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MĀORI CLAY BALLS

MICHAEL TROTTER

In December 1852 Walter Mantell was camped with some Māori guides at the mouth of a small North Otago stream less than 5 km south of what is today known as Oamaru. The stream had eroded through the remains of an early Māori encampment, revealing oven hollows, blackened soil, charcoal, bones and shells, which had been covered with about 30 cm of flood-deposited soil. With the help of his guides, Mantell spent a day digging into the archaeological deposits using tent poles. This was arguably the earliest archaeological investigation to have been carried out in New Zealand, and Mantell's record of what he found played an important part in the initial interpretation of our prehistory. Because of the quantities of moa bones and eggshell present, Mantell named the site Ruamoa and the stream Awamoa – the name by which it is known today – although its Māori name was probably Te Awa-kokomuka or Te Awa-koromiko, depending on your dialect (Stevenson 1947:77).

“The only human manufacture we found,” wrote Mantell in his report on the investigation (Mantell 1853) “was a small ball of baked clay, the work most likely of some ingenious young savage stopped on the thresh-hold of the invention of pottery by a vindictive [moa] tibia thrown at his head by his enraged parent with a concise order to go egg hunting, and not waste his time that way.” (They had in fact also found a number of flake knives amongst the remains of numerous species of birds, mammals and fish.)

No-one seems to have followed up Mantell's reference to the clay ball. There has been plenty of discussion as to why the pre-European Māori did not have pottery but there are very few references to their use of baked clay. And it is not as though this was unique to Mantell's discovery. One hundred and thirty-nine years after Mantell's investigation, a cursory investigation at the same site (J41/3) revealed fragments of rounded baked clay along with other artefacts (Trotter 1980; New Zealand Historic Places Trust permit 1978/4).

Mantell's account came to mind recently when we obtained part of a baked clay ball during salvage excavations at the Redcliffs moa-hunter site (M36/24) in Canterbury earlier this year. When found, it was covered with greasy black organic material ('moa grease') and sand, and it looked like part

of the rounded head of a moa femur. It was not until it was cleaned up that it became apparent what it really was.

And there are several other South Island sites on which pieces of moulded baked clay have been found including Tai Rua (J42/1) and Shag Point (J43/11) in North Otago, Redcliffs (M36/24) and Hohouponamu (M35/12) in Canterbury, and Fyffes (O31/30) in Kaikoura – all are of early or intermediate age rather than late or ‘Classic’.

Some time ago I suggested that fragments of baked clay from Tai Rua might have come from bird carcasses that had been covered with damp clay before cooking (Trotter 1965: 117), but a piece found subsequently at this site was definitely a flattened ball, as was part of a similar one from the Fyffe site in Kaikoura (O31/30; Trotter 1979: 221). Now we have another from Redcliffs (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Baked clay balls from Tai Rua (left) and Redcliffs (right).

So what was the purpose of the moulded baked clay found on these early sites? Examination of a number of pieces has not led to any firm conclusions. Many of the pieces are too fragmentary to give much indication of the shape of the object they came from. Three of them, from Tai Rua, Redcliffs and Fyffes, have definitely been made as solid balls of moist clay then baked in a fire – but was the baking accidental or done on purpose?

Another specimen from Tai Rua appears to have been shaped over a roundish object, but there is no sign of feather or fur indentations on the inner surface, which might be expected had it been moulded over a bird or rat before it was cooked – on the contrary it has marks of grass stalks.

The possibility that small animals were baked in clay remains, however, and is strengthened by an account by James of a Canterbury Māori method of cooking rats in this manner in early European times. Hay related how between 50 and 70 rats were killed when shifting a stack of wheat:

When one was wanted for cooking he was covered with soft clay and put into the fire. When cooked he was raked out of the fire, and when cool enough to handle was knocked on a stone or hit with a stick to crack the baked clay encasing him. When opened out the hair and scarf skin adhered to the inner surface of the clay, and the flesh looked white like chicken. A dexterous twist with the thumb nail scooped out the entrails in a round ball. All was eaten save a few of the large bones and the tail.

Hay (1915: 14-15).

The pieces of baked clay I am familiar with all come from the South Island, but the material has also been reported in the North Island. For instance, there was “a baked clay object” found at Oterewa Pā in the North Island (Murdoch 1963) which was thought by the finder to have been a stopper for a calabash, but it is not clear whether it had been moulded from moist clay and then baked, or carved from soft clay-like stone or even pumice (cf. Green 1963: 32).

Louise Furey (pers. comm., March 2012) has researched baked clay artefacts, including baked clay balls, from several northern sites. Hamlins Hill had plain balls and there were also two other pieces curved to suggest a ball with incised lines reminiscent of a spiral, as was a piece from Westfield. However, none of these sites, or others in the North Island where baked clay has been reported, is ‘early,’ probably dating to the 17th-18th century.

It seems more than likely that moulded pieces of baked clay have been found on many other sites but have attracted little or no attention. It may well be that examination of some of these could provide more information. In the meantime, we are left with at least two interesting questions relating to early occupation – what was the purpose of the balls, and were small animals ever cooked in a covering of clay?

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