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THE HISTORY OF A SITE – OMIMI 29 YEARS LATER

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Over the past year, Brian Allingham has been carrying out extensive excavations at Omimi, a moa hunter site on the Otago coast 8 km south of Karitane. The site (I44/1 [S155/31]) has been in the grey literature for 29 years, after I wrote a report of a salvage excavation carried out on behalf of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. To provide a more respectable basic reference for the present work, I decided to seek publication of the drawings and a summary of the text of the 1977 report (Hamel 1977).

When I visited the site at the request of the Historic Places Trust in March 1977, 37 holes had been dug in pasture over an area 25 x 40 m (Figure 1). Only 10 holes showed traces of cultural material. Moa bones and flake material had been taken by the fossicker to the Otago Museum for identification, which alerted the Trust to the site (see Site Record Form I44/1). My task was to employ standard techniques of test pitting, analysis of the disturbed material, recording stratigraphy, and mark the holes with polythene sheeting and backfill to a stable condition. The excavated material was deposited with the Otago Museum (Z373–380, 1096–1108, 1110–1115, 1118–1123). Excavation was carried out 24–28 May 1977 under HPT permit 1977/14. The fish bone was identified by Foss Leach, the seal bone by Ian Smith, the rock sources by Graeme Mason and the rest of the material by myself. Bone and rock material brought into the Museum by the fossicker was included in the analyses. The artefacts were re-examined in the Museum for this updated account.

The site and its surroundings

This is an unusual moa hunter site for Otago, as it is neither an open bay site nor at a river mouth. It lies about 30 m above the sea at the south end of a boulder beach on a rolling spur of a low headland 3 km north of Warrington Spit. The land rises steeply to the west and creeks are short and steep, though Big Creek 200 m north of the site does have the largest catchment between Warrington and Huriawa Peninsula. The high-energy boulder beach below is

slightly sheltered from the south and is the best canoe landing beach in the vicinity. There is also an excellent view of the coastline from Taiaroa Head to Doctors Point where at least three other early sites were situated.

This part of the coast is on unstable Tertiary sediments and earth movements have produced many slump features on the adjacent hillside. The exposed material lay in an arc along two adjacent slump hollows (Figure 1). On the north side of the site there is a prominent turf-covered cone, divided from the site by a ditch. A ridge rises a few metres on the east and south, and there is a shallow swamp only a few metres across on the west side. Dr C. A. Landis (Geology Department, University of Otago) considered all these features to be natural with the possible exception of the ditch. Large boulders of an unusual cemented conglomerate lie on the site, and are considered to be of recent origin from an earlier stage in the local land movements. (The notorious Abbotsford mudstone is part of the underlying sequence, and land movements in the past include massive Pleistocene slips hundreds of metres long.)

Large logs typical of those left by fallen trees of broadleaf (*Griselinia littoralis*) lay on the site in 1977. There are still remnants of coastal forest in the gullies and on steeper faces nearby, though the top of Porteous Hill 2 km away carries snow tussock (*Chionochloa rigida*). The coastal forest present prior to human occupation would have included podocarps such as *Podocarpus hallii* and matai (*Prumnopitys taxifolia*), ribbonwoods (*Plagianthus betulinus*, *Hoheria angustifolia*), kowhai (*Sophora micorphylla*) and tree fuchsia (*Fuchsia excorticata*). More open ground included cabbage trees (*Cordyline australis*).

Food resources of the local exposed rocky shore included blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) and paua (*Haliotis australis*), which were abundant before commercial collecting depleted them. The waters of Blueskin Bay are a favoured fishing ground for the local boats from Karitane and Port Chalmers, and a large assemblage of bone excavated in 1984 from a midden at Ross's Rocks (I43/22), 3 km north of Omimi, included 585 fish (Leach and Boocock 1993). Fresh water lobsters are present in local ponds, but the creeks are too steep for eels, lampreys or whitebait.

