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A BRIEF NOTE ON SOME PITS IN SANDSTONE

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During a site survey of the Whenuakura River valley, undertaken for the Wanganui Regional Museum, I had the opportunity to re-survey a ridge pa (N130/16) that had originally been recorded by Alastair Buist during the course of an aerial survey in the early 1970s.

The site is located approximately eight kilometres from the coast, as the crow flies, on the western side of the Whenuakura River (Fig. 1). The pa is typical of many in the Whenuakura-Waitotara river valleys, being constructed on a long narrow ridge leading down into the river valley. The site itself is approximately 400m long and as narrow as 2m for much of its length. This narrowness limits the areas which are suitable for the construction of houses and storage pits to about 4 areas where the ridge is sufficiently wide. These locations occupy less than half the total length of the site. Evidence for rua, rectangular pits, and possible house platforms are present in these areas. The pa was defended by two transverse ditches on the up ridge end, at least one ditch midway along the ridge, and the final ditch at the far end. However, there is a bulldozed track running the full length of the ridge and in sections where the ridge is very narrow this track occupies the full width of the ridge so it is now difficult to obtain a clear idea of what the site looked like originally.

The most interesting feature of this site is the presence of an outcrop of sandstone at the far end of the pa. This outcrop is approximately 35m long, 6 - 8m wide and 2-3m high. The sandstone varies in hardness from areas where it is possible to mark it with a finger nail to other areas where it is much harder. Five storage pits have been cut into the surface of the sandstone. These measure: (1) 1.5m x 1.5m x 0.3m deep, (2) 3m x 3m x 1m deep, (3) 3.5m x 2.5m x 1m deep, (4) 5m x 3m x 0.5m to 1.8m deep (Fig. 2), (5) 3.5m x 4.5m x 1.7m deep. The depth of the fourth pit varies due to its being cut into a sloping section of the outcrop. The first three of these pits are heavily overgrown with gorse and long grass and it is difficult to ascertain what the interiors look like. The final two pits are clear of gorse and the floors are covered in short grass. In these pits the marks of the tools originally used to construct them are still plainly visible. These show as grooves, primarily in the corners of the pits and along the bottom edges of the walls. These grooves are most evident in pit 4, where they measure 3cm in width by 1cm deep and up to

