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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON A RECENTLY DISCOVERED
CARVED PATAKA DOOR FROM OKATO, TARANAKI

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While digging a drain along the edge of a swamp on Mrs A. Cambell's farm, Komene Road, Okato (Grid N108/417751 2nd ed.) in early April this year Mr Keith Mundell uncovered a spectacular carved slab of wood with his machine (see cover). Not being particularly interested he put the carving to one side and continued with his job. Fortunately Mrs Campbell, on seeing the carving, decided to take it back to her home and put it in an old copper full of water. After contacting a local Maori, who expressed little interest in it, she intended to return it to the swamp.

At the time I was working on the monitoring programme at the Motunui gas to gasoline site, Waitara. It was through a chance call to a local antique bottle collector, Mr Gary Hall, that I heard of the find. He works as a part-time barman at the Okato Tavern and had been offered the carving by Mr Mundell but thought no more of it until I rang him.

Mrs Campbell showed me the carving and then took me to the area where it was found. Evidence for occupation in the form of hangi stones, ash and charcoal extended for several hundred metres along the newly dug drain. As well as this swamp, evidence for occupation in the immediate area can be found on nine lahar mounds, eight of which are named. Three of these are pa, while the rest have terraces, house sites and pits on them. These I have called the 'Pukehoe complex' after the largest pa. Walking over the drain tailings on this first visit I picked up two halves of different pumice bowls, one of which still had a piece of pigment (shaped like a .22 bullet) in it, a stone pounder and a broken adze.

The carving, which appears to be a pataka door, was transferred into the Taranaki Museum where it is now undergoing conservation treatment. From an ethnological point of view this is an extremely important find as it is the only known pataka door from the Taranaki province and one of only a few known examples from the rest of New Zealand.

What form does the carving take? It is a single female figure in a frontal position. The figure is in high relief on a rectangular base. It has a maximum height of 57 cm, maximum width of 40 cm, and a maximum depth of 13.5 cm. The figure displays the characteristic features of the Taranaki regional style of carving,

with peaked head, the greatest width of which is at the eyebrows. The mouth is narrower than the brows and has four semi-circular teeth. The hands are three fingered and the feet also have three 'toes' which are webbed. Elbows and knee joints are represented by circular 'knobs'. Spirals are used in pairs on the shoulder and hip joints. The genitalia are vividly portrayed. Ritorito is used around the mouth while haehae is used on the upper arm and thighs. Background decoration consists of matekupenga which extends from the top of the base down to where the elbows are resting. Below this no background decoration is present. No decoration appears on the body of the figure.

The top of the background board is bevelled inwards and along the base below the legs, a recess has been formed. These two features suggest that this is a door, presumably off a pataka, which was required to slide open and shut. A tunnel for a bar passes behind the body and continues as a groove on either side, severing the wrists. This would allow a bar to be inserted to help keep the door closed. Angas depicts a similar arrangement on a pataka at Te Rapa on the shores of Lake Taupo (Barrow, 1969:120). Also present along the right hand edge are four holes and one along the base between the two feet. Because a strip has been broken off the entire length on the left hand edge we can only presume that lashing holes were present on that side as well.

Because the carving was dug up with a machine we have no idea whether it was lying face down or up when in situ, or at what depth it was lying.

This is only a preliminary report. A fuller article is being prepared which will include details on the other artefacts which have come out of the swamp and will incorporate a detailed discussion on the Pukehoe complex.

Reference

Barrow, T. 1969 Maori Wood Sculpture. Wellington, Reed.