The farm on which the site is located was bought in the 1840s by the grandfather of the present owner, Mrs Hillary Ireland. Her grandfather knew that there was Maori occupation material round the shoreline of Omimi Bay, and he planted a hedge to divide the area of occupation from the rest of the farm so that it would not be ploughed. In 1977, we identified three separate sites: the occupation site considered in this report (I44/1), a find spot of flake material in the centre of the bay behind a boat shed (I44/2 [S155/32]), and a site below a rock face of phonolite 20 m from the beach on the south side of

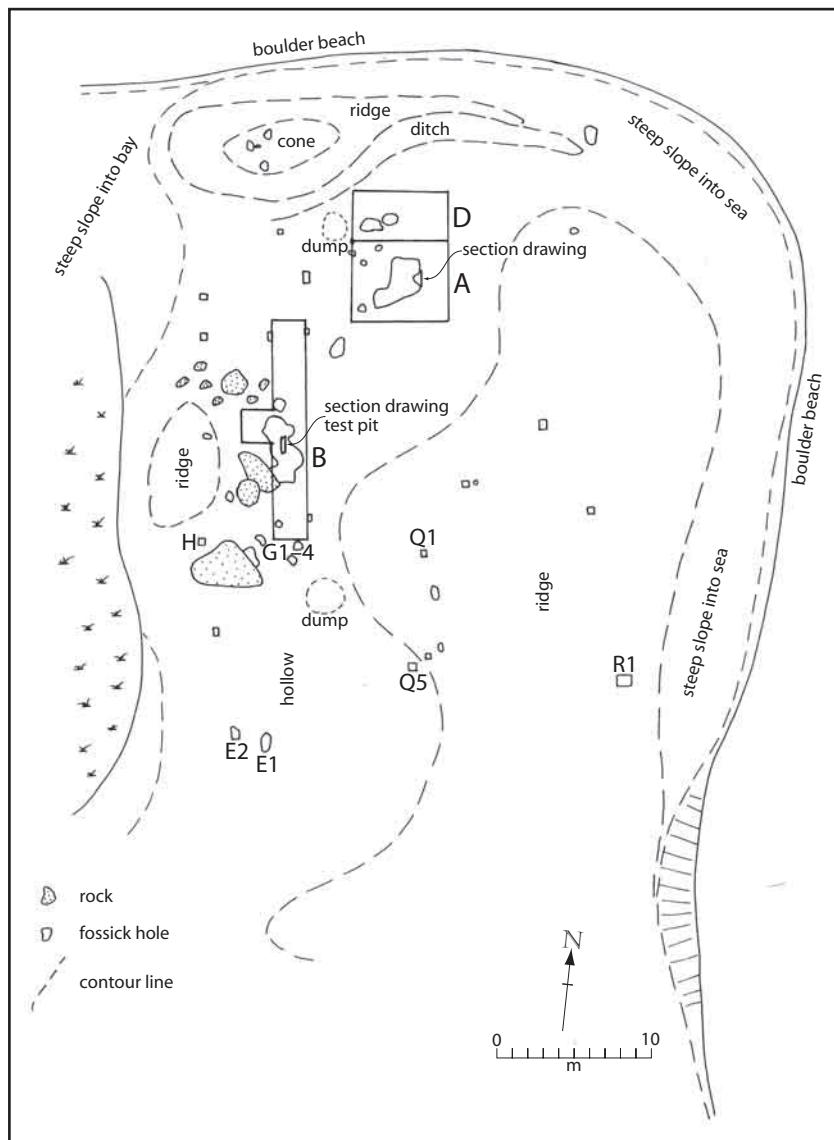


Figure 1. Omimi, I44/1. General topography, showing contours, fossick holes, test pits and positions of section drawings. For details of Areas A, B and D, see Figures 2–4.

Big Creek (I44/3 [S155/35]), the location of material held by the Ireland family (Hamel 1978).

The excavation

The fossicker had piled some of his spoil in neat dumps (Figure 1), but the rest was scattered. In the 10 holes with a cultural layer, crushed shell and fish bone lay in blackened soil, 100–500 mm thick. The natural stratigraphy comprised a dark brown loam (100 mm) above the black cultural layer and clay loam with some dark red inclusions below, which graded quickly into strong loessic clay in most places. A lightly grazed turf of grass and pasture weeds covered the whole site. The disturbed cultural material and sieved material which we returned to the fossick holes contained broken shell and fish bone evenly distributed through it, rather than layered.