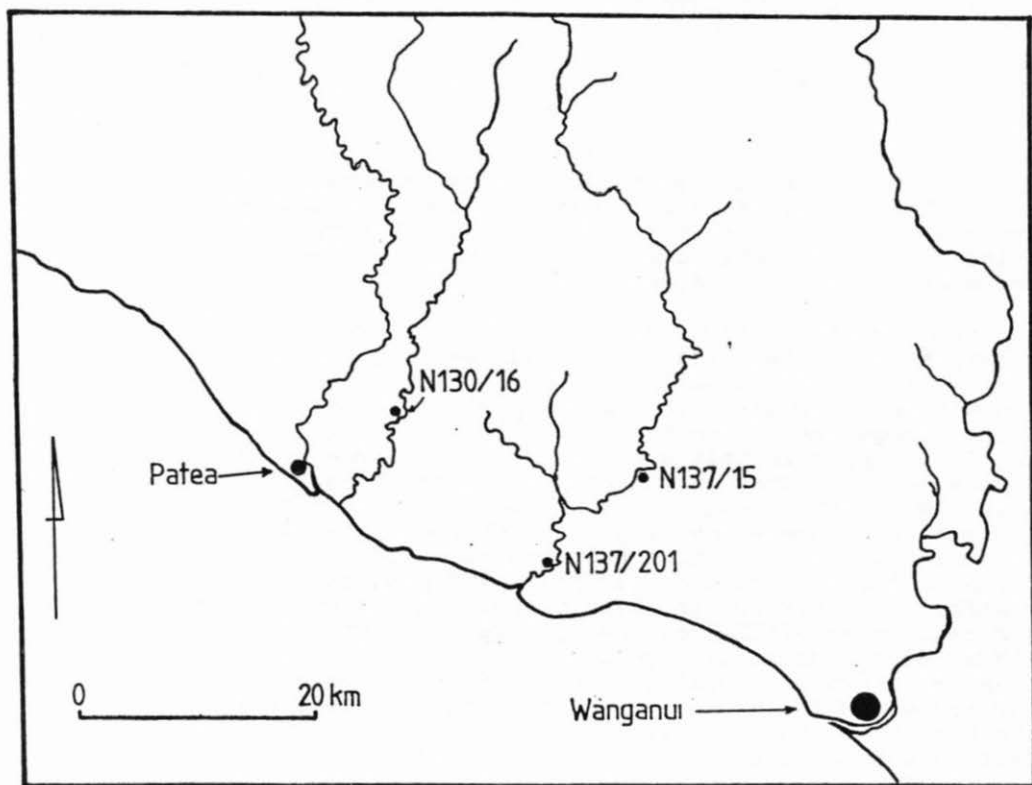


FIGURE 1. Location of sites mentioned in text. Rivers shown are, west to east, the Patea, Whenuakura, Waitotara, and Wanganui.

30cm long (Fig. 3). The size of these grooves suggests that a fairly small tool, either a small adze or hardened wooden stake was utilised for this work, and probably a larger tool was used to remove the bulk of the sandstone.

To my knowledge these are the only pits in sandstone in the Whenuakura catchment area but they are known from the Waitotara valley. Tarata pa, or more properly, Te Oie (N137/15), excavated by Colin Smart in the early 1960s (Smart 1962) yielded evidence of pits in sandstone, both bin pits and cave type rua. Although not mentioned in the article at least one of these rua must have tool marks in the walls as Colin Smart found the adze that had been used to construct the rua, confirming this by showing that the adze had a chip in it that

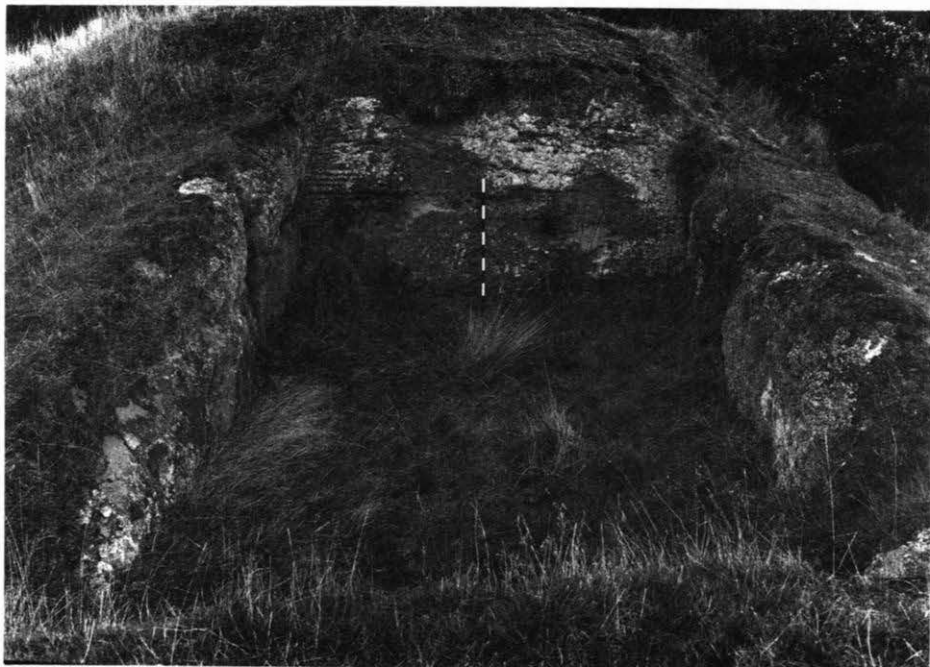


FIGURE 2. Pit 4. Note tool marks in left hand corner. Fainter marks are also present along the lower edge of the wall and in the right hand corner. The scale is 1 m.

matched the grooves in the wall of the rua (Buist pers. comm. 1988). Ihupuku pa (N137/201), towards the sea from the township of Waitotara, also has numerous rua on the flanks of the hill that have been cut into sandstone.

Reference

- Smart, C. 1962. Preliminary report of field work in the Nukumarū-Waitotara area. N.Z.A.A. Newsletter 5 (3):170-184.



FIGURE 3. Close up of the tool marks in the left hand corner. The scale is in 100 mm units.