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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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INTERIM REPORT ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY
OF THE WEKA PASS AREA

Beverley McCulloch

The hills surrounding the Weka Pass in North Canterbury have long been a favourite study area for members of the scientific fraternity. The upthrusting rock formations and deep fossil-laden gullies have attracted generations of geologists, while its adjacent swamps, notably Glenmark and Pyramid Valley, continue to yield a rich harvest of moa bone. However, with the exception of one well-known site, it has received little or no archaeological attention.

That such attention is warranted is proved by the results of a study carried out in the area by the writer over the past eighteen months.

Although work is far from complete, more than thirty previously unknown shelters containing rock drawings have been found within a relatively small compass and indications are that continued investigations will reveal still more.

That such relatively accessible sites should have been overlooked for so long is a reflection perhaps on the attitude rather than the methods of previous investigators. The tendency to regard Maori rock drawings as a form of art rather than archaeological evidence persists even today in many quarters, with the inevitable result that only the spectacular have attracted attention. The insignificant, the faded, and those not easily interpreted from an artistic standpoint, have been overlooked or ignored, despite the fact that their scientific significance is undoubtedly of equal validity.

The main purposes of this study have been:

- (a) To check the records of previous investigators in the light of newer archaeological methods and discoveries, with particular reference to the "Timpendean" shelter.
- (b) To obtain accurate references for the two known shelters in the area, and find and record new sites.
- (c) To trace all drawings and photograph them where possible.
- (d) To excavate shelter floors for signs of occupational evidence.

