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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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A WHAREPUNI IN THE WHIRINAKI STATE FOREST:
REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT N95/32

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The site is a group of terraces and one possible pit to the south of a knoll in the low rolling hills west of the Whirinaki River (Fig. 1). West of the site, hills rise to the ridge overlooking the Kaingaroa Plains. These rolling hills have been the first areas converted to exotics (in this case, Douglas fir) in the Whirinaki State Forest. The trees are now 20 years old.

The site was first noted by Nevin and Nevin (n.d.) in a report to the New Zealand Forest Service, Rotorua Conservancy, and graded "B" (a holding category) under the Historic Places Trust's site preservation policy. The site had suffered some damage from Douglas fir growing on it, and also from feral pigs.

The present investigation was conducted to determine whether sufficient structural, material culture, dating and ecological evidence remained to justify preservation of the site or a fuller excavation. The investigation was not intended to be a full-scale recovery in plan of evidence at the site.

Excavation

The terrace chosen for excavation had been cut into a gentle slope (Fig. 2). The down-slope sides of the terrace consisted of low banks, and the southern end was open. Recent pig rooting had broken down parts of these banks and exposed obsidian flakes and some river-worn stones. Douglas fir grew in and around the site, and light was limited.

Approximately 30% of the area of the terrace was excavated, principally in a length-wise and a cross-wise strip, each 1 x 4 m.

Stratigraphy. A lens of black humus (Layer 1) lay within the banks (Fig. 4). The banks and the southern 'open' end of the terrace, underlying the black humus, were composed of a brown or yellow mottled fill (Layer 2). This was deeper at the south end of the terrace and petered out towards its centre. Beneath the fill was a compact yellow subsoil with occasional sub-surface pockets of loose pumice gravel.

