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A POSSIBLE TUAHU AT LAKE KOHANGA-TE-RA,
SOUTH-EASTERN WELLINGTON

I. W. Keyes

SUMMARY

The nearly obliterated remains of a stone construction that partially surrounded an old sea stack on the western side of Lake Kohanga-te-ra is interpreted as a possible tuahu. The only recognisable surviving features that can be recorded are the remains of concentric stone alignments that formed two low walls defining a path. The site, however, may have originally been more extensive. The origin of the site possibly relates to Wairarapa Ngati-Kahungunu influence.

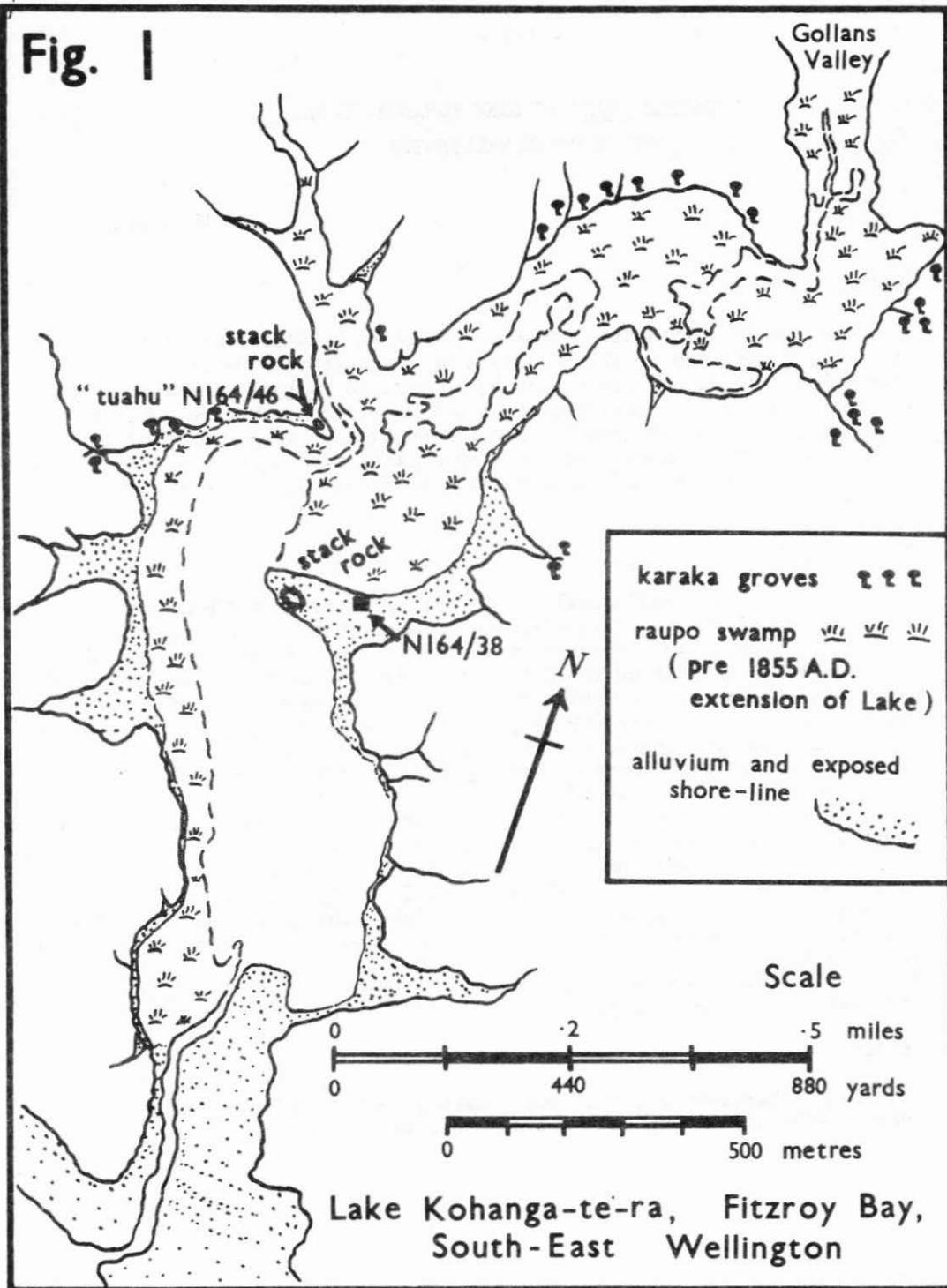
INTRODUCTION

One of the archaeologically interesting areas of the Wellington region is Fitzroy Bay. Situated to the east of the entrance of Wellington Harbour and immediately east of Pencarrow Head and extending for four miles in a broad sweep to Baring Head, Fitzroy Bay has revealed many interesting features relating to past Maori settlement of the Wellington area. Palmer (1963) presented a site survey of the Bay but did not include the upper reaches of the two lagoon areas of Lakes Kohanga-piripiri and Kohanga-te-ra that lie on the western side of the Bay. Because of their seclusion and differing natural environment from the coastal areas, these ponded stream courses were undoubtedly significant in the settlement of the area (Palmer, 1963: 127; Keyes, 1968: 103), providing valuable seasonal food resources (like eels, waterfowl and karaka berries) and also serving as possible refuge sites. The discovery of dendroglyphs at the head of Lake Kohanga-piripiri in 1959 (Keyes, 1968), however, emphasized the undoubted prehistoric significance of these lagoonal areas in Wellington prehistory. In this paper a further important archaeological feature - that of a possible tuahu - at the head of the second lagoon (Lake Kohanga-te-ra) is discussed.

SETTING

Lake Kohanga-te-ra, the "nest basking in the sun" (Palmer in Adkin, 1959: 30), occupies the lower reaches of Gollans Valley.

