

# 31

## Jack Golson in New Zealand

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In 1954, at the age of 28, Jack Golson accepted the foundational position of lecturer in archaeology in the anthropology department at the University of Auckland. Golson was Cambridge-trained, a student of Grahame Clark, and influenced by the field methodologies of Sir Mortimer Wheeler, which placed emphasis on stratigraphy and detailed record keeping. The introduction of new ideas and approaches was an important first step in the modern study of the past in New Zealand.

At the time, the study of Māori prehistory was dominated by South Island museum professionals H.D. Skinner at Otago Museum (see also White, **Chapter 23**, this volume) and Roger Duff at Canterbury Museum (see also Brooks, **Chapter 9**, this volume). Excavations were being carried out in the South Island, and although useful information mainly relating to material culture was being collected, the prime purpose was to obtain artefacts for museum collections. In addition, there were independent fossickers and collectors who were motivated by the thrill of the find and who had little interest in the past.

Museum specialists were attracted to artefact-rich sites that also contained sea mammal bones and extinct birds including moa (*Dinornithiformes*). The artefacts were, however, stylistically different to those held in established museum collections, and the objects collected mainly from the North Island by early European visitors. Skinner and Duff attributed the distinctive adzes, fishhooks and ornaments being found in South Island sites to an earlier East Polynesian cultural group

that, in the North Island, was influenced by a later group of Polynesians bringing new ideas, agriculture and different artefact forms. These were not new ideas and built on earlier interpretations by Julius von Haast, director of Canterbury Museum from 1868 to 1887 (collection. canterburymuseum.com; see also Brooks, **Chapter 9**, this volume). There were also a group of individuals who approached the subject of Māori origins from the perspective of oral histories and in the process created an alternative history. Legitimate Māori *waka* (canoe) traditions from different regions were amalgamated to create the ‘Great Fleet’ myth, in which Māori ancestors arriving on a contingent of *waka* found an existing population that was overcome by the new arrivals. The misappropriated traditions, with embellishments, were taught in New Zealand schools for many years and occasionally still surface despite 60-plus years of archaeological research refuting the ideas. The traditionalists, and their interpretation of history, held sway over the learned society journals in the first half of the twentieth century.

Over the next eight years, Golson (Figure 31.1) began investigating the previously unknown archaeology of the North Island, redressing the South Island ‘moa-hunter’ emphasis, and in doing so initiated an integrated New Zealand-wide Māori archaeology. Soon after arrival he commenced a program of excavation. Each university holiday period, and weekends, there were excavations in progress, including Taylors Hill (Te Taurere) in Auckland, Oruarangi on the Hauraki Plains, Ahuahu Great Mercury Island, Sarah’s Gully and Opito on the nearby Coromandel Peninsula mainland, and Kauri Point Pā in the Bay of Plenty. Initially there were no trained archaeology students to call upon, so Golson reached out to the wider student community, gathering around him a workforce of dedicated and increasingly skilled archaeologists. Among them was Wal Ambrose, who went on to have a distinguished career in archaeology in Canberra. Golson himself did not write detailed accounts of his excavations in New Zealand, but left notes, drawings and photographs showing skillful excavations (Figure 31.2), which have enabled other archaeologists to complete the final write-up.



**Figure 31.1. Jack Golson, 1956–57, inspecting a one-piece fishhook made of moa bone at Sarah's Gully, New Zealand.**

Source: Anthropology Photo Archive, University of Auckland.



**Figure 31.2. Excavation of kumara storage pits with postholes, Matakawau Stingray Point Pa, Ahuahu Great Mercury Island, 1956.**

Source: Anthropology Photo Archive, University of Auckland.

After establishing that early sites in the North Island contained moa, although in smaller numbers compared to South Island sites, he expanded his investigations to a wider range of site types in the North Island. The newly developed radiocarbon dating techniques reduced reliance on artefacts for relative dating and allowed sites with features including postholes, pits, drains and ditches, but without artefacts, to be placed in a temporal context. Golson also collaborated with natural scientists and geologists, using tephra (dust and rock fragments ejected into the air by a volcanic eruption) as a chronological marker at Pig Bay on Motutapu Island (Golson and Brothers 1959), and was influenced by botanist Doug Yen and his study of climatic limitations to the growing of kumara in New Zealand (Yen 1961).