The black layer was best developed in Area B (Figures 2 and 3), a very sheltered hollow, and was patchy to the south, appearing in E1 and E2 but not in G1–4 at the south end of the Area B hollow. It spread up into the gap between the boulders and appeared in H. Areas A and D (Figure 4) to the north of B on ground sloping gently towards the cone had similar stratigraphy, but contained far less shell and bone than Area B. R1 on the ridge top provided an exposure of midden 1.2 m long with no soil on top of the black cultural layer which was 50 mm thick, containing burnt stone, broken shell and fish bone in uneven patches above dark yellow clay loam. It was probably material from this midden which had drifted down slope and showed up as mostly burnt stones lying within the upper loam layer in the fossick holes labelled Q1–5 between R1 and Area B. Most of the 2004–05 excavations by Brian Allingham have been concentrated on the material eroding down to the sea, east of the cone and north of the ditch (Figure 1).

Artefacts

Among the material collected from the surface throw-out around the holes, there was the butt half of a medium-sized adze of grey D'Urville argillite with black streaks. It had been a quadrangular hafted adze, slightly reduced for hafting, well flaked and hammer-dressed. After it snapped in two, a few flakes were taken off as if to remake the bevel but the work had gone no further (Table 1). Flake material was scattered sparsely throughout the site, but collected material totalled 17 flakes from within the cultural layer, 44 flakes surface collected, and 9 other stone artefacts. Most of the flakes were of coarse-grained volcanic rock of local origin. There were 2 small grey obsidian flakes (a green flake has an early Z number), 5 lumps of schist, 1 possible schist file, a short thick sandstone file, 8 pieces of various chalcedony/agate

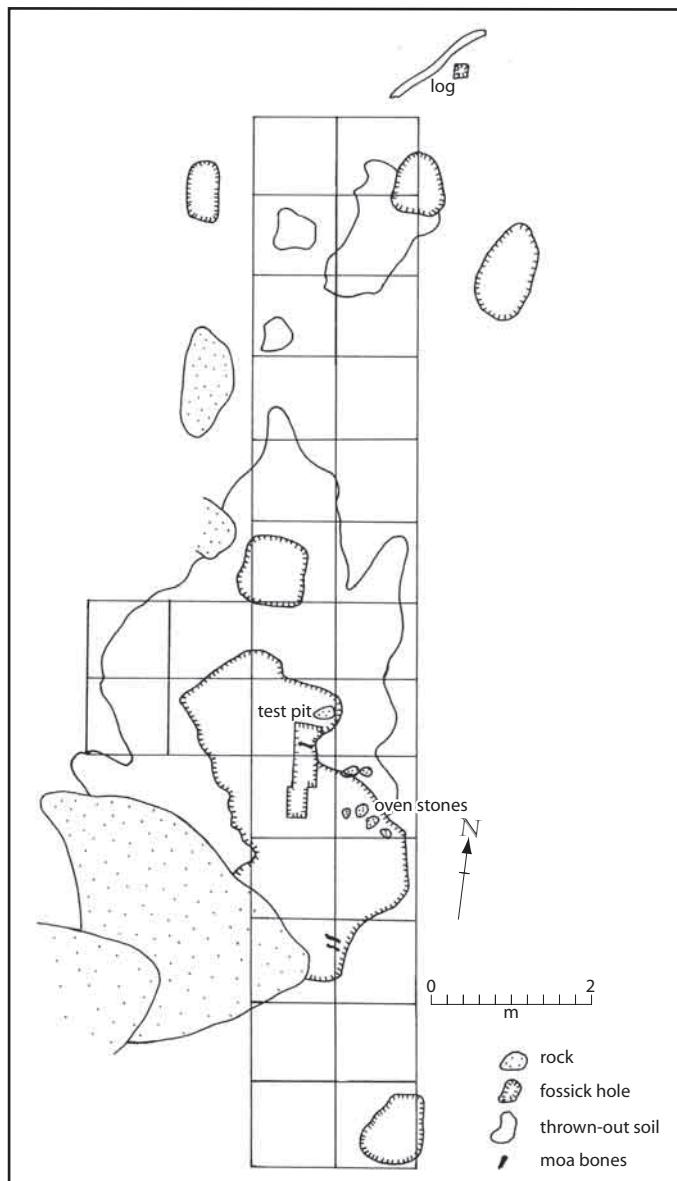


Figure 2. Plan of Area B, showing fossick holes and test pit.