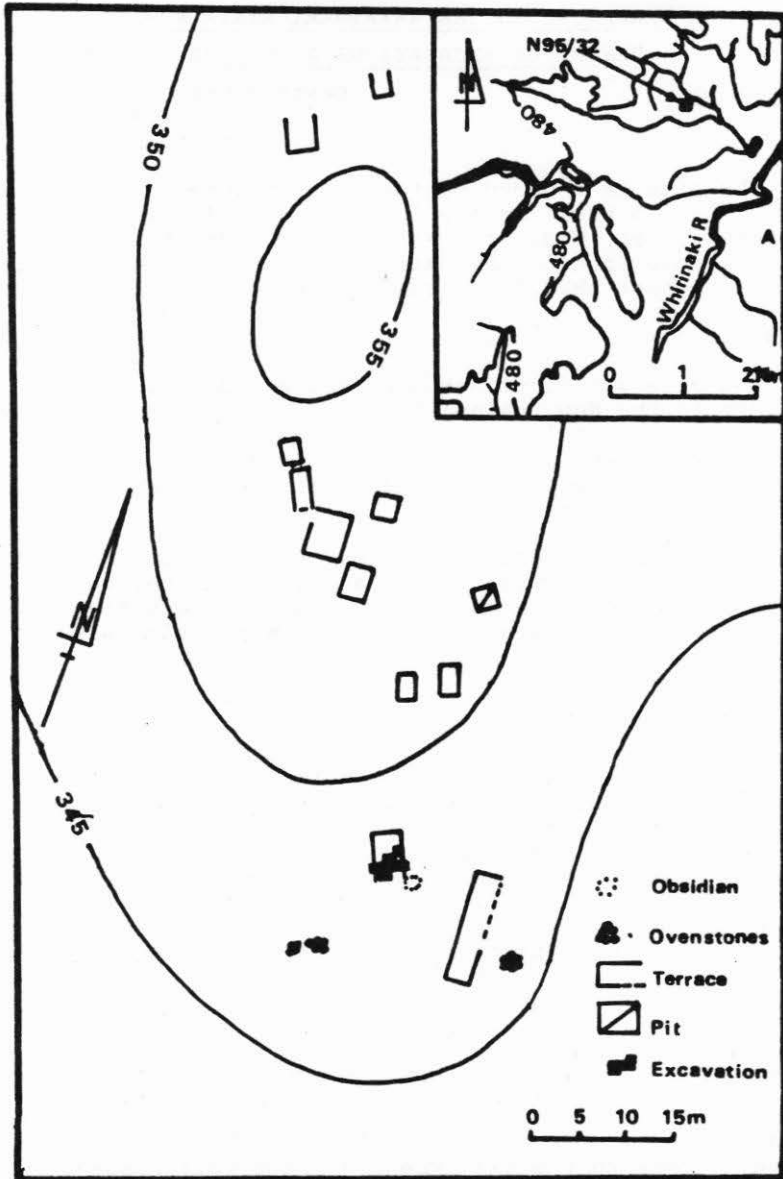


FIGURE 1. Plan and location of N95/32.

Layer	Description	Interpretation
Surface	Whole and partly rotted fir needles up to 2 cm thick.	Recent deposit of last ten years as fir closed out light and prevented growth of bracken.
Layer 1	A lens of black humus containing patches of charcoal cultural material, and infrequent grains of pumice gravel, up to 10 cm deep in centre of terrace, petering out over the banks. The interface with the layer beneath was uneven and disturbed. Fir roots up to 3 mm in diameter.	A fern soil, formed since abandonment of the site by wash of organic matter and occasional firing of the bracken. Incorporated the original deposits of the house floor, and has been periodically turned over by pigs.
Layer 2	A lens of mottled yellow brown loam, principally pumice origin. Occasional fern root casts, constituting the banks and southern portion of the site.	Fill from the excavation of the terrace. Occasionally disturbed and mixed with Layer 1 and Layer 3 material by pigs.
Layer 3	A compact yellow pumice sand with occasional fern root casts. Pockets of loose pumice gravel.	Original subsoil of the site.

TABLE 1. Stratigraphy.

Cultural material

Obsidian chips were found in Layer 1 in the southern squares. Obsidian surface - collected by the Nevins in 1978 is currently being analysed for source. The size, distribution and location of the obsidian flakes is noted in Table 2. One of the larger pieces had an edge that had been unifacially modified with some striation perpendicular to the edge. Use as a scraper seems likely.

A piece of kokowai (red ochre) approximately 5 mm in diameter was found in Square 2.

Structure (Fig. 3). Layer 1 contained patches of charcoal localised on the interior slopes of the banks in Squares 3

