



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



This document is made available by The New Zealand
Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY, WAIHOU RIVER, TIROHIA TO TE AROHA

Neville A. Ritchie
Regional Archaeologist
Department of Conservation
Hamilton

In September 1991 the Waikato Regional Council (Waihou Valley scheme office, Te Aroha) commissioned the Regional Archaeologist of the Department of Conservation, Hamilton, to conduct a survey along the banks of the Waihou River between Tirohia and Te Aroha (Fig. 1).

The fieldwork was undertaken by the writer assisted by Warren Gumbley on 3 and 17 October 1991. It involved contacting the landowners in the area and walking the true right (east) bank of the Waihou between Tirohia and Te Aroha, a distance of about 20 river-kilometres. Several areas where earthworks are proposed as part of the scheme (detailed on mapping provided by the Waikato Regional Council (drawing 175, Sheets 1 to 4; see Fig. 1)) were specifically examined.

Some areas where earthworks are planned on the left (west) bank were not walked over because:

- (a) they were clearly visible from the right bank;
- (b) most of the work on the west side of the river involves raising or modifying an existing stopbank.

The Waihou River separates the foothills of the Coromandel-Kaimai range, which borders the eastern side of the Hauraki Plain, from the low-lying Piako area to the west. The western side is lower, lacks relief, and prior to European drainage operations (which commenced in 1908), was swampy and flood-prone.

For the most part the surveyed terrain on the east bank is relatively flat with small areas of low relief. The ground cover now is predominantly improved grass-clover pasture; consequently, ground visibility is generally good. Originally kahikatea forest covered the poorly drained parts of the Hauraki Plains, whilst the vegetation on the sloping eastern flanks consisted of dicotylous (broadleaf) podocarp forest, including small stands of kauri. By the time of European settlement most of the lowland vegetation was characterised by remnant stands of kahikatea and scrub associations (Wilson 1980: 12). Small remnant patches of kahikatea and cabbage trees are a feature of the survey area today. Crack willow is now the predominant riverbank vegetation, but most of the riverbank is open in this sector.

The soils are primarily composed of meadow and gley soils which are susceptible to pugging, and more recent alluvium confined to the river and stream banks (Griffiths and Harris 1972: 6). The alluvium is composed largely of rhyolitic volcanic ash carried by the Waihou River from the upper catchment slopes and deposited as levees. Both soil types are highly fertile where they

