



Auckland
Regional Council
TE RAUHĪTANGA TAIAO

EYES IN THE FIELD

MIDDENS

What is a Midden?

'Midden' is an old Danish word for a domestic rubbish dump, and that is essentially its meaning in archaeology. Middens are refuse from human occupation. They are places where food remains, such as shells and animal bones, ashes and charcoal raked out of cooking fires, and worn out or broken implements were dumped or buried.



Concentrated shell midden exposed on hillside



Midden at Shakespear Regional Park .

How to identify a Midden

Middens can be found almost anywhere in New Zealand and are usually observed as layers or lenses of shell and bone intermixed with charcoal, ashes, and burnt stone eroding from sand dunes, river banks and road cuttings.

Shell middens are most commonly found near the coast. They consist of layers or patches of mollusc shells amongst soil blackened by charcoal and ashes. Middens may also contain fish bones, bird bones and sometimes the bones of seals and dogs intermixed with the shell. Some middens contain Maori artefacts such as fishhooks, chipped stone scrapers, adzes, and sharp stone flakes struck from many types of rock including obsidian or volcanic glass.

Historic middens dating to the early European period can be distinguished from pre-European Maori middens by the presence of glass,

crockery, and metals, or by the bones of sheep, cattle and pig.

It is important to distinguish the archaeological remains of shell middens from natural heaps or geological layers of shells along the coast. Closer inspection will usually reveal cultural indicators including charcoal, blackened soil or burnt stone and possible other materials such as bone and artefacts as mentioned above.



Deflated shell midden at Whatipu

Why are Middens important?

Shell middens are the most common type of archaeological site, they account for approximately 70% of the recorded Maori archaeological sites. Middens are often given little attention and are considered to be unimportant evidence of past human activities. This is far from the truth. Shell middens provide us with a great deal of information. At the simplest level, a shell heap identifies where a group of people have processed shell fish for a

meal. Larger shell heaps may represent a year round occupation or seasonal activities associated with resource gathering and food preserving which occurred regularly at the one site over a number of years.

A midden can, through detailed scientific study, provide us with information about the early inhabitants, the resources they exploited, their lifestyle and the environment in which they lived. In addition, various dating techniques can provide information about what season of the year, and for how long, a site was occupied, and even what month of the year different shellfish species were gathered.



Lense of shell midden exposed in slip

Examples in the Auckland Region

Midden sites contribute collectively to our overall knowledge of our past. Furthermore a small scatter of shell midden can often be an indicator of a more extensive archaeological site below the ground surface.

Excavations in the region have shown that what is recorded on the surface is often only the tip of the iceberg when compared with what lies below. For example, a site R11/229 on the banks of Pukaki Creek, on the proposed route of a new Auckland International Airport accessway, recorded as three patches of shell midden with possible house sites nearby. Archaeological excavation of a 1500m² area revealed a complex of 37 storage pits, 51 hangi, 14 houses and structures, burials, and numerous artefacts.

Although these middens can potentially provide much information about activities that occurred here in the past, these sites are among those that are disappearing rapidly.

What you can do

It is important that those in the field are aware of how to recognise different types of archaeological structures and features. You can be our “Eyes in the Field” and we need your help to preserve and protect our diminishing archaeological resource.

You can:

- **Locate** - Take a photo or make a quick sketch so that the site can be relocated
- **Determine content** - have a close look at the shell deposit and see whether there are indicators, as mentioned above, that it is an archaeological midden.
- **Report** - Contact a member of the Cultural Heritage team and let them know where you've been and what you saw. Write down notes so that you can describe the site (e.g. size, content).



Historic midden

Report Damage

Report any damage to archaeological sites to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Pouhere Taonga

- Auckland Region Ph: (09) 307 8896
- Head Office Wellington Ph: (04) 472 4341

Sources of information

- Davidson J.M. 1964 Concentrated Shell Middens. New Zealand Archaeological Association Newsletter 7(2):70-78.
- Daniels, J. R. S. 1979 New Zealand Archaeology: A Site Recording Handbook (Second Edition). Monograph No.10. New Zealand Archaeological Association.
- New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 1982 Archaeological Remains of Middens. The Past At Our Feet: 3.
- Nichol, R.K. 1978 Fish and Shellfish in New Zealand Prehistory: Some Approaches to Midden Analysis. Unpublished M.A. Thesis Department of Anthropology University of Auckland.
- Sewell, B. and R. Foster 1996 Excavations at Site R11/229 Papahinau South Auckland. Archaeology in New Zealand 39(2):124-130.