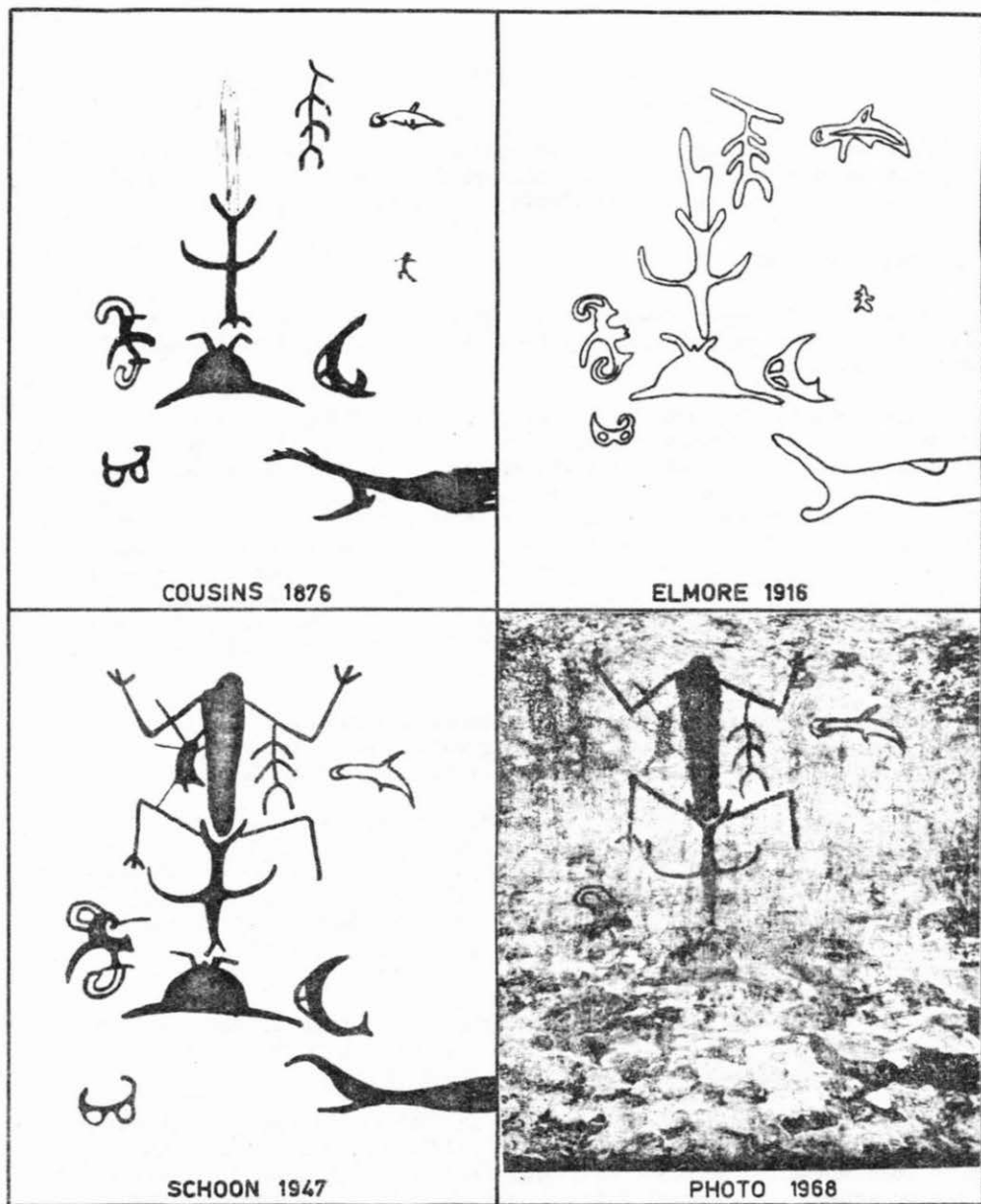


Fig. 1 Scale copies of centre group of drawings from "Timpendean" shelter illustrates artists different interpretations. Photograph at lower right shows group as it appears today.

- (e) To compare findings in this area with those of workers in South Canterbury and North Otago.
- (f) Eventually (although this is not possible at the present time) to form conclusions as to the pre-historical significance of the study area, using the evidence available as a result of the survey.

TIMPENDEAN - HISTORY

Until 1946 the only known site in the Weka Pass district was the much publicised "Timpendean" shelter, which in 1959 was declared a "Reserve for Historic Purposes".

Discovered by shepherds in the earliest days of European settlement, its size and the spectacular nature of the drawings quickly attracted attention. Sir Julius von Haast who visited it in 1876 described a mass of black and large red drawings almost entirely covering the back wall and part of the roof of the shelter which is seventy-five feet long, twelve deep and ten high. After examination Haast ascribed the origin of the drawings variously to a race of indigenous autochthones, tribes of primitive moa-hunting natives, and the survivors of a shipwrecked Tamil crew, this last because of a fancied resemblance between some of the designs and the writing on a Tamil ship's bell found in the North Island by William Colenso (see T.N.Z.I., Vol. X).

In comparing these drawings with those he had seen in other parts of the island, Haast was convinced of their greater age, a theory which he felt was confirmed in part by an excavation of the shelter floor.

Amongst the material he found were stone flakes and fragments of polished stone, charred wood, several varieties of marine shell, bones of seal and a number of small birds, and the broken leg bones of two or three species of moa. These latter he assumed to be the remnants of a meal from their resemblance to fragments he found at Moa Bone Point Cave and the Rakaia Encampment. Unfortunately, none of this material is today available for examination.

It was Haast, too, who commissioned the first copies of the drawings to be made, and these water-colour originals, painted by the artist T. S. Cousins, are today held in the Canterbury Museum.

Later visitors included J. L. Elmore in 1916 (photographs of whose sketches are held in the Otago Museum and the Hocken Library) and the artist Theo Schoon. Schoon's paintings, made in 1947 under the auspices of the Department of Internal Affairs, are also in the Canterbury Museum.