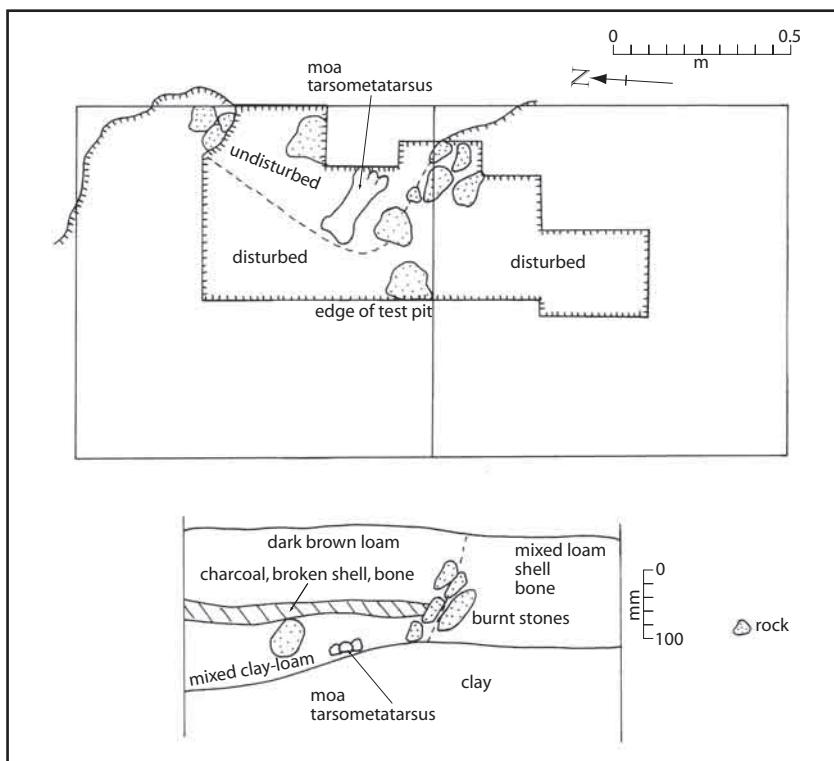


Figure 3. Plan and stratigraphy of test pit in Area B.

rock types, 1 of quartz and at least 13 silcrete flakes (19–40 mm). The latter varied from the red typical of Nenthorn, through common greys to a creamy yellow. The grey flakes tended to include cortex, but at least 2 were well struck blades from a prepared core. Most of the volcanic flakes were larger (around 40–80 mm), rough and presumed to be debitage from work done with the three hammerstones or similar tools to make adzes.

The bone artefacts consisted of an awl flaked off a mammal bone, a polished bone splinter too straight for a fish hook and probably intended for a needle, and six small tabs of which two were identifiably moa bone. There were also shanks of two, small, one-piece hooks, Hjarno Type D1, one larger than the other, and both finely made. Two points from two-piece fish hooks were broken, one with two outside notches and the other with one. They would both fit within Hjarno's type C1a (Hjarno 1967).

