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MIRACLES DO HAPPEN!THE RECOVERY BY INSTALMENTS OF THE PUKETE CARVING

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Discovery and investigation

On 13 April 1983, the Waikato Art Museum was advised by Mr Fred Chapman of an unusual find made by his 15 year-old son near their residence on Hamilton City Council's new industrial estate at Pukete. Here, some two or three weeks before Easter, Peter recovered an 89 cm long section of a decorated, wooden panel from the top of a spoil heap beside a stream-gully, the upper reaches of which had been drained in December 1982 as part of a major works programme.

As Curator of Archaeology, I visited the Chapmans to inspect the findspot (S14/89 metric) and collect the fully dried-out panel which the family wished to deposit with the Art Museum. Arrangements were made to spend the following Sunday on site to record full details and with Peter's enthusiastic assistance a plan of the general find context was drawn to scale (Fig. 1). After reconstructing the machine-operator's movements along the gully (Peter was fortunately watching him work at the time), a close examination was made of the surface of the huge, peaty spoil heap and the drain. On the latter's northern wall, some 10 m south of Peter's original discovery (a), a further three panel sections (b-d) were found partially exposed in a peaty-silt matrix about a third of the way up from the drain-floor. Cleanly broken into sections 32-48 cm in length, these artefacts were firmly wedged on the eastern side of and directly beneath a fortuitously placed tree-stump over which the ditch-digger's bucket clearly rode as the operator mucked out. Partially dried-out but in perfect condition, the finds were washed in a fungicidal solution, sealed in polythene and removed to the Art Museum.

The Historic Places Trust was notified of the discovery on 18 April. With the Trust's permission (1983/12) and the approval of Te Arikinui, Dame Te Atairangikaahu whom we had consulted through her advisers, a limited investigation was undertaken to:

- i) check the four month-old spoil heap and silted floor of the new drain for further panel sections, and
- ii) determine whether anything remained of a primary context in the undisturbed pedestal of peat forming the southern wall of the drain.