Comparison of these copies, however, reveals many discrepancies and one is faced with the conclusion that they tend to be artist's impressions

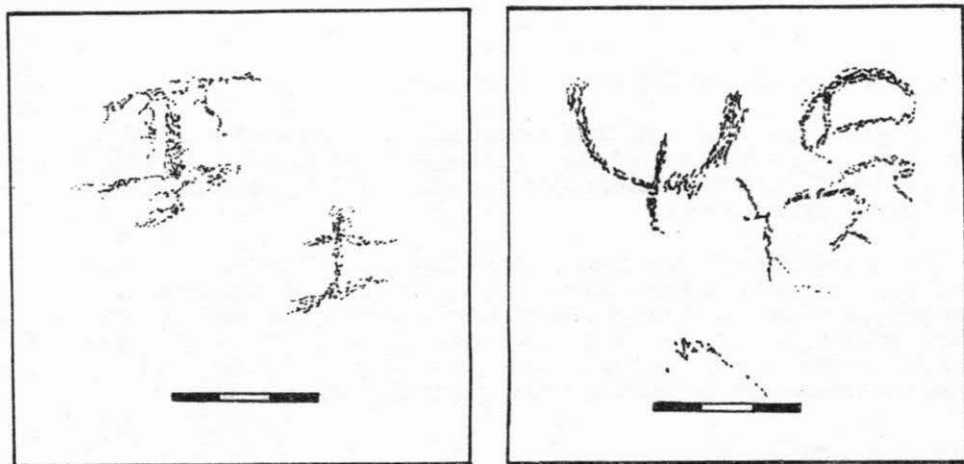


Fig. 2 Two characteristic forms which recur frequently throughout the area. Both can be seen repeated in Fig. 5.

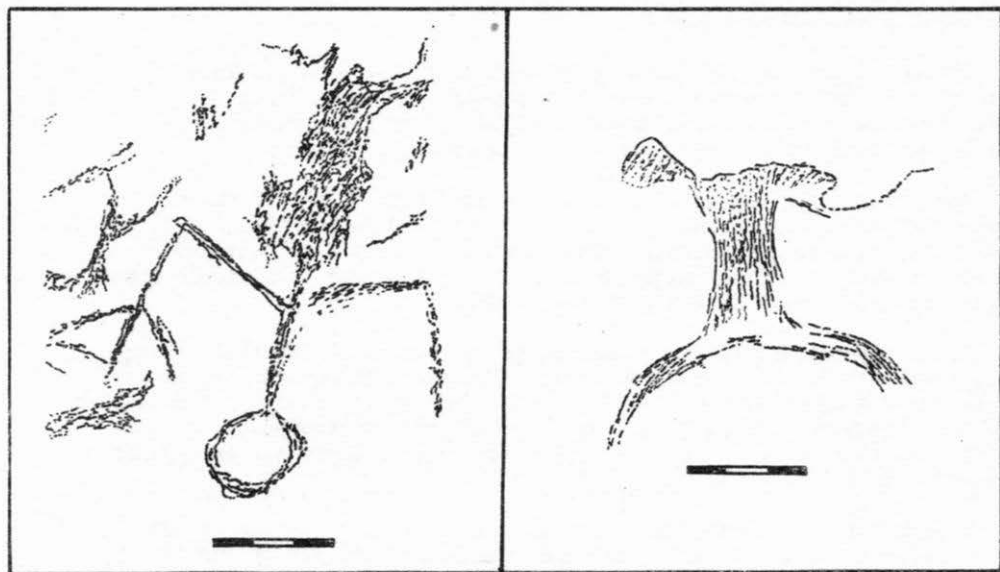


Fig 3 Stylized human figures executed in charcoal. Scale in inches.

rather than accurate scientific records (see Fig. 1).

Some of the more obvious differences may be accounted for by the fact that the more striking of the figures were overpainted in 1930 by a party from the Dominion Museum with the intention of preserving them from further deterioration.

The great bulk of subsequent visitors have, unfortunately, been the inevitable curiosity seekers, whose interest in rock drawings appears to have been secondary to their object of leaving a record of their visit. Vandalism takes the form of names and initials, many of which deface the drawings themselves, as well as a number of examples of blatant pornography applied in orange paint and black crayon to the rear wall.

