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THE RE-DISCOVERY OF A NOA-HUNTING SITE IN THE OLD MAN RANGE

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In 1894 Augustus Hamilton, an inveterate collector of all things to do with moas and moahunters, set off up the Waikaia valley in northern Southland to search for moa remains in the caves of the upper Waikaia gorges. One day, following several days of rain, he set off with a guide to walk to 'Gorge Creek' but, whilst high on the Old Man Range, decided the creek was too high to cross and turned back. Hardly had he begun the descent than he stumbled over a moahunters campsite scattered amongst the snowgrass. There were ovens, fragments of moa bone, thousands of stone flakes and some polished implements scattered over several acres of a small plateau surrounded by swamps. What is more, his guide informed him that several other such sites were known in the vicinity (Hamilton, 1894).

In January 1980 a party of archaeologists set out from Dunedin to find Hamilton's sites again. It had been snowing in the ranges but after advising Ron Scarlett, who was to come with us, that the trip looked doomed, the weather suddenly broke and we set off: Laurence Buckley, Megan Huffadine, Mike Till, Maurice Watson and the writer (Plate 1). Turning up the hill at the Shingle Creek pub (Roxburgh), after a short delay, we were soon hard at work shovelling a landrover track through the snowdrifts to reach the Snowpole Hut on the top of the Old Man Range. That might seem an odd place for prehistoric Polynesians to camp but it was one of the possibilities raised by the ambiguities of Hamilton's (1894) article.

Hamilton did not make it plain whether his thwarted journey had been headed for Gorge Creek on the Clutha, requiring a trip over the top of the Old Man Range, Gorge Creek on the Pomahaka, requiring a journey over the Whitecoomb Range, or Gorge Creek (now known as Blue Creek) on the Garvie Mountains, reached by crossing the branches of the Upper Waikaia and the country between them. The first choice appealed on the grounds that it was the best known Gorge Creek and Hamilton's journey would have been one commonly undertaken by the miners. The second choice looked good in terms of some suggestions that silcrete might outcrop along the Whitecoomb Range, and the third was recommended by local opinion that 'Maori ovens' were known up there somewhere. Clearly we had to look at each in turn.

Two days high on the Old Man Range searching the line of the snowpole track, Potters and Campbell's Creek convinced us that we were on the wrong track. So did digging the landrover out of a number of snow drifts and peat swamps. Back down to Shingle Creek and around the end

of the Old Man Range through Gore, Riversdale and Waikaia. We camped on the bushline of the Black Umbrella range near where, geological rumour had it, there lay some of the huge white silcrete boulders known as 'whitecombers' to the goldminers. The existence of silcrete and an archaeological rumour that a set of ovens had been seen from the air near where we were convinced us that the site was as good as recorded and unlikely to elude us much past lunchtime.

A day of combing the saddle between the headwaters of the Argyle and Whitecoomb streams as well as the tops of the Whitecoomb range left little room for doubt. Wrong again: no white combers, no moa-hunters and no lunch.

The next day we searched the country around the middle reaches of the Whitecoomb stream, without success, and camped several miles up the Waikaia from the Whitecoomb junction. Since the ford in the Waikaia gorge was impassable we had to get to the country above Blue Creek by crossing the east Waikaia gorge, climbing over the inter-fluvial plateau and then crossing the west Waikaia gorge to reach the plateau running down from the Garvie mountains to the north of Blue Creek. The weather by now had turned to blazing 'norwest' conditions so that by 6 p.m., after a 4 hour walk into the plateau and all day combing it without success, we were feeling pretty tired when we turned for home. But while dropping over the edge of the plateau in the west Waikaia we stumbled at last upon a site.

On the lip of the gorge and not a hundred metres from a most unexpected patch of whitecombers sat a site just as Hamilton described it. There are several cooking areas, patches of fragmented moa bone, numerous porcellanite flakes, and a few of silcrete, and some chips from polished stone tools. The latter and the flake tools of porcellanite were concentrated around two stone-lined hearths (Plate 2). There are, in each case, several structures which appear to be subsidiary hearths, perhaps only of working areas. Around them flakes and flake tools are concentrated as well. Near several of these structures, particularly near one of the main hearths, there are some flat stones laid upon the ground in a fashion similar to one of the houses at Hawkesburn (Anderson, 1979).

The next morning, footsore and with another blazing day in prospect we determined to get the landrover closer to the site. The upper Waikaia ford had been washed out in the second of two 'hundred year' floods which this district had seen inside of 15 months and the river, encouraged by these, was frisky and full of running. Maurice devised a plan. Strip the inside of the landrover and fill it with boulders, smother the engine in CRC, join all the wire ropes we could get and attach the landrover to an iron stanchion on the near bank, then sink

the boot. So we did. The landrover gunned across the river bottom, slightly sideways and with the water pouring through the steering wheel, until the rope ran out and flicked her up like a rainbow trout. We were close enough to the far bank, however, to disentangle the rope from the axles and chug onto dry land.

Crossing the ford enabled us to drive to within a couple of hours walk of the site. Once there we mapped the features with tape and compass and collected a sample of the important surface artefacts, mapping their location as we went. These are now awaiting analysis in the Anthropology Department laboratories.

From the surface evidence the site appears to be the camping place of moahunters who were there for a short period of time, perhaps a few weeks. The apparent duplication of evidence around each of the main hearths suggests either two social units, possibly extended families, or repeated occupation, very possibly by the same group. Most of the cultural stone on the site is porcellanite and it includes many pieces from the outside of quarried blocks, suggesting that the origin of this material is not far away. Porcellanite is the most common material at Hawksburn and seems also to be at the Schoolhouse Creek site in the Nevis Valley. Some geological evidence suggests that porcellanite may outcrop in the north of the Old Man Range. If the source was in that area then the site we found would represent a camping place on a journey towards the south. Other evidence, especially the flakes from argillite adzes, indicates that the ultimate destination of such a journey would have been Foveaux Strait. A tentative, but plausible, interpretation of our present evidence, therefore, would be that the site was a stopping place for people who had been hunting in the Old Man Range, perhaps from base camps at Hawksburn or Schoolhouse Creek, and were returning to their winter quarters on the Southland coast. Further investigations are clearly needed to test this proposition.

Finally, it must be asked whether the site we found was also the site which Hamilton discovered. In the field we could not tell whether it was, or whether it might have been one of the others which he was told about. Since returning we have obtained information which makes clear that it is not the site Hamilton described. That remains to be re-located although we have a good idea where it is, and will be searching for it next summer. There is reason to believe that yet more sites remain to be found in the central Otago mountains, and in the Old Man Range in particular, and further work in this area should help to balance our present ideas about the relationships of coastal and interior settlement in prehistory.

References

- Anderson, A.J. 1979 Excavations at the Hawksburn moa-hunting site: an interim report. N.Z.A.A. Newsletter, 22:48-59.
- Hamilton, A. 1894 On the feathers of a small species of moa (Megalapteryx) found in a cave at the head of the Waikaia River; with a notice of a moa-hunters camping-place on the Old Man Range. Transactions of the New Zealand Institute, 27:232-238.



OLD MAN RANGE SURVEY Plate 1.

Lunch on the tops. From left: Mike Till, Maurice Watson, Atholl Anderson and Laurence Buckley.



OLD MAN RANGE SURVEY Plate 2.
Stone lined hearth at the Waikaia site.