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EXCAVATION OF AN OPEN SETTLEMENT SITE NEAR WHANGAMATA

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In February 1986 a small open settlement site, T12/617 (grid reference 6220 4385) near Whangamata was excavated (Fig.1). Situated approximately 70 m above sea level and 1.2 km inland from Whangamata Harbour, T12/617 consisted of five terraces and shell midden on an east facing slope overlooking a very steep-sided gully.

The site, along with several others, had been exposed after trees were logged from an area in Tairua Forest. T12/617 was the most intact but from its surface condition was not considered worth protecting to be managed through the next tree crop rotation. A small-scale excavation to investigate the sub-surface deposits was carried out (Permit No. 1986/6) as a management related exercise to obtain information on open settlement sites around Whangamata Harbour.

Tairua Forest occupies much of the land around the margins of Whangamata Harbour and from limited surveys carried out (Coster and Johnston, 1975; Furey and Williams, 1979; Furey 1987b it is known that a large number of sites exist in areas scheduled for logging in the next few years.

Research proposal

T12/617 was similar to the majority of sites recorded in the forest blocks around Whangamata Harbour. These generally consist of several terraces and shell midden on steep slopes some distance from the harbour edge. Surface evidence for storage pits is uncommon.

Sites identified for protection and management have generally been pa. Only in one compartment (125) of the forest, on the eastern side of Whangamata Harbour, were open settlement sites recommended for preservation. Compartment 125, in contrast to the majority of forest blocks surveyed, was still vegetated and the sites in good condition. This may have contributed to a more balanced management strategy being proposed.

More than thirty recorded open settlement sites in Tairua Forest have been modified in the last twelve years without any investigations to assess what the sites represented, or how they contributed to the history of Maori settlement in the area. With an increasing amount of forestry activity in the area it was apparent that investigations of open settlement sites around Whangamata Harbour were necessary to understand settlement in the localised harbour environs.

With a renewed interest in open settlement sites in recent years it was timely to set up a proposal to investigate sites as they were exposed (Furey, 1987a). It has been apparent for some time that there are different types of open settlement or undefended sites. These have varied in size and types of features encountered. The majority of the sites excavated have been in the larger size class, generally with storage pits (for example Kauri Point and Hamlins Hill). More recently reported results from Pouerua in the inland Bay of Islands (Sutton, 1983 and 1984) have added to information on the more formal type of open settlement sites.

The sites around Whangamata provided the opportunity to redress an imbalance, and to concentrate on describing and interpreting the very small and probably very short-term settlements. These small sites are numerous in the area around Whangamata Harbour and make up a significant proportion of sites recorded.

At a wider level the research proposal would also contribute to ascertaining the relationship between the East Polynesian-type beach settlements and the hill settlement sites which are presumed to be younger in age. Several Archaic-type sites are situated in the Whangamata area and two of these have been investigated: T12/2 (Allo, 1972) and T12/16 (Jolly, 1978, and Furey, in prep.). The information from these sites, on its own, has contributed little to an understanding of settlement of the area. Questions relating to changes in landscape exploitation, and conservatism or change in settlement layout through time remain unanswered.

A project investigating open settlement sites as they are exposed by logging activities will help to fill out the picture of settlement, both inter and intra-site, over the 6-700 years of Maori occupation around Whangamata Harbour.

With this broad research design as a basis of work, it has been recommended to Historic Places Trust and Timberlands Forestry Corporation that a sample of the sites exposed by logging activities in Tairua Forest be investigated. This project will, very importantly, also provide the data on which to make more balanced decisions on the future of sites in this part of Tairua Forest, and also reflect on site management for the area as a whole.

Soils

The soil in this area is defined as Whangamata Gravelly Sandy Loam (Vucetich and Weston, 1964), a loose yellow brown loam derived from tephra deposits referred to as Whangamata Ash (Hogg and McCraw, 1983). This is a term used to describe

