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RECENT ROCK SHELTER INVESTIGATIONS IN NORTH OTAGO

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With Appendix by A. Fomison

ABSTRACT

A brief account is given of rock shelter investigations in North Otago during 1967 and 1968. Methods and techniques in the field and laboratory are described. Rock drawings are figured, their subject matter discussed, and an explanation given of the nomenclature and terminology adopted by the writers. Implications of the widespread distribution of inland rock shelters is summarized.

In an Appendix, A. Fomison describes two rock drawing compositions from South Canterbury and discusses "birdmen" in relation to the North Otago findings.

INTRODUCTION

In February 1967 one of the present writers made a field survey of pre-historic rock shelter sites in part of the Awamoko Valley, North Otago, with a team comprising members of the Otago Anthropological Society and some from the North Otago Scientific and Historical Society (Trotter 1967). The valley is largely bounded by limestone cliffs, separated by talus slopes from the grassed valley floor through which the Awamoko stream flows to join the Waitaki River some nine miles downstream.

Scattered midden, burnt stones, and rock drawings indicated that some overhanging cliffs and some of the boulders below them, had had pre-historic use as shelters. There were also signs of historic habitation in a few, and nearly all suitable rock formations in the area had been used recently by farm stock.

A record was made of the location and description of each recognized pre-historic shelter and, where present, rock drawings were photographed

and traced on clear polythene sheeting. These records brought the number of known rock shelter sites in North Otago up to 76.

On the final day of this survey it was suggested that members of the North Otago Scientific and Historical Society continue the work in adjacent areas, particularly near Ngapara and Enfield, fifteen miles north-west of Oamaru. Since then they have spent numerous days in the field recording a further twenty sites, some of which contain important drawings and one an engraving.

N.O.S.H.S. WORK

Although aerial photographs show where limestone outcrops occur, it is difficult to accurately identify those likely to contain shelters. For this reason, and because of the abundance of limestone, it was found more practical to walk over the area following along "runs" of outcrops. No other rock in this locality occurs in formations suitable for utilization as shelters.

