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THE POOR MAN'S REI PUTA: A SHELL PENDANT FROM SARAH'S GULLY

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During the first season of excavations at Sarah's Gully, almost 30 years ago, an unusual shell pendant was found in a secure stratigraphic context for which a radiocarbon date was subsequently obtained. There is no published reference to the pendant, probably because it was not obviously Archaic, as many of the other items from Sarah's Gully were (Golson 1959a:14; 1959b:45). However, Ron Scarlett, who was present when it was found, has periodically mentioned it, most recently at this year's conference in Cromwell. The purpose of this note is to place this important find on record, in view of the revival of interest in shell pendants exemplified by a recent paper in this Newsletter (Furey 1986).

The pendant (Fig.1) appears to be made from Haliotis shell. It is 54 mm long and 18 mm wide at its widest point. It is oval in outline, rounded at both ends, and has a single perforation. It is visibly curved along its long axis, and in side view resembles the Glycymeris pendants illustrated by Louise Furey (1986) in her Figs 3b and 3e. A notable feature is the continuously serrated edge. The convex surface of the pendant, which I take to be the "back", has a slight but distinct bevel around the edge, into which the serrations or notches, have been worked. The "front" surface has no bevel.

The pendant was found in Layer 9 of Square H11 in Area A at Sarah's Gully. This was the deepest part of the Sarah's Gully midden (Green 1963:65-66). The stratigraphy at this point was complex and confusing, but it appeared that at the very beginning of occupation, a pit had been dug into loose natural sandy deposits and filled with cultural material, and that subsequently another structure, either a shallower pit or a house floor, was constructed immediately above. Midden layers then accumulated above this floor, which partly overlay the earlier pit and had partly been cut back into the natural deposits on the landward side of the pit. Layer 9 in H11 was interpreted as the bottom fill of the earlier pit. A charcoal sample from this context returned a C14 date of 650 ± 50 b.p. (NZ 359). A wooden post butt associated with the overlying structure gave a result of 810 ± 50 b.p. (NZ 358).

The finding and context of the pendant are well documented in Golson's field diary and in the catalogue of finds from Sarah's Gully. From the same square and layer, and probably

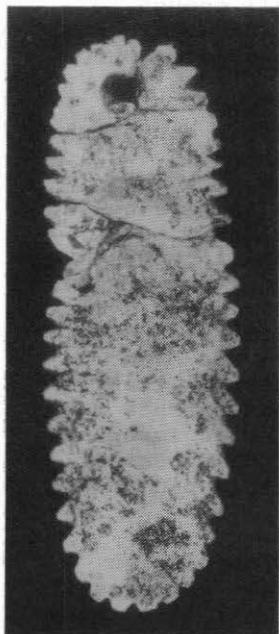


Figure 1. The Sarah's Gully pendant.

Figure 2. The moment of discovery — with Jack Golson.

closely associated with the pendant, were a number of pieces of Dentalium nanum. This association of pendant and dentalium was first mentioned to me by Ron Scarlett, and it is supported by the catalogue entries.

Figure 2 illustrates the moment of discovery. It provides interesting proof that, contrary to what some have believed, sieves were used by archaeologists as well as by fossickers as long ago as 1956-7.

Despite the complicated stratigraphy in this part of the excavation, there is no doubt that the pendant came from the very bottom of the excavation at Sarah's Gully, and was in clear association with typically Archaic artefacts. It is thus an important addition to the known range of Archaic personal ornaments. Taken on its own it is small enough to have been worn as an ear pendant. The association with dentalium suggests that it was the central pendant of a necklace, but this cannot be determined with any certainty.

Ron Scarlett has consistently referred to this beautiful little ornament as "the poor man's rei puta", which may well have been the name given to it when it was found. The name is a memorable one, but the pendant is unlikely to have belonged to a poor man, and its resemblance to the Classic rei puta is not great. It differs from the Glycymeris shell pendants described by Furey (1986) and from the shell and ivory tongue-shaped amulets described by Skinner (1974:83-85) in its symmetry, its rounded top, and its serrations. The serrations, indeed, suggest a faint resemblance to that equally rare and even more intriguing form, the single chevroned pendant. It is interesting that Mead (1984:73) mentions V-shaped notches on the edges of small objects such as pendants as an important decorative motif in his Tipunga style period of Maori Art (A.D. 1200-1500). The radiocarbon date places this pendant securely in that period.

The Sarah's Gully pendant supports Furey's conclusion that the single pendant with outwardly curving end was present, if uncommon, throughout New Zealand prehistory. It also shows that a single find from a secure and well dated stratigraphic context can add considerably to our knowledge of personal ornaments in New Zealand prehistory.

Acknowledgements

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all those who over the years have added to the photographic record of those excavations. Both illustrations for this paper were prepared by Martin Fisher. Figure 2 was produced from an old print given by Alan Clarke to Roger Green.

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