



These wooden coffins (stone-hewn) were found in a Maori burial cave high in a cliff face near Atene on the Wanganui River. Mr T.W. Downes, then (1919) in charge of the River Trust, photographed the coffins and their grim contents and then re-interred them.

Turehu coffins. These skeletons have recognisable European physiology. They were already very old when found in rugged country, far from any European churchyard and with stone hewn coffins.

A blowup of the picture positively shows a side view of a jaw (mandible) which is not Maori, but European. Maori predominantly have a "rocker jaw" with a continuous downwards curve on the lower border. Further to that, the eye sockets of these people are squarish, the nose openings pyramidal, the faces long and narrow (dolicephalic skull type) and the craniums very round with a high vault.

Ancient burial methods

One 19th century report from the fiord area of the South Island spoke of human remains in a limestone cave that were so old that a stalactite had partially encased the petrified remains.

Skeletons of the ancient people have been observed, frequently, since the earliest colonial time, in burial caves or in a sitting (trussed position) in sand dunes, with artefacts beside them. The trussed burial is a typical type of pre-Maori burial. Around Kekerengu in the Kaikoura area of the South Island a large number of these have been found, reportedly with a moa egg

with each trussed skeleton, a burial method similar to ancient burials in Costa Rica, where round stone balls accompanied the deceased into the afterlife. One such burial was found on Pigeon Mountain near Howick with a pumice ball found with the deceased.

Some bodies found in caves around the Raglan region were encased in Kauri gum, while in both Raglan and the Waima Range there are dry mummified remains in caves. Another ancient custom practiced by the pre-Maori people was to take the bodies to an open air location where the body tissues could be eaten by carrion birds, like the black-backed seagull. The remains would stay there for a year or so in the elements until the relatives returned to gather the bones and stack them neatly into a bundle. These would then be carried to and deposited in a burial cave or rock fissure. Others were placed on a carved wooden tray held by a menacing looking statuette figure the purpose of which was to scare anyone who wanted to come and disturb the remains. Several of these were located in the Waima Range around Waimamaku, Hokianga District.

Some burials were in stone hewn coffins, such as a number observed in different locations around the Wanganui River region. (see photo Turehu coffins)

Those found in burial caves often had red hair or other light brown and blond hues. Samples of their braided hair, taken from the Waitakere rock shelters, used to be on display at Auckland War Memorial Museum and were the subject of written commentary by Maori anthropologist, Sir Peter Buck. Our earliest maritime explorers frequently saw the, red headed, freckle-faced Maori or "waka blondes" and large pockets of them survived well into the 20th century as people who had never mixed their blood with colonial era European settlers. These days, when ancient, pre-colonial European Caucasoid skeletons are located, they are handed over to the local iwi and no scientific investigation is permitted.

An example of this happened in 1995 on a Manutahi farm in Taranaki. The remains of 12 skeletons in a formal pre-European burial ground were unearthed by contractors doing earthworks. The bones were removed and reinterred, reluctantly, at Manutahi Marae where elders said they should have been left where they were. Michael Taylor, a private archaeologist from Wanganui, was called in by the NZ Historic Places Trust to assess the discovery. He said the burial site "definitely pre-dates European settlement due to the style of burial, state of the bones and the presence of what may have been woven flax. Something like this is a significant discovery because it is an unrecorded formal burial site. I've been in archaeology for over 20 years and this is the first time I have seen anything like this."

Since the find, more evidence has filtered through. This tells us that the bones of each skeleton unearthed were in woven bags, but the material was not flax; The burial site was a formally organised location, totally unknown to the local iwi by their own admission. It's evident that they had no history of burials at this location and in this unique manner; The final burial had occurred in swamp or bog land and was similar to the bog burials of Britain. No photography or forensic analysis of the well preserved skeletal remains and accompanying materials to determine their age, ethnicity or physical anthropology was permitted.