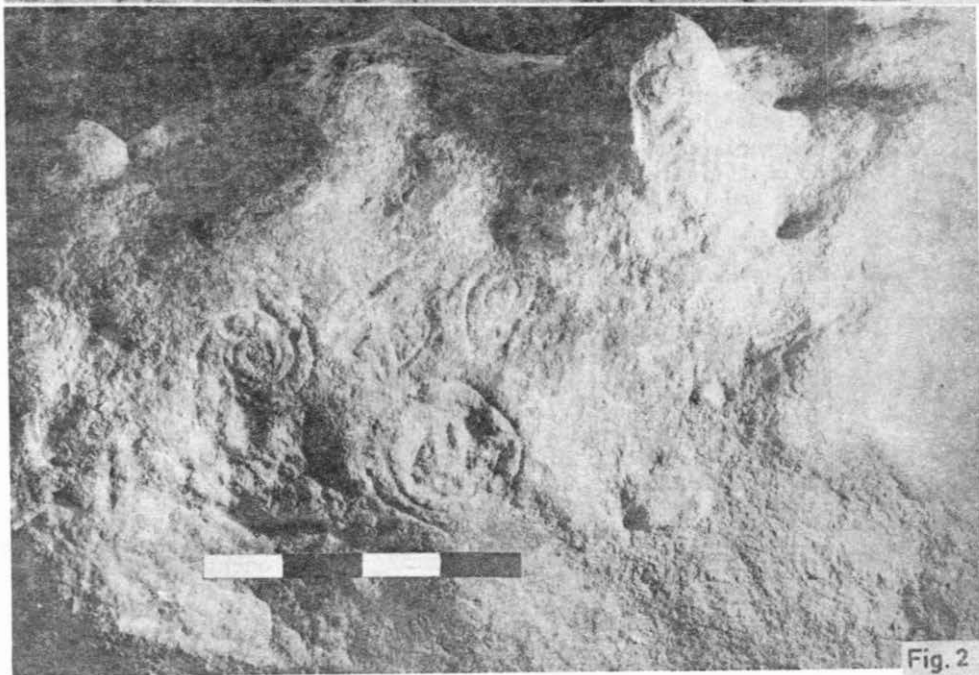
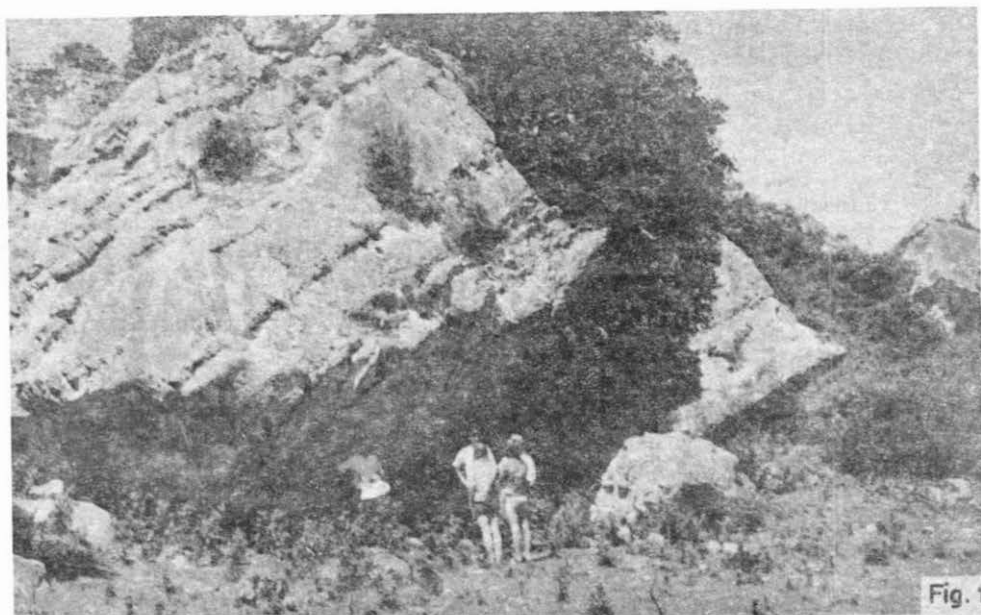
In nearly all cases the most prominent occupational features of the shelters were rock drawings and, indeed, many contained no other sign of pre-historic usage. Some of these drawings were so faint, probably due to weathering, that they could be recognized only after the rock surface was sprayed with water. The majority, however, were fairly clear - sufficiently so to be recorded by orthodox photography - and it is a little surprising that they had been previously unnoticed; possibly an indication of the general lack of interest taken in this type of archaeological site, although this area is well away from main routeways.

A special feature of the North Otago group's work is their large locality map at a scale of ten chains to an inch, compiled from original theodolite and chain surveys, showing the exact location of shelters in relation to natural features, fences, and buildings.

The recorded information, maps, and photographs and polythene tracings of rock drawings, are sent to the Canterbury Museum Archaeology Department for processing and allocation of New Zealand Archaeological Association site numbers.

ROCK DRAWINGS

Most drawings were in black, probably executed with dry charcoal used as a crayon on smooth limestone surfaces usually the back walls of the shelters. Some included red apparently as part of the compositions. To make an accurate copy, all pigmented areas were traced on clear



plastic sheeting .002 or .003 of an inch thick (the latter thickness being better for a permanent copy), with black chinagraph pencils. Field photographs were also taken where practicable, both of shelters and drawings. These are complementary to the tracings and other records.

The sole engraving discovered in the area was found on a piece of limestone which had broken from the main outcrop and was lying on the shelter floor. It was removed for safety and sent to the Canterbury Museum for examination and recording (Photographs were taken under varying lighting conditions - see Fig. 2 - and cast copies made by the museum's preparators). The pattern appears to have been cut into the rock with a sharply pointed object, producing a U-shaped groove, the depth of which at the present time varies between 1/32 and 1/8 of an inch. It seems likely that the original depth was greater and has been reduced by the weathering which is apparent over the entire surface. One other spiral engraving is known from an adjacent locality (Te Ana Raki S.136/16) and incised designs occur in another nearby area (Earthquakes district).