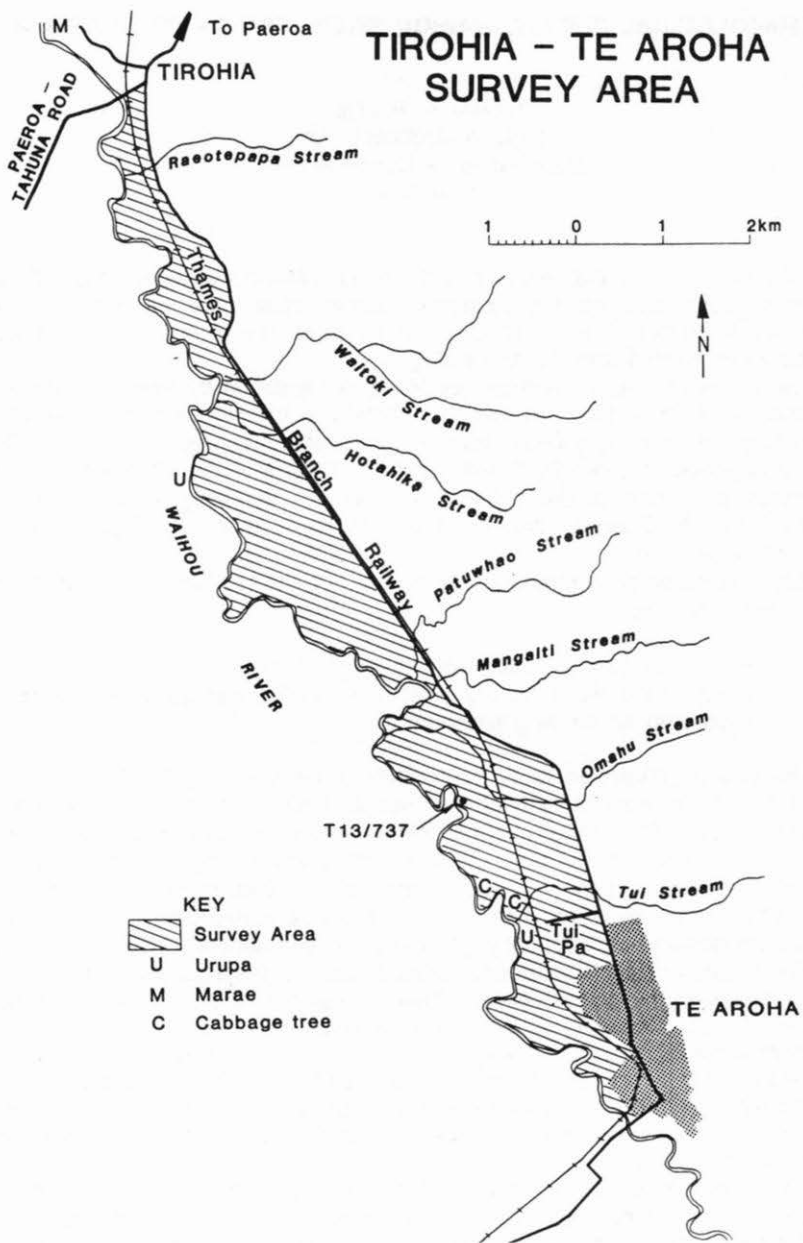


Fig. 1. Tirohia-Te Aroha survey area.

are elevated and adequately drained (ibid.).

A number of small entrenched stream-channels (3-5 m deep) bisect the floodplain before entering the Waihou. These include the Owihakatuna, Raeotepapa, Waitoki, Hotahika, Patuwahao, Mangaiti, Omahu-Waharau and Tui streams as well as several excavated drains.

DISCUSSION

Only one site was found in the low-lying areas adjacent to the river between Tirohia and Te Aroha. In addition two urupa are known to exist (map sheet T13 GR 445102 west bank, not visited; and at GR 483049 east bank). The site in question is a somewhat dubious 2-pit feature (possibly Maori storage pits, recorded as T13/757), which may prove to be of much more recent origin if they are specifically tested. The pits, located at GR 065476, are 5 m (1.5 x 2.5 x 0.7 m deep) and 10 m (4 x 2 x 0.7 m deep) respectively distant from the east bank of the Waihou. Despite their depth both are poorly defined. The larger pit is 'L' shaped.

Two slightly raised areas of hummocky ground surmounted by patches of cabbage trees (T13 GR 478056 and 482053) were carefully examined for evidence of pre-European occupation. Despite the common association of cabbage tree groves and Maori settlement, there was no visible evidence of pre-European activity in these areas.

Some time was spent with Mr Sonny McCaskill, kaumatua-custodian of the Tui Pa/marae (Tui Rd) talking about Maori settlement in the area and the nearby urupa (burial ground GR 483049) on the terrace above the river. Mr McCaskill was unaware of any former Maori settlements in the immediate area (and particularly in the riverside areas where it is proposed to build stopbanks). He said the marae, meeting house and urupa were established around about 1900. The urupa is still used. Although the terrace on which the urupa is located would have been a good settlement site he believed it was never occupied prior to the establishment of the urupa. The ditch-like features around the urupa were excavated in more recent times to facilitate drainage (McCaskill pers. comm.). Henderson and Bartrum (1913: 10) reported small groups of Maori residing within the survey area at Tui Pa, Mangaiti, Waitoki and Tirohia (there is another small marae at Tirohia, immediately to the north of the survey area).

Considering the high density of pre-European sites in the lower reaches of the Waihou (over 200 recorded sites: see Green and Green 1963; Best 1979; Crosby and Loughlin 1991; 1992), this stretch of the river appears to be remarkably bereft of evidence of early Maori occupation or subsequent early European activities. In particular, there is a virtual, if not a complete, absence of the pre-European raised shell 'areas' or mounds (and associated cultural midden deposits) which are such a feature of the old riverbanks and stream channels in the lower Waihou (cf. Crosby and Loughlin 1991; 1992). The absence of reports of artefact finds by landowners in the survey area also points to low density pre-European occupation of the area.

Historical records, however, indicate that the Waihou River above Paeroa

was exploited: 'For twelve miles above that point [Paeroa] the course of the Waihou, like that of the Piako, was impeded [for navigation] by [Maori] eel weirs. As well as seven of these obstacles there were many rocks and snags - the stumps and jagged limbs of an ancient forest' (Vennell and More 1976: 80). A distance of 12 miles (19.3 km) extends well into the Tirohia-Te Aroha section of the Waihou River. Today there is no trace of the eel weirs and snags. They were initially cleared between 1873 and 1878 by the well-to-do Matamata based settler J.C. Firth, to facilitate access for his steamers to Stanley Landing (a point about 25 km upstream of Te Aroha: *ibid.*: 80).

