NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

THE COOK ISLANDS CONNECTION

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Abstract

Two adzes of Tahanga basalt, a fine-grained rock from a known quarry area at Opito Bay, Coromandel Peninsula, have been found in the Cook Islands collection at the Auckland Musuem.

Petrological examination of stone tools is a technique that has been in use for at least 50 years (Thomas 1923). The spread of stone from known or suspected sources has provided archaeologists with a wealth of data regarding trade, movements of people and, in some cases, has enabled a relative chronology to be established. It is, however, in the area of prehistoric inter-island contacts in the Pacific that petrological techniques have their greatest scope, for only these can confirm the widespread networks suggested by other evidence.

Recent work on Tahanga basalt, from Opito on the Coromandel Peninsula (Moore 1975; Best 1975) has resulted in a comprehensive understanding of the rock's characteristics, both in hand specimen and under the microscope.

No unique feature in the composition of the rock has yet been determined. However the overall configuration of traits which collectively establish a distinctive rock type, plus the narrow range of variation in the rock itself, result in a very high degree of probability, through thin-section study, of correctly identifying this material in archaeological sites.

While the writer was comparing the macroscopic characteristics of fine-grained basalt adzes from island Polynesia with those of Tahanga material, two adzes in the Cook Islands collection in the Auckland Museum were noticed to possess the typical appearance of weathered Tahanga basalt. The rock was thin-sectioned, and found to be undistinguishable from that material. It can be stated, with a very high degree of probability, that the adzes originated from that source.

The specimens consist of one complete adze, museum number 26491, and one blade section, number 26492 (Fig. 1). Catalogue cards for the specimens gave no information save the depositor's name and a question mark against the Cook Islands provenance for the blade section.

Typologically the section of blade is most likely to be from a Duff IA type adze. The complete specimen is difficult to categorize; it has a high slightly reversed-quadrangular cross-section, is unusually convex frontally, and has a hammer-dressed tang.

What are the possibilities of, or evidence for, pre-European contact from New Zealand to the Cook Islands?

Intentional voyaging aside, the possibility of a drift connection has been shown by the computer simulations of Levison, Ward and Webb (1973) who found that 3.2% of such voyages from off East Cape, and 2.0% from off Mokohinau, reached tropical Polynesia and Fiji.

Skinner (1933) gives instances of a greenstone adze, and a piece of greenstone showing grinding marks, being found in the Cook Islands. In addition he mentions traditions relating the arrival of a fishing canoe blown across from the New Zealand coast.

Connections between the Cook Islands and New Zealand in the early period, pre 1300 A.D., are attested to by Duff (1974); if a sufficient number of these occurred then an intentional return voyage might have been run. Indeed the abovementioned computer simulation seems to place the chances of drift voyages from Polynesia reaching New Zealand to be so low that intentional voyaging, by default, becomes a more attractive explanation.

There are obviously many, and devious, ways in which artifacts from New Zealand could have reached the Cook Islands in post-contact times, just as there are many ways in which private collections can become shuffled before reaching museums. That some doubt did indeed exist as to the provenance of the blade section is indicated by the query on the catalogue card.

Whatever alternative explanations are proposed, however, there still remains the possibility that a Cook Island connection existed in the prehistoric past.

Certainly, in the annals of Polynesian culture history, more people have been moved longer distances on less evidence than the above.

I thank D. Simmons for permission to sample the adzes and G. Irwin for comments.

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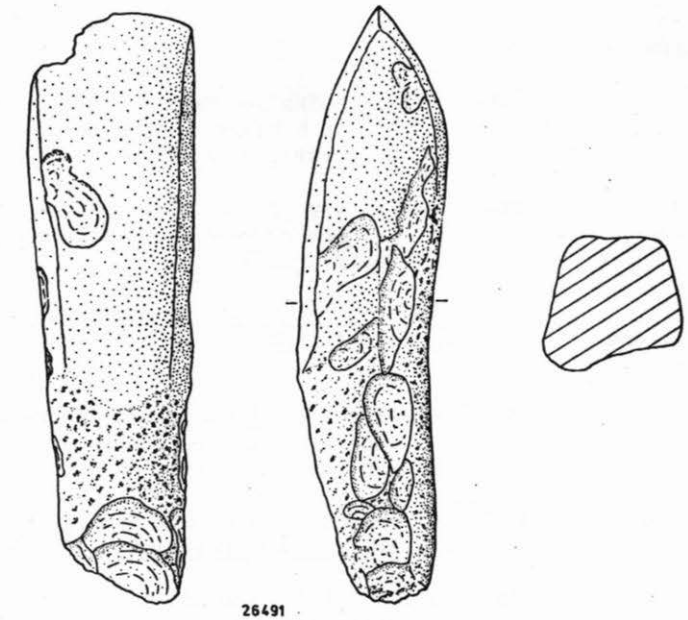

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