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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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THE HERU OR MAORI COMB

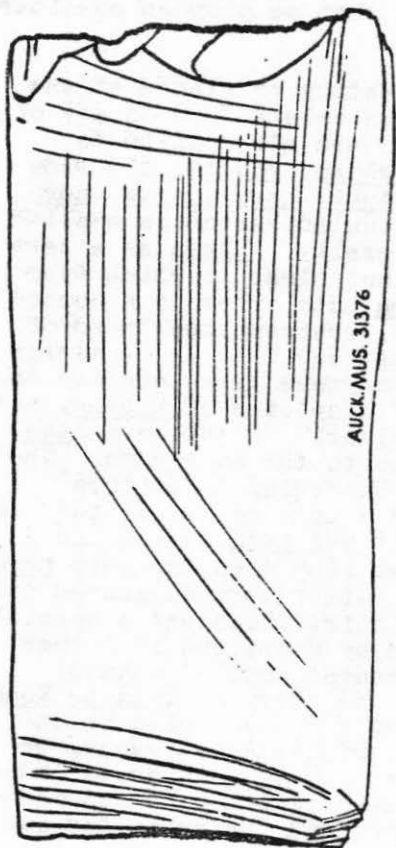
By V.F. Fisher

Maori combs may be broadly separated into three categories or types. These are: 1, simple bone combs carved from a single piece of bone; 2, composite wooden combs, consisting of numerous separate teeth bound together by a fine flax lashing; and 3, simple wooden combs cut from a single piece of wood. It is the third type that we propose considering here.

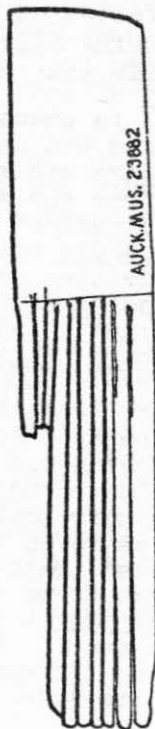
First, however, it may be interesting to glance at the Maori names for combs to see if we can relate them to any of the three types. The following nouns are all applied to combs: heru, kārau, māpara, kāpara, rōutu, rōhutu, and also the following terms, heru iwi, heru tuki, heru tu rae, heru tikitiki. Of these heru without any qualification is applied to any type of comb and to combs generally. Kārau as a term for a comb is rarely used and it is not clear to which type of comb it refers. Māpara and kāpara both refer to a composite wooden comb made from the tough, resinous heartwood of the kahikatea, rimu and perhaps mataī, cut into thin, narrow splinters. Rōutu and rōhutu are synonymous terms applied to a wooden comb, made from the wood of a species of Myrtus, but whether simple or composite is not clear. In the term heru iwi it is quite clear that it applies to the bone comb. The terms heru tu rae and heru tikitiki according to Editors¹ refer to a "decorated dress comb" of a type not specified. If worn to the front of the head then it was heru tu rae and when worn decorating the hair further back then the term heru tikitiki was employed. Probably the latter term suggested that the comb was set in a large knob of hair, which was a special method of dressing the hair employed by Maori men in former days. Heru tuki applies to an ornamental comb of unknown type. Takaanui Tarakawa² relating the story of Tama te Kapua and his stratagem to get Ruaeo out of the way, while he entices his wife Whaka-oti-rangi on board the Arawa canoe, requests Ruaeo to hasten and fetch his heru tuki which is under the window. Not finding the comb Ruaeo realises he has been tricked when he finds his wife missing and the canoe far out to sea.

There seems no doubt that combs of all types were regarded as ornamental. An old whakatauki says, "He makawe putiki, he heru tu rae, te tohu o te rangatira." (The sign of the rangatira is hair tied in a knob and a comb or heru tu rae).

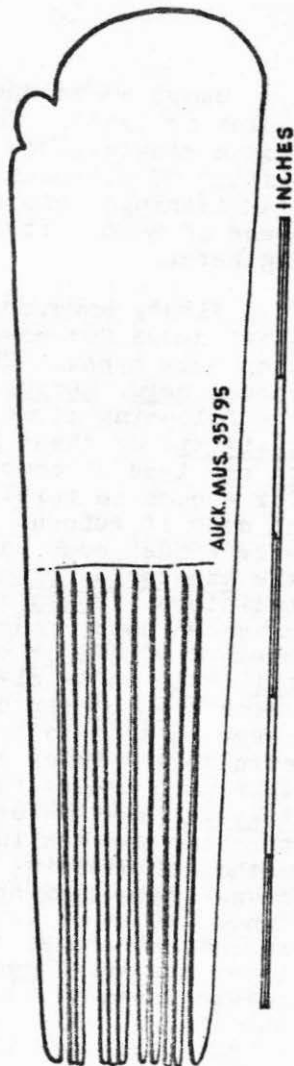
Is there any evidence to suggest that combs were used for



