



NEW ZEALAND
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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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TOWARDS AN OVERVIEW OF NEW ZEALAND PREHISTORY

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This paper is presented here as it was read to the extended A.G.M., with the addition only of references. No apology is offered for its verbal rather than literary style. It is hoped that it will stir a number of members of the Association, both amateur and professional, into presenting, for discussion, their own interpretations of New Zealand's past.

In early discussions over the theme for papers to be presented at this extended Annual General Meeting it was suggested that the time was ripe for a discussion of general ideas of New Zealand's past, rather than the more specific research-report oriented contributions which are usually a feature of this Association's meetings. With this in mind, this paper was planned to set the scene for the discussion by examining ideas about New Zealand prehistory which have held sway in the past, and by suggesting some of the lines which might be followed by present writers. It was supposed that this would be followed by papers by a number of people presenting their interpretations, which would lead to a very fruitful discussion to which all members would be able to contribute.

Prehistorians in New Zealand, both amateur and professional, have been very loath in recent years to commit to paper their ideas about what happened in the past. I began to wonder why this was so, and whether my enthusiasm for the presentation of syntheses was justified.

It seems to me that there are a number of reasons why synthetic accounts of New Zealand's prehistory should be prepared. These range from the practical to the academic to the ideological, just as syntheses themselves can be presented on a number of levels.

Academic syntheses are probably the least numerous. The preparation of a synthesis of the available knowledge in any field is likely to be a major undertaking, and one for which regrettably, there is unlikely to be much academic kudos gained. Moreover, any individual presenting such a composite view leaves himself wide open to criticism from all his colleagues, a step which many have been unwilling to take. I believe that these are likely to be the reasons for the absence of synthetic papers from this meeting - the amount of work involved in the preparation of a paper, and the fear of being attacked.

The main reason offered for this lack is that the study of prehistory in New Zealand is at too early a stage to permit any attempt at overall accounts. We simply don't know enough about the past to present it in a coherent form as an overview.

This rationalisation simply will not stand up to scrutiny. It fails to account for the many prehistories of New Zealand which have been presented in the past. Von Haast might justifiably have claimed that the study of archaeology in his day was not sufficiently advanced for the presentation of any account of New Zealand's past. He did not, but rather gathered together all the available evidence, and presented it as best he could. Similarly, other scholars, both archaeologists and ethnographers, have continually been able to present an overview of their studies. Best, Smith, Te Watahoro, Buck, Lockerbie, Duff and others have all presented accounts covering the entire scope of New Zealand's past.

More important than this, however, is the consideration that no discipline ever has all the available facts at its command in order to present synthetic accounts. Rather, the very presentation of an attempted synthesis is a means of elucidating further comment, and enabling an advance to be made in the subject. We will never be ready to present a synthesis which is entirely satisfactory, but synthesis is an important part of the process of constructing a prehistory, even if it has to be rewritten time and again. The major archaeologically based synthesis of New Zealand prehistory, Duff's *Kupe, Moa-Hunter, Fleet, Classic Maori* (Duff, 1950), was and remains a tremendous contribution to the discipline regardless of its shortcomings. Duff schematised the results of 30 years of archaeological work in New Zealand, and was able to show the directions in which future research would proceed. That he was successful is shown by the spate of research which has shown up the inadequacies of Duff's work. Whether Duff could see these inadequacies at the time of writing is irrelevant to the issue. His book provided a focus, a target if you will, around which future work has centred. His synthesis is now well outdated and therefore decreasingly a source of inspiration for future insights. Clearly a fresh appraisal is required for the progress of the study of the past in New Zealand.

A major role of museums in science is the interpretation of the results of academic research to the general public. My interest in the preparation of synthetic accounts is therefore not solely for the advancement of the academic study of prehistory. I am also interested in being able to present an up-to-date and factual answer to the question which is so often asked by the museum visitor: 'What

happened in New Zealand in the past?' Of course, the question is not often phrased in those words, but rather ones like 'What about the Morioris?', 'What have you got on the Maoris?', or more simply, 'How old is this adze and who made it?'. Often the visitor has heard that a man in the North Island has found very early evidence for human occupation, or that the 'Fleet' he was taught about in school has been questioned. What sort of answer can be given to this person?

