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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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ROCK CARVINGS AT ONGARI POINT, KATIKATI (1)

by W. Ambrose

Mr. J. Schofield of the Geological Survey recently brought to the attention of members of the Archaeological Society a group of previously unrecorded rock carvings cut at intervals along a section of low cliff face between Kauri Point and Ongari Point in the northern Tauranga Harbour area. There appear to be two major areas, one at either end of the Ongari Point Beach, and both in close proximity with well preserved headland pa sites. The evidence at the more northerly of the two groups suggests that the carvings were executed at a time shortly after European contact in the middle of the last century.

The Northern Group (NZMS. 1. Sheet N53 & Part N.54 (Paeroa) 452818 N35).

The northerly group seems still to retain a good deal of its original quality, no doubt due to its relatively sheltered position. There is little difficulty in deciding the subject matter in all but a couple of examples, with by far the most frequent form being a meeting house, viewed from its most distinctive aspect, that is end view showing decorated gable, window and door frames. As well there is one finely incised war canoe form. Stylistic treatment is rudimentary, forms being neither greatly elaborated nor simplified. However, the most significant point about some of the carvings is that they are produced in a relatively sophisticated technique, best described as a linear bas-relief, for the surrounds have been removed from about the figure leaving it relatively raised, as with normal relief, but still retaining a linear quality in the general outline. Only the house forms display this raised-line technique though they also occur, as with the canoe form, in a simpler incised line method. Supplementary decoration in the form of simple spiral patterns is included as infilling on some of the houses. Repetition of house forms occurs, giving the impression of a rather erratic frieze.

Similarities exist with two other recorded sites about eighty miles distant at Rua Hoata⁽²⁾ and Kaingaroa⁽³⁾ with respect to most of the features outlined above, i.e. bas-relief, supplementary decoration and repetition of similar forms. The subject matter at Ongari (canoes and meeting houses), at Kaingaroa (canoes), and possibly at Rua Hoata (? canoes) consists almost exclusively of important items of material culture.

Mrs. Joan Hunter discovered on cleaning down the rock face a rather more delicate incised drawing of a war canoe which was subsequently published as a colour plate in the N.Z. Woman's Weekly of March 20th, 1961. Seemingly associated with this canoe is Roman lettering and this, with script lettering associated with some of the house carvings, implies an age for the whole group in the earliest years of European contact.

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In this connection it is interesting to note a record of the existence of a Christianised Maori community at Ongari Point in 1842 (4). This community, apparently Christianised in 1840, is reported as living in a small pa and this pa must be the one near the rock carvings under discussion here. Certainly local lore today identifies it as such.

The Southern Group. (NZMS. 1 sheet N.53 & Part N.54 (Paeroa) 459468 N.35).

The group at the southern end of the beach is very badly weathered but still distinguishable, with the dominant figure a canoe form about ten feet long.

Techniques of Recording.

On behalf of the Bay of Plenty-Rotorua Regional Committee of the National Historic Places Trust, we made rubber moulds of almost all the carvings using a very simple method adapted from suggestions made by Mr. Jack Diamond. Plaster casts will be made from the moulds.

The procedure we followed may be of interest to other members. We made first a thick paste from a mixture of latex compound and French chalk which could be trowelled on to the cleaned surface to be recorded. For about two hours this was left to set before another layer of latex-chalk was applied. Before the second coat had set a single thickness of paperhangers' scrim was laid on to the adhesive surface and carefully moulded to assume the form of the underlying shapes. When this scrim had set in position with the drying of the latex paste, a further coat, this time without French chalk, was applied. Before this had set a second and final scrim layer was attached. To hasten the setting of this last layer dry French chalk was spread liberally over the whole surface. About twelve hours were allowed for the latex compound to set before the mould was carefully peeled away from the rock. French chalk was liberally applied to the whole mould before it was removed, with as little folding as possible, to mature under shelter for a fortnight before we believed it was sufficiently stable for plaster casts to be made.

The quantity of latex used will vary according to the nature of the rock surface but a rough estimate would be one gallon of latex to every two square yards of surface. From three to four pounds of French chalk to one gallon of latex should be allowed, depending on the consistency found most suitable.

References

- (1) There are a number of alternative forms for this name. The fin. map gives Ongare; Gifford and Williams 1940 (see note 4 below) give Onare. According to local Maori informants, Ongari is the correct form.
- (2) Phillipps W.J. 1947 "The Rua Hoata Shelter, Waikato River", Journal of the Polynesian Society, Vol.56. No.4, 336-339.