



NEW ZEALAND
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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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LIMITATIONS ON ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND

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Since 1959 concern has arisen in New Zealand for the development of overall theoretical approaches and frameworks in the archaeological reconstruction of Maori prehistory. In that year, J. Golson published his proposed archaeological analysis in terms of "component", "aspect", "phase", and "culture" (Golson 1959: 31-36). Three years later, Golson, with P. Gathercole, reviewed the past decade of archaeology in the nation and again detailed the current position as he saw it (Golson and Gathercole 1962). That same year, R. C. Green and W. Shawcross (1962) re-examined R. Duff's two-fold scheme for Maori prehistory, the "Moa-Hunter Period" and the "Maori Period", and concluded that it had reached the limits of its usefulness as a suitable generalization. Green suggested a synthetic model based on an evolutionary approach which sub-divided the Maori past into five prehistoric periods (see also: Green 1963). At the same time, L. M. Groube proposed the study of Maori settlement patterns and drew evidence for such patterns in the immediate prehistoric period from ethnohistory, subjects which he later discussed in a master's thesis (Groube 1964). Most recently, Golson at the 11th New Zealand Royal Society Science Congress described the role of theory in New Zealand prehistory and reviewed the synthetic model proposed by Green (Golson 1965a, 1965b). At a more general level, Golson stated: "An Inordinate amount of archaeological time is spent in establishing the facts of prehistory, which includes the winning of the basic data from the ground: much less on seeing what the archaeologist is actually doing with his material and what he thinks he is doing" (Golson 1965b: 79).

Now while no one would deny the great necessity for theoretical and conceptual approaches to prehistory, all such efforts, of course, must always keep in mind the realities with which archaeologists must eventually deal. In this paper, I will note some of the serious limitations to archaeology in New Zealand and emphasize that archaeologists must be realists. Specifically, I want to cast doubt on the utility of the concept of "aspect" in New Zealand in so far as the trend of evidence thus far permits one, a concept which has been defined by Green (Green and Shawcross 1962: 214-215) in the following terms:

Within any region of New Zealand at a given period of time one finds various types of sites which represent all the activities carried out by a community: i. e. a set of beach midden components, a set of dwelling components, a set of burial components, a set of quarry components, etc. Together these make up the regional aspect and may be designated by a local name to distinguish them from other aspects. An aspect then is an assemblage of types composed from a number of site components and defined in such a way that the events represented by the total assemblage cluster sufficiently closely in time to permit the inference that no marked change took place between the first and last events implied.

Green (1963: 93) has also given a shorter definition:

The aspect is thought of as the basic operational unit within a region representing contemporaneous and culturally identical communities which exhibit no marked change over a particular period in time.

In order to raise doubt about the utility of the "aspect" as it has been applied to New Zealand, I suggest archaeologists must always keep in mind two fundamental questions and weigh their theoretical schemes in terms of what answers they can give them. These questions are:

1. What kind of evidence is available?
2. What can one hope to make of this evidence?

In as brief a manner as possible, the remainder of this paper will present my own answers to these two questions.

Golson (1965b: 79) and Green and Shawcross (1962: 212-214) have been careful to emphasize that Duff's organisation of the archaeological evidence into two broad periods has reached the limits of its usefulness as a productive organising device. If new conclusions are to be reached, more detailed sub-divisions of the history of culture change in New Zealand must be applied. Duff himself pointed out he was contrasting only the cultural "peaks" of each phase or period (Duff 1956: 21). It is necessary to ask: what evidence is available upon which further segmentation of Maori prehistory can be made?

On the whole, the available evidence is marked by a paucity of those kinds of data with which archaeologists elsewhere in the world traditionally have based their reconstructions: a wide range of diagnostic artefact types. In New Zealand artefacts occur neither consistently enough nor in a wide enough range of types to permit the detailed postulation of culture complexes. There are exceptions, of course, which do exist. Wairau Bar is one (Duff 1956). For later times in New Zealand there are also isolated areas, such as the Hauraki Plains (Green and Green 1963; Shawcross and Terrell 1965) where, in comparison with other later sites elsewhere in the country, such as most pas and apparently also beach middens (Terrell 1965), "rich" artefactual assemblages assigned to the Classic Maori Phase or later have been excavated, unfortunately without attention to stratigraphic position. It must be emphasized, however, that to date artefactually productive sites especially for the later periods have been the exception and not the rule.

Take a case in point. In the past five years much work has been expended on excavating pas, the fortified sites found in great numbers over the countryside. The trend of the evidence resulting from this work has not been encouraging. While it is quite true that occupation sequences have been deduced, these have been based principally on constructional features such as the recutting of ditches and "pit structures". Diagnostic artefacts have been notoriously scarce. In the lack of such traditional archaeological evidence, archaeologists in New Zealand have been forced to try to analyze the pits themselves to see if they could be made to conform to typological forms having, it has been implicitly assumed, diagnostically limited

distribution in space and time. Indeed, pits, while their very function is debated, have been heralded as superior to portable artefacts precisely because of their fixed stratigraphic position and assumed formal variation. In some cases, pit "types" have been interpreted in terms of "phases" and "aspects" and whole cultural traditions have been set up in terms of them (Parker 1962; and see criticism in: Shawcross 1964: 96). While not forthrightly denying the theoretical possibility of pit typologies, the objection must be stated, nevertheless, that because of their limited stratigraphic expression and limited diagnostic potential, the situation arises constantly that one side of a pa, for example, cannot be related archaeologically in terms of them to another side, nor the inside to the outside. Moreover, occupation sequences solely in terms of the superposition of constructional features, only weakly supported by contained artefactual evidence, if at all, seem barren of prehistoric meaning. They have proved difficult, if not impossible to use in relating a sequence at one pa with that at another, even in so limited a locality as the Kauri Point area defined by Shawcross (1964: 79-81).

