The Development of Historical Archaeology in New Zealand 1921-1990

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The emergence of historical archaeology in New Zealand from the 1920s into recent times is outlined in this paper. Although well published in New Zealand, little of this research has reached a wider audience. Inclusion of a detailed bibliography makes this paper a particularly useful tool for archaeologists.

Historical archaeology is a rapidly growing field in New Zealand. At the same time much of what has been done within the subject is not widely known. The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of the sub-discipline in this country. In doing this I will attempt to isolate important innovations and highlight features that have characterised its practice at various times throughout its 70 year history.

The growth of New Zealand historical archaeology could be assessed in several ways. In this analysis the focus is largely upon publications and excavations. Both the number of publications produced each year and the number of excavations undertaken provide a quantified measure of varying rates of activity. Furthermore, closer analysis within each of these areas also reveals changing trends in subject matter, methodological approach and theoretical objectives.

A recently compiled bibliography lists 246 publications on New Zealand historical archaeology. The first of these appeared in the 1920s, but with 97 percent of the entries appearing after 1960, it is clear that historical archaeology here has been a phenomenon of the last three decades (Fig. 1). This is very similar to the patterns observed in North America and Australia where little, if any, historical archaeology took place before the early 1960s. In New Zealand, the last decade has been the real growth period, with 71 percent of the bibliographic entries appearing after 1980.

A similar pattern obtains with the excavations (Fig. 2). There have been 117 excavations on historic period sites in New Zealand between February 1959 and September 1990. Although there was quite a burst of activity in the late 1960s, the real growth was once again in the 1980s, with 63 percent of the excavations shown here occurring in the last decade. One distinctive feature of the distribution shown in Figure 2 is its strongly bimodal nature. This, along with several other major changes in peak heights in Figures 1 and 2, reflect a number of important changes in the development of the discipline, and gives is some watershed points for dividing its growth into six otherwise rather loosely defined periods.

EARLY OBSERVATIONS - 1920S AND 1930S

The beginnings of historical archaeology in this country can be traced back to six works published in the 1920s and 1930s. Eisdon Best's paper on Old Redoubts, Blockhouses and Stockades of the Wellington district, was followed in 1922 and 1923 by the two volumes of James Cowan's The New Zealand Wars. Best's book on The Pa Maori included a chapter dealing explicitly with sites of the historic era. During the following decade two further publications described pa visited by French explorers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

At this juncture it is pertinent to ask whether these works qualify as historical archaeology. In this regard there are two essential criteria. The works must deal with sites or material culture of the historic era, and they must do this from an archaeological perspective. The six works under consideration clearly qualify on the first of these criteria, and they go at least some way towards satisfying the second. Although relying strongly on historical sources and eyewitness accounts they do describe details of the sites themselves. Now, if these works were published today this level of archaeological description might not be sufficient for them to qualify as 'archaeological' in perspective. However, when seen in the light of other archaeological publications of the 1920s it would be churlish to exclude them on these grounds.

Several features of these early works established trends which can be seen re-emerging in later historical archaeology. The sites that they described were virtually all fortifications. Most derived from the wars of the mid-nineteenth century, while a smaller group were associated with early European exploration. Both these groups of sites have remained as an important focus of attention in New Zealand historical archaeology. The sites also included, with more or less equal emphasis, both Maori and European examples. Once again, this interest in indigenous as well as immigrant sites and culture has recurred in later historical archaeology.

Both in method and emphasis, these early works were largely descriptive and historical. They focussed on site location and description of surface evidence and emphasised accurate reconstruction of the events that had occurred there. Again these are recurrent themes in more recent times. However there were also broader concerns. One of these works was concerned quite explicitly with documenting and explaining processes of change. Best's chaper on The Modern Maori Pa was an attempt to show how Maori fortifications had adapted to the introduction of muskets in the early nineteenth century and then later to the impact of artillery bombardment. This established yet another important trend; the concern for documenting and explaining adaptations in indigenous culture during the historic period.