Fig. 1



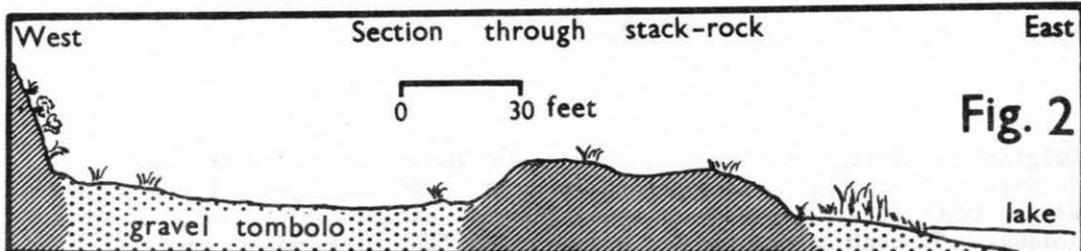


Fig. 2

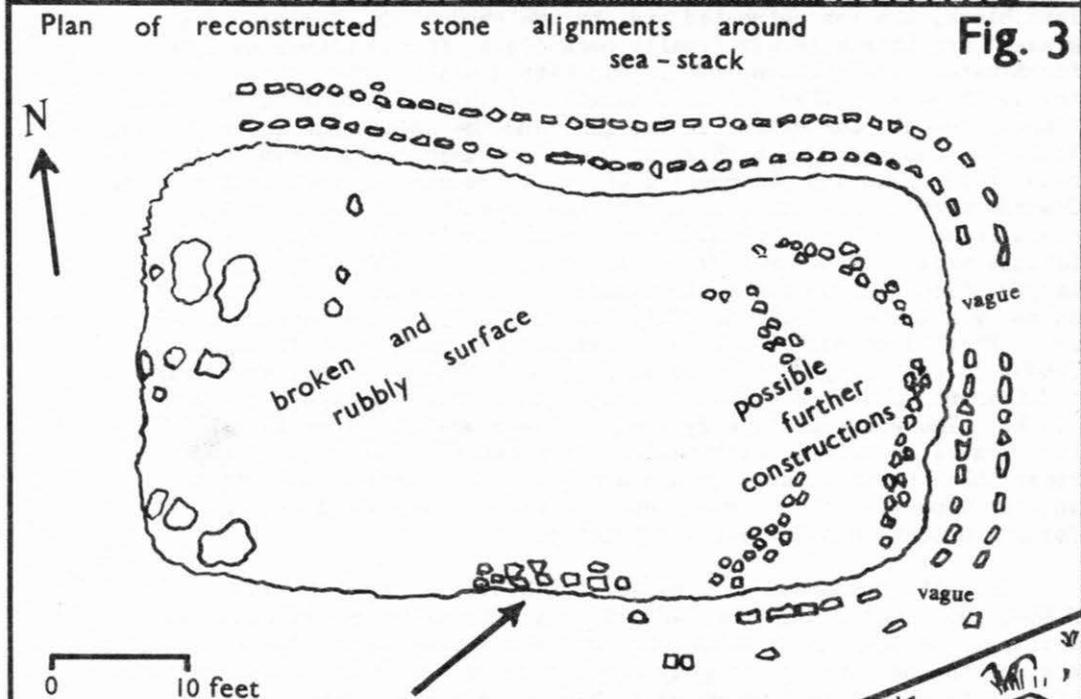
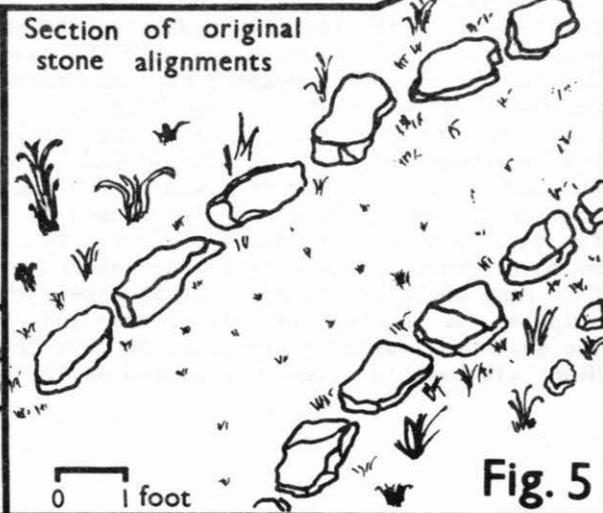
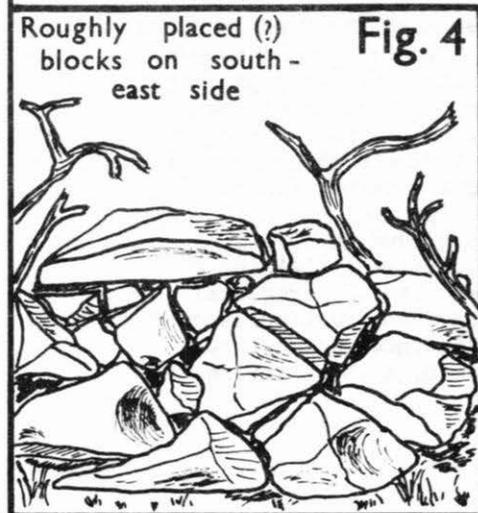


Fig. 3



Originally, through submergence, this valley became an arm of the sea (a history identical to Lake Kohanga-piripiri - Adkin, 1959: 30; Keyes, 1968: 103), allowing active cliffing to extend for a mile or so inland. Through successive tectonic uplifts that have raised this land block, the sea retreated and, by the gradual development of a gravel bar, this waterway finally became cut off and converted into a fresh-water lake (Cotton, 1921: 139) with a small outlet to the sea at the south-west. The 1855 A.D. uplift (of about 6-7 feet in this area) finally reduced the extent of the lake and the upper reaches of Gollans Valley became aggraded with alluvium. A swampy delta occupies the head of the lake and its present extent is reduced to only half a mile. Towards what is now the head of the Lake remnants of two greywacke stack rocks survive (originally spur ends) on opposite sides of the Lake as relics of the valley's sea sculptured history (Fig. 1). The larger stack rock on the eastern side of the Lake has been tied to the shore by a tombolo (Cotton, 1921, Pl. 31, f. 2). The western stack rock (Fig. 2) stands closer to the marine cut cliffs and is small (about 70 feet by 30 feet) and lower (about 12 feet high), preserving a different record of sea level height than does the higher eastern stack. The western stack is tied to the shore by a tombolo built of fine gravel as well as with fallen cliff debris. This stack rock is remarkably shattered and through weathering has eroded into broken angular blocks. It is from these weathered loosened blocks that the feature described below was constructed.

The site (recorded as N164/46, N.Z.M.S.1, inch to the mile sheet N.164, 1962 edit., Grid Ref. 422125) was originally reported to the writer in 1955 by Mr D. Noble who, while tramping around the Lake, noticed the presence of roughly aligned stone blocks on the north side of the stack rock that appeared to him to define a low wall. This observation of the feature appears not to have been the first for the position of the site coincides with the name "Old Pa" on the modern N.Z.M.S. 1:25,000 topographic map (Pencarrow Sheet N.164/6) published in 1944. A search of all the early Survey plans that cover the Pencarrow Survey District held by the Wellington District Office of the Department of Lands and Survey failed to indicate the origin of the term "Old Pa". Mr M. Jones of the Lands and Survey kindly searched the original air photographs used for producing the base map for this sheet but, in spite of many notes on ground observations being recorded by the original surveyors, no details pertaining to this name could be traced. It is likely then that the original compilers of the base map either observed stone constructions around the sea stack during their field surveys or the information that a Maori site existed there was passed on to them by a local informant.

