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PREHISTORIC SITES IN THE ASHBURTON DISTRICT, SOUTH ISLAND

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Seventy years ago, in a paper "On Ancient Maori Relics from Canterbury, New Zealand", which dealt largely with the Ashburton district, W. W. Smith wrote:

> "It is regrettable that so little exploration is done among the old encampments and rock shelters formerly tenanted by extinct Maori tribes."
>
> (Smith, 1900: 433)

In examining the evidence of prehistoric occupation of the Ashburton District which is available today, we can only agree with this sentiment, although we would probably not express it in quite the same way.

Smith was convinced, by the evidence of stone implements being ploughed up "in every district in Ashburton county", that Canterbury was formerly occupied by a large nomadic Maori population. The advantages of the country were, according to him, its accessibility and its plentiful supply of marine and fresh-water fish, birds, forest products and fernroot. Since Smith's time many more artifacts, mostly adzes, have been found through cultivation and other farming operations, and possibly as many ovens and other evidences of occupation have been destroyed by the same process.

Although no intensive archaeological research has yet been undertaken, it is possible to learn something of the prehistory of the district by examining the finds and records that have been made by assessing the significance of site distribution, particularly in relation to environmental factors.

Many archaeological sites are now merely areas of blackened soil and burnt broken stones noticeable in cultivated ground; occasionally pieces of mussel shell or moa bone may be seen, and sometimes discoidal flakes of greywacke, flakes of chalcedony or porcellanite or even an adze, may be found. In most cases sites have been located by asking farmers if they had seen any such indication of occupation on their property. Sometimes the following up of an isolated artifact find has led to the discovery of other material not recognized by the finder.

Other artifact finds have been made in places where occupational evidence may have been totally destroyed, and in some cases because the exact locality of the find is no longer known, we cannot establish whether or not there was any associated occupational material.

It follows, then, that there are probably many more archaeological sites than have been recorded. The pattern of their distribution is however unlikely to have been much different from that shown on the accompanying map. It is a pattern which, allowing for local modifications, is repeated elsewhere on the east coast region of the South Island.

The largest and oldest archaeological sites are right on the coast. There is an important Moa-hunter site on the eastern bank of the Rakaia River, and another similar one which was not so intensively occupied on the western bank. (I use the term Moa-hunter to refer to the early inhabitants of the South Island - who hunted moas - and to their culture.)

The first mentioned site (S93/20) has yielded more artifactual and faunal material and archaeological data than all the other sites in the Ashburton district put together. It was first investigated and described by Julius von Haast in 1869 and, although much cultivated and fossicked, was practically forgotten about archaeologically for almost one hundred years. Recently more artifactual and faunal material has been recovered from it and the available data reassessed (Trotter, 1972).

The site covers about eight hectares over which were scattered burnt stones, broken moa bones, artifacts and other occupational material. A few pockets of undisturbed deposit were found below plough depth in 1969 and samples of moa bone collagen from this level have been radiocarbon dated as 585 $\pm$ 64 and 518 $\pm$ 80 B.P. (NZ 930-31). Another sample, of burnt moa bone carbonate, gave a date of 956 $\pm$ 93, which suggests that the site was occupied for several centuries, although I am inclined to suspect the accuracy of this date as they all came from the same oven hollow. Obviously further investigation is called for here. Artifactual and faunal evidence points to an age of at least five hundred years.

There are archaeological sites on either side of the Wakanui Creek some six kilometres north-east of the Ashburton River mouth; that on the western bank being several acres in extent (S103/1). Many artifacts and moa bones have been found on the surface here after cultivation. A small test excavation I made in a cooking area showed an undisturbed

stratified deposit to a depth of over 50 cm in an oven hollow, and this was confirmed by a larger scale excavation in 1971 and 1972 when some 65 one-and-a-half-metre squares were excavated by volunteers under my direction. The artifact assemblage is similar to that from the main Rakaia Mouth site, and bones include those of at least two species of moa, thus pointing to an age of 500 years or more.

Coastal Moa-hunter sites are commonly found at the mouths of large rivers, and we might therefore have expected one at the mouth of the Ashburton rather than the Wakanui (which is now not usually open to the sea). A probably explanation for the absence of a site at the Ashburton mouth is that at the time of occupation the River flowed out to sea near where the Wakanui mouth is now. Certainly it did at one time in the not too distant past, but whether it did during Moa-hunter times has not been ascertained.