After these promising beginnings there was no further historical archaeology for more than 20 years. Two reasons can be suggested for this. In part it probably resulted from a general revival of interest in prehistoric archaeology during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps more significantly, it reflects a
reliance upon individual effort that would come to characterise much subsequent New Zealand historical archaeology. The early works originated in the individual interests and enthusiasm of the three scholars that produced them, rather than any institutionally based concern with the sites and material culture of the historic period or any ongoing debate about issues relating to them. Once the attention of those scholars turned elsewhere, historical archaeology in this country became dormant.

UNCONSCIOUSLY HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY – 1960s

Things began to happen again in the 1960s, but for most of the participants there was little awareness, or at least acknowledgement, that what they were involved in was historical archaeology. The first excavations of historic period sites took place in 1959.11 In February, Green and Pullar excavated a nineteenth-century Maori occupation overlying prehistoric deposits at Orongo Bay, Gisborne. During September and the following February, Davis investigated the British army’s mid nineteenth-century Paremata Barracks, just north of Wellington.12 While the Paremata excavation continued the earlier interest in fortifications, it was Orongo Bay that was more typical of the archaeology that was to follow.

The emphasis at this time was quite clearly upon Maori sites and culture of the historic period. Of the 22 publications during the 1960s, two-thirds dealt with Maori sites. They were predominantly either site survey reports, or descriptions of the surface features of fortifications. Most were brief and made little explicit use of historical information. The emphasis on Maori sites was even stronger in the case of excavations. More than 80 percent of those undertaken before 1970 were on Maori sites (Fig. 2).

This pattern was determined largely by the emphases of three projects that dominated the historical archaeology of this time. Developing a theme touched upon earlier by Kelly, Les Groube13 excavated at two sites associated with Du Fresne’s 1772 visit to the Bay of Islands. Both were Maori sites. Between 1966 and 1971 Trevor Hosking excavated ten historic period sites as part of the Tongariro Power Development Project. All but one of these were Maori sites.14 Likewise, Maori occupation was inferred for each of the ten historic period Fiordland rockshelters excavated in 1969 and 1970 by Peter Coutts.15 While the emphasis of Hosking’s work, as a mitigation project, was determined largely by the predominance of post-contact Maori sites in the particular landscape under development, the emphases of the other projects derived from specific research objectives. Both Groube and Coutts were explicitly concerned in their work with documenting and explaining processes of change in early historic Maori culture brought about by contact with Europeans.

The emphasis on Maori sites, and what in New Zealand is often called the protohistoric period, reflects something quite important about the origins of historical archaeology in this country. That is, that it has grown out of an archaeological tradition, rather than an historical one. The practitioners then, as is more or less exclusively the case now, were trained in prehistoric archaeology. Not only did this stimulate the early interest in Maori sites of the historic period, but it also brought generally high
standards of field observation, excavation and recording to the discipline. In this regard it is noteworthy that as early as 1966 the New Zealand Archaeological Association modified its site recording scheme to include historic as well as prehistoric sites, as long as "they are capable of being described, discovered and examined only by standard archaeological techniques."

At the same time, these factors probably also contributed to the general lack of awareness of the extent to which historical data could also be brought to bear upon the subject. Indeed, it is only at the end of the 1960s that we see any explicit consideration of how these two databases might be combined. Jean Kennedy, in her thesis which built upon material from Groube's project, described her method as "text-aided archaeology." Coutts also proposed and employed a strategy of independently collecting, then comparing archaeological and historical data.18

SLOW A WAKENING – EARLY 1970s

By the early 1970s New Zealand historical archaeology had awakened into some kind of consciousness. In 1971 the term "historical archaeology" was used for the first time in the title of a publication.19 While this paper itself was very brief and not informative, its title certainly symbolised the newly emerged consciousness about the discipline.

The early 1970s were not particularly productive, either in terms of excavations (Fig. 2) or publications, of which there were only twelve between 1970 and 1975. However, these works do show two important developments: increasing emphasis on European sites and material, and with this the beginnings of a diversification in the topics being covered. So we see, for the first time, coverage of a mission station,20 whaling stations,21 an early farmhouse22 and kauri driving dams.23

The most significant work of this period was that by Peter Coutts, who followed his investigations of contact period Maori sites in Fiordland with excavations at three early or mid nineteenth-century European sites in Southland and Otago.24 He also undertook a considerable body of historical research on building methods and materials.25 Several times in these publications Coutts was to lament the paucity of reference collections available for identification purposes, and the absence of other excavated assemblages with which to compare his. However, these things were soon to change as historical archaeology in this country moved in to its first real growth phase in the late 1970s.