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combing or dressing the hair? Williams³ records heru as a verb, meaning "Comb, dress with a comb" and again⁴ the verb wani means, "comb the hair". In addition there are numerous stories where heru is used in the verbal sense. For instance in the story of Hatupatu, Grey⁵ uses the passive form herua. It is thus perfectly clear that combs of some kind were used for combing and dressing the hair, but there is no definite evidence that the simple wooden comb was used for this purpose. After examining several combs of the latter type, notably fig. c. No. 35795, there seems little doubt that such combs could have been used for this purpose. Incidentally this is the most perfect comb in the Auckland Museum collection, and it may be taken as typical of the simple wooden comb. It was found in a cave in the Taupo area. It is often difficult to decide the kind of wood used for making combs, but evidence gleaned in part from a study of the combs and in part from literature shows that the following were used: pōhutukawa, kahikatea, pūriri, rimu, mataī, mānuka, rōhutu, tōtara.

In examining the simple wooden comb in this article all further evidence submitted will be based on the collection in the Auckland Museum. Typically the comb is rounded at the top, slender and tapering slightly throughout its length, lacking any attempt at decoration except for a notch or sometimes a tiny projection at the side and near the top. All are thin, light and usually finished with great care and attention. Of five perfect or near perfect combs and eleven imperfect combs examined, they range in length from 3 inches to $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches and in width from $\frac{7}{8}$ to $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches. In thickness there is not much variation shown, but it runs between $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch. In most cases however the length is between 4 to 5 inches, the width 1 to 2 inches and the thickness $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch. The large number of broken or badly damaged combs is quite high and it suggests one or two possibilities, either the fragile nature of the comb rendered the comb liable to easy fracture, or the lower part of the comb was purposely broken, because of the high personal tapu of the owner. This idea might account for the number of combs found in caves. Owing to the tapu nature of the hair of a person of standing, it was a common practice to deposit locks of hair and the obsidian flake with which it was cut in a cave out of sight and reach. Several combs show evidence of red ochre (kōkōwai) and this may have been rubbed over the comb before it was disposed of in a cave, or it may have had some ochre added while in use.

A characteristic feature of the teeth is that the two flanking teeth are wider and hence stronger than the inner teeth. This is of course essential for practical reasons as a glance at any modern comb of today will show. The number

of teeth varies from three to fourteen.

Of special interest in the collection are two partially made examples. The first, fig.a. No.31376, is $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide and $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch thick. It was found in a dry cave and discloses a little shaping on the right hand side. Further shaping, thinning, and the cutting of the teeth would have been necessary to complete the comb. The other specimen, fig.b. No.23772, is $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, $\frac{7}{8}$ inch wide and $\frac{3}{16}$ of an inch thick. In other words all the preliminary work of shaping and thinning has been completed and work commenced on the cutting of the teeth. Three teeth have been broken and also one of the under flanking teeth. Possibly an obsidian flake was used for the incisions, but only one cut has been completed right through.

The localities represented in the collection are Anawhata, Karekare, Paritutai, Piha, Ihu-a-Mataoho, (Ihumata) in the Manukau area; Patetonga and Waitakaruru in the Hauraki Plains area; Kereone; Lake Taupo; and Scott's Point (Ninety Mile Beach) and Hokianga in North Auckland. In the Manukau and Taupo areas the combs were found in dry caves, in the Hauraki Plains and Kereone in swamps, and the example from Scott's Point was found in an old midden but wrapped in flax matting.

With two exceptions none of the wooden combs in the collection are carved with a definite design. One of these, No.18817, is of a different type from the usual and displays two spirals on one side. The other carved specimen is No. 30896 from Scott's Point and it displays a neatly carved profile face at the top.

In conclusion I should like to express my thanks to Mr. W.Ambrose for his line drawings to illustrate this contribution.

References

- (1) Editors. 1926. Word List. Journal of the Polynesian Society Vol.35. p247.
- (2) Tarakawa, Takaanui. 1893. "Ko te hoenga mai o te Arawa, raua ko Tainui i Hawaiki" Journal of the Polynesian Society. Vol.2. p221.
- (3) Williams, H.W. 1957. A Dictionary of the Maori Language.p46.
- (4) Ibid p479.
- (5) Grey, G. 1928. Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna, Third Edition.