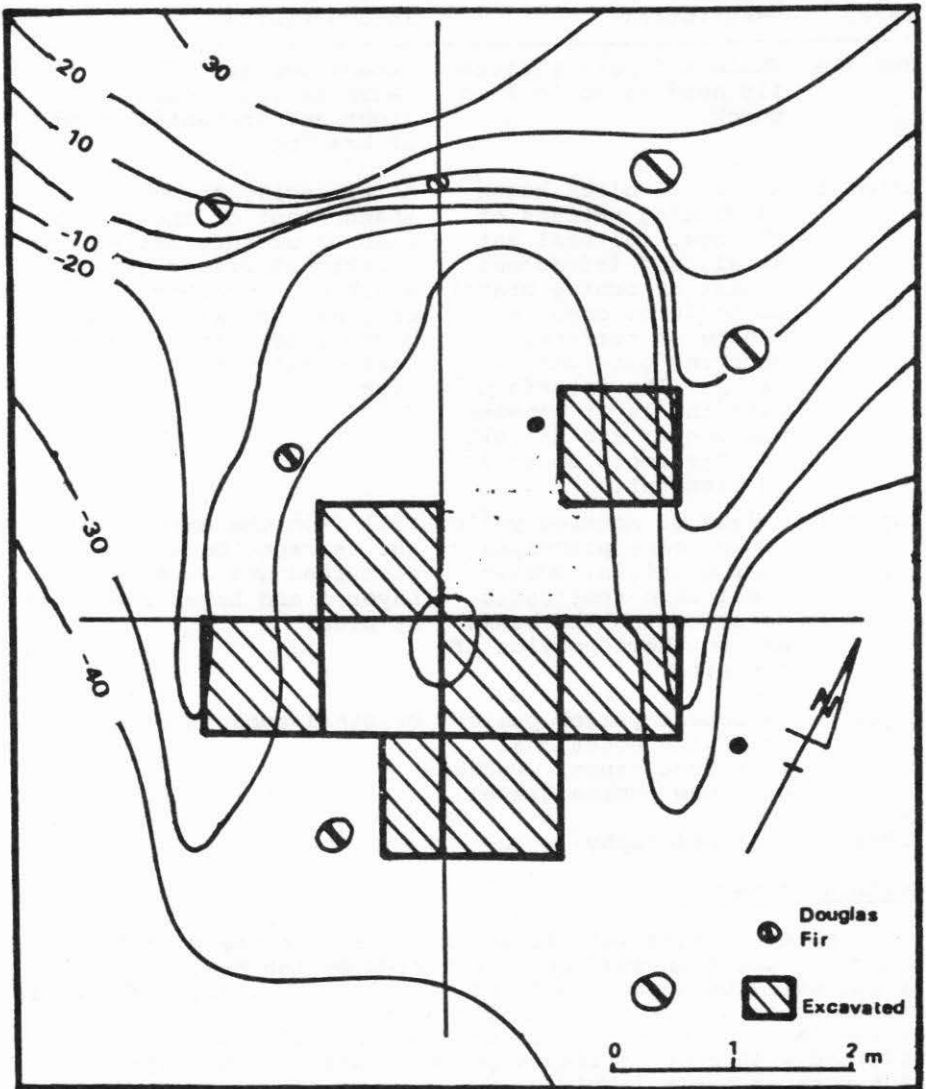


FIGURE 2. Plan of excavation at N95/32.

Max. dimension	No. of pieces	Square	No. of pieces
3-4 cm	3	1	3
2-3 cm	8	2	8
1-2 cm	9	6	8
1 cm	0	7	1

TABLE 2. Size and location of obsidian flakes (n = 20).

and 6. Excavation of the bank fill beneath Layer 1 uncovered lines of charcoal lumps, some with unburnt surfaces. These are presumed to be remnants of stakes or slab posts burnt off to ground level; the sub-surface wood then rots, leaving a characteristic brown surface on the charcoal. On the eastern bank in Square 3 a slab-post butt was recovered complete (11 x 4.5 cm). Beneath this was a post hole 22 cm deep.

On the surface of Layer 2 in Squares 1 and 2, two post-holes were detected. One was approximately on the centre line of the terrace (dimensions 22 x 7 x 45 cm deep). This is presumed to represent a slab post (possibly truncated lenticular in section) supporting a ridge pole. The long axis of the second was in line with that of the first and separated from it by 57 cm. This hole was 12 x 4.5 x 22 cm deep. Charcoal from the post butts has been identified as from the Podocarpus totara - hallii group (Molloy, pers. comm.).

In Square 7 stones had been placed in a three-sided rectangle and into the surface beneath Layer 1. Shallow depressions also occurred in this surface, corresponding with the outline of a presumed fireplace approximately 80 x 60 cm in its external dimensions. This fireplace was clearly offset from the centre line of the structure. No ash or charcoal was found in the fireplace.

Overall, it would appear that the terrace was occupied by a structure enclosing an area 3.16 m wide and between 4.3 and 4.6 m long. Earth banks extend a further 60-70 cm outside the enclosing post-holes. Adopting the model of the wharepuni (Firth, 1926), the overall size of the structure, taking into account eaves overlapping the walls by up to 80 cm, would have been approximately 5 m wide by 5 m long. Heavy slab posts of totara supported the ridge pole and the eaves, and structural rigidity was gained by digging and driving inflexible slab posts deep into the ground. Height of the ridge pole could have been between 1.5 and 2.5 m and the eaves considerably less. Stakes backed on the outside by dirt up to 50 cm deep may have formed the walls, with the roof overlapping the walls and the dirt.