Within six months of arriving in Auckland, Golson had persuaded museum colleagues and collectors to come together to form the New Zealand Archaeological Association (NZAA) (Prickett 2004). Fossickers and the staunch promoters of the ‘Great Fleet’ myth were also included in the hope that they would be open to new ideas, although with mixed success, and there were often heated discussions (Groube 2003; Prickett 2004). Golson’s ability to get along with all comers, including landowners and Māori, enabled him to drive changes in attitude without alienating people. Annual conferences brought together an increasing number of individuals interested in New Zealand archaeology to discuss and debate ideas, and research results were published in a quarterly ‘newsletter’, although this name was a misnomer for the quantity and quality of original research results. Within a few years of Golson’s 1961 departure to The Australian

National University (ANU) in Canberra, a new way of doing archaeology was in place, shifting the emphasis from the museums to the universities, and from the amateurs to the professionals (Gathercole 2004).

From the beginning Golson championed other issues, including site protection and the recording of archaeological sites. The volcanic cones of Auckland were being destroyed by quarrying, but they were also Māori *pā*, with extensive terracing, kūmara storage pits and defensive features, and were unique monumental structures. Golson carried out excavations on Te Taurere Taylors Hill and Maungarei Mt Wellington in advance of quarrying, and published a booklet drawing attention to the destruction of the cones and their Māori history (Golson 1957). He continued to advocate for site protection mechanisms, later taken up by his successor Roger Green (see also Sheppard and Furey, **Chapter 33**, this volume), but legislation to that effect was not enacted until 1975. Golson's other major achievement was his contribution to the founding of the NZAA Site Recording Scheme in 1955 (Golson 1955), which required negotiation among the factions of the membership to ensure its successful adoption: the scheme was seen by fossickers as an attempt to rein them in and force them to share information on sites. From small beginnings and the initial handbook guide to the recording of archaeological sites (Golson and Green 1958), the scheme has developed into a large and invaluable database, now digitised and online as Archsite, consisting of over 60,000 individual records of occupation places of Māori and European origin.

Of Golson's 26 publications on New Zealand archaeology (Anon. 1993), his overview paper *Culture Change in Prehistoric New Zealand* (Golson 1959) is most widely cited. His intention was to standardise the generalised terminology used in the literature and provide clear definitions. For instance, Skinner and Duff used the term 'moa hunter' to describe early material culture because it was found in association with moa, but Golson considered the term inappropriate as sites in the North Island containing moa also contained sea mammals, fish and shellfish, which formed a more significant contribution to the diet. He proposed new terms as a means of ordering the data, which could be applied to the archaeology of both islands: 'Archaic' for the early evidence of the New Zealand East Polynesian Culture, and 'Classic Maori' for the time of European contact in the eighteenth century. The paper also examined the evidence available to clarify if the differences in material culture between early and late could be attributed to cultural replacement, as proposed by Skinner (1921) and Duff (1956), or to internal change. The fact that Golson at that time

was unable to reach a conclusion either way demonstrates how little information was available. By 1961 (Golson and Gathercole 1962) he was able to positively state that the differences in artefact styles were due to local development of the East Polynesian culture. Using a theoretical framework based on the work of Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips in North America and Gordon Childe in Europe, Golson organised North and South Island material culture into phases (chronological) and aspects (the regional expression of phases). He highlighted differences in form and type using common artefacts such as adzes, fishhooks and ornaments, as well as distinctive items from each phase (Figure 31.3). He could only identify the two ends of the sequence, and concluded change must have happened in an elusive middle phase. One of the most important observations of the paper was that regional histories were important for understanding the big picture. The range of latitude, diverse climate and environments meant that there was no standard form of material culture even within the early/late divisions. Golson (1986) reflected that his work was unable to make an impact due to the narrow, artefact-based emphasis, although he did draw in horticulture and settlement patterns to a small extent.

The 1959 paper caused ongoing problems. Initially there were arguments over terminology of phase and aspect and the 'Archaic/Classic' division, which is now more commonly referred to as early/late, but the concepts also set up a dichotomy between the two ends of the Māori sequence, with an elusive middle period in which all change took place (Davidson 1993). Archaeologists for a long time hoped to find a continuously occupied site that would demonstrate a period of change and the reasons for it, and Golson dug at Oruarangi with this in mind. We now know that there is no transitional period; broadly speaking, every artefact type has undergone continual change in stylistic attributes despite being used for the same purpose at each end of the sequence (Furey 2004), although some new object types such as weapons made an appearance mid-sequence. It is also evident that the raw material used in manufacture changed over time. For example, use of moa bone was substituted with dog or human bone, or wood, and basalt and argillite were replaced by sedimentary greywacke and pounamu (nephrite), which required modification to the manufacturing process and the shape of the object.



**Figure 31.3. Artefact styles and types replicating the illustrations in Golson's (1959) paper.**

On the left are adzes, fishhooks and ornaments representative of early Polynesian material culture, and on the right are artefact styles from the late eighteenth century.