TIMPENDEAN - CURRENT WORK

The first visit to the Timpendean shelter, early in 1967, was to obtain an accurate map reference for the site records. This being accomplished attention was turned to the drawings themselves. Obviously because of the extent and complexity of these, tracing of all material in the conventional manner was going to be almost impossible, although equally obviously something more accurate than the three previous copies was necessary.

It was finally decided that an attempt should be made to trace the main figures, and to record the rest by photography using infra-red colour transparencies and panchromatic film. Some photography was carried out in November 1967 with varying degrees of success.

For the tracing the assistance of the main body of the Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society was enlisted and on December 4th a party of about forty visited Timpendean. The task was completed in just under two hours, outlines of all major drawings being recorded on a single sheet of plastic, six feet wide and over eighty feet long.

The afternoon was spent in excavating test-holes at intervals along the shelter floor. Flakes of obsidian, flint and orthoquartzite, as well as shell and fragments of moa bone, were recovered from these. Indications were that the work of Haast might not have entirely destroyed the stratigraphy, and it is proposed at the time of writing to carry out an organised excavation of the floor in February 1968.

A ground to roof mesh fence was recently erected by the Lands and Survey Department, and it is to be hoped that this will arrest further vandalism at this valuable site.

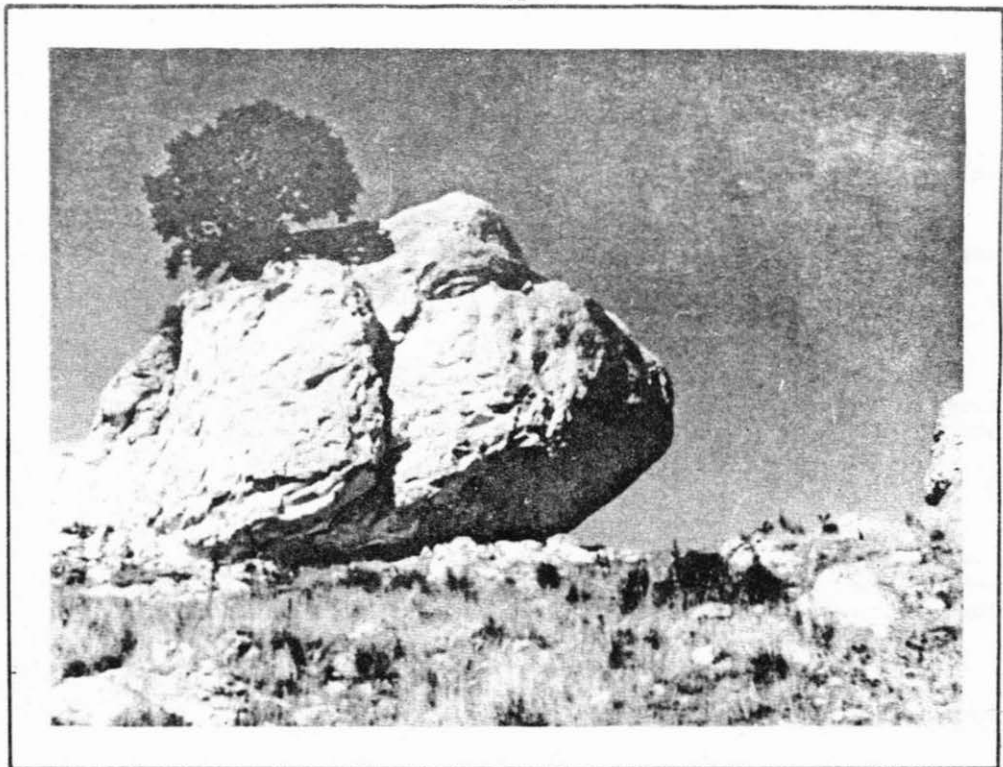


Fig. 4 A typical limestone shelter in the Weka Pass area. Two black drawings on outer face.