Although the evidence is incomplete, a structure similar to the wharepuni reported by Prickett (1979) and Leach (1979) is consistent with the evidence found on this site.

Economic evidence

A single carbonised tawa berry (*Beilschmiedia tawa*) was found in Layer 1, Square 3. The use of this tree fruit, especially valuable to "those tribes dwelling on high lands of the interior ... and unable to produce much in the way of cultivated food supplies", has been fully documented (Best, 1942:41-44).

A bulk sample of Layer 1 was sorted by water flotation and searched for land snails. None was found.

Dating

The evidence so far discussed, obsidian, kokowai, and the structure, are persistent elements of Maori culture, known to have occurred in the twelfth century A.D. (Prickett, 1979) and lasting well into the nineteenth century. The Layer 1 soil build-up could be relatively recent, say 100 years, more or less.

Independent evidence for extensive occupation of the Whirinaki valley early in the nineteenth century is well known. Such occupation would have been aided by potato cultivation in an area where kumara cultivation would have been difficult for climatic reasons. Conclusive evidence for nineteenth century occupation in the form of iron artefacts or pottery was not found.

On these grounds, an early nineteenth century date for the site seems likely but an even earlier date cannot be ruled out.

Condition of the excavated site

Surface disturbance and the condition of structural features, e.g., displaced fireplace stones, suggests a degree of pig-rooting. Perhaps 60% of the excavated site remains.

The origin of Layer 1, containing portable cultural and ecological evidence, poses difficulties. The charcoal, carbonised seeds, etc., that it may contain, unless definitely associated with the wharepuni, could be debris from the fired vegetation (manuka, bracken) covering this small, shallow basin. Such independent evidence of the covering of the post-occupation is of limited value since similar cover may be inferred from older aerial photographs.