PROCESSING OF MATERIAL

Relevant data from the field notes are used to compile site reference forms for the New Zealand Archaeological Association site recording scheme, each individual shelter or bay being allotted a separate site number even though it may be adjacent to another. Unless adjacent bays can be demonstrated to be part of the same site, it seems desirable to consider them separately, and it is certainly much more convenient to do so for the purpose of recording rock drawings. Copies of the site reference forms are sent to the regional filekeeper in Otago and to the central filekeeper in Wellington.

Where possible, the location of each shelter is marked on the N.Z.M.S. 1 map of the area (S.127), although they are often too close together to be indicated individually. Copies of all records, including photographs, tracings, and locality maps, are filed at the Canterbury Museum, where they are available for study, and have already proved useful to research workers in other areas.

For copying purposes, the polythene tracings are photographed on very high contrast film while illuminated by evenly reflected back lighting. The illustrations reproduced here are basically such photographs, retouched with reference to field photographs and sketches (necessary because of the variable quality of the tracings). At the same time, however, care is taken during the retouching process that

nothing is added which does not occur on the rock itself, even though it may be apparent that the original figures have been reduced by flaking. Technical pens of varying thickness are used during this process to reproduce as accurately as possible the intensity of pigmentation on the rock surface. (We cannot, of course, say with any certainty just how much this intensity of colouration has altered or decreased since the drawings were originally executed. There is no justification, therefore, for any interpretation when retouching, and all drawings are pictured as accurately as possible just as they appear today.) These photographically reduced copies, complete with scale, are much more useful for quick reference than are the more cumbersome tracings. They are also suitable for reproduction by most printing processes, and certainly give better results in newspapers or such publications as the New Zealand Archaeological Association "Newsletter" than conventional photographs (which tend to be indistinct) or hand sketches (which are often inaccurate).

NOMENCLATURE AND VOCABULARY

Before continuing with descriptions of, and comments on, a selection of drawings recently recorded by members of the North Otago Scientific and Historical Society, it is important that some clarification be made of certain words and phrases we employ and which may be open to different interpretations by different people. In other words, it is important the reader takes from the text the meaning which the writers intend to convey.

Because there has been so little actually written and published on the archaeological significance of New Zealand rock drawings, no standard terminology has yet evolved. Hence, each individual field worker tends to build up his own vocabulary for convenience in personal recording and note-making. For example, the term "bird-man" may be used by an investigator in North Otago to describe a particular figure which occurs in his area. To a reader familiar only with the drawings in another part of the country, however, this term may conjure up a picture of a totally different form, for which the description is equally apt.

There is a danger, too, that the use of such a term as "bird-man" might be taken to imply that the writer sees some magical or ritual significance in the drawing, or that he is, in fact, interpreting that figure as a deliberate combination by the artist of the characteristics of "bird" and "man". In fact, the terminology may be purely descriptive of the appearance of this particular form of rock drawing and imply absolutely nothing else except that.

If, then, we refer to certain figures as humans, dogs, birds, or fish, it is important to remember that we do not know, nor are we assuming, that these were the particular objects which the artist was attempting to portray - they are merely the forms with which we can draw the closest parallel using modern standards of depiction as a comparison. We must, too, be careful of the interpretation put upon such words as "art" or "composition". There is often a tendency on the part of the reader to assume the narrowest or current meaning of these words as implying something quite deliberate in the way of arrangement or execution. While not denying the possibility, we cannot see any justification for assuming that the position of figures in a group (such as that shown in Fig. 3, for instance) shows any indication of pre-conceived composition. Only in few instances do separate figures appear to bear a deliberate relationship to one another, although there are certain stylized forms which combine figures in a conventionalized juxtaposition.

DESCRIPTION OF FIGURES

Fig. 3 (scale in inches - Site S.127/76)

This composition, descriptively called "The Ngapara Twist" by its discoverers, consists of groups of figures executed in charcoal. Their positioning on the rock forms a pattern which is extremely pleasing to the eye, having both balance and movement. Although there appear to be some considerable differences between certain of these figures, we can, by taking them individually and re-arranging them, get a sequence or progression of variations from the almost naturalistic human form (lower left) to the animal-like motif (upper centre) with laterally extended head terminals. (The stick figure on the far left is doubtless a simplified human.) The exception to this sequence (the shape at upper right) is not so amenable to interpretation, but is probably incomplete as a result of weathering.