The trend of the evidence to date, and there is no reason to expect great improvement in the future, therefore, is this: with the possible exception of early sites, the archaeological data are limited to broad temporal inferences and the details of specific sites. The middle ground between these two extremes is lacking: because no characteristic range of artefact types is found consistently at sites in New Zealand, there is practically no way by which sites and occupation layers in and between sites can be shown to belong both to the same limited time and, at the regional and locality level, to the same cultural or sub-cultural unit defined even vaguely in sociological terms. Now, in fact, where diagnostic artefacts are recovered in sufficient numbers to breakdown prehistory into small periods of time and limited units of space, sociological correlates are always difficult to determine with any certainty (Willey and Phillips 1958: 48-51). In New Zealand where artefact types are scarce, the chance for regional sequences and deduced settlement patterns is regrettably highly limited.

Therefore, the situation of archaeology in New Zealand briefly can be summarized. Assuming that adequate chronological control can be imposed on New Zealand archaeological sites through the application of radio-carbon or obsidian dating, or by the ecological inferences which Golson (1965b: 83) notes Green has devised, any resultant correlation of sites can only be in terms of range dates. Yet even the acquisition of two identical range dates for two sites, precisely because of what these dates are, does not assure that the two sites, even in the same small locality, were occupied at the same time, much less by the same sociological group of people.

Thus, while it does seem possible that New Zealand prehistory can be further sub-divided into periods of time within which certain kinds of evidence occur, it is more doubtful that it will ever be possible that regions of New Zealand defined in cultural, instead of purely geographic or ecological terms, will yield sufficiently varying sequences of evidence to permit the definition of contrasting regional ("aspect") sequences. Geographic variation in Maori culture, long known to exist (Skinner 1921), must not be ignored. Nevertheless, the evidence for it in

terms of archaeology alone consists neither of a sufficiently wide range of types, nor a high enough incidence of these types in excavations, to permit the detailing of culture changes and cultural processes at the level of aspect analysis.

Turning from cultural periods to the evidence from specific sites, archaeological sites can also be ordered temporarily and be made to contribute to the overall definition of phases in New Zealand. However, if diagnostic artefacts having limited space and time dimensions continue to elude us, what does not seem likely is that archaeologists will some day be able to relate specific sites to specific sites and by such a process, deduce specific settlement patterns in archaeological terms and culture histories for areas limited enough to suggest social groupings. This is true because without sufficiently diagnostic artefactual complexes, it is almost impossible to define such areas in cultural instead of geographic terms. That is, without them there exists no clear way of showing that the people inhabiting closely situated sites did so at the same time and shared in the same political and cultural tradition. Thus, without a precise way of demonstrating culture complexes in New Zealand, one is left with only the potential of general temporal phases with perhaps some geographic variation, and not, as one would ultimately desire, with the chance for finer spatial units defined in social and cultural terms.

Although of necessity this argument has been suggestive more than it has been conclusive, I cannot as a result share in the optimism which Golson (1965b: 90) and Green (1963: 30-31, 90-97) have demonstrated for the potential of the "aspect approach" to the detailing of New Zealand prehistory. To quote from Golson:

The phase concept was introduced as an ordering of culturally similar aspects below the level of culture itself (Golson 1959: 32-3). Green has alternatively expressed it as defining an inter-regional stage in cultural development (Green 1963: 90) ... Growing refinement in the definition of aspects in more specifically cultural terms like the form of houses, types of storage structure, and details of artefact typology will help to disclose the complex processes underlying the broad parallelism of regional development. Thus the settlement phase in area Y may be inaugurated by colonisation from area X by the evidence of close and specific cultural similarities ... As Green suggests, when this stage of analysis is reached, aspects will be carrying the burden of interpretation". (Golson 1965b: 90).

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SITE RECORDING, KUAOTUNU POINT, COROMANDEL PENINSULA

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Dr R. C. Green, in Volume 6 number 1 of the NEWSLETTER, allotted numbers to and summarized the sites of the Opito Bay area of Kuaotunu Point. The bay had endured intensive fossicking and controlled archaeological activity over many years, but Green's paper was the first to correlate these various activities in an endeavour to allot each site to its place in the cultural sequence of the Auckland Province. It was felt, however, that a survey of the whole of Kuaotunu Point would provide a more complete range of possible cultural activities and would place the Opito-Mahinapua Bay area in clearer perspective. This paper summarizes the results of a fortnight's intensive field-work at the end of 1964. This work was made considerably easier by the help of Mr Alf Lee of Whitianga who generously provided his notes and maps of placenames. Whilst obvious middens were noted and recorded, no excavations were undertaken. An examination of the aerial survey photographs was undertaken during 1965.

Historical Recordings of the Area:

Mercury Bay, the southern part of Kuaotunu Point, was named by Captain James Cook who landed there in 1769 to observe the transit of Mercury, and so to place New Zealand accurately on the map of the Pacific. Whilst there he visited Wharetaewa Pa (N44/21), noted the recent destruction of Whitianga Pa and also noted the sparsity and penury of the local population who lived in daily fear of raids both from the north and the south. Leslie Kelly (1953) quotes the accounts of Cook and Banks and relates some of the later history of the area, mentioning Rangihoua