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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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TWO RADIOCARBON DATES FROM HEN ISLAND (TARANGA)

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Two radiocarbon dates have been obtained for rock shelters on Hen Island, 15 km southeast of Whangarei Heads, off the east coast of Northland. Shell for dating was collected during an archaeological site survey of the island in August 1977 (Hayward et al. in press). The dates supplied by the N.Z. Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory are as follows:

<u>Site No.</u>	<u>Fossil Record No.</u>	<u>Age</u>	
		<u>Old T_{1/2}</u>	<u>New T_{1/2}</u>
N25/3	R07/f4	390 <u>±</u> 40 (NZ4528A)	400 <u>±</u> 40 (NZ4528B)
N25/36	R07/f1	200 <u>±</u> 40 (NZ4527A)	200 <u>±</u> 40 (NZ4527B)

Site N25/3 is a large rock shelter at the western end of the island containing a thick spread of shell midden over the floor. The dated material was paua (Haliotis iris). Site N25/36 consists of a series of rock shelters and associated stonework, terraces and midden stretching over 100 m of the main ridge at the east end of the island. Shell midden is scattered over a cleared flat, terraces and shelter floors; Nerita shells were collected for dating.

Significance of the dates

Hen Island is remarkable for its extensive and well-preserved stone structures, and large number of rock shelters (at least 35 recorded). The extent and variety of stonework indicates considerable development of the agricultural potential of the island, and Hayward et al. (in press) consider that Taranga could have been inhabited by a permanent, year-round population of up to 100 people. The absence of definite pa sites, and other archaeological evidence, suggests that the island was occupied at an "early" rather than "late" period.

The two radiocarbon dates provide the first direct evidence of early (pre-European) occupation of Hen Island. The two samples were obtained from surface midden and therefore probably do not date the earliest occupation; in view of this, settlement of the island at least 500-600 years ago is not an unreasonable assumption.

The date obtained for site N25/36 is much younger than expected. There is no reason to suspect the accuracy of the date since x-ray diffraction of the Nerita shells showed them to consist solely of aragonite. We can therefore accept that some of the rock shelters were still occupied, if only temporarily, up to between 150 and 300 years ago (NZ4527 \pm 2 standard deviations). Consequently the island could have been occupied over a period of up to 350 years, between about 1450 and 1800 A.D.

Reference

Hayward, B.W., Moore, (in press) Archaeological site survey of Hen
P.R., Newman, M. Island (Taranga). Tane, Vol. 24.