Most of these figures display characteristics in common with drawings in other parts of North Otago and elsewhere in the South Island. The small head, flexed arms and legs, and general body shape are a quite typical representation of the human form, while the antennae-like projections from the head of the mantis figure (fourth right in central line) are also common to others found in North Otago. A South Canterbury style in which a small human is drawn beneath the arm of a larger one may also be paralleled here. Recent discoveries near Weka Pass, North Canterbury, have revealed several figures which bear a marked resemblance to the animal motif already referred to.

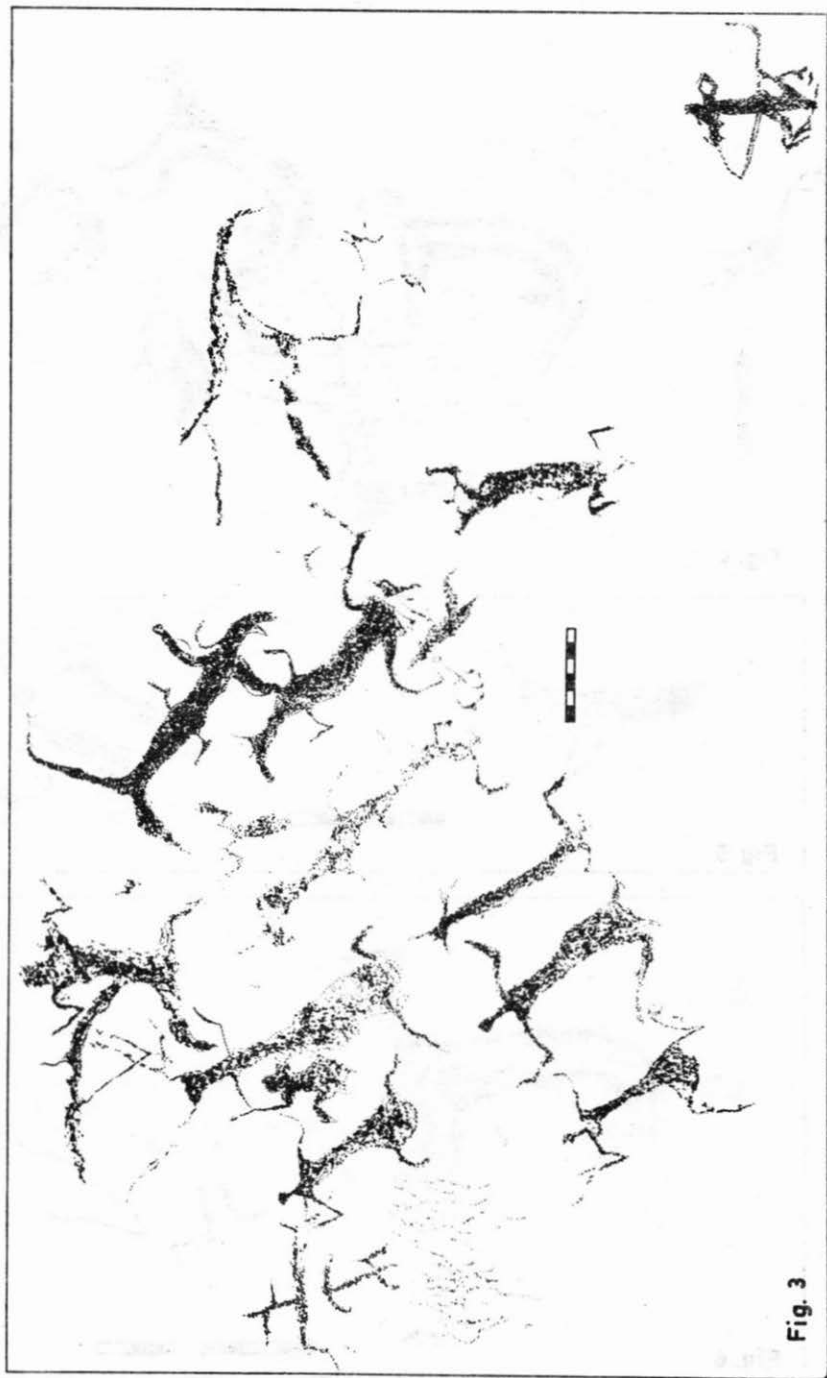
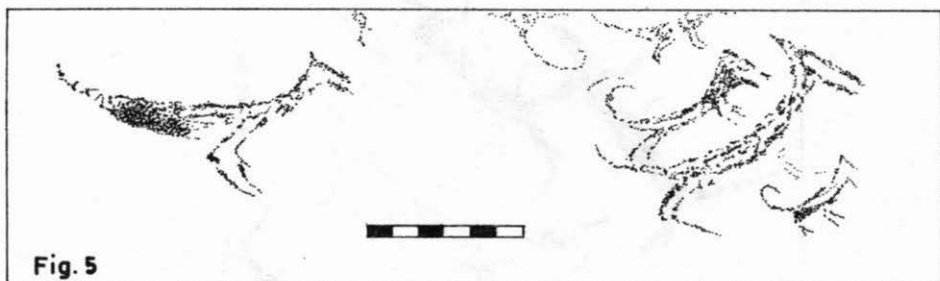
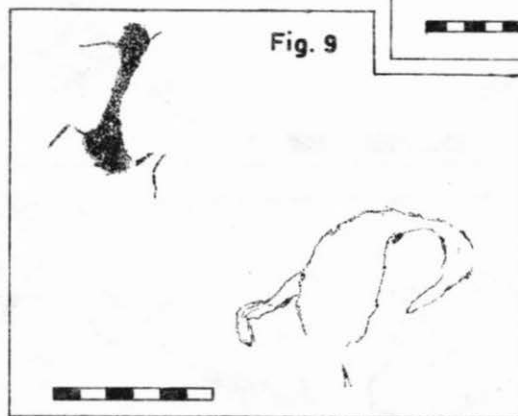
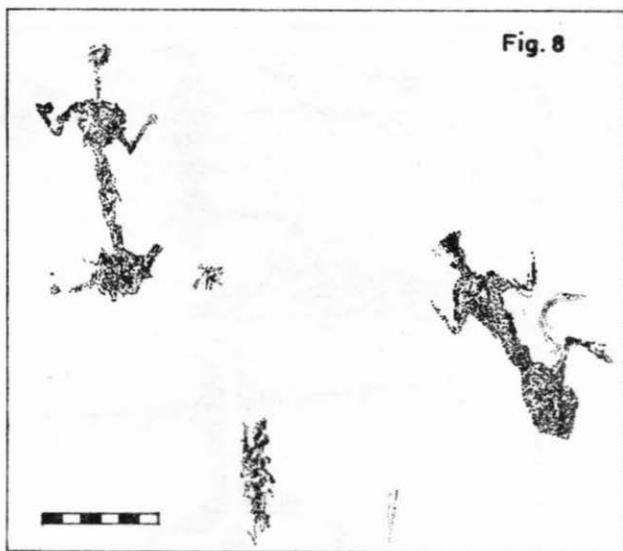
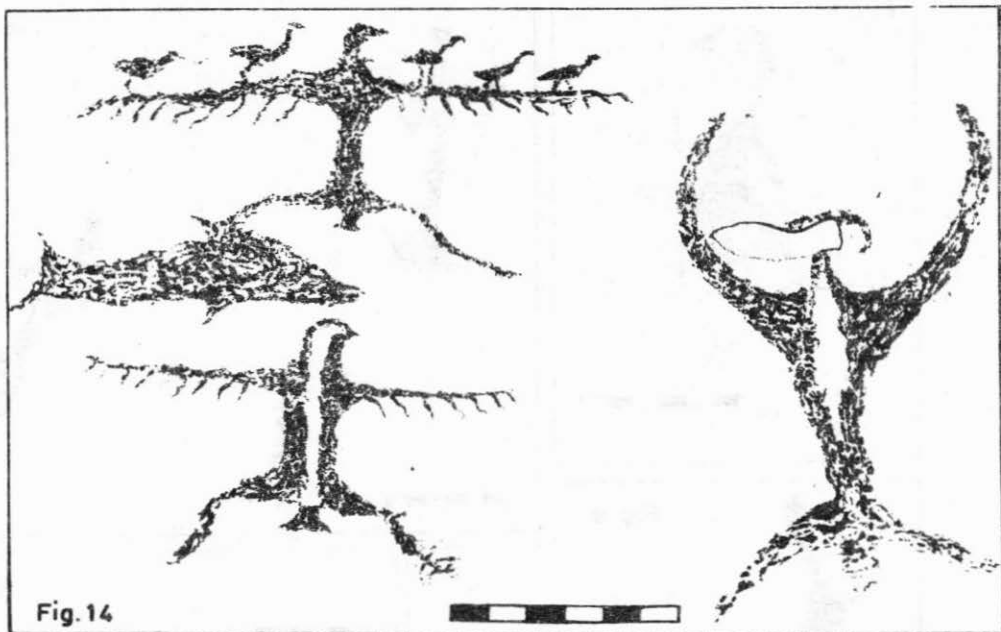


