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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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THE OPUA MOAHUNTER MIDDEN,CAPE EGMONT, TARANAKI

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On Saturday 4 December 1896 Ebenezer Maxwell and his friend Mr Berry discovered a midden while "curio" hunting along the coast between Opunake and Opua, south of Cape Egmont, Taranaki. Wind erosion had cut deeply into sand dunes exposing a largely bird bone midden in association with ovens (Opunake Times 11 December 1896, Daily News 12 December 1896). The fossickers returned to the site and collected moa and other bird bones, but appear not to have recovered any artefacts. The whereabouts of this initial collection is not now known.

Eleven years later Ebenezer's son, M.G. Maxwell, with his uncle, Sir George Syme, visited the site and made a second collection (Taranaki Herald 24 August 1967). This collection was deposited with Taranaki Museum in 1967, where it remained unstudied until 1980.

The Site (Fig. 1)

The site (P20/105) was situated about 100 metres upstream from the mouth of the Okawau Stream (G.R. N118/419462). The old dunes which covered the site have completely disappeared and only small fore-dunes immediately behind the beach now exist. The stream valley in the vicinity is narrow with difficult access down twenty metre cliffs. The site appears therefore not to have been extensive, although M.G. Maxwell recalled that he could "have easily collected several wheelbarrows full" (pers. comm. 1980). The site is the only known "moahunter" midden north of the Kaipokonui River and is a valuable addition to a sequence that includes the well known sites of Kaipokonui (P21/3), Te Rangatapu (Q21/76) and Ohawe (Q21/75) (Prickett 1983:297).

In November 1980 the author completed a site record and excavated a series of five test pits across the likely site area (Permit No. 1980/25). No evidence of any cultural material was located and the site appears to have been destroyed, probably by floodwaters from the Okawau Stream.

Faunal Remains (Fig. 2)

In 1980 the avifaunal remains collected by M.G. Maxwell were identified by P. Millener, National Museum (Millener 1981: 829-830, Prickett 1983:297). A total of twenty-nine species of



FIGURE 2.

THE FAUNAL REMAINS FROM OPUA SITE (P20/105)

| <u>BIRD REMAINS</u> (after Millener 1981) | MNI |
|---|-----|
| <u>Moas</u>                               |     |
| Anomalopteryx didiformis                  | 2   |
| Pachyornis mappini                        | 12  |
| Euryapteryx geranoides                    | 3   |
| Euryapteryx curtus                        | 2   |
| Pachyornis sp./Euryapteryx sp.            | 1   |
| Dinornis struthoides                      | 2   |
| Dinornis sp.                              | 1   |
| <u>Other birds</u>                        |     |
| Haematopus sp. Oystercatcher              | 1   |
| Porphyrio mantelli. Takehe                | 1   |
| Macronectes giganteus. Giant Petrel       | 1   |
| Nestor meridionalis. Kaka                 | 12  |
| Euryanis finschi. Finsch's Duck **        | 1   |
| Thalassarche sp. ?Shy Mollymawk           | 1   |
| Pterodroma brevirostris. Kerguelen Petrel | 1   |
| Apteryx mantelli. N.I. Kiwi               | 4   |
| Apteryx owenii. Little Spotted Kiwi       | 4   |
| Gallirallus australis. N.I. Weka          | 4   |
| Daption capensis. Cape Pigeon             | 1   |
| Stictocarbo punctatus. Spotted Shag       | 1   |
| Palaeocorax moriorum. Extinct crow **     | 1   |
| Aythya novaeseelandiae. N.Z. Scaup        | 1   |
| Strigops habroptilus. Kakapo              | 1   |
| Eudyptula minor. Little Blue Penguin      | 2   |
| Puffinus gavia. Fluttering Shearwater     | 1   |
| Larus dominicanus. Black-backed Gull      | 1   |
| <u>MAMMAL REMAINS</u>                     |     |
| Mirounga leonina. Southern Elephant Seal  | 1   |
| Phocarcotos hookeri. N.Z. Sea Lion        | 2   |
| Arctocephalus forsteri. N.Z. Fur Seal     | 4   |
| Canis familiaris. Polynesian Dog          | 1   |
| Homo sapiens. Human                       | 1   |

Key

- MNI Minimum Number of Individuals.  
 \*\* Species now extinct, remains found in association with middens or campsites of Polynesian Man.  
 sp. Species unidentified.

birds were present, including seven species of moa and five other species now extinct in the North Island. Prominent amongst the bird bone assemblage are the remains of twelve Kaka. Although this may reflect a collecting bias, the presence of a very large number of bones "belonging to some small parrot-like bird" was noted by Ebenezer Maxwell (Opunake Times 11 December 1896). Other species strongly represented amongst the small assemblage are Weka, North Island Kiwi and Little Spotted Kiwi.

Five species of mammal were identified by I. Smith, Auckland University. Three species of sea mammal and a Polynesian dog were present. The most unexpected discovery was the presence of human bones amongst the middens. Anatomically the bones belonged to the rib cage, upper vertebral column and hand of a single individual, suggesting that a burial had at some stage become incorporated amongst the midden. No further diagnostic analysis of the human remains was considered possible. The presence of one other human bone in the site had previously been reported by M.G. Maxwell (Taranaki Herald 24 August 1967). No further details of this bone are available.

The only other faunal remains from the general site area are some moa egg shell fragments located on the cliff top, fifty metres south of the site, during the site inspection in 1980. It is unlikely however that the egg shell is directly related to the site.

### Conclusion

All the known Taranaki sites containing moa and other extinct bird bone have much in common. Opua is the only site containing moa in quantity north of the Kaupokonui River. The array of species, some represented in relative abundance, suggests that when Opua was occupied, the nearby forest and open country were still close to their pristine state. No dates are available, but it is reasonable to expect the site to be contemporary with comparable South Taranaki sites dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

However, unlike the other South Taranaki sites containing moa bone, no artefacts are reported as having been recovered at Opua.

The site occupied a river mouth location a little distance back from the beach in very much the same situation as the Waingongoro and Kaupokonui sites. Human remains have also been reported from Waingongoro, although as with Opua their context is uncertain (Prickett 1983:295).

The information from Opua adds to a growing body of evidence of man's arrival and early settlement along the South

Taranaki coast.

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