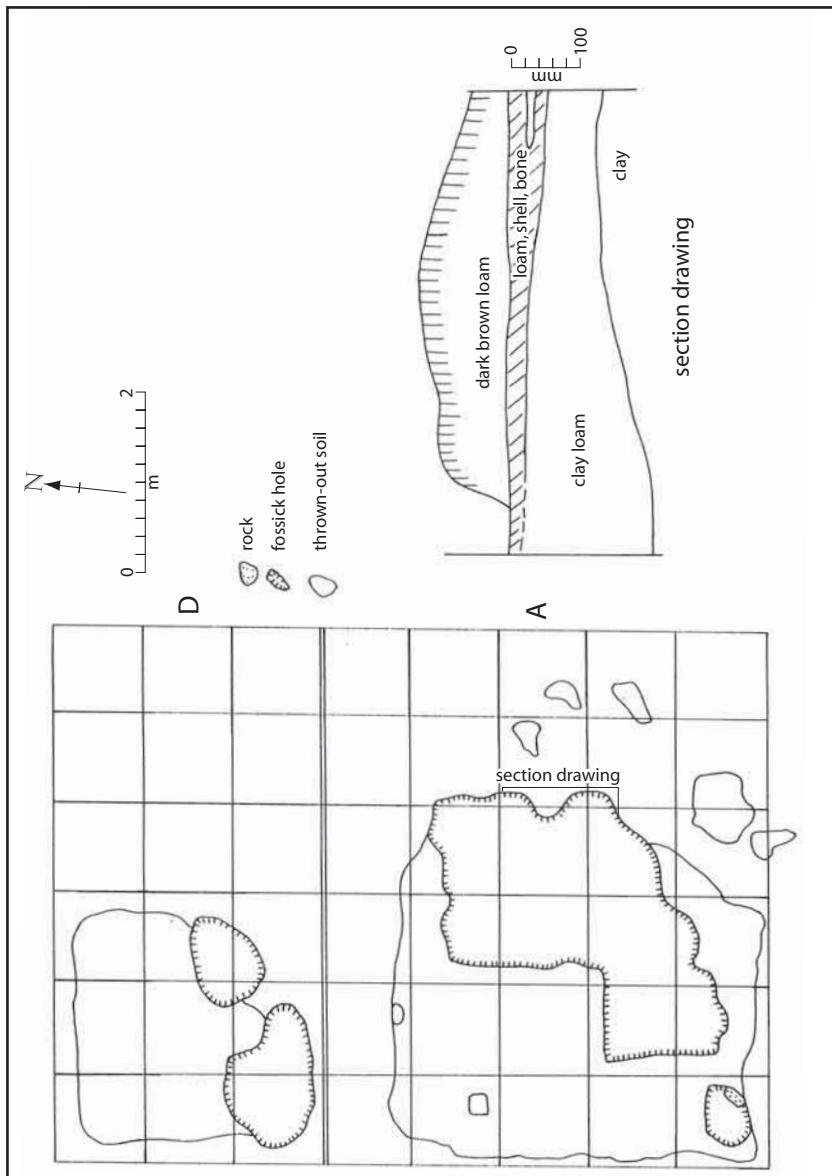


Figure 4. Plan of Areas A and D, showing fossick holes and stratigraphy.

Table 1. List of stone artefacts in each area.

Area A

From cultural layer

- Local volcanic rocks, 7 flakes
- Schistose rock, 2 pieces
- Grey obsidian, 1 flake, 21 mm
- Porcellanite, red, irregular flake, 31 mm.

Surface collected

- Local volcanics, 25 flakes
- Silcrete, 6 flakes
- Grey obsidian, 1 flake, 27 mm
- Quartz, 1 flake
- Schist, 1 piece
- Sandstone file, well worked, 43 mm
- Hammerstone, 1, rough, 50 mm diameter

Area B

From cultural layer

- Local volcanics, 3 flakes
- Silcrete, 4 flakes
- Sandstone, 1 piece

Surface collected

- Local volcanics, 2 flakes
- Adze butt end, D'Urville argillite, 110 mm long,
63 mm wide, 34 mm deep
- Hammerstones, 2 local pebbles, 65 and 54 mm
long

Area D

Surface collected

- Local volcanic, 2 flakes
- Silcrete, 3 flakes
- Schist, 1 piece

Area Q5

Surface collected

- Local volcanic - 1 flake.

Faunal material

A wide range of faunal material was found in the disturbed material. The most important group, in terms of food value, were the bones from six individuals of moa species (Table 2). Using the comparative collection in the Otago Museum in 1977, which had been identified using Archey's classifica-

tion (Archey 1941), I distinguished at least four birds in the *Anomalopteryx*/small *Emeus crassus* size range. They were represented by leg bones, parts of pelvis and tracheal rings, one bird being a juvenile. A fifth bird, a large *Emeus crassus*, was represented by leg bones, vertebrae and parts of the pelvis. One large phalanx (first on the middle toe) could have come only from a large *Dinornis robustus*. Small bird species were mostly marine (blue penguin, shags and diving petrel), with freshwater and forest birds represented by shoveler duck and native pigeon.