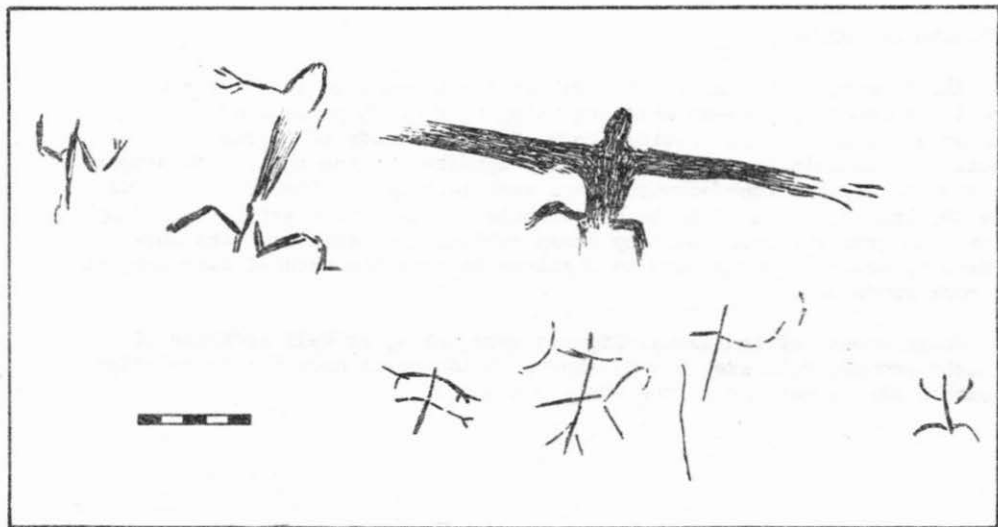


Fig. 5 The general similarity between Weka Pass drawings and those in other parts of the island is shown by this group of figures from the rear wall of a recently discovered shelter.

RECORDING OF NEW SITES

Following up a report from a local landowner of an unrecorded drawing having been seen in the Weka Pass area a systematic search of the surrounding country was commenced in February 1967. (The only other known site on the eastern side of the Pass had been re-examined the previous October.)

The search for further shelters entailed examination of all limestone outcrops in the area. Most of these are to be found in valleys adjacent to streams which are nowadays either dry or partially so for most of the year, although the high eroded ridges were also given attention, mostly with negative results.

Where drawings were found an attempt was made to secure an accurate map reference for the site, although this was sometimes difficult in the absence of prominent landmarks and accurate topographical maps. Aerial photographs can be of assistance but these are not always available.

Shelters were next measured, sketched, and photographed to aid later identification. Relevant local features were also noted, e.g., proximity to water and position in relation to possible routeways.

Drawings were found extensively throughout the whole area, although almost all were at lower levels, where they occurred both on outcrops and on the larger boulders with which the valleys abound (see Fig. 4).

RECORDING OF DRAWINGS

All drawings, including faint markings not amenable to interpretation, were traced on to polythene sheeting using chinagraph pencils of the appropriate colour. In tracing every effort was made to reproduce as exactly as possible the markings as they appeared on the rock. No attempt was made to fill in where obvious gaps were left by flaking or where fading made the traces too faint to be discernable through the plastic. In many places the greasy residue left by sheep rubbing the walls made the work difficult, drawings being hard to distinguish from the natural darkening of the rock surface.

Measurements of individual figures were taken, as well as those of complete groups, with sketches to show positioning of drawings in relation to each other as well as in the shelter itself.

EXAMINATION OF FLOORS

As yet very little evidence of occupation, either permanent or temporary, has been revealed by the excavation of shelter floors. Most have a floor of limestone, but where there is any depth of soil over this test holes have been put down where possible.