There is a camp site at the mouth of the Hinds River, on the south-west bank, and it appears to have been much the same as the one at Wakanui, although it is now largely destroyed by erosion.

I have not found any large site at the mouth of the Rangitata River but there is considerable evidence of prehistoric camping and cooking on the north-east side of the river mouth, and some on the south-west side.

Between the Hinds and the Ashburton Rivers was a considerable area of swampy ground, a fact well attested by the network of drainage ditches in use today. A Lands Department map of about 1863 shows the margins of the swamp as they were prior to drainage. It extended along the eastern bank of the Hinds and about 16 miles inland.

In 1900 W. W. Smith referred to indications of a "buried forest" in this area; large roots and trunks of trees being dug out of the swamp land. Even today some of the buried timber is sometimes used for firewood. Some of the tree trunks seemed to have been charred while they stood upright, before falling over and becoming submerged. Possibly the charring was due to human agency, though natural fires are known to have occurred in South Island forests prior to the arrival of man.

Apart from reported (but not confirmed) caches of artifacts and the Moa-hunter sites previously mentioned, the concentration of artifact finds and "Maori ovens" is greater around this swamp area than elsewhere in the district. There are, for example, a dozen areas of blackened soil, with burnt broken stones and other signs of occupation, around the Flemington locality, and numerous adzes have been found both near them and in other places where there are no reported signs of associated

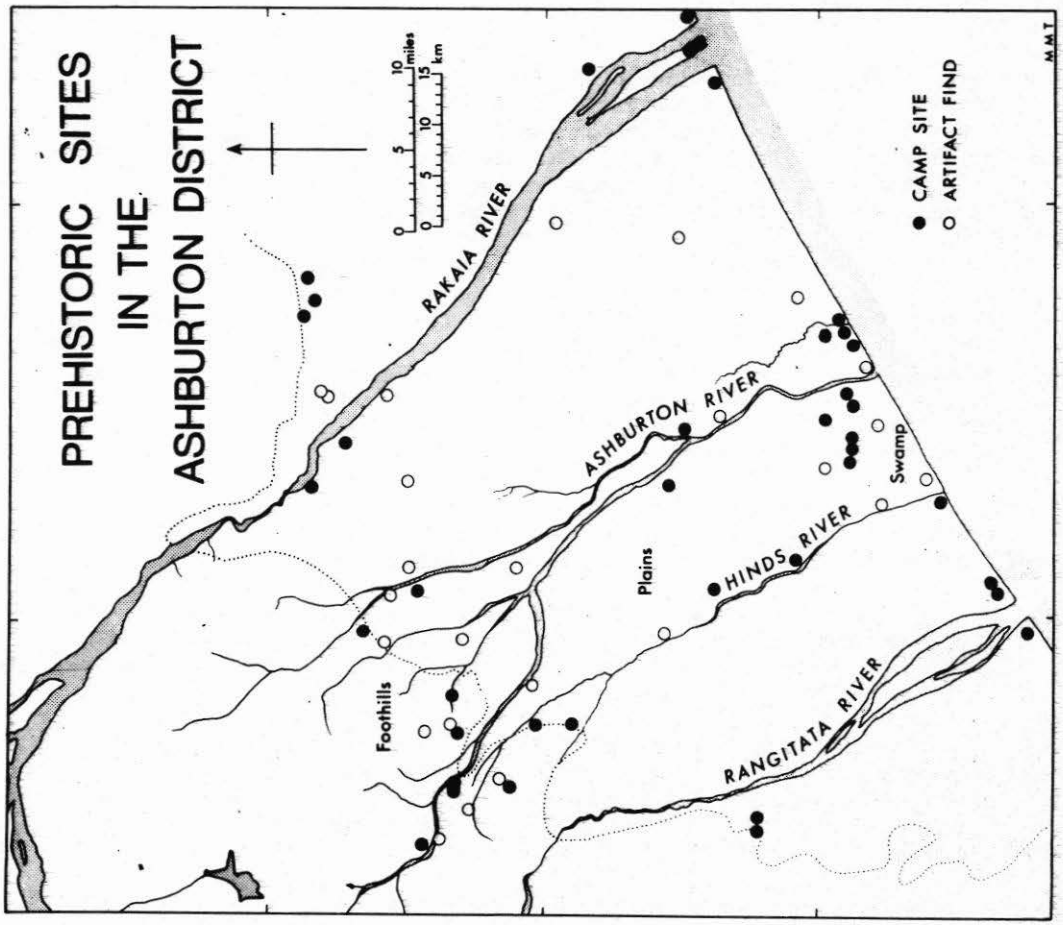
PREHISTORIC SITES
IN THE
ASHBURTON DISTRICT
0 5 10 miles
0 5 10 15 km
RAKAIA RIVER
ASHBURTON RIVER
HINDS RIVER
RANGITATA RIVER
Foothills
Plains
Swamp
CAMP SITE
ARTIFACT FIND
MMT

