



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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/>.

---

 THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NUKU HIVA, MARQUESAS ISLANDS, FRENCH POLYNESIA
 

---

by

Robert Carl Suggs

Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History,  
New York 1961, Vol.49, Pt.I. 205 pp. - 13 plates - 40 figures

Presented in this volume are the results of archaeology on Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas. This includes field survey and excavation reports concerning some forty-nine sites, of these some fifteen are dealt with in more than brief summary form. Fourteen plans and sections from ten of these sites are given. The artefacts and structures found are dealt with more fully in separate sections. In all, fifty-five pages are devoted to excavation reports, eight to artefact description and interpretation, fourteen to architectural types and burials, eighteen to interpretations and five to methodology.

In supplying this body of information Dr Suggs' work takes a prime place in the study of Polynesian archaeology. It is a tribute to Dr Suggs that he has not attempted to gloss over any faults in technique, but has clearly described his methods and procedures. In nearly all of the sites, natural stratigraphic levels were followed, and this in itself contrasts with the rather doubtful results published by other groups who have used exclusively the unit level technique which, as Mortimer Wheeler has said (1956 : 71) - "bears little more relationship to scientific archaeology than astrology to science". Some of Dr Suggs' section on methodology is fairly hair-raising as the following quotation will illustrate -

"It was impossible to take time to trowel through the deposit, and shovels were used with as much care as possible. All features such as pits, ovens, post-holes and burials were isolated as soon as they appeared, and the contents removed separately. In sandy sites, post-holes were left in relief and removed only when all surrounding deposits were excavated to virgin soil". (Suggs 1961 : 17) This last statement in view of Dr Suggs' claims for superimposed house plans at his earliest site makes these claims somewhat doubtful. It is a tribute to Dr Suggs that he has himself given the means for this criticism.

The standard of presentation of the book as a series of excavation reports and discussions is marred by the paucity in many cases of adequate sections and especially by the lack of all but two excavation photographs. As Wheeler says (1956 : 76): "The published sections are the readiest index of the value of an excavation report." Dr Suggs gives clear sections but often does not tie these into his site plan or report. For instance, the two published sections dealing with the important and early Ha'atuatua site (NHaaI) given on p.61 are labelled "Profile of Excavation Unit 730, Site NHaaI ---" and "Profile of Excavation Unit 715 Site NHaaI ---". There were two locations at NHaaI shown in plan on pp.62 and 64; in neither of these is there any clue as to where excavation units 715 and 730 might be. On other sections this fault is not so

glaring, for example, in excavating the terraced tohua at Hatiheu (NHe3) where the sections are related to "North Face of Cut (A)1" and these cuts are described. Unfortunately, Dr Suggs records some twenty structures of various types (Table 6) and seven dancers' stones associated with them at Hatiheu tohua (p69). The various cuts are orientated by the structures and, though correlated with the sections, would be much more readily understandable if a site plan or series of them representing the various periods, had been provided; as it is, only a plan of one main structure (P-A) is provided (Fig.24b), and statements such as "Cut 4 (Fig.25b): A depression was noted in the end platform on the north end of the site on the west side of P-B" and the section (F.25b) showing "Oven complex in Cut 4, Site NHe3" can only be related to the site by a process of deduction from Suggs' general description.

The temporal sequence of sites was established mainly on the seriation of fish hooks and coral files at six sites. These were synthesized with radio-carbon dates, and the chronological positions of non-seriated types of artefacts.

While seriations have a vogue in certain quarters, they have a limited use. It is possible to overemphasise their value. Studies such as that done on Hawaiian fish hooks are probably significant even though based on what appears to be unit level excavation. As mathematical techniques are applied in the successive stages of seriation, so does the raw excavation material become more remote. For instance, NBM1 occurs in the Coral file and Fish-hook seriation (Fig.27) as one site or one layer. On p24 NBM1 site is said to be "occupied continuously from the Expansion period into the Classic period." The section (Fig.5) shows what are described on p22 as "five separate strata, all roughly five inches thick" --- which comprise at least three separate occupations. We are told what the cultural assemblage consisted of (p24) but not where the various artefacts were found. The seventeen coral files and fourteen fish-hooks listed in the seriations are presumably the total assemblage for this excavation. Another site in the seriations NH1 (Moe'ana) occurs in both the fish-hook and coral file series. Again this is a site consisting of four layers with a maximum total depth of seven feet in a trench fifteen feet long. On p59 it is said: "Artefacts, fortunately, were most numerous in the lower levels, I and II, but did not permit a good statistical mean except on coral files. With these artefacts it was possible quite definitely to place the site chronologically" --- Artefacts from Stratum IA represent an early brief occupation but are not assignable to any period because of their non-distinctiveness". As Suggs himself says (p19) of seriation: "No really exact, absolute chronological placement is possible with this technique".

