NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

MURDERING BEACH, OTAGO - A SUGGESTION

by Peter Gathercole

In the most recent review of the archaeological material from Murdering Beach, Skinner says that "the site can be ranked among New Zealand sites thus far investigated as having incomparably the largest concentration of worked nephrite and near-nephrite", (Skinner 1959: 223). Although it is possible, as Skinner also states, that "this high proportion, in a stratum belonging to the concluding phase of Maori culture, is a feature not limited to Murdering Beach but found on other South Island sites between Foveaux Strait and Kaikoura.....", (Skinner 1959: 233), no other site has yielded 3½ hundredweight of 'greenstone' - and this estimate takes no account of finds made since about 1900.

Given our present evidence, is it possible to offer any particular explanation for this unusual wealth of material? We do not know when the final occupation at Murdering Beach began. It ended, according to the most widely held view, with the burning of the village by the visiting sealer, Kelly, in December 1817, some seven years after the Otago Harbour became known to Europeans. This is consistent with the fact that only four objects of definite European origin have been reported from the site, while there is, apparently, an absence of such objects as bottle glass or clay pipes. These, incidently, have been found elsewhere in the vicinity, at sites known to have been occupied when direct contact with Europeans became more marked about 1830.

On the other hand, the presence of four European objects suggests that sometime before 1817 the inhabitants of Murdering Beach began to have a certain form of contact with Europeans. The specimens are: a copper gouge, an iron chisel found just below the grass, a small fragment of china from within the top inch of a large midden some 12 inches thick, and one of the medals distributed by Cook during has second voyage (1772-75). Skinner considers that the chisel and gouge are of Maori workmanship, and that the medal "was probably given to a Maori at ship Cove, Queen Charlotte Sound, where Cook spent 117 days during that voyage. It had presumably come south along the much-used east coast route, perhaps in exchange for Murdering Beach nephrite", (Skinner 1959: 221, 225-226).

The gouge, chisel and china fragment might have been obtained directly from sealers in the first decade or so of the 19th Century; the sherd, dated post-1800, is presumably from a complete pot or dish which, in any case, would hardly have withstood transportation over long distances. On the other hand, if we disregard this piece, the tools might have arrived at Murdering Beach by the same route that Skinner suggest for the Cook medal - and for the same reason. Indeed, it is possible that all three metal, easily transportable objects could have been at the site by about 1780. This is particularly feasible if we regard them as then rare in Murihiku, and if we visualise their exchange as fitting into a well established pattern of barter which extended all along the east coast of the South Island and north of Cook Strait, and embraced a number of products. Preserved mutton-bird was a welcome delicacy in both Islands, and Mr D.R. Simmons has drawn my attention to the statement by Shortland in 1844, that for the Maoris south of Banks Peninsula, nephrite, kotuku feathers and karamea oil had always been articles of barter with the natives of Cook Strait and the Ngatikahungunu of the East Coast, for which preserved kumara, mats and canoes were received in exchange.

If it is plausible to see certain European influence at Murdering Beach - and, by implication, elsewhere in Murihiku - by about 1780, can it be suggested that the potato might have been introduced around this time? It is generally accepted that the potato was being cultivated, in certain parts of Murihiku at least, by the second decade of the 19th Century. This led, apparently, to some increase in population, particularly in such areas as the Otago Harbour and Foveaux Strait. In 1809, the sealer Murray was stationed on the Strait near Maoris who, it was later reported, "grew some potatoes, which with their mats they exchange with the sealers for any articles they chose to give in exchange, preferring iron or edged tools, none of which they had ever before had in their possession", (McNab 1909: 169). Murray was in the area again in 1813, on this occasion with Williams to investigate the possibilities of the flax trade. It is clear from Williams' report that the potato was both carefully and extensively cultivated at the Bluff at that time - "a field of considerably more than one hundred acres" is noted, (McNab 1909: 196-205), and this, to Durward, writing in 1933, "seems a surprisingly large acreage of potatoes at such an early date", (Durward 1933: 75). The Maoris at the Otago Harbour looked after their plots with similar care, for in the same year, 1813, Fowler put into the Harbour for revictualling, and it was reported that "their potatoes were not more than half-grown, and were taboo'd until they should attain their full size. Though the natives were thus prohibited their use themselves, the worthy chief would allow of no restraints operating against the distressed strangers, and to them an abundance was offered", (McNab 1909: 216).