When I began to write this paper, I believed that there was very little available. I was familiar with Janet Davidson's excellent little 'First Settlement' booklet, but believed it to be the only one (Davidson, 1969). However, in the course of examining the available resources on New Zealand's past, I was surprised to find that there have been over 20 accounts of New Zealand's pre-European past published in the last 10 or 15 years. Almost all the leading professional anthropologists in New Zealand have contributed to this number, as well as sundry other people, like an attendant at the British Museum. Some of these accounts are published in rather obscure places where they are not widely available. Some are very out-of-date in the 'facts' which they present as being currently held. But there are a good number of reliable and readable accounts available in publications which have a wide circulation. Articles in the 'Descriptive Atlas of New Zealand', 'The Encyclopedia of New Zealand', 'The Oxford Encyclopedia of New Zealand', and 'New Zealand's Heritage', as well as books by Suggs, Chapman-Taylor and Trotter and McCulloch, are all factually up-to-date and readily to hand.

I was gratified to find that this was so, but all the more mystified at the apparent unwillingness of members of this Association to discuss their ideas about New Zealand's past at such a forum as this. At these meetings are gathered most of the professional and a good proportion of the amateur archaeologists of New Zealand. What better opportunity could there be for the discussion of problems raised by the various interpretations of the past? One of the major aims of the establishment of this Association was the hope that amateur and professional would each be able to contribute to a better understanding of archaeology in New Zealand (Golson, 1955). There has been considerable concern expressed informally at previous conferences at the direction in which the discussion is moving, and the alienation of the amateur member of the Association. It seems to me that whilst discussion of advances in archaeological methodology, or of research into increasingly specialist problems can be of value to all, the common ground to which all can contribute is the synthetic consideration of New Zealand's past. Several members of the Association have expressed to me their views that they are becoming less and less able to contribute anything to the Association, and are therefore also getting less and less

out of it. I believe that the strength of the Association lies in its ability to weld together all those who are interested in the study of New Zealand's past. One of the most useful ways it might do this is to provide a forum in which the views of all members can be included, whether he be a Doctor of Philosophy or a bloke with School Cert. I hope that this meeting will provide the opportunities, both formal and informal, for such contributions. In addition, I hope that the Newsletter might be able to act in this capacity while still providing accounts of current research. I am sure that the Editor would be glad to accept articles or comments even though not expressed as a formal paper.

Let me return for a moment to the question of the provision of prehistory for the general public, in relation to the N.Z.A.A.'s concern for site protection and public support for archaeological investigations. It could be, and often is, assumed that with the Kupe, Toi, Great Fleet sequence everyone learns in school, supplemented by Buck's 'Coming of the Maori' and Duff's 'Moa-Hunter Period' that we know all that we need to know about New Zealand's past. To achieve any success with our attempts to increase public awareness of our archaeological heritage, we have to persuade the public and Government of two things. Firstly, that New Zealand has a past which is worthy of study. All too often people remark, when they find that I am interested in archaeology, 'Wouldn't you like to go to Egypt where they have real archaeology?'. There is considerable doubt that anyone can be an archaeologist in New Zealand. This can only be overcome through the presentation of descriptions of New Zealand's past which show that it is of interest, even if it is rather different from accounts of Ancient Egypt. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we need to show that the Kupe version of our prehistory can be improved upon by the application of archaeological methods. Only if it can be shown that we do not know all the answers and that artefacts are interesting as more than curios can we hope to win sympathy and support for site protection measures. Popular syntheses must not be too ready to gloss over the existing gaps in our knowledge.

I wish now to examine some of these gaps. Rather than give a detailed account of prehistories of New Zealand, I propose to take a number of themes which have been the subject of discussion in the past and which I believe still have relevance today.

The first question asked about the past in any area is usually 'When?'. Since the advent of radiocarbon dating this has become a relatively simpler question to answer. Most scholars I think would be happy with a suggested date of 7-800 A.D. for the first settlement,

although there are some suggestions that it could be a few hundred years earlier. We must also not lose sight of the possibility that the Poukawa material could demonstrate a much earlier settlement still.

Before the advent of C14, it was customary to date New Zealand prehistory by reference to the large body of myths which were recorded in the 19th century. Indeed, in many schools, this 'mythical' version of New Zealand's past is still taught. Dave Simmons' work in particular has shown how unreliable this data is as history and how un-Maori many of the myths are (Simmons 1969). Simmons has more recently attempted to link the data from mythology with that from the archaeological record. This is an area of study which I am sure will prove to be of great interest in the future, particularly in view of the great importance attached to mythology in New Zealand by Maori and Pakeha alike.

