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A RECENTLY DISCOVERED PETROGLYPH AT OMATA, TARANAKI

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In a recent article Kelvin Day has drawn renewed attention to the petroglyphs of coastal Taranaki. Day documents ten petroglyph sites in the region between Puniho and Rahotu and mentions other examples previously found at Oaonui and Opunake (for which see, Best, 1927; Phillipps, 1948; and Griffin, 1970). Phillipps (1927) also reports another petroglyph at Otakeho, west of Opunake.

Petroglyphs found in Taranaki form a highly distinctive group. They are invariably carved - or rather pecked - on the large andesite boulders of the region. They are located in accessible situations, sometimes within earthwork fortifications, but more often in open country or on the sea shore. They employ few design elements, usually consisting only of spirals, but sometimes also including an 'eyebrow' motif, which is in effect a greatly simplified and stylised human face (see Phillipps, 1948:179; and Day, 1980: Plate 1). Spirals known to me are invariably of the double spiral form, and mostly, but not always, radiate clockwise from the centre. At most petroglyph sites there are two or more spirals.

Petroglyph motifs found in Taranaki are not unknown elsewhere in the North Island. Spirals are widely distributed, for example at Lake Taupo (Trotter and McCulloch, 1971:45), and at Raglan (Phillipps, 1962) where, however, the whole work is much more complex than in the simple Taranaki examples. A waterworn boulder from the Waitakere Ranges, west of Auckland, now in the Auckland Museum (Register Number 249), has a simple double spiral pecked on its surface, which is very reminiscent of Taranaki petroglyphs. The 'eyebrow' motif can be seen on a slab of rock from Mangakino, now on display in the Auckland Museum (Register Number 33560).

Best (1927:137) remarked that this form of petroglyph is to be found in Taranaki between the Stoney and Waingongoro Rivers. Neall (1981) has advanced a geological and geomorphological reason for this distribution in which he links the petroglyphs to the andesite boulders and lahars of the region between Okato and the Punehu Stream. As Neall points out, however, andesite boulders ideal for petroglyphs also occur elsewhere in Taranaki in rivers and on beaches, although outside the lahar landscape the parent material inland is now buried by thick accumulations of ash.

Messrs Ron O'Reilly and Alfred Brandon of New Plymouth have recently reported a petroglyph which they came across early in 1981 while

walking along the beach north of Tapuae River in the Omata district (Cover and Plate 1). The site can hardly have been unknown before as it is conspicuous to anyone travelling along the beach to New Plymouth taking the easiest route beneath the sea cliff.

The petroglyph is situated on the wave platform beneath the point of land between Wairere and Okurukuru Streams (N108/183, map reference 572878, N108 3rd edition). It is on an andesite boulder about 8 m from the base of the 10 m high sea cliff. The boulder presents a flat surface about 130 x 40 cm and is 70 cm deep. The decorated surface is inclined to the south-west. The petroglyph consists of two double spirals both radiating clockwise from the centre, the centres of which are 55 cm apart. The larger (north-easterly) spiral is 33-36 cm, and the smaller is 15-21 cm in diameter. The total length of rock used is about 80 cm. A difficult area of pecking adjacent to the larger spiral may represent an 'eyebrow' motif.

The Omata example extends the known range of Taranaki petroglyphs of this form north of Stoney River (see Fig. 1), although such petroglyphs may have been known in the Omata district in the past (see Day, 1980:114). The new find falls neatly within the traditional territory of the Taranaki tribe (see Smith, 1910:127), to which almost all others also belong, and thus makes more sense of the known distribution in human terms. Indeed, the lack of petroglyphs north of Stoney River, while readily explained by geology, always seemed anomalous in the Taranaki cultural landscape. More such finds might be anticipated.

The meaning or function of these markings need not always remain a mystery. It is commonly held that they are territorial boundary markers at a tribal or sub-tribal level (see, for example, Phillipps, 1948:180; and Day, 1980:114). Other suggestions are that they mark places where divination took place (Best, 1927:138-139), or where men fell in battle (Phillipps, 1948:180; and Day, 1980:114). Other roles also may be identified. Nor is there any apparent reason why the petroglyphs should not have had more than one function, collectively or even individually.

From the repeated occurrence of a very few simple motifs it seems to me likely that the Taranaki petroglyphs convey information. The number of times two or more spirals occur suggests that this information concerns a relationship between the subjects represented by the spirals. One suggested function in which this might be explained is in the use of these petroglyphs as territorial markers. The Omata site, for example, may convey, through the relationship of the spirals, the relationship of the groups living north and south along the coast and in its hinterland. The simplicity and size of the spirals and

associated marks may carry information on the territories, or on the relative seniority of the groups, or on the relationship of their leading lines of descent. The Warea site N118/71 (Day, 1980:115), with its two decorated rocks 6 m apart in the inter-tidal zone, may give a similar type of information.

Other petroglyphs also may have something to say concerning the relationship of people to each other and to the land. Those which are located within earthwork fortifications, for example, may be statements of possession - which need not rule out their use as sites for divination or other purposes. If, indeed, the size of spirals and their relationship to other spirals and motifs does convey information concerning relationships between people or groups and people and the land, then a considerable prospect is opened for the interpretation of Taranaki petroglyphs. What is needed is a thorough catalogue of all known sites and a very close description of their various motifs, with precise data on aspect, orientation and the archaeology and topography of their location. The variety of motifs and their spatial relation may then tell us something of perceived relationships in the past among people of the Taranaki coast.

