



Digging Up the Past

**Archaeology for the
Young and Curious**

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Photograph © davidwallphoto.com

Early in the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand people lived here on Motutapu Island or Te Motutapu a Taikehu (the sacred island of Taikehu). Place names can be useful in filling in parts of the story that archaeology can't explain. We know that Motutapu was named soon after Māori came to Aotearoa, because Taikehu arrived on the *Tainui* canoe and tradition tells us that the island's name recalls both the ancestor and a place in Hawaiki, the ancestral homeland.

Leave nothing but footprints

During the late 1970s I worked in London as a volunteer on archaeological excavations. Everything on these sites was ordered and organised, rather like the ancient Roman world we were digging up. The trenches we made were ruler straight and the buckets, trowels, wheelbarrows and little brushes we used were lined up alongside the trench whenever we stopped for morning tea or lunch.

I enjoyed the work, and when I came home to Aotearoa/New Zealand I decided to study to become an archaeologist. One of the first things we did on that university course was visit an excavation being carried out on Motutapu in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf. After a short ferry ride and a walk along a beach, we arrived at the excavation site, now known as the Sunde site. It was like no archaeological dig I had seen. Instead of the razor-sharp, straight-sided trenches there was a series of long, wandering, intersecting holes in the ground. What was going on?

We took a look. The trench wasn't following a well-ordered Roman wall or some mathematical grid laid out on the landscape. Instead it followed the wanderings of human and dog footprints preserved in volcanic ash that had erupted from Rangitoto, the

island alongside Motutapu. The ash had been soft and wet when these people and their dogs had walked there about 600 years ago, but it was now rock hard and buried by ash from later in the eruption.

Archaeology is the study of people and their behaviour from looking at the things they have left behind. These things are often nothing more exciting than old rubbish, but occasionally archaeologists find things that can give us a feeling of closeness to the people from long ago. The footprints on Motutapu were like this. We have all walked along beaches leaving our own footprints, but usually the tide comes and washes them away. For the people on Motutapu, a walk across the soft, wet volcanic ash had been frozen in time, making it look as though they had walked, not centuries before in the shadow of a rumbling volcano, but minutes before we arrived at the site. It was totally different from anything I had seen before. This wasn't some far-off relic of a past empire. This was local and ours – a history created by people who had shared the same country as me. I was hooked.

There is a book I read when I was at school, written by L. P. Hartley, which begins with the wonderful

sentence, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there' – and there are many ways we can explore the 'foreign country' that is our past. For example, historians read writings from the past and oral historians talk to people who were there.

But there are problems with this. What about times very long ago – long before any person alive today can remember? And how can you study people who didn't write, or explore the things that people didn't write about? This is where archaeology steps in.

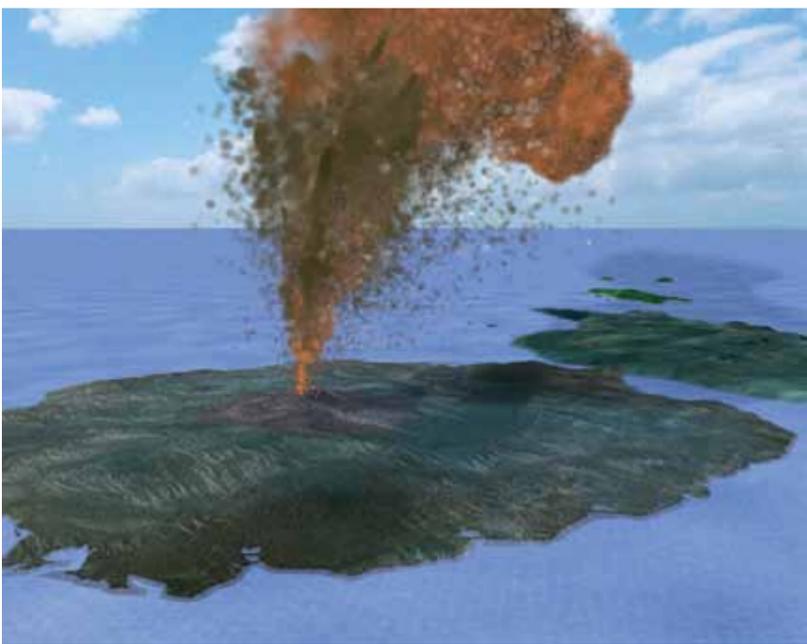
Archaeologists examine everything from huge Māori pā, fortified villages, to tiny strands of DNA (deoxy-ribonucleic acid) inherited from our ancestors.

So despite the fact that the footprint people on Motutapu left no written description of their lives, archaeology can not only tell us that they walked through the fresh ash from the eruption of Rangitoto, but it can also give us a good idea of who they were, why they were there and when.

As the archaeologists on Motutapu dug further down through the ash, they found the remains of a papa kāinga, a village, buried by the eruption. Imagine your home had been covered by volcanic ash . . . what is the first thing you would do when the eruptions stopped? I would go and check out what remained of my house, even if it meant splashing through wet, sloppy ash.

And because volcanologists – people who study volcanoes – have worked out that Rangitoto erupted about 600 years ago, we know that the footprints must be 600 years old because they were made when the ash was fresh, wet and still soft.

Throughout this book we will follow the footprints left by the people who came before us to Aotearoa and explore some of the ways archaeologists have



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Chris Gaskin

The grassy, beachside flat on Motutapu that is now called the 'Sunde site' would have been an attractive place to live for early Māori settlers. It was sheltered, gave access to the sea and had a freshwater stream running through it. When Rangitoto erupted next door (left), its volcanic ash covered the Māori village, as the above painting by Chris Gaskin shows. A small group of adults and children together with their dogs walked across the wet, sloppy ash, soaked by the torrential rains during the eruption. Further ash fall covered their footprints and preserved them for ever.

Below and to the left you can see the iconic shape of Rangitoto – Auckland's largest volcano – looming in the background of the Sunde site today. To the right is one of the footprints. Archaeologists have splashed a bucket of water over the print to make it more visible in the photograph.



Robert Brassey



Reg Nichol