's Gully pits might conceivably be evidence to the contrary.

The third season's work, during the summer of 1958-59, had therefore two aims: to search the ridge top for more pits and to investigate the relationship of the pits to the Moa-hunter levels of the beach. Two pits only, of slightly different character from the previous series, were uncovered in the course of extensive area excavation, as well as a complex series of postholes situated on sloping ground and forming no apparent plan. A great deal of attention was paid to the stratigraphy of the area and numerous soil samples taken over an extensive area. The most promising feature, however, was undoubtedly the presence on top of a layer which sealed at least some of the postholes in of a number of haangi which provided good material for what will be a vital radiocarbon date.

#### Sarah's Gully Pa:

The excavations described above came to an end before the summer's digging season was over. In the final week therefore, investigations shifted to the small headland pa which had for long been a source of interest to the Sarah's Gully excavators.

The pa is small - the flat ridge top behind the defences is little more than 100 ft. long - and the defences simple - two ditches and banks crossing half the ridge from opposite sides and slightly overlapping in the middle and a simple, well-preserved lateral scarp apparently with a small ditch at the base. Within the pa no surface features are visible.

On completion of a plane table survey, the site was gridded into 12 ft. squares in such a way that 9 ft. squares within could be excavated to section the two banks and ditches, investigate the interior of the pa along the central ridge and include the lateral scarp.

Excavation began in the belief, soon to be proved false, that the settlement evidence within the pa would be simple and straightforward. Though the excavation of the ditch and bank defences raised no problems, within the pa at least two stages in occupation soon became evident. The later stage was evidenced by the large quantities of obsidian and haangi stones in the blown sand layer which mantled the site. The earlier stage consisted in a number of pits dug into the subsoil and filled completely by natural or human agency before the sand mantling began. The pits are of two types - rectangular pits up to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep and a variety of circu-

bar pit of a type not hitherto recorded - simple shafts sunk into the ground with a small expansion of the sides towards the base. They are of varying depth, from 2 ft. to  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft.

Connected with one or other of the occupation periods is a mass of stake holes in the centre of the pa.

The well-preserved scarp on the side of the hill proved to be partly built up with material apparently won from a very shallow ditch at its base. It is as yet unclear to which stage of occupation this and the other defences belong.

Barely a week was spent in its initial investigations of the pa. The excavations are being continued, however, by Mr and Mrs T.L. Birks, two retired members of the Society, who are devoting their full time during 1959 to the total excavation of the pa.

#### Opito:

At the beginning of the second season's work at Sarah's Gully (1957-58) Mr Cruman of Opito Bay reported that artefacts were being eroded by high tides from an area at the mouth of a large creek on Opito Bay. An exploratory group from the main party confirmed the report and recovered sufficient evidence to suggest that the new site was worth investigation.

Two days' excavation by the full party cleared a stretch of dune  $41$  ft. long,  $10$  ft. wide and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft. deep. The stratigraphy of the deposits was reasonably clear. At the bottom of the dune series, which contained at a high level evidence of late occupation with unfortunately very few remains, was an 18-inch series of layers quite remarkably rich in faunal and artefactual specimens. The topmost layer of the wind blown sand less heavily affected by human activity from a thinner and less continuous occupation spread at the bottom of the deposit which compensated for its modest proportions with a most immoderate content of archaeological material. This contained a number of significant items, including moa egg shell and a rich collection of moa bone. Mr R.J. Scarlett, of the Canterbury Museum, who took part in the excavations and is now studying the bird remains, reports that a good proportion of the moa bones will be identifiable as to species and that a variety of moas appears to be present, including the larger examples. Significantly enough, the moa bone in the uppermost layer of the series was less plentiful and came in much smaller pieces.

Adzes were recovered in some number and comprised almost every standard Moa-hunter type with the exception of the sidehafter. Bone fishhooks and shell ornaments were also present, as well as fragments of stone bolts and flake knives of various shapes.

Pumice was abundant throughout the deposit and particular concentrations were noted on top of the cultural series at the base of the section and on top of the lowest layer in this series. At this date, however, Dr Wellman's interest in pumice was not known and beyond noting its occurrence nothing further was done.

By the following season, however, (1958-59), the group was aware of Dr Wellman's work and interested in the implications of his "black" pumice hypothesis (discussed by Roger Green in this Newsletter). In view of the common occurrence of pumice in the Opito deposits, it was decided to cut a small section adjacent to the 1957-58 site with the specific purpose of collecting pumice at all levels of the section. The test section thus excavated was taken down into the underlying beach deposits and was subsequently extended in scope. Pumice was found at all levels, but material that could be described as "black", or even "grey", as opposed to "white" did not appear below a certain level in the sequence, stratigraphically the upper half of the sand layers dividing the two main cultural horizons at the base of the deposits. From this point up, however, "black" pumice occurred freely with white pumice.

A small excavation was simultaneously conducted at a sand-hill site further west along Opito Bay, where moa bone was again found in considerable quantity.

---

#### A NEW SITE AT OPITO by R.H. Parker

During the last few days of the Auckland University Archaeological Society's dig in the Mercury Bay area last summer, a small party was detached to test a new site in the western part of Opito Bay. The site is a ridge rising abruptly from the small flood plain of the Otama Stream and lying immediately to the south of the fore dunes.

It was among these dunes that, during the season of 1957-58, the Society carried out a three-day "rescue" dig on a Moa-hunter working floor.

The testing of the new site was undertaken partly from the consideration that any occupation there might be related to that of the "fish hook" floor and partly in response to the insistence of the owner of the property, Mr R.A. Chapman, who had noted as characteristic of the ridge its unusually vigorous growth of grass, which he attributed to deep disturbance of the soil, and its striking greenness, which he attributed to the presence of large quantities of decayed shell in the markedly acid soil.