Since Suggs first stated his general view that the early settlement of the Marquesas was possible from Western Polynesia, and that "the Melanesian artefacts in the settlement period culture point to a Melanesian-Polynesian relationship on an earlier time level than has already been demonstrated by historical linguistic studies" (1961:63) - various other writers have used his view to support their own. While the presence of pottery at the early date of 2080± 150 BP links well with the information supplied by Gifford, McKern, Golson, Birks and others in Fiji, New

Caledonia, Samoa and Tonga, and does indicate some sort of relationship especially between Samoa-Tonga and the Marquesas; the other artefacts cited by Suggs from his early site at Ha'atuatua (NHaaI) are not demonstrably Melanesoid. The settlement period was defined as a level being "the lower portion of the midden, from 10 inches to sterile soil" (p17), on a site on which it "was decided to use 5 inch arbitrary levels in case the occupation represented a fairly long span of occupation". (ibid)

The abandonment of the use of "natural stragraphic levels" is puzzling in view of Suggs' own statement that "many pits could be followed --- and the precise point from which they had been excavated was determinable" (p62). If pits were traceable then presumably some differentiation of layers was possible, and the sections shown in Fig.20a and b seem to confirm this supposition.

The same site provided evidence of superimposed house plans. Suggs' tentative plan of these (Fig.22 p56) means little unless there is some reason for linking the various post holes in groups - though only the stone braces are shown - and the fire pits marked in Fig.22 appear to have little to do with it. According to Suggs, the ovoid houses of the Settlement Period were made with "poles -- arranged roughly in a single row along the wall line of the house. Small fires were made for warmth, and small pits may have been used to cache valuables" (p159).

In view of the general thesis put forward by Suggs and repeated by others as to the nature and origin of early settlement on the Marquesas, it is important to know whether this thesis is confirmed by the evidence presented. For instance the "Melanesoid" character of this settlement is based mainly on one adze type, (Hatiheu), having an ovoid cross section, it is true, but also having "a band of pecking on the butt or a light reduction on the front above the pcell evidently provided support for a firmer lashing." (p110). One of the other adze types found exclusively in the early settlement or immediately following period was of the more or less triangular apex to front type (Ha'e'eka). As Suggs says "It represents another element of the complex that I believe suggests relationship between Melanesia and the Marquesas". (p111) The relationship is apparently based on Gifford illustrating two surface collected specimens with close similarities from Fiji (p11).

The other adze type (Hai) exclusive to the settlement and developmental periods is of quadrangular cross-section, front wider than the back, resembling Duff's 2B, but being deeper in cross-sections. By themselves, these last two adzes are not unknown in museum collections from the Marquesas. It is extremely interesting to find them occurring exclusively in the early periods of Marquesan pre-history. However, as Suggs remarks, they are both rare and judging from Table 11 p107, form about thirteen and seven percent respectively of the total adzes from NHaaI levels I and II. The dominant adze type at this site is the "mouka" of flat triangular or low triangular section with the front wider than the back which forms some twenty-two percent of the total. It will be noted that the important West Polynesian type, ungripped, quadrangular, back wider than the front, is not represented at all in the archaeological specimens from Nuku Hiva. All the adze types represented are known from museum collections from Eastern Polynesia in both gripped and ungripped forms. The proportional

distribution of ungripped triangular apex to front, and rectangular back wider than front adzes in Western Polynesia where they predominate, contrasts with the much rarer occurrence of the same adze types in Eastern Polynesia. In Marquesan archaeology, while types which are also of Western Polynesian distribution tend to occur more frequently than in ethnographic collections, they are also accompanied by a full range of other exclusively Eastern Polynesian types. At NHaal for instance, the former make up about twenty-three percent while the exclusively Eastern Polynesian types provide the other seventy-seven percent. Of the nine adze types represented, only five are known in other sites. It is interesting to note that Suggs records the Ha'e'eka (triangular apex front ungripped) as occurring in three percent of the surface finds, while it forms thirteen percent of the adzes at NHaal. Other resemblances noted (p177) with Western Polynesia and Melanesia are in the use of Tonna vegetable peelers, and pearl shell disc ornaments, in the early Marquesan culture, which may be significant. The important finds of pottery from the early site dated to about the second century B.C. do provide evidence of some relationship with the pottery of Tonga and Samoa, and, by extension, to Fiji and New Caledonia.