COMING OF AGE – LATE 1970s

Both in terms of excavations and publications there was a doubling in output in the second half of the 1970s. Several factors contributed to this growth. One of these was undoubtedly the passing of the Historic Places Amendment Act in 1975, which gave protection to all archaeological sites 100 years or more in age.26 This not only provided a means by which developers could be made to pay for site investigations, but it also forced the Historic Places Trust (which administered the Act) to take greater cognisance of historic period sites than they had previously. The second important event was a New Zealand Archaeological Association Seminar in 1976, during which the Association developed a policy aimed at promoting the archaeological investigation of historic period sites, and also resolved to devote a significant part of its 1977 conference to historical archaeology.27

Two projects that stand out as major landmarks in the development of New Zealand historical archaeology also began at this time. In 1977 Nigel Prickett commenced a programme of survey and excavation of fortifications associated with the Taranaki wars of the 1860s and 1870s.28 This was the first substantial attempt to excavate a coherent set of European sites and to describe and analyse the resulting material. It also set out to place the Taranaki evidence within the broader contexts of imperial expansion and developments in the technology of warfare.

The same year also saw the appointment of Neville Ritchie as archaeologist to the Clutha Valley Development Project. Over a period of ten years this project saw the first detailed survey of one of New Zealand's major historic gold mining areas, as well as excavations at some 25 historic period sites along with a smaller number of prehistoric ones. These investigations were focussed on the archaeological remains of Chinese goldminers in the area, and produced detailed descriptions of their living sites, material culture and diet, which permitted assessment of the conservatism and adaptations of this discrete ethnic group.29 This project was by far the largest ever undertaken here, involving almost 20 percent of all the historic period sites that have been excavated and just over 20 percent of all the publications on historical archaeology.30

Both of these projects again illustrate the important role of individuals in the development on New Zealand historical archaeology. In both cases there was some institutional support; Nigel Prickett was employed by the Taranaki Museum during the initial stages of his research and Neville Ritchie was employed by the Historic Places Trust and funded by the Ministry of Works and Development. However, the emphasis on sites of the historic period, and the coherence and productivity of the research programmes came not from these institutions but from the interests and enthusiasm of the individuals concerned. There has also a longer term influence, in that many people who subsequently became active in New Zealand historical archaeology had their first experience of it in one of these projects.

GETTING DOWN TO DETAIL – EARLY 1980s

The first half of the 1980s was the single most productive period that there has been in New Zealand historical archaeology (Figs 1 and 2). Over half of the excavations during this time took place as part of the Clutha Valley project. The remainder show continued interest in Maori sites,31 European fortifications,32 and whaling stations,33 as well as diversification into industrial sites,34 agricultural sites,35 and some from the tourist industry.36 However, the major developments of the early 1980s were not so much in the sites being excavated but in the description and analysis of material from those excavations, and a major expansion of site surveying. Reports describing either the analysis of site contents or site surveys together make up almost 70 percent of all publications between 1980 and 1985. This represents a dramatic change from the previous five years when site contents analyses made up only 6 percent of publications, and site surveys 26 percent.

Well over half of the site contents analyses arose out of the Clutha Valley project, and included thorough descriptions of excavated assemblages,37 as well as detailed analyses of various classes of artefacts,38 fauna39 and site features.40 Similar types of studies were also undertaken elsewhere in the country.41 The dramatic growth in this type of research exemplifies the increasing professionalism and greater attention to detail that characterises the historical archaeology of the early 1980s.

Site surveys clearly dominate the early 1980s literature, making up 40 percent of all the publications. Again this
reflects the increasing attention to detail, with these surveys contributing to a much fuller understanding of the number and distribution of historic sites.

