

Rat Bones Define the Past



The Polynesian Rat or Kiore.

Non-human bones are invaluable as a way to prove the antiquity of human settlement in New Zealand, invaluable because, unlike human remains, they are not subject to tapu and can be analysed scientifically and without prejudice. In 1996 a dramatic discovery divided the scientific community. Zoologist Richard Holdaway discovered and radiocarbon dated kiore (Pacific rat) bones at older than 2000 B.P. (Before the Present, 1950). These rats could not have made their own way to New Zealand. They had to come with man. DNA studies (Matisoo-Smith et al 1998) indicated several lineages of kiore with separate origins, suggesting multiple immigrations. Not all rat bones were found on the coast, some were well inland and were under Taupo ash, which has an age of c. 1800 B.P. Holdaway used the same precise measuring of undisturbed ash band layering as Russell Price to back up the date for the bones. Holdaway had set out to confirm the Short Chronology, but reported the contradicting findings in a true scientific manner.

Despite the clear evidence, some archaeologists did not want to accept the story the bones told: that the accepted theory of human settlement in New Zealand from AD1200-1300 was incorrect. The method of ash layer dating was vigorously attacked, but intensive retesting found it to be sound. A vote at the 2002 Archaeological Association Conference was split – 27 voted for and 24 against early human arrival. There was eventually a majority consensus that humans had brought the rats to New Zealand in 100AD, **but didn't stay.**

Professor John Flenley, then Head of the Geology Department at Massey University, commented on pre-1300AD settlement: "I think they (Maori) came but remained in small numbers because, apart from hunting and fishing they couldn't really get much to eat. Their tropical crops couldn't grow very well." This ignores the evidence that early Maori found a large populace with well established gardens already here (taro, kumera, yams, several species of potato. South American type stone "Potato God" statuettes were found on Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua and around the Auckland Isthmus. The latter are on display at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Plentiful food was, and still is, yielded by the forests and internal waterways – eg piko-piko, huhu grubs, te kouka, puha, harore, eels, koura (fresh water crayfish), as well as birds, berries and kaimoana (sea-food, including seaweed.) There are even 'bush' seasonings like the peppery horopito and mint tasting kawakawa leaves.

But entrenched ideas are hard to shift. Richard Holdaway was lucky his findings were grudgingly accepted. Professor Mike Elliott lost his post-doctorate fellowship at NIWA for submitting a paper showing that fossilised pollen, taken in core samples within silt wash deep beneath the sea off Hawkes Bay, proved evidence of significant human occupation and deforestation in the Hawkes Bay district around 600AD. The New Zealand Institute of Geological and Nuclear Sciences said that analysing fossilised pollen was its business and NIWA should keep out of it. Elliott's findings were thus swept under the carpet.

If There Was Nobody Here, Who Built These?

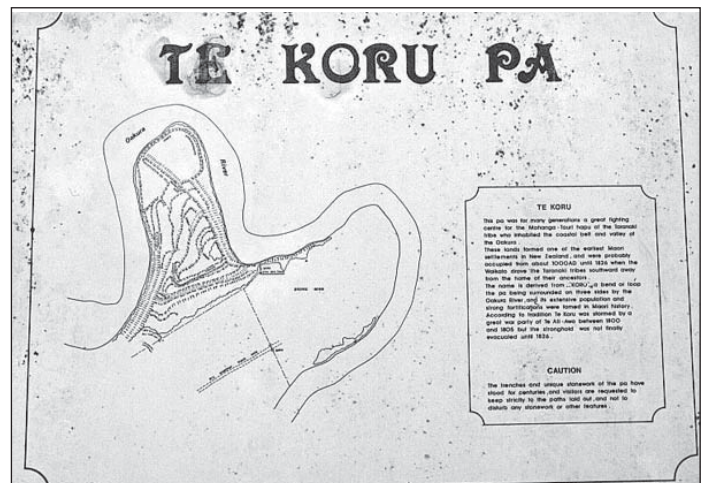
Koru Pa at New Plymouth, Taranaki is one of several stone pa surviving in the area, two of which are massive. The plaque at Koru Pa reads: "These lands formed one of the earliest Maori settlements in New Zealand and were probably occupied from about 1000AD until 1826 when the Waikato drove the Taranaki tribes southward away from the home of their ancestors." Oral tradition states the Pa was built by "friendly Maori," not the later Polynesian people who were in severe decline through inter-tribal war and high infant mortality by the dawn of the 19th century. Up to 200 people, including 50 females, arriving in 1200AD could not have multiplied sufficiently to have built these fortresses, constructed in a similar style to the ancient hill forts of England, Wales and Scotland. Koru itself is typical in design to Rath/Casel structures in Ireland, complete with underground tunnels and remains of a standing stone circle lining up with Mt Taranaki, giving a clue about the heritage of the people who built the Pa.

This huge stone structure would have required considerable labour, time and stone working expertise to build. Some of the walls would have extended upward of 14 feet high and giant excavations cut through solid rock. Many other large Pa around the country fall into the same category. Turuturumokai Pa in Hawera, with evidence of a labyrinth of underground tunnels would have taken thousands of labourers to construct and defend, its size presumably intended to protect a very large population: How could a small migration of Polynesians in 1300AD build these and why? None were built in their homelands, where warfare was rife.

Moa, Rats and Stone Buildings:

The figures simply don't add up to a Short Chronology. It seems academics are starting to agree. "The timing of the human discovery and colonization of New Zealand" (2007), a paper by professors of the University of Waikato and Massey, including Prof. John Flenley, recognises the Long Chronology as "the most plausible hypothesis." (available online at www.science-direct.com)

When will we get to see this confirmed in our history books, government websites (used for school projects) and tourist guidebooks? ■



The plaque at Koru Pa in Taranaki, stating it dates back 1000 years. The huge Pa is bordered by the Oakura River.