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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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MAORI MAT FROM TENT BURN

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For some years the mouth of the Tent Burn, between Taumutu and the Rakaia River mouth in Canterbury Bight, has been subjected to minor control measures to facilitate farming operations. Prior to the advent of this control it flowed into an area of swamp immediately behind the beach.

During October 1985 the mouth of the stream was dug out deeper than it had been previously to allow the construction of a fish ladder leading to a newly developed salmon farm. In the course of excavating the new channel the remains of a Maori mat were dug out by a mechanical digger and deposited amongst the excavated material. The find was reported to the Canterbury Museum by Mr Bob Nee who noticed it when he was fishing for whitebait, and I accompanied him to the site the following day. By this time parts of the mat had been souvenired but we were able to salvage four fragments which fitted together to make a piece 80 x 33 cm in size.

The mat remains were very poorly preserved and could be handled only on the hardened mud to which they adhered. Stratigraphy in the sides of the channel, which was over three metres deep, showed deposits of gravel, mostly from the beach, with a layer of dark grey hardened mud, up to 60 cm thick, some two metres below the present surface. This layer contained woody plant remains and the shells of fresh-water mussels, Hyridella menziesi. The mud corresponded to that which the mat adhered. It would appear that the mat had been placed flat in a muddy swamp which was later invaded by deposits of gravel.

Once exposed to air, fragments of the mat tended to curl up and became dislodged as they dried out. Their survival between the time they were dug up and their recovery by Mr Nee and myself was due largely to misty damp weather. The remains were brought back to the Canterbury Museum and kept wet for a further two days while they were studied and photographed. When it became apparent that the mat was deteriorating rapidly and that we would soon lose it altogether, the somewhat drastic step was taken of spraying it with a weak solution of polyvinyl acetate over a period of three days to stabilise it, and with formalin solution to inhibit growth of mould. This has enabled it to be placed on display in the Museum.

The mat had been plaited from strips of New Zealand flax, Phormium tenax, each strip being probably half a leaf

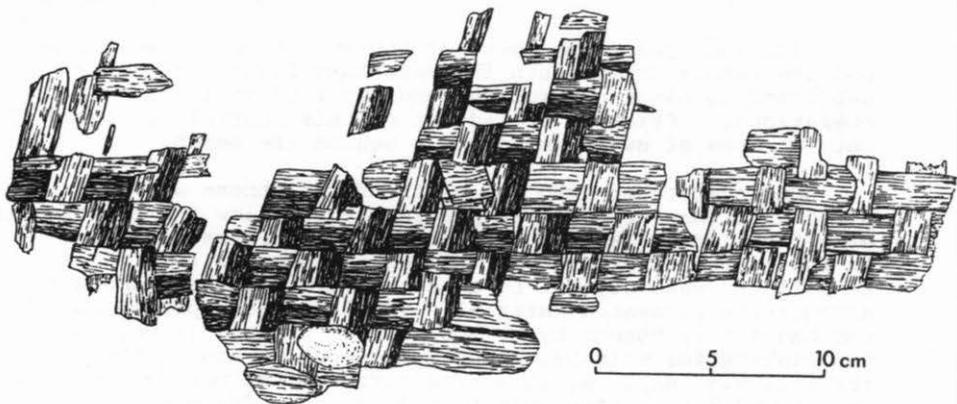


FIGURE 1. Drawing of Maori mat fragments from Tent Burn, Canterbury. A fresh water mussel shell is at bottom centre.

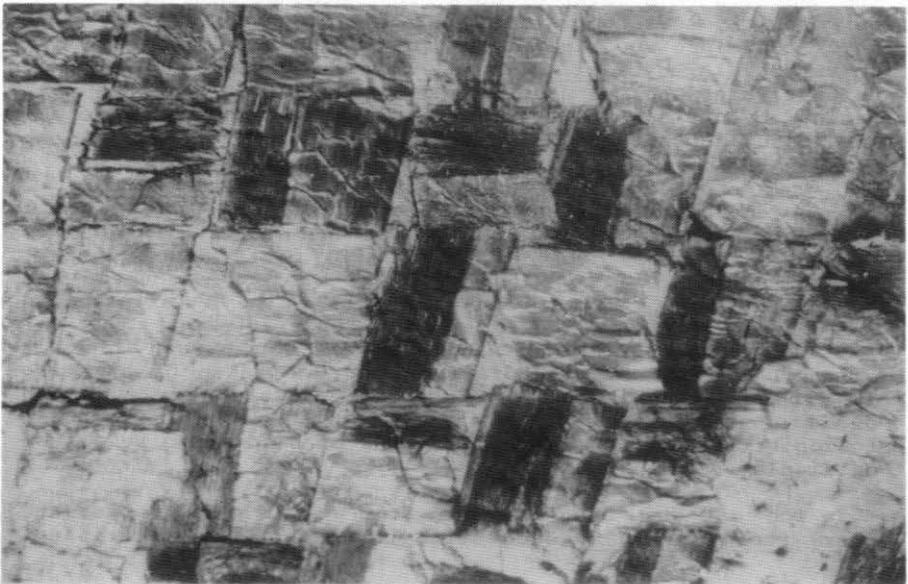


FIGURE 2. Detail of central part of mat.

wide and averaging 34 ± 3.6 mm in width. A simple under-over plaiting technique was used. Many of the strips had been scraped for half their width on one side, and these scraped areas had become stained black from the swamp mud. There are no selvages on the fragments recovered.

Several archaeological sites - middens and cooking evidence - have been recorded in the vicinity of the Tent Burn, and stone artefacts have been found in the course of agricultural work. An important centre of late Maori occupation is at Taumutu six kilometres along the coast to the north-east, and a well known moa hunter site occurs at the mouth of the Rakaia River just over four kilometres to the south-west (see Trotter, 1972).

I think it likely that the mat had been deliberately placed in the swamp for the purpose of dying black the scraped areas of the leaf (the unscraped sections would not absorb the black colour). Flooding of the Tent Burn or heavy seas may have then broached the beach ridge that would have divided the swamp from the sea, allowing gravel to be deposited over the swamp where the mat had been placed. The coastline at this point is eroding and has retreated several metres in living memory. Unfortunately there are too many variables for the position of the swamp deposit in relation to the sea to provide any reliable indication of the possible age of the mat. The map reference is S93/692147 (site number S93/40).

Reference

- Trotter, M.M. 1972 A moa-hunter site near the mouth of the Rakaia River. Records of the Canterbury Museum, 9(2):129-150.