However, it is questionable just how representative of the historic site resource base this acquisition of information was. The early 1980s surveys are overwhelmingly dominated by mining sites. More than 80 percent of the surveys deal exclusively or predominantly with this class of sites. Furthermore, almost all of these are concerned with the gold mining industry. While there is no question that this is an important class of site and needs to be recorded, it is only part of the historic archaeological landscape. As Ritchie (this volume) indicates there are fields within mining, other industries and indeed many other aspects of historic period activity that have still seen virtually no recording, investigation or analysis.

This florescence in site surveying can be attributed largely to the growth of public archaeology. Funding of historical archaeology by government agencies had its origins in the late 1960s, but did not become a routine component of their activities until the late 1970s and early 1980s. More than 70 percent of the early 1980s surveys were undertaken by or for two departments: the Forest Service, and Lands and Survey. Their main interest was in the management of their own lands which included a considerable proportion of the main goldmining areas. This factor is largely responsible for the marked emphasis on sites of the mining industry. Of course it also meant that the main focus of historical archaeology was the rural areas of New Zealand.

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY COMES TO TOWN – LATE 1980s

There was a significant change of focus towards urban historical archaeology in the second half of the 1980s. Prior to 1986 there had been only four excavations on historic period sites in urban areas, three in Auckland and one in Christchurch. Survey work had also been limited. Since that time another 19 urban sites have been investigated, taking up 56 percent of all sites excavated in the period. The change of emphasis is not quite so marked in terms of publications, with only 40 percent dealing with urban sites or material. However this difference can be attributed largely to the time delay that usually occurs between excavation and publication of results.

Two thirds of all the urban excavations have been in Auckland, and are discussed in detail by Macready (this volume). The remainder include four in Wellington and one each in New Plymouth, Whangarei and Christchurch. A systematic survey programme has also begun recently in Dunedin.

Beyond the urban environment the late 1980s saw less activity than in the previous five years, but it continued to explore familiar themes. In terms of excavations there were four on Maori settlements, three of European fortifications, three at industrial sites and another three at various other site types. Site surveys continued to emphasise mining, and to a lesser extent other industrial activities.

DISCUSSION

One of the trends apparent throughout the course of development outlined above has been the gradual shift in attention from Maori sites to those of Chinese miners and more recently European colonists. Historical archaeology’s contribution to current understanding of the societies that these sites represent has also varied.

As already indicated, the interest in Maori sites was stimulated initially by a desire to describe and explain changes in indigenous culture during the early part of the historic period. Superficial examination of the sites that have been excavated might suggest that they comprise an appropriate sample with which to assess processes such as changing subsistence and settlement patterns, adaptations in technology, and the adoption or abandonment of items of material culture. The focus has been quite clearly upon living places of one form or another: ten fortified pa with clear evidence of historic period occupation, ten caves or rockshelters, seven undefended house sites and four coastal middens. The remaining sites include four fortifications that lacked evidence of any substantial occupation, a causeway and cemetery.

Several factors have limited the success of these investigations. One of these has been the difficulty in securely dating many of the sites. About 45 percent of the sites can be described only as ‘post-contact’, or ‘probably nineteenth century’, while a similar proportion can be assigned with greater confidence to the middle or later decades of the nineteenth century. Only four sites can be placed with any confidence in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century period that is so crucial to documenting and evaluating the processes of change.

Another problem has been in the reporting of data that would facilitate comparative study. While 78 percent of the excavations have been described in some published form, only 50 percent have anything like full descriptions of the artefacts and other remains that were recovered, and most of these were sites investigated within two projects of the late 1960s and early 1970s. More detailed studies of site contents such as specific artefact types, faunal remains or site features have been exceedingly rare.

A third reason may be that for many of the investigators, analysis of historic period Maori sites was used as a vehicle to understanding pre-contact Maori society. Unravelling the impacts of culture contact held sway over exploring the dynamics of post-contact change. However, recent and ongoing investigations at a closely related group of sites on the Hauraki Plains that span the prehistoric/historic time boundary appear to be taking a more balanced and productive approach.