It is not readily apparent why there is so little evidence of transient, temporary, or longer term pre-European Maori occupation along the Waihou in this area. Perhaps it is to be found further back in the foothills rather than along what are likely to have been swampy or flood-prone river margins (especially on the western side) in pre-European times. The surveyed area is between 49 to 69 river-kilometres from the mouth of the Waihou. This section of the river is above the tidal reach and distant from marine resources, which may also have deterred substantial settlement in this area. On the other hand, the soils, topography, and remnant native vegetation do not appear to differ substantially from those found in the more intensively occupied riverine stretches of the lower Waihou (i.e. further towards the Hauraki Gulf).

Another factor that may partially account for the lack of Maori occupation evidence between Te Aroha and Tirohia is that this land appears to have been a frontier or disputed area between the Ngati Haua to the south and the Ngati Maru and other tribes of the Thames district. The antiquity of this dispute is uncertain, but it came to a head in 1869 when Europeans, in part motivated by the desire to prospect for gold in the hills behind Te Aroha, sought to acquire the Aroha Block (the land on either side of the Waihou around the base of Te Aroha Mountain). Both groups declared it was their land, but eventually a court ruling delivered in 1871 decided that the Ngati Haua had failed to prove their title to the Aroha Block and that the Thames tribes had a right to the certificate which they claimed (Vennell and More 1976: 75). It is possible that open or covert inter-tribal competition for the land or its resources during the latter part of the pre-European era may have discouraged much settlement between Te Aroha and Tirohia because it would have been at the frontier or interface between the tribal groups. The area may have served to some degree as a sparsely occupied (and possibly relatively impoverished) buffer zone between the tribes. The eel weirs described above were obviously substantial, but whether they were large enough to curtail Maori waka (canoe) movements up and down this section of the river is uncertain.

To conclude, whatever the reasons for the dearth of pre-European sites along the Waihou's eastern margins between Tirohia and Te Aroha, I believe after inspecting the area and talking to the people on the land that the absence of archaeological sites (Maori and European) in this sector is real rather than taphonomic factors or vegetation masking the sites and making them difficult to locate. In particular, there seems to be a virtual, if not a complete, absence of the marine shell-mound sites which are so numerous along the lower reaches of the river. This being the case, the field evidence reveals a remarkable

difference between the nature and intensity of pre-European occupation along the riverbanks of the lower Waihou and that found in the middle reaches of the river system about Te Aroha.

The absence of early European sites in the survey area is more readily understood. Until the turn of the century farming was hampered by two major technical difficulties, viz swamp drainage (or lack thereof) and establishing and maintaining good quality permanent pasture on both dry and swampy land. Until these problems were largely overcome this century there was little incentive for Europeans to settle along the Waihou between Tirohia and Te Aroha.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to: Warren Gumbley for assistance with the fieldwork; Scott Fowlds and David Ray of the Waikato Regional Council for setting up the survey and assistance with mapping, contacts, etc; the many landowners who provided assistance and useful information about the terrain, vegetation, drainage, and other land modifications over time; and Sonny McCaskill for the information cited above.

REFERENCES

- Green, R.C. and Green, K. 1963. Classic and early European sites of the Hauraki Plains. *NZAA Newsletter* 6 (1): 27-34.
- Best, S. 1979. Site Survey Report, Lower Waihou River, Hauraki Plains. Report prepared for the Hauraki Catchment Board and NZ Historic Places Trust.
- Crosby, A. and Loughlin, S. 1991. Site Survey Report: West Bank of the Lower Waihou River. Report prepared for the NZ Historic Places Trust.
- _____. 1992. Site Survey Report: East Bank of the Lower Piako River. Report prepared for the NZ Historic Places Trust.
- Griffiths, C.D. and Harris, R.W. 1972. *Waihou Valley Scheme Mountain Zone Report*. Report for Hauraki Catchment Board and Regional Water Board.
- Henderson, J. and Bartrum, J.A. 1913. The geology of the Te Aroha subdivision, Hauraki. *NZ Geological Survey Bulletin* 16 (new series).
- Vennell, C.W. and More, D. 1976. *Land of the Three Rivers: A Centennial History of Piako County*. Wilson & Horton, Auckland.
- Wilson, A.D. 1980. Soils of Piako County, North Island, New Zealand. *NZ Soil Survey Report* 39. DSIR, Wellington.