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Discovery and migration

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New Zealand has a shorter human history than any other country. **The date of first settlement is a matter of debate, but current understanding is that the first arrivals came from East Polynesia between 1250 and 1300 AD. It was not until 1642 that Europeans became aware the country existed.**

The original Polynesian settlers discovered the country on deliberate voyages of exploration, [navigating](#) by making use of prevailing winds and ocean currents, and observing the stars. The navigator credited in some traditions with discovering New Zealand is [Kupe](#). Some time later the first small groups arrived from Polynesia. Now known as [Māori](#), these tribes did not identify themselves by a collective name until the arrival of Europeans when, to mark their distinctiveness the name Māori, meaning ‘ordinary’, came into use.

The Lapita pottery trail

Although New Zealand has abundant clay deposits, Māori people did not make pottery. But their distant ancestors brought the skill from South-East Asia across the Pacific as far as Samoa and Tonga before it was lost. Lapita pottery (named after a site in New Caledonia) is one of the ways we can trace the emergence of Polynesians in the Pacific. The motifs of Māori art in New Zealand clearly resemble the decoration on Lapita pottery.

Hunting and gathering

The early settlers lived in small hunting bands. [Seals](#) and the large, flightless [moa](#) bird were their main prey, until moa were hunted to extinction. In the South Island, hunting and gathering remained the main mode of survival.

Gardening and fishing

The Polynesians brought with them [kūmara](#) (sweet potatoes) and yams, which grew well in the warmer North Island. Extensive kūmara gardens supported relatively large settlements. But even in the north, [birds](#), [fish](#) and [shellfish](#) were important in the Māori diet. In some northern areas, large populations put pressure on resources. The Polynesian [dog](#) and [rat](#) came with the early arrivals, but the domestic pigs and chickens of the islands did not, for reasons not fully understood.

A robust people

In favourable conditions, Māori lived reasonably well. Their life expectancy was low by modern standards, but comparable to that of Europeans in the same era. The Māori population before European contact may have reached 100,000.

An oral culture

Māori passed on rich and detailed history and legends orally. Society was organised around groups that traced their descent from common ancestors. Reciting [whakapapa \(genealogies\)](#) was an important way to communicate knowledge.

Warfare

The concepts of [mana \(status\)](#) and [utu](#) (reciprocity) were central to the culture, and led to widespread [warfare](#). But the violence was usually episodic. For most of the time Māori lived not in fortified [pā](#) but in unprotected settlements or seasonal camps.

Material culture

The greatest achievements of Māori material culture were carving wood for important buildings and [canoes](#), and fashioning stone and bone into tools and ornaments. Warfare did not inhibit regular trade in desirable stones and foods, and was itself a means by which resources were appropriated.

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