The Chinese sites display some similarities but their investigation has been much more successful. Like the Maori sites, living places predominate with rockshelters, huts and dwellings within townships making up 76 percent of the excavated sample. Stores, horticultural terraces and a mining forge make up the remainder. However the potential of these sites has been much more fully explored. All of the excavations have been fully described, and there have been another sixteen publications discussing in detail various classes of artefacts, fauna and site features. These data have provided clear insights into the lifestyle of a discrete ethnic group that are poorly known through the historical record. Furthermore they have contributed to understanding of broader issues by identifying areas of conservatism in the process of acculturation, alongside adoptions, adaptations and innovations.59 Dating the Chinese culture has been less problematic than with Maori sites. In part this reflects a shorter time scale (post 1865) and more abundant historical documentation, but it can also be attributed to the active development of techniques for dating artefacts during the course of the Clutha Valley project.

European sites present a somewhat different picture. A much greater diversity of site types is apparent (Fig. 3). Only 35 percent fall into the two categories (houses/huts/camps, hotels/accommodation houses) that could be
Historical archaeology has a long and impressive history in New Zealand. The first ventures into the field in the 1920s were among the earliest examples of historical archaeology anywhere in the world, and the quantity of work that has been produced since then displays a vitality that also stands up well to international comparisons.

The growth of historical archaeology in New Zealand has followed a pattern broadly similar to those observed in North America and Australia, but at the same time it has established and maintained a distinctive local character. In part this stems from its interest in documenting and explaining changes in this country's indigenous Maori culture during the historic period. It also reflects the strong grounding in anthropological archaeology of most of the practitioners here.

There have been very few attempts by New Zealand historical archaeologists to present their work to the wider world. Less than four percent of publications in the field have appeared in international journals, and almost all of these derived from a single project on the archaeology of Chinese miners in Central Otago. However two factors point towards imminent change in this regard. The attention of New Zealand historical archaeologists is being focussed increasingly on the sites and material culture of European settlers, and thus they are dealing with local expressions of international processes of colonisation, adaptation and change. Secondly, the opportunity that this conference has provided to exchange information, compare data and established trans-Tasman links may one day be seen as the beginning of a new and highly productive phase in the development of historical archaeology in New Zealand.

Fig. 3: Excavated European Sites: Frequency of Site Types.

Described specifically as living places. Fortifications are quite clearly the predominant site class, with industrial sites also well represented. In part, this may be an archaeological reflection of greater compartmentalisation in the social organisation and settlement patterns of European society. At the same time it indicates that only limited attention has been focussed on the domestic component of that society.

There have also been limitations in the reporting of excavations at European sites. Some 44 (74%) of the 59 excavated sites have been described in some published form, but for only 24 (40%) of these is there anything more than a preliminary description of the work undertaken. Artefacts and other material recovered by excavation have been described from 22 sites (37%), but for only 13 (22%) are there full and detailed descriptions and analyses of the assemblages that have been recovered. Another eight papers provide detailed analyses of specific classes of artefacts or fauna from European sites.

At this point it should be noted that a considerable proportion of the artefact types found in European sites were also found in the Chinese sites. Thus the more recent analyses of material from European sites should have been able to build upon the analytical procedures developed during the Clutha Valley project and the wealth of chronological information and comparative data that it provided. Despite this there have been remarkably few papers that have attempted to view the material recovered from European sites within a broader comparative framework. This has diminished historical archaeology's contribution to current understanding of early European society in New Zealand.

The principal reason for this lies in the relatively poor publication record outlined above. Opportunities for comparative studies have been limited by the scarcity of published descriptions of material from European sites. In part this reflects the relative recency of many of these excavations, and the inevitable time lag between investigation and full publication. Lack of sufficient descriptive detail in many of the publications that have appeared has exacerbated this problem. The recent appearance of several full and detailed reports suggests that the tide may be turning in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Historical archaeology has a long and impressive history in New Zealand. The first ventures into the field in the 1920s were among the earliest examples of historical archaeology anywhere in the world, and the quantity of
34. Oliver & Wood 1981; Ritchie 1985a.  
50. Chester 1989; Fyfe 1988;  
51. Smith 1990; Table 4.  
52. Smith 1989; Coster 1980.  
54. Coutts 1972;  
60. for example Anson 1983; Bedford 1985b.  
61. Smith 1990: Fig. 4.  
62. Smith 1990: Table 3.  
63. for example Brassey 1989, 1990; Macready & Goodwyn 1990.  
64. see Deagan 1982.  

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