Fig. 3







The present-day condition of all figures in this shelter is much the same, and this, coupled with their general similarity in design and execution, leads one to believe that they are all contemporaneous and part of a single composition, quite possibly the work of a single artist. This is not always the case with rock drawings, where figures of different styles and drawn with different mediums are often found side by side or even superimposed upon earlier works.

Fig. 4 (S.127/66)

This group of drawings presents a totally different aspect to those referred to in the preceding section. It comprises four widely differing styles (all of which occur in other areas), a factor which, together with the variations in intensity of pigmentation, suggests that they were drawn by different people.

So-called naturalistic birds, such as that on the far left side of Fig. 4, occur in many shelters in North Otago and are more common here than in other areas. (Examples have been figured by Stevenson 1947, Ambrose and Davis 1960: 15, and Trotter 1967: 9.) Because of its close resemblance to aquatic birds such as shags or herons, there is a tendency to think of this form as a purely naturalistic rendition. However, the general similarity of most of these, and the lack of such a degree of naturalism in nearly all other subjects, rather suggests that this, too, is a conventionalized figure.

Next to it in the group is an outlined bird-man, this particular form of which occurs in several places in North, West, and South Canterbury (see, for instance, Fig. 14, and McCulloch 1968: 81). Its main feature is the outstretched wing-like arms and a bird-like head; others also have a tail, adding to the hybrid impression. A very interesting variation of this motif is the bottom central figure in illustrated group; here the head is less distinct, and the lower body is triangular in shape, suggesting a profile tail, a feature comparable to the object in Fig. 7. Along its outstretched arms (or wings) are three or four small figures. These latter might be thought of as small birds of different form to the aquatic bird described above, but the degree of stylization is obvious when they are compared, for example, with dogs from other shelters, such as the Ahuriri group (Site S.117/4), part of which is shown in Fig. 5. (See also a note on bird and birdmen by A. Fomison at the conclusion of this article.)

The most prominent figures in this group (Fig. 4) are three highly stylized forms which may be described as dogs. Once again, these drawings are a convention which occurs in other rock shelter areas of the South Island (see also, for example, Fig. 6). Their chief characteristic is the "blanked" body, down-curved hind-quarters, and forward-bent forelegs.

It is on the basis of these last two features that other workers have interpreted this form to represent a seal. A variation with a curled tail is found in the North Otago Ahuriri group (Fig. 5).

An interesting feature of these forms, which may or may not be coincidental, is that in almost all cases they face to the viewer's right (as do the great majority of "birdman" heads). Perhaps most important here is that the two dominant dogs in Fig. 4 have a very clear indication of sex. This is one of the few definitely conclusive depictions of sexual organs in Maori rock drawings, although it is possible that other occurrences have been overlooked due to fading, background complexity of design, or that such indications have been conventionalized rather than portrayed naturally. It is interesting that Julius von Haast, when writing of the Weka Pass drawings, noted that "It is most remarkable that none of these paintings are indecent, which is so characteristic of all Maori carvings and paintings of the human figure" (Haast 1877: 51). Today we would probably substitute the word realistic or naturalistic for the Victorian "indecent", but other than that the comment is still true and applies to almost all Maori rock drawings. It is also noticeable that facial and body features, e.g. eyes, nose, mouth, breasts, are rarely if ever indicated in genuinely pre-historic rock drawings in the South Island - most figures being rendered in simplified or stylized silhouette in which such features would not show.