G. L. Adkin also visited the site prior to 1959, for when discussing possible occupation at the Lake (Adkin, 1959: 70) he stated that "a visit confirmed it as one of former occupation but possessing some peculiar features". He did not enlarge on what these "peculiar features" were. It was not until 1962, then again in 1966 and 1969, that the writer visited the site, each time noting the gradual deterioration of the feature through stock action and the increasing covering growth of maruka. From observations made during these visits it can be stated with confidence that the site was not a living site. This suggestion of Adkin (1959: 79) appeared to be due to an interpretation of a series of semi-rectangular depressions beneath the cliffs immediately south of the stack rock as remains of possible hut sites. However, to the writer, these depressions as evidence of hut sites appear to be extremely doubtful. They appear to be the remains of "sheep wallows" which have dug down through the soil covering into the fine gravel and silts comprising the Lake shore margin and tombolo. These depressions, some grassed over while the more recent expose the underlying gravels, are scattered over the entire tombolo area.

DESCRIPTION

The site as it was originally observed (and reconstructed in Fig. 3) consisted of a semi-circular pathway defined by a double row of loosely placed greywacke blocks that followed the outline of the stack in horse-shoe fashion around on the gravel apron on the Lake side of the stack rock. In 1962 many of the rocks were missing or shifted out of alignment and some were overgrown but the course of the rock lineations could still be determined. Today most of the stones have now been disturbed by cattle and become overgrown or confused with freshly eroding blocks shedding from the stack rock, making the stone alignments largely unrecognisable. The north-east side is the only area that retains any blocks that can be regarded as being in place.

The rocks used for the lines were rough irregular elongate greywacke blocks about 12 to 18 inches in length obtained from the eroding sea stack. They were laid approximately lengthwise end to end (but not touching) at the base of the stack (Figs. 3, 5) to make an inner wall, and about 3.5 feet from this a second line parallel to this was laid to form an outer wall. Originally some blocks may have been double stacked in places to give a higher curbing, but this is not possible to ascertain. The total length of the walls appear to have been approximately 80 feet. From the uneven rubbly top of the sea stack strewn with loose blocks of eroded greywacke it is difficult to

determine if the site originally was more extensive. Loose piles of lichen covered rock on the eastern slope of the stack, however, could be taken to possibly suggest the remains of artificial stone frontings that define two terraces (Fig. 3). Little, however, remains that is definite.

INTERPRETATION

The site recorded in this paper could be described in archaeological terms as crescentric stone alignments or a stone bordered pathway. However, this stone feature which does not have any apparent practical purpose or lend itself to easy interpretation could be considered as a tuahu. Tuahu are described by Best (1924: 171) as being sacred places "where any religious ceremony is performed", often "marked by a heap of rough unworked stones, sometimes by one or more blocks of stone set upright....." They were the very crudest form of shrine, often being no more than a natural feature such as an out-cropping rock (Buck, 1949: 480) or a stone mound situated in a secluded area. This use by the Maori of natural features or very simple constructions explains why only a very few such sites have ever been or will be identified from any surviving archaeological field remains. The use of the term tuahu in New Zealand archaeology is admittedly interpretive rather than descriptive, but the use of the term to describe the present site does not seem inconsistent with what is known of ceremonial sites.

AGE AND ORIGIN

It is not possible to determine the precise age of the site but an approximation can be attempted. It is fairly certain that the tuahu would predate European settlement in the region. With the 1855 A.D. uplift which raised the Fitzroy Bay area some six or seven feet, the Lake level appears to have been lowered some three to four feet. Prior to this uplift, Lake Kohanga-te-ra would have been a more open waterway providing canoe access well up Gollans Valley to the extensive inland karaka groves. Access to the tuahu would have also been by water as the Lake would have lapped against the steep cliffs in many places around the shores and bush would have also been present in many of the side valleys. As the stone constructions of this site are nearly obliterated, the impression gained is that it is a feature of considerable age. There are several recorded traditional sites that are associated with this area, in particular that of Para-ngarehu and the Takapau-rangi refuge. These also became important in a consideration of the possible period of construction.

