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NOTES ON A NGURU FROM KAURI POINT SWAMP

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Kauri Point Swamp is one of the best known and most richly informative archaeological sites in New Zealand. The reconstruction and analysis of Maori combs from this assemblage has provided invaluable data on stylistic change in Maori art motifs, and in conjunction with the remainder of the excavated material has suggested that the site was a repository for articles used in or concerned with Maori ritual; primarily with the ceremony of haircutting (Shawcross, 1976).

In association with these combs there were several wooden artefacts, two broken putorino or 'bugle flutes', thousands of obsidian flakes and numerous fragments of gourd. The major part of this excavation took place twenty years ago when the preservation of organic material in New Zealand was still in its experimental infancy, consequently although the gourd fragments were chemically treated, the majority were badly warped during the process of conservation. Considering this factor and the time-consuming and painstaking work involved in reconstructing the combs, which is still continuing today, it is hardly surprising that until recently no attempt was made to reconstruct the gourd material.

The gourd fragments from Kauri Point Swamp make up the largest prehistoric collection of this material discovered in New Zealand, and while they offer no obvious indication of their function, as Shawcross has pointed out it is still possible to estimate the shape, size, and the minimum number of gourds that were present (1976:293). As I am presently involved in research for an M.A. thesis on the bottle gourd, Lagenaria siceraria, I was most grateful when Stephen Edson arranged for me to borrow this material from the Waikato Art Museum but I had little hope of reconstructing recognisable artefacts.

It was therefore both surprising and exciting to discover a small gourd nguru or curved flute within the first two weeks of work. The nguru was broken into small fragments, many of which were discovered and reassembled by Dorothy Brown, librarian in the Anthropology Department, and its identification has been verified by Mervyn McLean, ethnomusicologist at the University of Auckland.

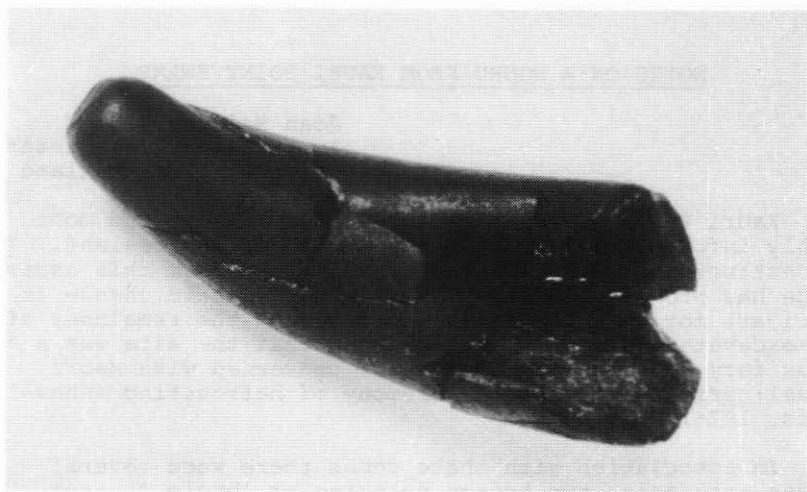


PLATE 1. Kauri Point swamp nguru.