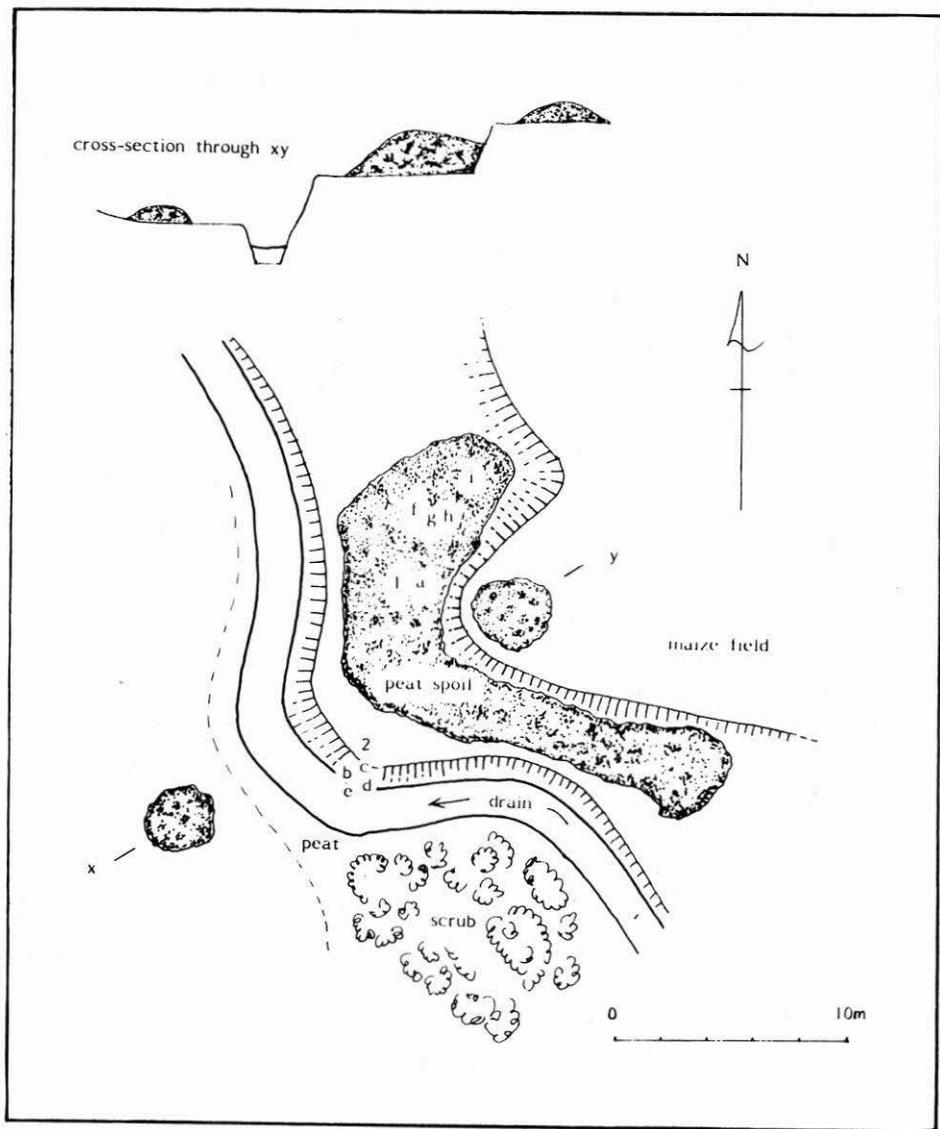


FIGURE 1. Plan of the Pukete find context, S14/89.

In the meantime, the site's existence had been brought to the attention of the appropriate City Council authorities to ensure that no further development work would take place until the Art Museum had concluded its investigation.

On Sunday 24 April, a section of the spoil heap between Stations 1 and 2 (see plan) was carefully combed without success. However, a visit made two days later to check the drain directly below finds b-d resulted in the recovery of a 57 cm long panel section (e) from the drain-floor beneath a 40 cm deep overburden of sludge with pumiceous sand topping - the consequence of erosion upstream.

It was by now clear that a systematic search of both the stream-bed and the massive spoil heap on the northern bank would be labour-intensive. It was therefore decided to enlist the help of the Art Museum's Archaeological Society over the week-end 21-22 May following temporary diversion of the stream around the primary context area.

Altogether, some 29 folk from Hamilton, Cambridge, Te Awamutu and Auckland participated in this salvage exercise under the direction of myself and our kaumatua and President, Jack Taylor who prepared the way with a waerea. The Society's magnificent efforts resulted in the orderly removal of an estimated 60 m³ of peat spoil and yielded a further panel end-section (f) 56 cm in length, two tiny fragments of a carved koruru (g-h) and a fine 2B adze of greywacke (i) all, as fate would have it, in close proximity to Peter's original find. Under Dilys Johns' direction, a substantial quantity of natural, waterlogged wood was collected from the spoil heap for her conservation research needs. Nothing further was recovered from the approximately 4 m² of stream-bed excavated below finds b-e and no remains of a primary context were located in the 50 cm deep pedestal of peat forming the southern wall of the drain. The examination of a small spoil heap located under vegetation on the south side of the drain also gave negative results.

In the belief that the exercise had not been wholly successful, the site was vacated on Sunday evening in low spirits and with no clear idea as to the next move. However, on the following morning (23 May), an attempt to fit the various panel sections together, starting with the most recent find, was immediately successful and despair turned to jubilation with the realisation that we had in fact recovered all the constituent parts of a single piece and not the elements of two separate panels as originally believed.

Since it was the Arikinui's Anniversary Day, Art Museum staff took the carving up to Turangawaewae Marae that afternoon where it was viewed in Mahinarangi by Dame Te Atairangikaahu and her kaumatua.

Significance of the find

The reassembled Pukete panel (Plate 1) is remarkable for its slender proportions. Measuring 2.35 m from end to end, its maximum height is only 6 cm and maximum depth 4 cm. The product of stone-tool technology, it has been most skilfully adzed and finished on both front and top. The species of wood has yet to be identified.

Decoration consists of three koruru and two manaia carved in bold relief at more or less regular intervals but in an unusual sequence. The style of carving closely resembles that obtaining on the richly carved paepae pataka recovered in 1978 from the Chartwell Crescent site (Sl4/23) - some 5 km south-east of the present find and on the other side of the Waikato River. This affinity is most strikingly evident in the treatment of manaia form and detail which may well prove to be a definitive feature of pre-European carving in the central Waikato Basin. The same form is found, for instance, on the Parawera pare held at Te Awamutu Museum.