Fig. 1

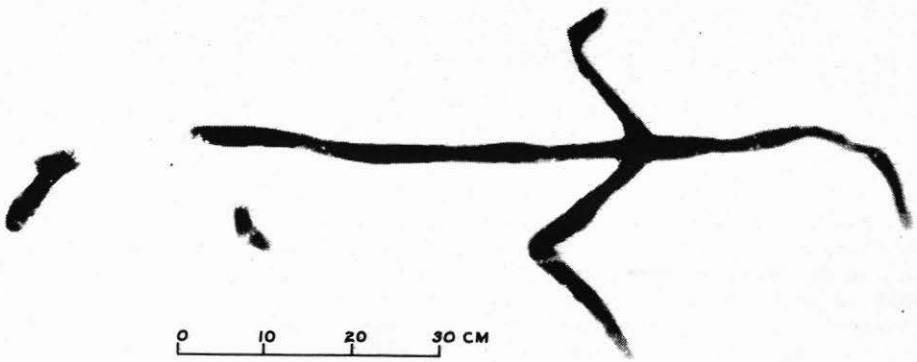
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Fig. 2

occupation. Although some of these archaeological remains occur on what the 1863 map showed as dry ground, most are in swamp areas; all of them indicate temporary encampments.

Far from being the "impenetrable bog" mentioned by some local historians (e.g., Stevens, 1952: 22; Brown, 1940: 4), the swamp land appears then to have had attractions for the prehistoric New Zealanders. Although very few faunal or vegetable remains have been preserved in the archaeological sites, probably because of the soil conditions, it is fairly safe to assume that the principal attraction was food - birds, plants, eels, fresh-water shellfish and crayfish.

Further inland from the coast and the swamp area, there are a few archaeological sites close to the rivers. The rivers would have provided a source of food - birds, fish, and perhaps shellfish in some places - firewood, and possibly shelter.

Although there are still some problems relating to the extent and density of prehistoric bush cover on the east coast of the South Island, there can be no question however that extensive forest or bush did once exist, and radiocarbon analyses of buried charcoal indicate that most of it was burnt during the period of Polynesian occupation. With the bush gone, large areas would have become uninviting, even uninhabitable, and it is not surprising therefore that, generally speaking, most inland archaeological sites appear to be fairly early; that is, they were occupied while there was at least some bush still extant (see Trotter and McCulloch, 1971: 78-80).

Where the foothills meet the plains (see dotted line on map) is an archaeologically important area. Here are many small sites, ovens, stone quarries, rock shelters and numerous artifact finds. Their concentration is due to several factors. Stone quarries or source sites are of course situated where the stone outcrops; in this case a hard silicified tuff, often greenish in colour (sometimes called "palla"), occurs in the Surrey Hills-Alford Forest vicinity. Worked pieces have also been found near the mouth of the Ashburton and elsewhere.

Many natural rock formations of suitable shape have served to provide shelter for nomadic visitors, and one at Mount Somers and three at Inverary have preserved from the elements a few traces of their red and block rock drawings. A red drawing on the ceiling of the Mount Somers shelter is illustrated in Fig. 2 (S81/4).

The presence of other sites in this foothills region, most of which are cooking areas and artifact finds, is probably largely due to the attractions of the forest which was doubtless heavier in this region than elsewhere. Another possible food source is from seasonal gatherings of sea birds which have been noted in recent years (Marion Lane, pers. comm.); it seems likely that these would have also taken place in prehistoric times.

The small size of most sites and the absence of permanent settlements suggest that, for the most part, the prehistoric inhabitants of the Ashburton district had a basically nomadic hunting and food-gathering economy, and probably would have thus depended largely upon the bush, and the birds and rats that lived there, for subsistence. The steep gravel beaches and the absence of littoral rocks greatly reduced the range and quantity of sea foods (including fish, shellfish and birds) that might otherwise have been available along the coast.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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