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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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POSSIBLE AHI KOMAU AT HURIAWA PA SITE, KARITANE PENINSULA, OTAGO.

Hardwicke Knight.

Elsdon Best (Best 1924:70) says: "This term ahi komau ... may be rendered as 'covered fire' ... As a verb komau means 'to cover fire, as with ashes,' often done in order to keep embers alive ... This term has been applied to subterranean fire because it is covered by the earth."

The ahi komau would appear to be a type of fire employed for other than ritual purposes and, since it is archaeologically rare, especially in the South Island of New Zealand, it may be associated more particularly with certain tribes, and may only be employed in the necessity of war, during a siege, or temporary evacuation of a pa. David Simmons (Otago Museum) describes the traditional ahi komau as essentially a device to keep a fire going for an extended period of time, constructed in a pit, which is covered, and provided with a flue.

The feature at Karitane was found during excavations (undertaken by the Otago Anthropological Society, January, 1963) on the site of the traditional Huriawa Pa on the Karitane Peninsula, Otago. While following a line of palisade postholes associated with a low outer bank and trench, a pit was discovered cut through by these defence works. It was apparent that the pit had been filled and subsequently cut through.

The pit fill was cut by the trench to a depth of 50cm below the surface, and by two empty postholes of 30 cm diameter to a depth of 75cm below the surface. Both of the empty postholes were covered by large stones. The sides of the postholes were black and dusty and did not reveal the nature of the matrix which was subsequently found to be the pit fill. This fill was removed cautiously on account of the artefactual material and faunal remains imbedded in it, and which were of primary significance in distinguishing it.

Most of the fill was relatively loose and came away easily from the harder walls of the pit. To a depth of approximately 1m the pit walls were of clay, below which they were cut into the sandstone, and it became apparent that as the fill was lifted away from the walls the marks of the implement or implements used in the original digging of the pit were being exposed. To preserve these cultural toolmarks unscathed by archaeological tools, the fill was removed entirely by hand. The fill caked against the walls of the pit was taken away by thumping it with the palm of the hand. Material which remained after this treatment adhering to the grooves was left until later to be removed with a dental tool, picking out the fill without touching the bottom of the grooves.

The toolmark grooves are mostly angular in section, though some are rounded, approximately 3cm wide, and 15cm long; one line of marks being from left to right, and the next being right to left, giving a herringbone pattern, and so on down to the floor, where some of the toolmarks spanned the junction between floor and wall. The floor was quite smooth.

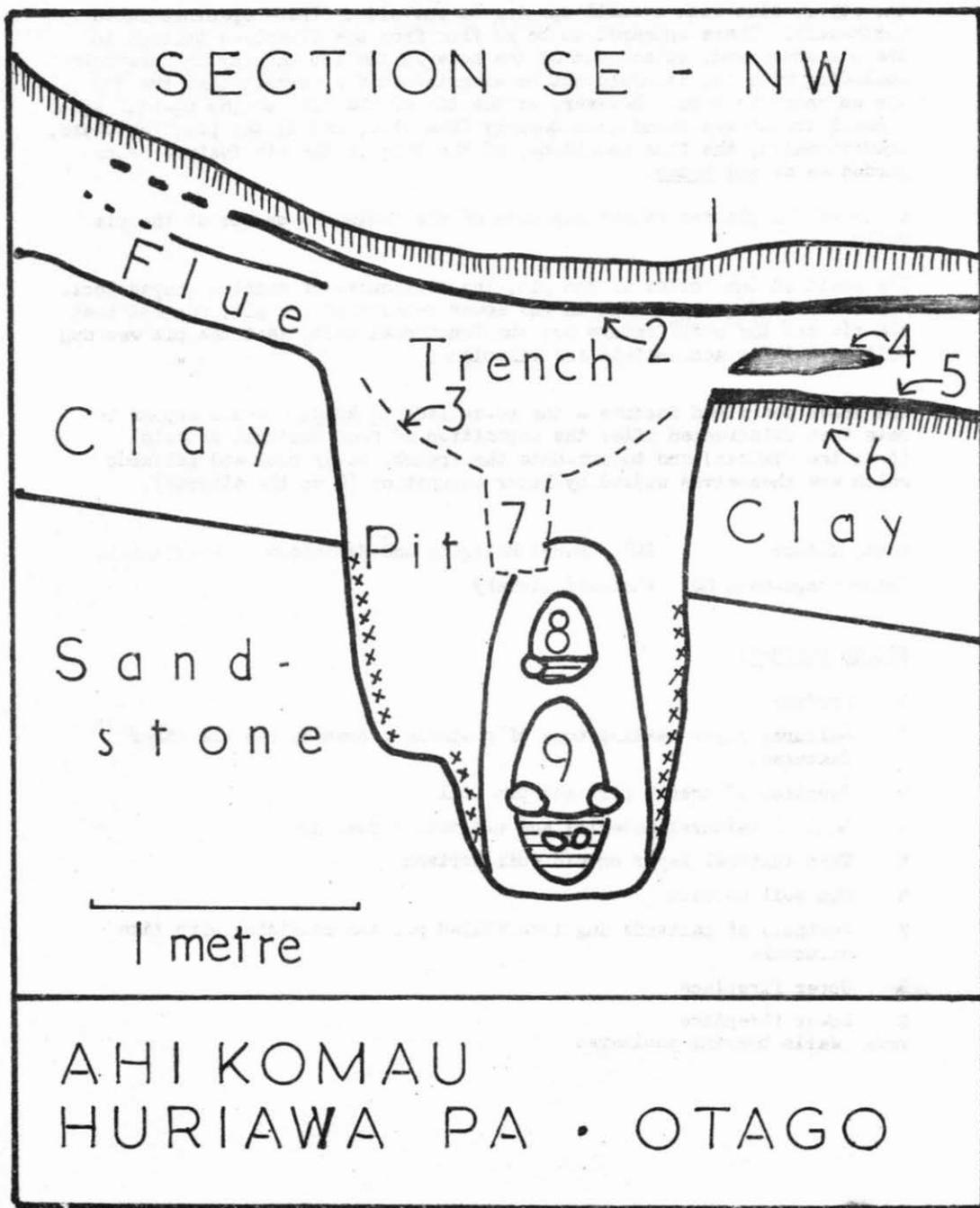
With the removal of the fill from the pit, a concretion was revealed in the south-west corner, separated from the corner and adjacent sides by a space of about 10cm. The top of this concretion had been cut into by one of the palisade postholes, and for this reason the artificial structure was not immediately recognized. When the fill was removed to 1.75m below the surface, a domed structure of light coloured clay with a smooth exterior and showing two black openings one above the other, stood isolated to one side of the pit. At this stage the structure was sectioned, showing a double fireplace, one above the other, each hollow in the centre, with deposits of charcoal, and the two fireplaces separated by a layer of clay 10cm thick. There were stones at the bottom of both fireplaces. The diameter of the structure at the floor of the top fireplace was about 50cm and at the floor of the lower fireplace about 60cm. The structure was seen by David Simmons and recognized as fitting the description of an ahi komau, although differing in shape to that described. (Matorohanga-Best).