Source: Auckland Museum.

An unforeseen consequence of Golson's paper and other discussions around that time was the ongoing lack of interest in material culture by later New Zealand archaeologists after the realisation that artefacts were of little use in explaining culture change (Davidson 1993). Instead economics and settlement patterns became the focus.

After Golson left New Zealand, he continued to clarify his 1959 paper, reiterating that the traditionalists' view was not only erroneous but was long out of date and unhelpful, and that the previous artefact-centric approach to history ignored the non-artefactual changes (Golson and Gathercole 1962). On further reflection, the main goal of writing the paper was establishing an archaeological methodology and organisation of the data, rather than explaining Māori prehistory (Golson 1986). Golson widely acknowledged that his thinking on this subject was influenced by discussions with Roger Green during his 1959 visit to Auckland. Green (1963) took a different approach, using settlement pattern theory that incorporated ecology, subsistence and settlement patterns, and the data generated by excavations by Golson and himself, to identify six stages of change in the upper North Island (Auckland Province).

Golson expanded his archaeological research outside New Zealand in 1957 under the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program jointly funded by the Bishop Museum, University of Hawai'i and Yale University. He carried out five weeks of fieldwork in Tonga, testing six sites including the Mangaia Mound excavated by McKern in 1929 (Davidson 1965:66), and four weeks in Western Samoa with Wal Ambrose excavating several low mounds at Vailele, including Va-1 (Figure 31.4), which produced ceramics in the earliest layer (Golson 1969; Green 1993). The Tongan research has not been written up by Golson, but others returned to continue the excavation (Davidson 1965:66). Roger Green attributed Golson with setting him on the path to the major field program in Western Samoa, co-directed by Janet Davidson (Green 1993). Golson's skills in synthesising data meant he was able to recognise that the plainware ceramic fragments he dug up in Tonga were similar to the sherds being excavated further to the west in New Caledonia. Sometime later he coined the phrase 'communities of culture' (Golson 1971) as people creating the distinctive Lapita ceramics spread out through Near and Remote Oceania. This became the title of the festschrift honouring him after his retirement from ANU in 1991 (Spriggs et al. 1993).

Golson made important contributions to New Zealand archaeology, elevating excavations to new standards of methodology and data collecting. From this a history was beginning to emerge, where Polynesians arrived in a previously uninhabited land, had a mixed economy, including gardening in the northern areas where kūmara growing was viable, and cohabited with moa for a short time before they were made extinct, and where cultural change was internal and not subject to outside influences.





**Figure 31.4. Jack Golson excavating at Vailele, Upolu, Western Samoa, 1957.**

Source: Anthropology Photo Archive, University of Auckland.

Archaeology as a discipline in New Zealand universities grew when Peter Gathercole, a Cambridge contemporary and friend of Jack Golson's, was appointed in 1958 to a joint Otago Museum and Otago University position. The foundations were then built on by others, including Roger Green with his pioneering work on settlement patterns, which included environmental considerations, and later by Wilfred Shawcross on economic archaeology, Helen Leach's study of Māori horticulture and the role climate played in its viability, Foss Leach's work with artefacts and applications of science to archaeology, and Janet Davidson's work on Auckland's regional sequence and Pacific archaeology.

For the 50th anniversary of the NZAA in 2004, the next generation of archaeologists contributed to a book that discussed the state of New Zealand archaeology (Furey and Holdaway 2004). All authors referred to the groundwork laid by Golson before identifying how far the understanding of New Zealand's past has come, but also setting the directions for the future.

Golson argued from the beginning that New Zealand's past is a Māori past and that Māori should be involved. In the early years of the NZAA there was a position on the governing council for a Māori representative, and the original discussions around the code of ethics included respect for Māori (Golson 2004), though this was not included in the final version of the constitution of the NZAA. This was a profound idea for 1950s New Zealand society and Golson's influence can be detected. The 1959 NZAA conference was held in Rotorua because of its large Māori population and rich Māori history. After a *pōwhiri* (welcome) at Ohinemutu Marae, Golson led a training excavation on Pakotore Pā, but only after seeking permission from current landowners and traditional Māori owners (Golson 2004). He later championed Indigenous involvement in archaeology in Australia and Papua New Guinea, and his commitment was acknowledged by the World Archaeological Congress. As archaeologists in New Zealand, we have made improvements to our relationships with Māori over the decades, and with an increasingly bicultural approach to New Zealand society, full partnership is a goal that must be actively sought. This extends to encouraging more Māori students to study and practise archaeology, but also to incorporating the Māori world view in interpretations of their past.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira from February to May 2020.

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