

Maori geographical knowledge and mapping: a synopsis

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The purpose of this essay is to examine Maori geographical knowledge and the ability to construct 'mental maps' and to review any evidence that these 'mental maps' were transcribed on non-permanent media for the instruction of other Maoris. Maps which were drawn by Maoris for Europeans between 1769 and 1859 are examined in detail.

New Zealand and the Chatham Islands were probably discovered and settled by migrants from eastern Polynesia about 1,000 years ago. The settlers, the ancestors of the present Maori people, needed to explore their new home to locate sources of food and raw materials for the construction of artifacts. It is clear that the settlers were thorough and determined explorers, from the widespread distribution of rock types such as chert (from the North and South Islands), obsidian (from Great Barrier, Mayor Island and the North Island) argillite (D'Urville Island and Nelson) nephrite (West Coast, South Island), serpentine (Dart Valley), and bowenite (Anita Cove, Milford Sound) in former Maori occupational sites throughout New Zealand. New Zealand's difficult terrain, with heavy rain forests in the North Island and on the West Coast of the South Island, extensive mountain ranges and fast flowing rivers, provided formidable obstacles to travel. For the Maoris of the South Island, faced with a climate less favourable to agriculture than in the North Island, extensive travel to seasonal food sources was necessary and they soon acquired an extensive geographical knowledge which they were able to pass on to the early European explorers and surveyors.

The Maori developed an extensive topographical nomenclature and physical features were given names that were practical or descriptive or commemorated events. Through their well-developed memories this topographical nomenclature enabled them to develop a geographical locational framework or 'mental map'. Two investigators of another primitive culture, Spink and Moodie, in their study of Eskimo maps from the Eastern Arctic, comment that

The facility for naming was useful in the development of cartographic ability among the Inuit (Eskimo). The names became focal points in the organised directional schema made available to the individual. A nominal realism in which the name is part of the essence of the object helped in creating a 'mental map', the