The precise function of the Pukete carving remains elusive for the moment. With respect to general form and composition, there appears to be a good basis for comparison with the 61 cm long Waitara pare figured by Archey (1977:33) and kindly brought to my attention by Roger Fyfe of Taranaki Museum. Both works are strongly reminiscent of the raised, upper rim upon which the heads of figures are commonly rendered on more elaborate forms of paepae and pare (Fig. 2). A recess running the full width at the back of the Pukete panel terminates at chamfered ends - each of which preserves a facility for attachment by way of a small hole chiselled through from back and front suggesting that it was slotted in place prior to being lashed or pegged. The nature of the building for which it was designed remains equally uncertain. Dave Simmons of Auckland Museum suggests that it may be derived from a memorial structure.

Notwithstanding our current difficulties with respect to identification, the Pukete find considerably enhances our understanding of carving styles obtaining for the Waikato in the late prehistoric period. Taken together, the Chartwell Crescent and Pukete finds point to a distinctive local development - possibly linked to the occupational history of Ngati Wairere - and one that was certainly unanticipated for the Hamilton district.

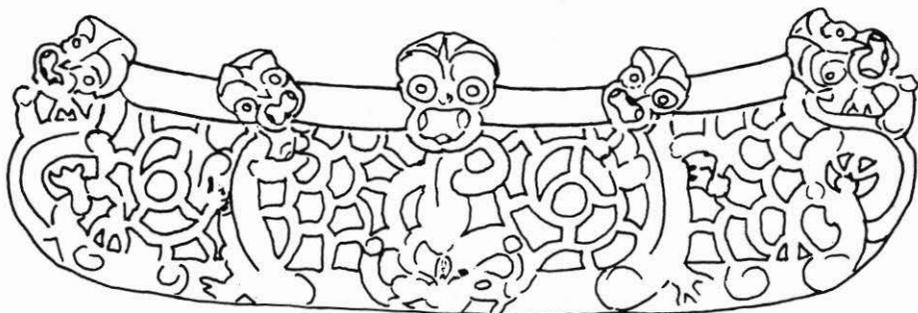


FIGURE 2. In form and composition the Pukete carving bears a striking resemblance to the raised upper rim of more elaborate works such as the 1.75 m long 'Ainsworth' carving from Waitara.

Nature and significance of the site

Like the Chartwell Crescent site, the Pukete findspot appears to be an isolated cache. Situated between Route 1 and the Waikato River (Plate 2), it lies at some considerable distance from any recorded settlements - the closest of which are two pa (S14/19 and 30) on the Waikato Riverbank some 1200 m to the south-east.

Interestingly, both the Chartwell and Pukete finds were made in the upper reaches of stream-gullies bordering on extensive cultivation areas of almost certain prehistoric origin. It is conceivable that, like the Chartwell finds, the Pukete panel was secreted away at a crossing place. The topography has been modified almost beyond recognition, but an examination of aerial photographs taken in 1982 (Aerial Surveys: Hamilton City J & K 11, scale 1:1000) suggests that the carving was hidden at the south-eastern foot of a sub-rectangular promontory. The gully narrows markedly here, the south bank being a mere 6-8 m distant.

Soil profiles exposed by the machine operator as he excavated the promontory to gain access are suggestive of horticultural activity at the edge of the gully. The 15.4 cm long 2B adze found at the interface of the peat soil and freshly excavated Horotiu loam is more likely related to such activity than it is to carving. A surface collection of adzes found on the estate is reported to be in the possession of former owner, Mr W.B. Pinkerton.

Prospects for further finds

The site of a major industrial development for which a number of services (e.g. drainage, sewerage reticulation and roading) have been or are about to be provided, the Pukete Estate embraces a large area of suspected prehistoric gardens for which there is now little surface indication other than an occasional borrow-pit. No other archaeological sites are in evidence. Traditional sources have drawn a blank locally, although information provided by Dave Simmons points to the possibility of there having been on the estate a memorial, in the form of an oblong mound, dedicated to Te Kawairangi at a place called Whenuatoto.

Whilst no further archaeological fieldwork is contemplated at this stage, the possibility of additional waterlogged, wooden material being revealed by future drainage work on the estate has to be considered. Caches of such artefacts seemingly rank amongst the least predictable kinds of archaeological sites; however recent experience has shown us that a major find is likely to be followed by additional discoveries in the immediate vicinity.

We are also beginning to appreciate that we can now reasonably anticipate such finds at some considerable distance i.e. within a radius of 1.5 km from known settlements. Recorded sites closest to the Pukete find are the two riverbank pa (S14/19 and 30) 1.2 km to the south-east and the two pa (S14/17 and 18) some 2.5 km north. By way of comparison, the three pa sites closest to the Chartwell Crescent cache are S14/3 (350 m west), S14/27 (600 m north-west) and S14/28 (900 m north).

