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DWELLING SITES OR STORE PITS

by V.F. Fisher

The question of the function of the numerous pits visible on old pa sites has received much attention of recent years. Broadly, the majority are either rectangular or round, but in this brief article I propose to focus attention on the rectangular pits alone. There have been verbal statements at conferences of the Association that the rectangular pit was used for storing the kumara, or sweet potato, others have stated that it indicated a dwelling site.

I plan two things in this statement : first, to offer some thoughts on the function of the rectangular pit; and second, to quote from early observers in New Zealand, who give of course evidence of the pits as found in the Classic Maori culture. It is recognised that these pits vary considerably in size and depth: they may be 12 feet long by 10 feet wide (or even less) to perhaps 30 feet long by 18 feet wide. The depth varies from one foot to perhaps 4 feet. In examining these surface pits today, many are still well defined, but some show only as faint rectangular depressions due to weathering and erosion. Frequently a field examination of a terrace may at first glance reveal no evidence of the pits but by viewing the terrace from some distance at an acute angle, the outlines become plainly discernible. While the final answer to the function of the rectangular pit will be decided by spade and trowel, and it may well be that a minority prove to be storage pits, I think that the great majority will be classed as dwelling sites. In support of this idea, let us consider the terraces of that very large pa Maungakiekie or One Tree Hill situated on the Auckland Isthmus. An examination reveals numerous rectangular pits scattered over the many terraces. If all observable pits were storage pits, the question immediately arises, if so much space was taken up with storage pits, where then did the several thousand occupants of the pa dwell? This same question could be applied to many other pa both large and small.

Another thought refers to the siting of pits. A study of any pa site on the Auckland Isthmus will produce evidence of rectangular pits on terraces with a northerly aspect. These would certainly be used as dwelling sites in order to obtain not only full benefit from the sun, but also shelter from the cold southerlies. It is hardly likely that the Maori with full appreciation of both factors would relegate such northerly sites solely to the storage of food.

Now let us quote a few instances from early observers. Thomson (1859, p. 208) mentions the fact that the dwelling was rectangular in

shape because he records dimensions as follows: length 15 feet, breadth inside 13 feet. More importantly he follows this up by writing "but there are other huts, excavated a foot below the ground, for sleeping in during cold weather".

Colenso, who travelled extensively and made many notes, mentions in two separate publications the sunken floor. Thus he writes (Colenso, 1868, p. 349) of the dwellings: "In shape they were generally a parallelogram.....In size they were from one which would contain with ease a hundred men, to one which would only contain six. The floors were rarely ever raised above, oftener sunk into, the ground". Again Colenso (1894 p.367) referring to the village of Onepoto on the shores of Lake Waikaremoana, which he visited in December, 1841, writes: "Their houses are large and warm, and curiously constructed to keep out the severity of the winter's cold, each being built over a large pit or trench the full size of the house. Thus a house that on the outside appears to be only 3 ft. or 4 ft. high is, when you descend into it, from 5 ft. to 7 ft. in height".

Richard Taylor (1870 p. 500) writes: "The principal houses are called whare-puni or warm houses;...they are usually sunk one or two feet in the earth....."

Meade (1871 p.14), referring to Maketu in the Bay of Plenty, mentions that houses "are usually of an oblong shape". Later (p.15) he writes "They have also a kind of whare specially designed for cold weather, which is sunken some three or four feet below the surface, the eaves of the roof alone being on a level with the ground".

All the above writers, quoting from their own observations provide valuable evidence of the use of the rectangular pit for dwelling sites.

References:

- Colenso, W. 1868. 'On the Maori Races of New Zealand.' Trans. N.Z. Inst., Vol. I, Second Edition, p. 349.
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