The greatest hindrance to this is the heavy overlay of clay which has run off the hills since the disappearance of almost all the natural vegetation. (Growth of any sort on the steeper slopes is sparse with considerable erosion, but local landowners confirm that scrub growth, with isolated pockets of small trees, was found in the area up to sixty years ago, and the presence of large totara logs charred by fire in some places, suggests that the area may once have supported a considerable growth of bush, with its accompanying range of bird life.) This denudation of the land with its subsequent erosion of soil to lower levels, together with the droppings of cattle and sheep with which the hills have been stocked for over one hundred years, often results in a layer of concrete-like consistency of up to fifteen inches in thickness on shelter floors.

Apart from the main shelter at Timpendean, only one other has yielded any definite signs of occupation. A fairly large shelter, thirty-nine feet long, four to five feet high, and up to seven in depth, the floor consists of a dry crumbly soil, only a few inches deep at the rear wall and deepening towards the entrance. It had unfortunately been disturbed at an earlier date, but obsidian and orthoquartzite flakes, together with fresh-water mussel (*Hyridella*) shell, bird-bone (possibly natural), charcoal, and greywacke firestones were recovered. Mussel shell also occurred in small quantities in an adjacent shelter, although no traces of drawings were apparent here.

Moa bone frequently occurs throughout the area but there is no indication that this is other than natural.

It is hoped that the proposed excavation of the Timpendean site will yield evidence of a more precise nature than that at present available.

NATURE OF DRAWINGS

Materials used in the execution of all drawings so far found appear to differ very little from those used in other parts of the South Island, with a complete absence of any incised figures. Charcoal applied dry is the most common medium with isolated figures in red which appears in most instances also to have been applied dry. (The exception is Timpendean where red predominates.) One large design of spirals, however, has the appearance of red paint applied with the finger, forming lines from one quarter to one half an inch in width.

It is unfortunate that the retouching of the Timpendean drawings denies us the availability of comparison with these, the only extensive red paintings in the survey area.

Most of the drawings could be described as "typical" of the bulk of rock shelter art in the South Island, although they have a style and character which is exclusively their own. Where there are recognizable forms they appear to be in the main stylized human figures, either of the familiar stick variety, or more rarely sprawling and frog-like, these latter usually being "filled-in" sketchily with the same drawing medium (see Fig. 3, photographic reductions of tracings). Several of these stick forms which are characteristic of Weka Pass recur frequently throughout the area. So similar in fact are many of these that they have the appearance of being the work of one person or family, much as handwriting as we know it today can be traced by its characteristics to an individual (see Fig. 2).

The marked dissimilarity noted by Haast between the Weka Pass drawings and those further south is true only of the dominant drawings at Timpendean. Taking the area as a whole, the variations are only those which one would reasonably expect to find in localities as widely separated as these (see Fig. 5).

SUMMARY

Intentions at the time of writing are to continue work in the area along the lines laid down in this report at least until the end of 1968. By this time it is hoped that evidence may have been uncovered which will give a more definite pattern of occupation than present investigations have revealed.

Meanwhile the indication from occupational evidence is that utilisation of shelters was in an early rather than a late period. Partial support for this supposition is the negative evidence supplied by the absence

of greenstone or artefacts pertaining to later cultures. Nor are there any drawings of the "contact period" type such as can be seen in some other areas of the island. As tradition records that a Maori greenstone route passed via the Waikari plain, the Waitohi, and the Hurunui to the West Coast, it is interesting that up to the time of writing no archaeological validation of greenstone traffic has been discovered in the Weka Pass area itself.

A better knowledge of the ecology of the area at the time of occupation might provide a partial solution to the most important questions:

- (a) What was the importance of the area to the culture and economy of the people who utilised it?
- (b) To what extent was the choice of shelters affected by the natural features in the vicinity at the time of occupation?
- (c) What is the significance of the drawings themselves, taken both as examples of human expression and in correlation with all other available archaeological evidence?

STATUS OF THE SURVEY

As a member of the Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society, I have carried out this field work under the personal direction of the Museum's archaeologist, Mr Michael Trotter.