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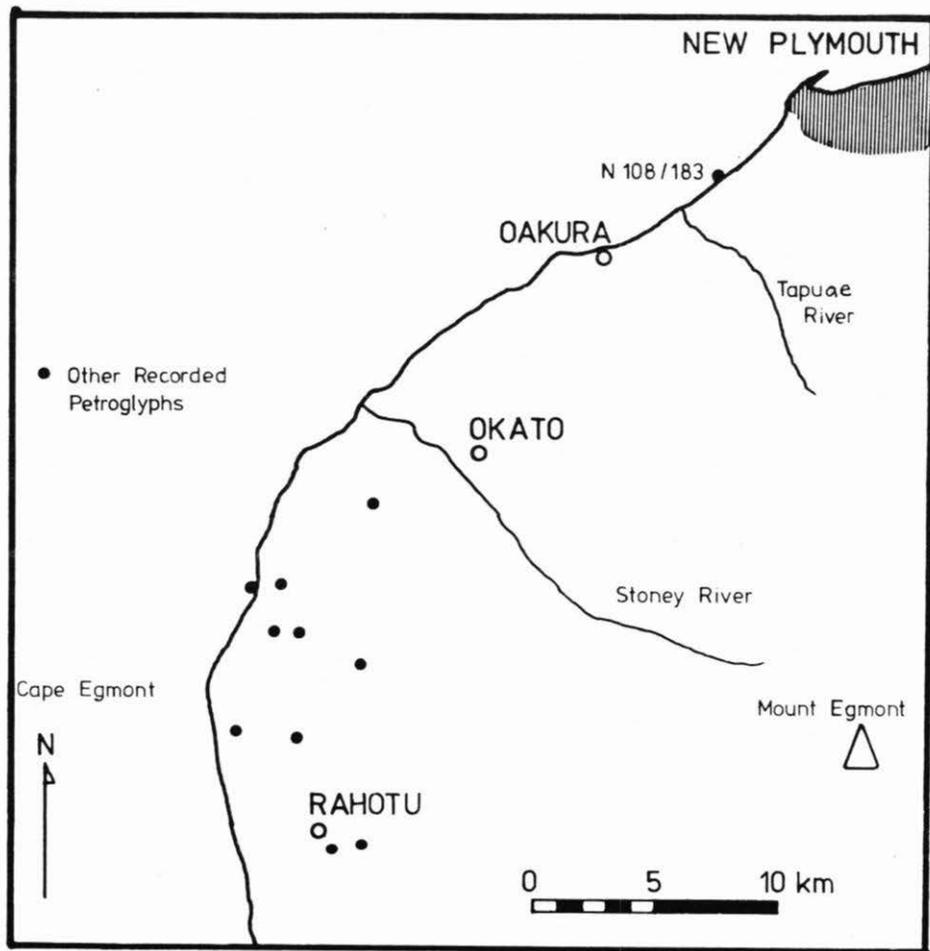
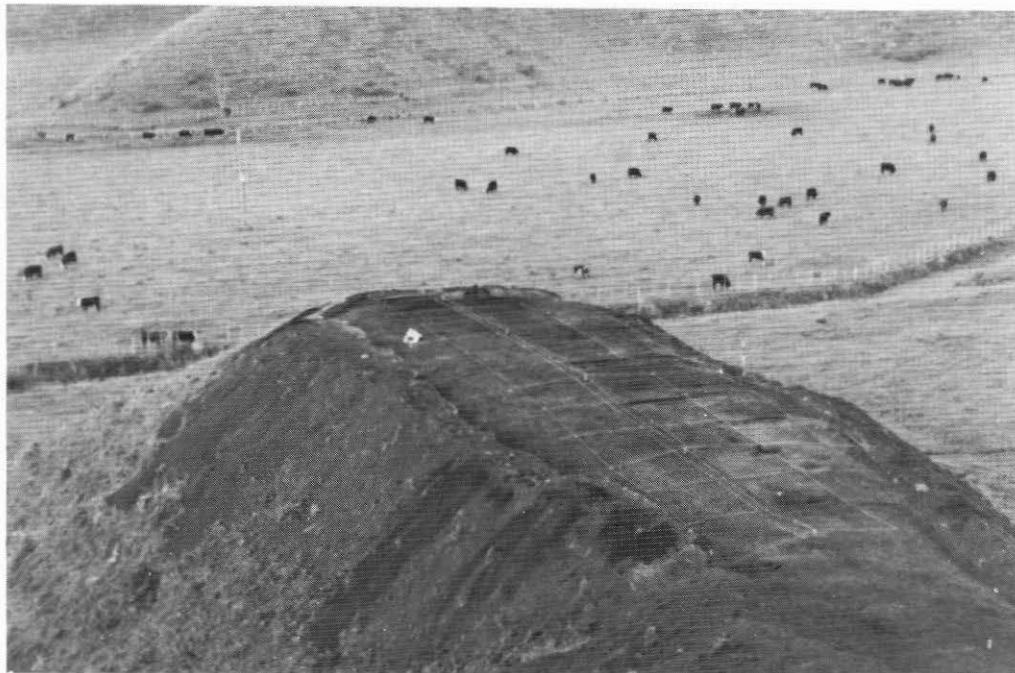


FIGURE 1. N108/183 and other petroglyphs of the Taranaki coast.



KAWERAU EXCAVATIONS Plate 5. N77/606 after removal of Tarawera Ash.



OMATA PETROGLYPH Plate 1. N108/183 close-up.