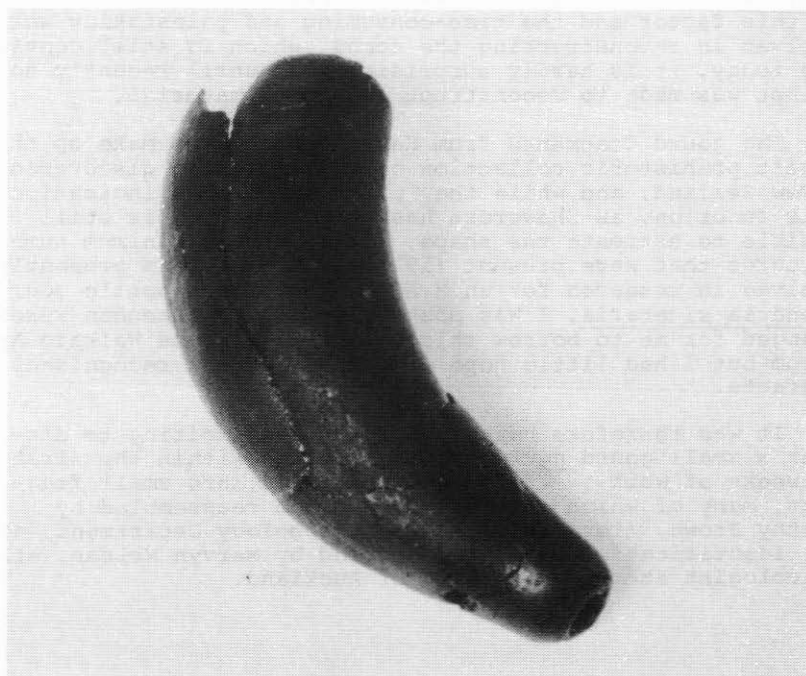


PLATE 2. Kauri Point swamp nguru.

The flute is made from the stalk end of a small gourd. It is approximately 93 mm long; it has two finger-holes on the upper surface of the instrument, one at the 'snout' or stalk end and a further base hole at the rear (see plates). The remaining portion of the top finger-hole is obscured in the photograph owing to warping of the gourd fragments. The blowing end of the flute has a slightly bevelled edge, the interior has been scraped clean and the exterior surface has a smooth, polished appearance in contrast to most of the gourd sherds which still retain patches of mould undoubtedly produced during the original drying process. It seems probable that the gourd was rubbed clean before the instrument was made, although this polish may be partly the natural result of frequent handling.

This discovery is of particular interest as it substantiates the suggestion by Fischer and more recently by McLean that the shape of the nguru was originally based on a gourd prototype (McLean, 1982:125). It seems probable that this is the earliest example of a nguru which has so far been discovered and certainly it is the first to be recorded within a stratified context. In his re-evaluation of the Kauri Point dates Roger Green persuasively argues that the cultural items in the swamp were deposited "within an interval of 150-200 years beginning circa A.D. 1500 and ending before the eighteenth century" (Green, 1978:39). Even this relatively broad period places the gourd nguru earlier than those made of stone, wood or ivory, which have mostly been dated to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries on the basis of carving style (McLean, 1982:141), and it is expected that a further refinement of dating will be possible as all of the flute fragments were found within the same stratigraphic context.

The lack of decoration on this flute compared with the ornate carving of many ethnological examples adds reinforcement to Shawcross's argument that the widespread application of intricate decoration was a relatively late efflorescence in Maori design (Shawcross, 1976:289). But although the flute is small and unembellished, its shattered remains and its association with the other contents of the swamp suggest that it may have held a considerable intrinsic value, and was perhaps used within some ritual context which made its subsequent destruction necessary.

Obviously one small nguru does not make a gourd orchestra but it is interesting that in New Zealand, as in so many other parts of the world, there appears to have been a gourd

prototype for a musical instrument. The musical potential of the gourd has been realised to various degrees in almost every country where it can be grown (c.f. Heiser, 1979:179-200), yet in Polynesia there is only specific evidence of gourd instruments from Hawaii, New Zealand and Easter Island. Of the various types, the Hawaiian ipu hokiokio and the Maori nguru may have shared a common Polynesian ancestor, which was later discontinued or replaced in other island groups (McLean, 1982:125), although it also seems significant that the gourd attained its greatest Polynesian importance within these marginal areas (Dodge, 1978:95). Perhaps further archaeological research will indicate whether gourd flutes were indigenous inventions or were developed from a common prototype.

But regardless of interesting hypotheses, this latest small piece of evidence from Kauri Point Swamp emphasises yet again what is so frequently reiterated but so seldom fully realised - the wonderfully rich potential of swamp and cave sites for a fuller understanding of Polynesian pre-history.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Dorothy Brown for her help in reconstructing the nguru, and Stephen Edson for arranging the loan of the Kauri Point gourd material from Waikato Art Museum.

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