Perhaps the most interesting and well documented of Suggs' results are those given when he discusses the evolution of house, temple and ceremonial structures. The ubiquity of stone remains in Eastern Polynesia has led to many attempts to classify and explain them. Here we have a well documented local evolution of the various types of stone structure. Suggs stresses local development of specifically Marquesan types of structure. Until we have a sequence as clear as this from other areas, it would seem pointless to speculate further. The suggestion that the general Eastern style temple may have been known in the earliest period is interesting, but a further comparison of the small timber structure it may have carried with a Western Polynesian type god-house must wait for further excavation in Samoa or Tonga to find any time correlation between the two. The idea of a wooden-image house is too simple a one to project as a unifying trait between two cultures separated by a thousand years.

The great service Dr. Suggs has done to Pacific Archaeology in providing a reliable body of information is somewhat obscured by the use he himself makes of that information in his generalisations. On the other hand somebody has to provoke discussion and Dr. Suggs has done just that. For instance in choosing to use the standard stadial concepts of American Archaeology in naming periods, Suggs has opened a way for discussion on just how much sociological data can be inferred from the archaeological evidence in Polynesia. As used in Peruvian archaeology sequences, similar stadial concepts are sometimes useful, but more usually imply an orderly evolution which exists only in the mind of the producer of the sequence. In Suggs' case he has been more careful, and only occasionally does the evolutionary aspect of his sequence override his evidence. While several reservations can be made about the quality and style of presentation of Suggs' work, yet it is still one of the more important works to have been produced about Polynesia in recent years. The general conclusion that Marquesan cultural development "can be viewed as the result of the inter-

action of a group with its environment" (p194) is an important one in view of the wide variations in culture which were observable in Polynesia, when Europeans first penetrated the area. Archaeology in the Pacific so far has demonstrated the purely local character of cultural evolution on each island group studied, and until we have sufficient data at our command, broad generalisations would seem to be neither very profitable nor very permanent.

Dave Simmons  
Otago Museum

#### REFERENCES

- Burrows, E. 1938 *Western Polynesia - A Study in Cultural Differentiation*.  
Ethnologiska Studier 7 Stockholm.
- Duff, R. 1956 *Maori Hunter Period of Maori Culture*. Wellington.  
1959 *Neolithic Adzes of Eastern Polynesia - in "Anthropology in the South Seas"*. New Plymouth.
- Emory, K.P., Bonk, J.W., Sinoto, Y.H. 1959 *Hawaiian Archaeology - Fish Hooks*. Bishop Museum. Spec. Publication 47.
- Emory, K.P., Sinoto, Y.H. 1961 *Hawaiian Archaeology - Oahu Excavations*. Bishop Museum. Special Publication 49.
- Ford, J.A., Wiley, G.R. 1949 *Surface Survey of the Viru Valley*. Peru.  
Anthrop. Papers Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist. Vol.43, Pt.1.
- Heyerdahl, T., Ferdon, E. (eds.) 1961 *Archaeology of Easter Island*. Vol.1.
- Golson, J. 1957 ms. Report of tri-institutional Programme.  
1959 *D'archaeologie du Pacifique Sud*. Jnl. de la Soc. des Oceanistes. TXV. No.15.
- Green, R. 1962 *Cultural Succession in the Auckland Province*.  
N.Z.A.A. Newsletter Vol. 5, p.2-10.
- Phillips, P., Ford, S., Griffin, J. 1951 *Archaeological Survey in the Lower Mississippi Valley 1940-1947*. Papers of Peabody Museum. Vol.25.
- Wheeler, Sir Mortimer. 1956 *Archaeology from the Earth*. Penguin Books.

---

#### REFERENCES - Article by Stuart D. Scott.

- Bannister, Bryant and T.L. Smiley 1955 "Dendrochronology" in *Geochronology, Physical Science Bulletin No.2*, pp.177-195. Univ. of Arizona.
- Bell, Virginia and Robert E. Bell 1958 *Dendrochronological Studies in New Zealand*. Tree-Ring Bulletin, Vol.22, Nos.1-4, pp.7-11.
- Cameron, R.J. 1960 *Dendrochronology in New Zealand*. Journal of the Polynesian Society, Vol.69, No.1, pp.37-38.
- Green, R.C. and Kaye Green 1963 *Classic and Early European Maori Sites on the Hauraki Plains*. N.Z. Archaeological Assn Newsletter, Vol.6, No.1, March, pp.27-34.
- Kelly, Leslie G. 1945 *Tapuariki and Raupa - With remarks on Marsden's Visit to Hauraki*. Jnl. of the Polynesian Soc. Vol.54, No.4, pp.199-211.
- Pullar, W.A. 1962 *Age of Kaharoa Ash*. N.Z. Archaeological Assn Newsletter, Vol.5, No.1, March, pp.17-18.