

The First People

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This essay is concerns early Maori settlement. It is a large subject, and I am only covering certain aspects here. I hope to return to this subject in later articles.

When Europe 'discovered' New Zealand in the sixteenth century, it already had a vibrant and unique culture all of its own. The native people that Captain Cook and other explorers encountered, the Maori, were a tribal based society, who had developed and flourished by adapting to the country's particular features.

But they too were descended from travellers. About a thousand years ago the Pacific was already settled by people who had migrated across terrific distances. They had spread across the ocean from the west, born out by the fact that they brought with the sweet potato which had originated in South America. This sweet potato would eventually become the kumara much favored by the Maori. These early inhabitants of the Pacific were peppered throughout many islands, speaking languages of a similar origin, and living their lives in fairly similar ways. The ancestors of those that would become the Maori came from these ancient mariners, and while scientists debate endlessly over exactly which set of islands they specifically came from, it is likely to be somewhere in either the Marquesas or the Society Islands. Researchers have examined physical similarities between modern Maori and people from all over the Pacific in an attempt to narrow this down, but the sheer range of body types throughout the area makes this virtually impossible.

One thing is certain though, the ancient inhabitants of the Pacific were mighty sailors, and capable of travelling great distances. Wherever they came from, they would have had to have been excellent in the art of navigation and boat building to reach the distant shore of Aotearoa. Their boats would have been of the type that Captain Cook recorded seeing in the early 18th century; outriggers as large as 33 meters and able to carry up to 200 people. These ships with their double hulls and triangular sails have been proven capable of making these long journeys through modern day re-enactments using replica ships.

They would have travelled in small groups, carrying all they would need with them; dogs, pigs, hens and even rats. They also brought with them their staple vegetable crops, amongst them taro and kumara.

However when they migrated south to the dark green islands of Aotearoa (New Zealand) they had to deal with a whole other set of problems.

This is another area where scientists are still debating hotly exactly when this settlement occurred. A very recent argument has emerged in which one faction argues that Maori settlement occurred over 1400 years ago, while others insist that carbon dating only confirms human settlement 700 years ago. The debate could rage forever.

But whatever the when of this matter, these early Maori found a land that was a far cry from the warm atolls and islands left behind them. The country was much larger, and contained a wider range of climates from sub tropical in the north to snow covered mountains in the south. There were dense evergreen forests, populated with all sorts of bird life, all alien to the new arrivals. The most majestic and amazing of these was of course the moa. This flightless bird had several species ranging from hen sized to the nearly six feet tall. In this new environment, the settlers tropical crops would not necessarily grow, and they must have worked hard to find out all the uses and pitfalls of the new vegetation. Still though there were disadvantages to moving south, there were also pluses. The new forests supplied them with good strong wood which they could use to provide shelter. But

when they first arrived they made use of the new lands caves and rock formations. Even today in the South Island it is possible to see some of the rock paintings these first settlers did to mark their passing. Done with red ochre and charcoal, and they depicted all the things that the Maori saw around them; moas, the giant eagle and people, but also more mythical forms like the taniwha (a type of mythical sea dragon). They also drew more abstract designs, like triangles and concentric circles- the meaning of which we can never truly know.

But like every other culture they need more than art, they needed tools. The best resource for this was of course stone, and their new home had a wide variety to be made into chisels and axes. They created them through the techniques similar all over the world, flaking stone into the shapes required. Maori also carved wood right from the very beginning. Their early art was angular, for it was not until a later period that the familiar style of curves and spirals emerged. They decorated small items like combs, as well as larger things such as door lintels.

They were also more than capable of beautiful personal ornamentation. Necklaces of whale teeth, and carved stone show the spirit of the people, but they also used bone, ivory and shell. We only imagine how they used the new country's feathers in combination with these items.

The new land was indeed a land of plenty. Many of the crops that they brought with them flourished. Despite the difficulties of a new climate, the settlers managed to adapt and learn to grow, taro, yam, gourd and kumara to local conditions. They learned to over winter the tubers of kumara in the cold weather, and made walled gardens to help with drainage. It would have been hard work, but worth it. They of course supplemented their diet with foraged foods, like fern roots and fruits from the tree. Meat would have come in the form of the moa (until they were hunted to extinction) and the bounty of the sea. Maori were adept at weaving nets and making fish hooks from bone.

Of course the most popular way to cook meat would have been in the hangi- a method still used in New Zealand today. A pit is dug in the earth and hot stones placed on it. Once the food has been put on top of this, a layer of soil is put over the top, this keeps in steam and heat.

The archaeological history of the land is a fascinating one, and one that is still being discovered. In later articles I will look at other aspects of these first peoples of Aotearoa.

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