The dog in Fig. 6 (S.127/81, Maerewhenua) combines the down-curved hind-quarters of the Fig. 4 style with the Ahuriri head, shown in Fig. 5. Again, the body is centre-blanked, as is the small human in front of it. At first sight, the latter may seem to be upside-down (as some rock drawing figures undoubtedly are), but it is more likely that the head is missing and that the curved line beneath the trunk is a rounded basal termination similar to that on many of the figured humans (see Fig. 3, second from left; Figs. 8, 9, 11, 12, etc.).

The remaining figures reproduced here show a selection of other drawings found in the Ngapara area by the North Otago Scientific and Historical Society. In some shelters there are merely black marks which today appear rather shapeless, others contain recognizable forms and styles including the following, all of which are similar to those in other areas.

Fig. 7 (Site S.127/73) appears to be a profile figure with more affinities to an imaginary animal than to a human. The faint lines around it may have been part of the figure or could just as easily have no connection with it.

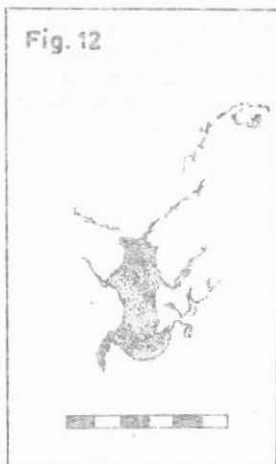
Fig. 8 (S.127/76), two human figures which occur to the upper left of the group shown in Fig. 3 and may be part of the same composition.

Fig. 9 (S.127/80) contains a conventional human, without a distinct head, alongside an unidentifiable linear object. The drawing illustrated in Fig. 10 (S.127/67) is rather indistinct but a central human is recognizable with a profile human on the left. Probably another profile human was drawn on the right, but it is now too fragmentary to tell for certain.

In Fig. 11 (S.127/78) there are at least three connected human figures, with another probable human at the bottom.

Fig. 12 (S.127/78) is a human figure with antennae-like head terminals, comparable to some in Fig. 3 already referred to.

Fig. 13 (S.127/80) shows a human form standing on a crescent shape and is very similar to some in South Canterbury. It is interesting to speculate that the crescent represents a canoe or mokihi and the line in the upper left a pole by which the craft is being propelled or steered.



IMPORTANCE OF THE SURVEY

It is 115 years since the first pre-historic rock shelter was discovered in North Otago and its artwork recorded. Since then many others have been found accidentally, and still others found as the result of deliberate searches. That more continue to be found today is an indication of the large amount of site survey work remaining to be done before we can get a realistic idea of the pre-historic utilization of these inland areas. Admittedly, the large and important sites of this region appear to be mostly on the coast, but the number inland shows at least nomadic occupation here.

Until recently, discoveries of rock shelters were made mainly in large river valleys, and the obvious conclusion was that they had been occupied by Maoris using these valleys as routeways into the interior. In fact, it now seems likely that the finding of them here was largely due to Europeans using river routeways since the days of settlement, and thus being in a position to find the shelters that were there. When investigations are made in other areas, we find just as many sites which are as valid as evidence of pre-historic utilization of those areas as are those in the larger valleys. There appears to be a good chance of finding rock shelters wherever there are suitable rock formations, and these occur mainly where limestone has been eroded by streams and rivers. The site distribution may then be due to this fact more than to their use by overland travellers traversing recognized routeways.

The styles and conventions of the drawings (or other evidences of graphic expression) which are more often than not found in North Otago shelter sites, have no general differences from those in other areas of the South Island, although there are, naturally enough, particular forms and styles which are more common in North Otago than elsewhere.