



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



This document is made available by The New Zealand
Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

REVIEW

Atholl Anderson and Richard McGovern-Wilson (eds), *Beech Forest Hunters. The Archaeology of Maori Rockshelter Sites on Lee Island, Lake Te Anau, in Southern New Zealand*. NZAA Monograph 18. 1991. 88 pp. \$45 (\$35 to members).

In March 1983 Atholl Anderson (University of Otago) and Lynette Williams (then at the Southland Museum) conducted a salvage excavation of three rockshelter sites (S131/3, S131/4 and S131/6) located along an approximately 120 m stretch of the western shoreline of Lee Island, Lake Te Anau. A fourth site (S131/5), situated between S131/4 and S131/6 and described (p. 14) as 'cave-like ...[with]... virtually no soil and very few cultural remains' was unexcavated. *Beech Forest Hunters* presents the results of these excavations.

The discovery of the rockshelters in 1979 aroused considerable interest amongst the southern archaeological community, not least of all because of the presence of *in situ* drying racks in three of the shelters and the recovery of a totara bark basket (S131/5), a fire plate and stick (S131/4) and a distinctively southern style Archaic Duff type 1D adze (S131/4), all of which are rarely found in undisturbed archaeological contexts. In addition, Maori habitation sites, especially largely intact ones, are not common in the inhospitable southern beech/mixed podocarp forest environment of the Te Anau area. In the event, the excavations did not disappoint. An additional 13 adzes and a wealth of wooden and fibrous items were recovered as well as faunal material, indicating that specialised forest fowling, bird preservation and the collection of bird feathers were the principal activities being carried out at the sites.

Beech Forest Hunters is well written and easy to read, each chapter being presented in a similar format and style of writing (reflecting, perhaps, the hand of the senior editor, who authored or co-authored seven of the nine chapters). Tables, line drawings and photographs abound. After a brief introduction by Anderson, which outlines the circumstances leading to the excavations, and a useful chapter by Morrison (Fiordland National Park) and Anderson on the island and its environment, Anderson discusses the techniques and methods of excavation and the stratigraphy encountered, and presents the results of radiocarbon dating. Five of the next six chapters were written or co-authored by the (then) University of Otago postgraduates who undertook much of the laboratory analysis of the material. These chapters cover the stone and (three only) bone artefacts; the wooden artefacts (including two fire plates, two fire sticks and a possible bowl fragment) and a multitude of wooden chips; the bark and fibrous items (including a fragment of a cloak decorated with strips of bird skin and a piece of dog hair); the faunal material (kakapo, kaka, parakeet and pigeon are the most common species present); the bird skin and feathers (including two large bundles of kakapo tail feathers from S131/4 and cut kaka

feathers from S131/6); and, finally, a bundle of hair found in S131/4. The first five of these articles make very worthwhile contributions to our understanding of the sites. I have some doubts, however, about the value of including the last one on hair analysis, given the inconclusive results presented.

All sites consisted of a single cultural layer and the radiocarbon dates indicate that they were occupied around 400 years before present. The single date from S131/6 is several decades younger than those from S131/3 and S131/4.

S131/3 contained little cultural material, apart from a drying rack which was recorded in 1979 but largely destroyed by 1983 (as, indeed, were those in S131/4 and S131/6); and, as mentioned, S131/5 was unexcavated. They thus provided little material for direct comparison to the other two sites. There were marked differences in the cultural material recovered from S131/4 and S131/6, however. Wooden artefacts and chips were confined to S131/4. There were stone types unique to each site: nephrite was present only in S131/6; of the four adzes from S131/4 two were distinctively southern New Zealand Duff type 1D forms and one was a possible ulu, while those from S131/6 were generally smaller (although there was one large unfinished adze of southern form), and nephrite predominated. Kakapo were not present in S131/6. There was also a marked variation between the sites in the feathers and bird body parts recovered. And these are just a few of the differences.

In the final chapter, 'Maori settlement on Lee Island', Anderson and McGovern-Wilson (University of Otago) discuss the implications of these differences in relation to the chronology of the sites. It is suggested that, if the differences in the dates obtained for S131/4 and S131/6 are in fact due to sampling and the sites were occupied contemporaneously, the variations in artefact and faunal assemblages could represent a division of site function. If, however, S131/6 was occupied several decades later than S131/4, the assemblages from the two sites indicate a significant (and very rapid) change in the material culture of the inhabitants. In either case, and as the authors point out (p. 76), there is in the sites 'a general indication of a material culture in transition towards a Classic phase assemblage during the sixteenth century' which is consistent with evidence from elsewhere in southern New Zealand.

The nature of the activities carried out at the sites, together with possible techniques of bird capture and methods of processing and preservation, are discussed in relation to the seasonality and duration of occupation. It is suggested that all four rockshelters were occupied for short periods only during mid-late summer when rata and other trees attract large numbers of birds. During times of particularly profuse rata flowering and/or good blooming years, the attractions of both the meat and the brightly coloured feathers of the kakapo, kaka, parakeets and pigeons would have made the trip into the otherwise rather barren beech forests worthwhile.

While the standards of scholarship and writing are excellent, the same cannot be said of the general presentation of the book. It is marred by, among other things, some very poor quality half-tone reproductions. In the copy I have, some photographs (Fig. 5.4 for example) are so badly reproduced that they are meaningless. This is inexcusable in a scientific (or, for that matter, any

other) publication. Interestingly enough, many of the field photographs have reproduced better than the studio shots. To my mind, Fig. 2.2, which is a photograph of site S131/3 prior to excavation, would have been preferable to the rather dull and uninspiring 'artist's reconstruction' depicted on the front cover. I must admit, however, to having a bias against the use of such generalised reconstructions in scientific publications.

More attention to design and production detail would have produced a far more marketable product and given better value for money. But don't let these problems, and the rather high cost (due to the small print run), put you off buying the book. It is an excellent analysis and interpretation of a fascinating group of sites and deserves a wide readership.

Wendy J. Harsant