It seems extraordinary, if not more than a little disconcerting, that the only Maori carvings of importance to have been recovered in Hamilton (to our knowledge, at least) should both have been found within the last five years - by sheer chance and as the direct result of drainage programmes undertaken by the Hamilton City Council. Clearly, steps must be taken in anticipation of similar finds coming to light as the development of stream-gullies is intensified in the city. Since there are distributed, along both banks of the Waikato River between Pukete and Hillcrest, some 22 pa sites (a devastating 80% of which have been destroyed since World War II), it follows that just about any stream-gully within the city boundary could preserve significant cultural material. A memorandum has been sent to all council departments concerned with the planning and development of stream-gullies in order to establish a standard procedure whereby the Art Museum receives advance notification of drainage work in such places and an opportunity to conduct a watching brief wherever this is considered desirable.

By remaining alert to the possibility of similar finds being made in the future, we may yet recover a wealth of information on Hamilton's rich cultural history.

Publicity given to the Pukete find

A press release was prepared following the successful conclusion of the Art Museum's investigation. A report appeared in the Waikato Times on 27 May and filming was undertaken by NZTV for its 'Spot On' magazine.

Conservation

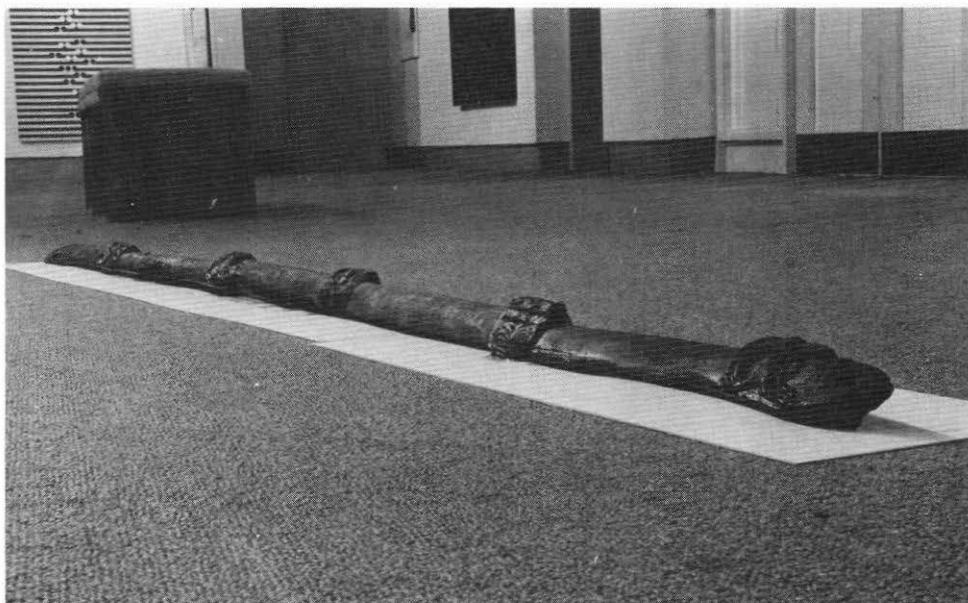
As an interim measure, all of the panel sections recovered were kept immersed at room temperature in a small tank containing a solution of PEG 400 and 4000 to which a fungicidal agent had been added. In September, the finds were transferred to Conservator Karel Peters of Auckland University's Anthropology Department for preservation treatment.

Acknowledgements

For their very considerable and much appreciated help, my thanks to our kaumatua and Archaeological Society President, Jack Taylor; to Bob Allbrook, Keith Bird, Dante Bonica, Dick and Margaret Cardiff, Jan de Nicolo, Val Gilchrist, Helen Gordon, Wikuki (Snr.) and Wi (Jnr.) Kingi, Dilys Johns, Eric Laird, Neil Laurie, Ann McCartney, Jim Mandeno, Bob Porter, Barbara Proctor, Bill and Joy Pullar, Barbara and Sandra Rosenberg, Cam and Lee Storey, Betty Wilsher, Peter Wishart, and finally to a very special young person, Peter Chapman, whose natural curiosity and infectious enthusiasm enabled the miraculous recovery of a superb Waikato taonga.

Reference

Archey, G. 1977 Whaowhia: Maori Art and its Artists. Collins, Auckland.



PUKETE CARVING Plate 1. The reassembled carving.



PUKETE CARVING Plate 2. Find spot (S14/89) on northern outskirts of Hamilton.