Samples of the various deposits and fills were taken for examination, and the pit covered over with timber and earth and the turf replaced.

The pit was re-opened in June, 1964, for the purposes of taking a plaster relief of the toolmarks and the examination of what lay beneath the double fireplace structure. The base was chiselled through at the lowest level to which it had been exposed the previous year, and lifted out of the pit with block and tackle. Charcoal and debris was removed from the bottom of the lower fireplace to a depth of 40cm below the lowest level previously exposed. Amongst the debris found in the bottom of the structure were unburnt bones and a piece of a composite hook point.

Material was carefully removed from the area immediately below the fireplace towards the pit walls. 30cm before the south-east wall of the pit was reached, a further vertical face was found, 50cm deep by 90cm wide, showing toolmarks similar to those exposed higher up.

Cleaning down the remaining two adjacent walls which had been hidden behind the structure now revealed that what had previously been thought to be the bottom of the pit at 1.75m below the surface, continued downwards in part a further 50cm, and that in this lower part of the pit the fireplace structure had been constructed by building up a circle of clay, raising it up in a beehive shape with a small opening, and subsequently continuing the structure upwards to form another beehive, one on top of



the other, also with a small opening to one side. These openings faced north-east. There appeared to be no flue from one fireplace through to the one above and, on account of the hole in the top made by the posthole colliding with it, it could not be ascertained for certain that the top was an unbroken dome. However, at the top of the pit, on the up-hill side, a small trench was found 25cm deep by 30cm wide, and in the position where, traditionally, the flue should be, if the fire in the pit feature is regarded as an ahi komau.

A successful plaster relief was made of the toolmarks on one of the pit walls.

The shelf at the bottom of the pit, the continuity of similar shaped toolmarks on all four walls and in the lower section of the pit, suggest that the pit and the oven feature are one functional unit, that the pit was dug deliberately to accommodate the fireplace.

The above described feature - the so-called ahi komau - would appear to have been constructed after the deposition of some cultural material (5 on the diagram) and to pre-date the trench, outer bank and palisade which are themselves sealed by later occupation (2 on the diagram).

Best, Elsdon 1924 Maori Religion and Mythology Wellington.
Matorohanga-Best MS. Turnbull Library

KEY TO DIAGRAM:

- 1 Surface
- 2 Cultural layer sealing tops of postholes, trench, and all other features.
- 3 Junction of trench fill and pit fill.
- 4 Lens of cultural material and old soil thrown up.
- 5 Thin cultural layer on old soil horizon
- 6 Old soil horizon
- 7 Posthole of palisade dug into filled pit and colliding with fire structure.
- 8 Upper fireplace
- 9 Lower fireplace
- xxxx Walls bearing toolmarks