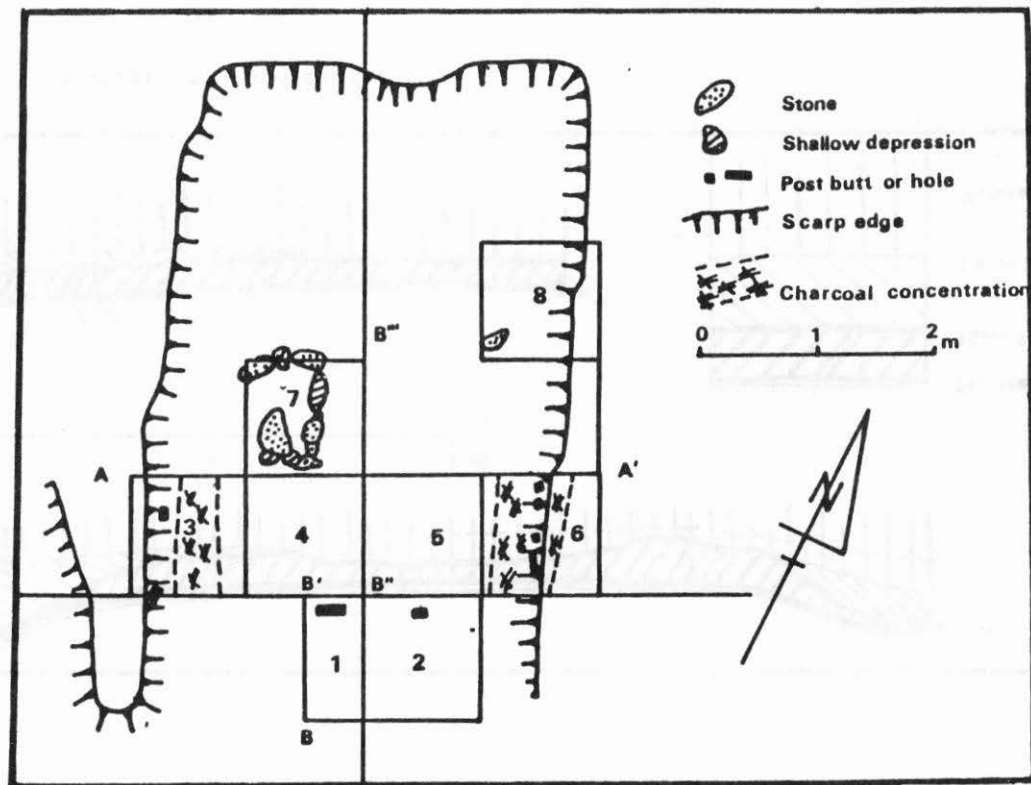


FIGURE 3. Results of excavation.

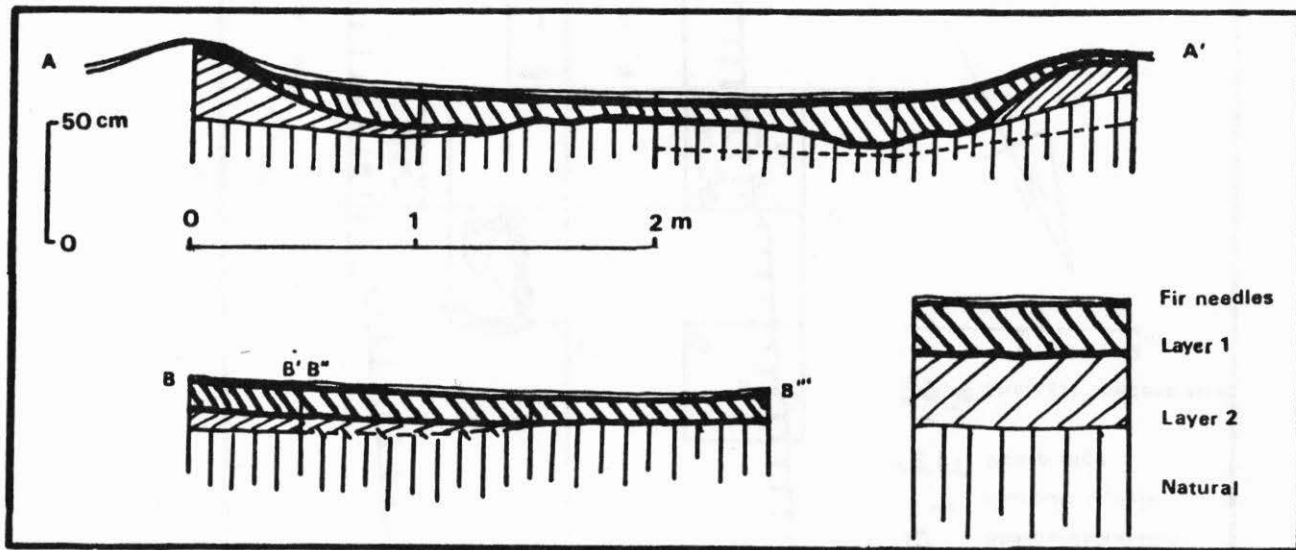


FIGURE 4. Stratigraphy (see Figure 3).

In summary then, perhaps 60% of the structure is retrievable; 90% of the portable material culture remains; and the ecological associations of the site (based on archaeological evidence) are doubtful. N95/32 is, nevertheless, of considerable interest as a rare example of an undefended settlement in this area.

Conclusions

Excavation of a partly rimmed terrace in the Whirinaki Valley revealed a rectangular structure made of slab posts with earth walls, a fireplace and a porch. The structure probably dates to the eighteenth or nineteenth century and is similar to the traditional wharepuni. Economic and cultural evidence included obsidian, red ochre (kokowai), and a single carbonised tawa kernal.

The site is part of N95/32 and has had Douglas fir growing on it for some 20 years but has remained substantially undisturbed. Further investigation of the whole site (N95/32), a complex of terraces, is warranted.

Acknowledgements

Glenys and David Nevin assisted with excavation of the site. The interest and concern about archaeological sites of the Forest Service staff in Minginui is appreciated.

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