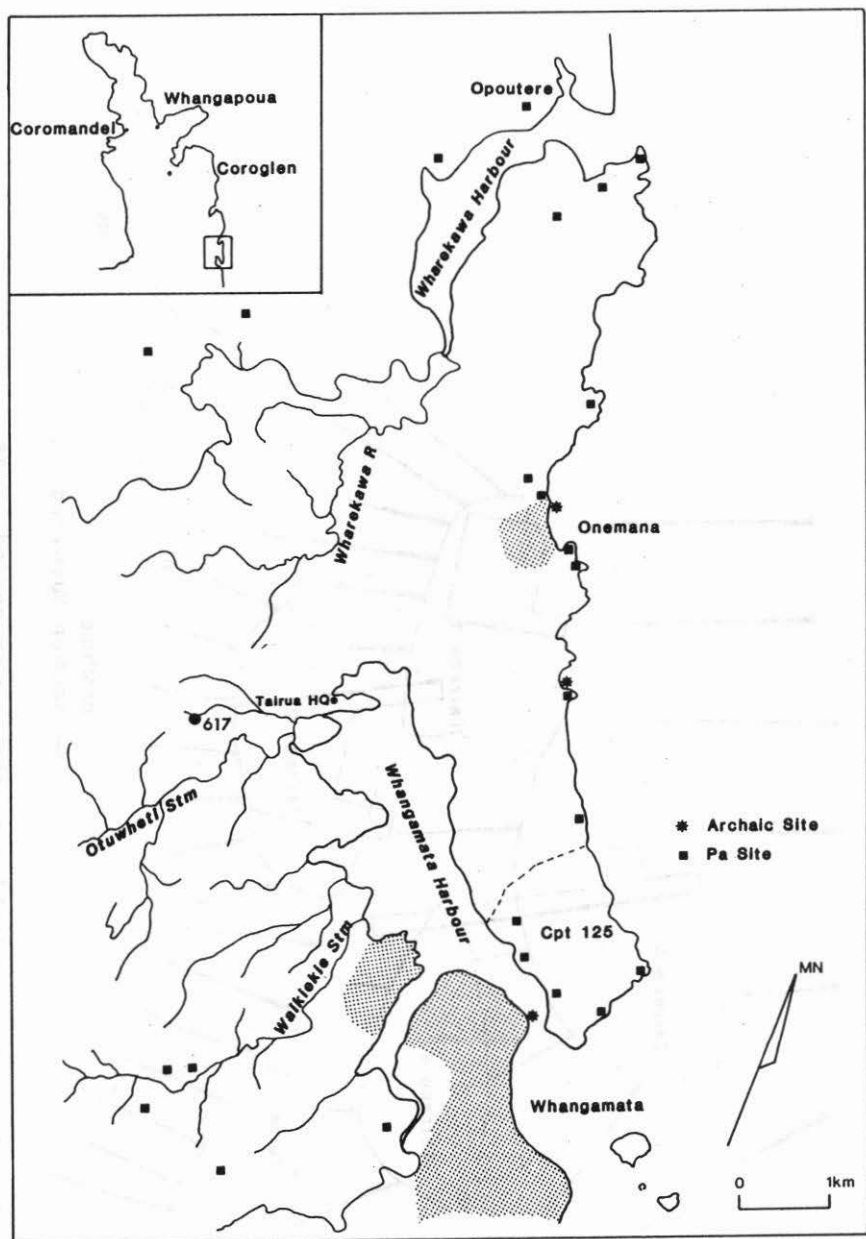


FIGURE 1. Whangamata district showing recorded sites including T12/617.

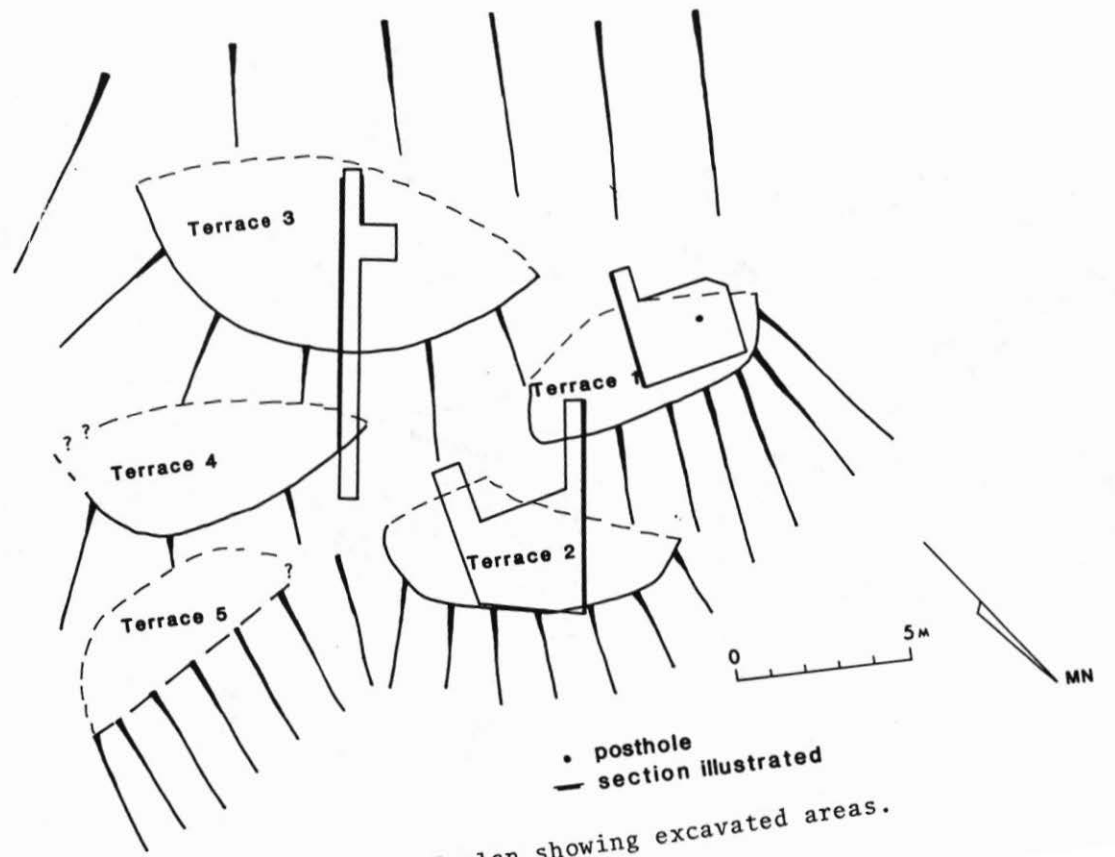


FIGURE 2. Site T12/b17 plan showing excavated areas.