Best (1917: 163) states that Takapau-rangi was a "refuge hamlet" for women and children of Para-ngarehu pa, traditionally the early pa of Tautoki (the younger brother of Tara) in Wellington (Adkin, 1959: 62, 80, 100). Best, however, confused the position of both Para-ngarehu and the refuge site of Takapau-rangi (Adkin, 1959: 79), considering the latter to be "at the head of Waimui-o-mata, a lagoon to the eastward of the Great Harbour of Tara" (Best, 1917: 163). Adkin (1959: 79) discounted Best's "Waimui-o-mata lagoon" as a feature and convincingly associated the name with Lake Kohanga-te-ra. As the probable site of the Takapau-rangi refuge of the Para-ngarehu pa, Adkin selected the area of the sea stack containing the stone remains (Adkin, 1959: 79) described above. Unknown to Adkin, however, on the opposite side of Lake Kohanga-te-ra, on the northern side of the tombolo tying the large sea stack to the mainland, are also the remains of a group of shallow rectangular hut sites (Site N.164/38, mentioned by McFadgen, 1963: 122) with raised rims (Fig. 1). This site which is the only one around the Lake that can definitely be said to be the remains of dwellings could in fact be more readily deduced to be the Takapau-rangi refuge.

Para-ngarehu, as it was observed by William Colenso in 1853 (Bagnell and Petersen, 1948: 219, footnote 16), was an open village beneath the coastal cliffs towards the eastern end of Fitzroy Bay (Adkin, 1959: 62) and has been marked on early survey maps (e.g., Lands and Survey, Wellington District Office Plan 3070, surveyed 1869; Field book 14, p. 26, 1844 Survey). It seems unlikely that the site complex of Para-ngarehu as recorded today (N.164/28-31) could have had a lengthy history that extended back to remote times. In spite of its traditional association with the legendary settlement of Wellington by Tara and Tautoki, the site appears comparatively late. If the refuge site of Takapau-rangi at Lake Kohanga-te-ra was a functional satellite of the Para-nga-rehu settlement then this would have most likely been during times of late intertribal conflicts before European arrival.

Although it is not possible to identify which site at Lake Kohanga-te-ra may have been the possible Takapau-rangi refuge, the hut site mentioned above on the east side of the Lake (N.164/38, see Fig. 1) could be a distinct possibility. The tuahu site described in this paper does show through its stone construction a distinct link with Para-ngarehu, for stone wall units built of rough blocks at the base of and oriented parallel to the cliffs still survive (Palmer, 1963: 131). These walls and the remains at Lake Kohanga-te-ra (plus some at Orongorongo River further east)

constitute the only stone constructions known from the Wellington area and suggest a likely Wairarapa influence.

The traditional later occupants of the Fitzroy Bay area were the Ngati-Ira (possibly with Ngati-Kahunguna mixture) who held this territory until 1825-26 when they were replaced - either driven out or assimilated - by the Ngati-Awa from Taranaki. The traditional Takapau-rangi refuge could well date from 1825, the time of Ngati-Awa incursions, but the tuahu feature appears to have been constructed much earlier than this. Takapau-rangi could also have belonged to the preceding period of Ngati-Ira occupancy when contact and raids by the Ngati-Kahungunu were frequent, but it cannot be proved. This earlier period of Wairarapa Ngati-Kahungunu contact appears, however, to be the most plausible time and influence for explaining the building of the tuahu and possibly the Para-ngarehu wall as both features are closely allied to the stone wall constructions of Southern Wairarapa.

CONCLUSION

The tuahu then was a unique construction probably dating from the time of earliest Ngati-Kahungunu contacts. The stone walls at Para-ngarehu also appear to be related to this site but may have been constructed at a later period. The Para-ngarehu walls may have been rebuilt from time to time or reconstructed by the later occupiers (i.e., Ngati-Awa), which would explain the good state of preservation of one section. The tuahu site, however, appears to have been built, used, and abandoned at earlier times and not connected with the Ngati-Awa settlement. There appears little evidence to associate the tuahu site with the traditional Takapau-rangi refuge as suggested by Adkin (1959: 79). All that can be stated for this refuge is that, like the tuahu, it was concealed in a remote hidden part of inland Fitzroy Bay.

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