The mammals included a relatively large number of dog bones (parts of the crania, vertebrae and leg bones), native rat bone (pelvis, leg bones and a mandible) and the right occipital condyle of a large sea leopard. (The latter may have been a treasure picked up from the beach.) Objects identified as dried dog coprolites were found in areas A, B and R1. Rabbit bones were numerous throughout the material.

Fish bone comprised the usual few species, and minimum numbers of individuals were small (Table 2). Barracouta, red cod and the very large specimen of ling could all have been taken immediately offshore from the site.

Shellfish were present in all areas, blue mussel and paua dominating. Minimum numbers of individuals were not calculated, but to give an idea of relative quantities the number of 1 x 1 m grid squares in which each shellfish species occurred is given in Table 3. The soft shore pipi (*Paphies australis*) was sufficiently widely distributed to indicate that it was deliberately brought to the site, the nearest beds being at least 3 k to the south at Warrington. Other than catseye (*Turbo smaragda*), the other rocky shore limpets and snails could have been brought in accidentally to the site, especially with oven stones carried up from the beach. Charcoal was not abundant but occurred frequently in small pieces.

Table 2. Minimum numbers of individuals of fish, mammals and birds.

| Species | Area | A | B | D | Q5 | EI |
|---|------|---|---|---|----|----|
| Fish | | | | | | |
| Barracouta (<i>Thyrsites atun</i>) | | 3 | 6 | 1 | 1 | |
| Red cod (<i>Pseudophysis bacchus</i>) | | 2 | 7 | | | |
| Ling (<i>Genypterus blacodes</i>) | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Unknown sp. | | | | 1 | | |
| Mammals | | | | | | |
| <i>Rattus exulans</i> | | | | 2 | | |
| <i>Canis familiaris</i> | | 1 | | 2 | | |

Table 2. Continued.

| Birds | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Anomalopteryx didiformis</i> | 1 |
| <i>Anomalopteryx/Emeus</i> | 3 |
| <i>Emeus crassus</i> | 1 |
| <i>Dinornis robustus</i> | 1 |
| <i>Eudyptula minor</i> | 1 |
| <i>Pelecanoides urinatrix</i> | 1 |
| ? <i>Phalacrorox</i> | 1 |
| <i>Stictocarbo punctatus</i> | 1 |
| <i>Anas ?rhynchos</i> | 1 |
| <i>Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae</i> | 1 |
| <i>Hydrurga leptonyx</i> | 1 |

Table 3. Shellfish species in each area. The figures show the number of 1x1 m squares in which each species occurred. P = Present.

| Shellfish species | Area | A | B | D | H | R1 |
|--------------------------------|------|----|----|---|---|----|
| <i>Mytilus edulis</i> | | 7 | 19 | P | P | P |
| <i>Haliotis iris</i> | | 7 | 18 | | | P |
| <i>Paphies australis</i> | | 3 | 9 | | | |
| <i>Cellana strigilis</i> | | | 9 | P | | P |
| <i>Melagraphia aethiops</i> | | P | 9 | | P | P |
| <i>Lepisithais lacunosus</i> | | 1 | 6 | | | |
| <i>Turbo smaragda</i> | | 2 | 5 | | | P |
| Barnacle – large sp. | | | 5 | | | |
| <i>Cookia sulcata</i> | | 1 | | P | | P |
| <i>Austrovenus stutchburyi</i> | | P | | P | | P |
| Oyster sp. | | 1 | | | | |
| Squares with material | | 13 | 22 | | | |

Summary

Relatively little of the site had been disturbed by the 1977 fossicking. The stratigraphy appeared to be that of living floors into which shell, bone and charcoal had been broken and trampled. There was no indication of structures, ovens or even a separate midden area. The topography could be compared to Little Papanui, with small flattened areas and terraces suitable for houses on a spur adjacent to a beach. The fauna and artefacts are typical of several other early sites along the Otago coast. Moa from nearby breeding populations were being brought to the site to be butchered, and their meat supplemented with fish, dog and shellfish. Fur seal and sea lion are notably lacking though

the nearby rocky shoreline would have been suitable habitat for hauling out and even breeding. Rock types used for tools indicate use of local materials, as well as schist and silcrete from further inland and obsidian from the North Island. Further analysis of material excavated recently from this site should add a useful insight into the pattern of moa hunter life in eastern Otago.

References

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