It is possible, therefore, that the potato was obtained by some of the inhabitants of Murihiku from unknown sealers early in the 19th Century, and that cultivation spread rapidly, stimulated by its evident demand among the various sealing gangs left, often for months, along the southern and eastern coasts. But it may be that knowledge of potato growing was obtained rather earlier than this, from Maoris living further north, and that the plant was already well established, in some parts of Murihiku at least, by the time the sealers arrived. In this case, it need not be considered surprising that over one hundred acres of the crop were in cultivation at the Bluff in 1813.

Here then is a possible reason for the unparalleled flourishing of the village at Murdering Beach at a time, as suggested above, European contact was minimal and perhaps only indirect. The newly introduced plant provided a ready staple for the growing permanent settlement at what Skinner has aptly termed "the snuggest village site in the South Island south of Banks Peninsula", (Skinner 1959: 221). Moreover, the finds at the site are remarkable for the high proportion of fine and varied ornaments, particularly hei tiki - and this could have been even higher had not so much of the site thereby provided a fatal attraction for curio-hunters. This proportion is most unusual, but it might be explained if we regard Murdering Beach as a centre for a specialised industry in ornaments, which, starting in prehistoric times, began to develop about 1780 and flourished particularly after 1800. By then, its products, alongside tattooed heads, mats and other objects, could have been in unprecedented demand among coastal Maoris of both Islands, as items for exchange with the increasing number of Europeans who were beginning to frequent their settlements.

This admittedly speculative note obviously owes much to L. Groube's paper, Settlement Pattern and Social Organization in Prehistoric New Zealand, presented at the recent conference of the Association. I am also grateful to D.R. Simmons for much useful discussion. It has been written to increase interest in questions of Maori-European relations in Murihiku during early historic times.

Durward, Elisabeth W., 1933. 'The Maori Population of Otago.' Journal of the Polynesian Society, 42: 49-82.
McNab, Robert, 1909. Murihiku, (Second Ed.). Wellington, Whitcombe and Tombs.
Shortland, Edward, 1844. MS Letter - Book A. General Report on the Tribes South of Kaikoura.
Skinner, H.D., 1959. 'Murdering Beach: Collecting and Excavating. The First Phase: 1850-1950.' Journal of the Polynesian Society, 68: 219-238.

ROCK SHELTER ART IN THE DUNTROON AREA

by Gwytha Peterson

Systematic recording of Maori rock-shelter art in South Canterbury has been under way for some time. In Otago, the Upper Waitaki River sites have received exhaustive treatment and recording before the waters of the Benmore dam inundate the area. (Ambrose and Davis, 1958-60). Some of the sites in the area of the present survey had been recorded before, (Stevenson, 1947) but it was obvious that an extensive search was necessary. This report is the outcome of a brief survey of the Duntroon area in North Otago. The survey was made with a view to locating and plotting the sites already known and to exploring new territory rapidly, so that the extent of the work would be more apparent. Detailed recording of the sites is planned for next summer, but this preliminary report may be of some interest in the meantime.

The area covered in this survey extends for some six miles south of the Waitaki River in the country bordering the Maerewhenua River on both banks. The block rises gradually from about 200-300ft above sea-level at the Waitaki River to a little over 1000ft. It is gently rolling farm country, cleared of bush, cut by deep meandering gullies carved in the limestone by rivers and streams, which are lined by steep limestone bluffs and outcrops. The Maerewhenua River drops gradually through a shingle bed about a half a mile in width.

The paintings are all found on limestone surfaces of varying quality, mainly in shallow shelters and on isolated boulders. They show a variety of style and medium, with some post-European contact examples depicting horses, sailing ships etc. with some Roman letter initials and Maori writing. Black paint and 'crayon' are the most common medium for the recent drawings. There are some red ochre - "kokowai" - drawings, the most spectacular of which are found in the Takiroa and Maerewhenua shelters. Some of the forms depicted are common to those of the Canterbury area whilst others seem to be peculiar to the locality.

Most of the shelters are under overhangs at the base of the limestone bluffs and in nearly all cases are used today as shelter for stock and the storage of hay. At the lower levels they are covered with grease from the sheep's wool, but otherwise stock damage does not appear to be great. Natural erosion is causing flaking on the more exposed surfaces and in some cases only faint traces remain, though this varies with the nature of the rock.