One element of the traditional history of New Zealand which was the subject of much scholarly debate, and is still the basis for much popular belief, is the vexed problem of the Morioris and Melanesian influence in New Zealand. Although Skinner was able to demonstrate the cultural affinity of the prehistoric Chatham Islanders with the Maori of New Zealand (Skinner, 1923), the idea that there has been considerable Melanesian influence on Maori culture persists, both as popular belief and scholarly hypothesis. The latter is based on the existence in New Zealand of artefacts which appear un-Polynesian. In orthodox archaeological opinion these ideas have generally been dismissed, but they deserve close attention, particularly now that a settlement route for Polynesia through Melanesia rather than Micronesia seems most plausible.

In 1921 Skinner postulated the division of New Zealand into eight culture areas on the basis of a wide variety of evidence, chiefly ethnographic rather than archaeological (Skinner, 1921). Since then there has been only scant attention paid to the problem of regional variation in Maori culture. It is acknowledged that there must have been great differences in the subsistence patterns of Maori living in, say, Kaitaia and Waitaki. However, although museum ethnologists talk of Southland or Hawkes Bay types of adzes, little has been done to investigate regional differences in material culture. Recently I have been able to demonstrate objectively the existence of regional variation in stone adzes by use of the statistical technique of factor analysis (Park, 1972). The method has great potential for the study of a wide range of artefacts and is likely to shed considerable light on the problem of regional variation in material culture.

I have left till last the consideration of an issue which has been debated throughout the history of prehistory in New Zealand. This is a complex question which has taken many facets. It concerns the nature of the relationship of the earliest settlers of New Zealand with the people found here by Tasman and Cook. In Haast's day it was a question of the distinction between the Palaeolithic hunters of the moa and the Neolithic Maori. Elements of Haast's ideas remained in Roger Duff's discussion of the relationship of the moa-hunters with the agricultural 'Fleet' Maori. The problem of the introduction of agriculture is a still unresolved question, though it seems likely that it was certainly established before the date of the supposed 'Fleet'. Indeed, there seems to be no evidence for the intrusion of a later group into Maori society after the initial period of settlement. Duff's ideas on this question have undergone a deal of change (Duff, 1947, 1956). His early postulation of three distinct cultures, Maori, Moa-Hunter and Moriori, has however remained strong in the popular literature.

Since Golson's paper in 1959 it has been generally accepted that in New Zealand we are dealing with only one culture, in two major aspects. In 1962 Golson and Gathercole wrote that the main problem besetting New Zealand archaeology was the relationship of these two phases (Golson and Gathercole, 1962). Ten years later I believe this is still true. New Zealand prehistory has become polarised. Layers, sites and artefacts are either Archaic or Classic with nothing in the middle. Sites that are chronologically in this middle period can still be assigned to either one end of the scale or another. Clearly, this is a problem which is inherent in the two-stage model which is used to describe New Zealand's past. There have been a number of attempts to solve this problem by Green, Groube, Simmons and others, but it is an area to which a great deal of attention will have to be paid in the future.

These, then, are to my mind the issues which remain to be solved in future analyses of New Zealand's past; the date of the first settlement; the role of traditional history; non-Polynesian influence in Maori culture; regional variation in Maori material culture; and the relationship of the temporal phases of culture which have been recognised, together with the possible designation of other phases.

Academic prehistory has been very concerned in recent years with the relative merits of two approaches to prehistoric data; that of culture history and culture process (Flannery, 1967). Most New Zealand studies have relied on the culture history approach basically the description of events in space and time.

Students of culture process are interested, in the first instance at least, in analysing as fully as possible each of the components of a site in order to detail every aspect of the life of the people who inhabited it. (At a higher level, of course, the processualists are also interested in synthesis though to slightly different ends (Flannery, 1967).) However, I believe that the intense analysis of site components is essential for the improvement of our understanding of the past. What do we know of life at Wairau Bar? Certainly far less than we do of the people at Mt Camel or Makotukutuku. This method of study must, of course, be combined with the culture historical approach, in particular in the preparation of material for the general public. Through such a joint approach, archaeology can hope to be able to tell a much fuller prehistory for New Zealand than is possible through the Kupe-Fleet myths. As I have mentioned, archaeologists must convince the people that excavation can produce worthwhile results.

I have argued, then, that attempts at synthetic accounts of New Zealand prehistory are vital for the growth of our understanding of the past as well as to encourage popular support for excavations and site protection. In addition, I believe that discussions of this sort are of great importance to this Association in that all members are able to contribute their ideas and interpretations. I have suggested some of the lines along which I think such debate might proceed in future. I can only hope that there will be ample opportunity at this and other meetings, and in the Newsletter, for free discussion of a wide range of views of New Zealand prehistory.

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