a number of different tephras mixed through time by root action and erosion. Individual tephras from separate eruptive centres include Kaharoa, Taupo, Tuhua and Rotoehu. The topsoil and underlying tephras are easily eroded, especially on steep slopes with the result that the cultural features tend to be ill-defined.

The excavations

A small excavation was carried out on one terrace in the group (Fig.2). The remaining terraces were initially trenched to record the stratigraphy and assess the relationship between adjacent terraces. Excavation was subsequently carried out on two of the terraces to better interpret layers viewed in section.

Surface evidence consisted of stone and obsidian flakes on the surface and below the front scarp of Terrace 1, and shell midden eroding from Terrace 3. Another terrace above and to the south-east of the main cluster of terraces had been truncated and badly disturbed during formation of a forest road.

Terrace 1 was constructed by cutting back the hillside to a yellowish-white compacted ash with unweathered blocks of ash underlying the loose tephra deposits (Fig.3). This material formed a stable rear edge to the terrace. Evidence of occupation on the terrace surface consisted of obsidian and stone flakes and one posthole. Post-occupation slopewashed ash and pumice covered the terrace surface.

A trench dug between Terraces 1 and 2 indicated the terraces had been constructed simultaneously. Spoil from the upper terrace was used to build out the lower.

There was little evidence of occupation on Terrace 2. Several amorphous depressions were excavated but were not interpreted as cultural features. With the terrace being constructed on a loose fill layer, root disturbance and erosion has no doubt contributed to obscuring or masking features.

Terrace 3 was trenched from the rear of the terrace across the level surface, and down the slope onto the backscarp of Terrace 4 (Fig.4). Crushed and burnt shell, into which firescoops had been dug, was present on the surface of Terrace 3. Intact shell midden abutted this deposit and spilled over the front edge of the terrace. A small area excavation revealed firescoops, filled with charcoal, stones and wood ash, under the shell midden and cut into the terrace surface. The midden consisted of small cockle shells less than 30 mm in diameter.

Charcoal from within the firescoops on Terrace 3 indicated a wide range of shrub and small tree species were burnt (Rod Wallace, pers. comm.). Manuka (Leptospermum scoparium), rangiora (Brachyglottis repanda), rewarewa (Knightia excelsa), Coprosma

species, tawapou (Planchonella novo-zelandica, maire tawake (Syzygium maire), makamaka? (Ackama rosaefolia), and two unidentified species were present in the sample. The presence of shrub species suggests the vegetation adjacent to the site was disturbed and the landscape had already been cleared of the primary forest cover. However species such as maire tawake, makamaka and tawapou are all tree species associated with a forest cover (F.Eadie, pers. comm.). This suggests there was a mixed vegetation pattern present in the vicinity of the site, with human-induced modification having occurred prior to occupation.

A radiocarbon age estimate (Institute of Nuclear Sciences, NZ 7218) of 312 ± 35 years B.P. (old half life) or 320 ± 35 B.P. (new half life) was obtained on cockle shells from the terrace.

Damage to the site through pine tree roots was apparent in the section illustrated in Fig.3). Intrusive fingers into the midden layer are the result of root disturbance. A pine tree trunk was situated very close to the excavation.

Terraces 4 and 5 were trenched to establish if they were constructed features or the result of erosion. These two features were vague in outline and slightly sloping. Terrace 4 was built out using spoil excavated from Terrace 3 higher up the slope. The backscarp of Terrace 5 truncated the fill used to construct Terrace 4. Slope-washed ash and charcoal covered the fill layer. From the section, little evidence for use of the terraces could be seen.

Stone material

Two types of stone material, in addition to rhyolite used for cooking stones, were present on the site. Obsidian and a fine grained volcanic rock were present on the surface below Terrace 1 and several pieces were also found on the terrace during the excavation.

Five pieces of obsidian were recovered, although only one had any evidence of usewear. One core, of a greenish colour, was present and was most likely from a Mayor Island source. The remainder of the obsidian was grey, not unlike the obsidian from local sources at Onemana (Whitipirorua) and Whangamata. Small pieces of obsidian also occur within the tephra deposits.

The volcanic stone material (11 pieces) was all of a similar type. It has been identified as a dense, dull, glassy, igneous rock with small phenocrysts and is possibly from the same area as the Rangihau Rhyolites, found near Coroglen (D.Skinner, pers. comm.). The stone was not of good flaking quality and tended to fracture irregularly. A weathered cortex was present

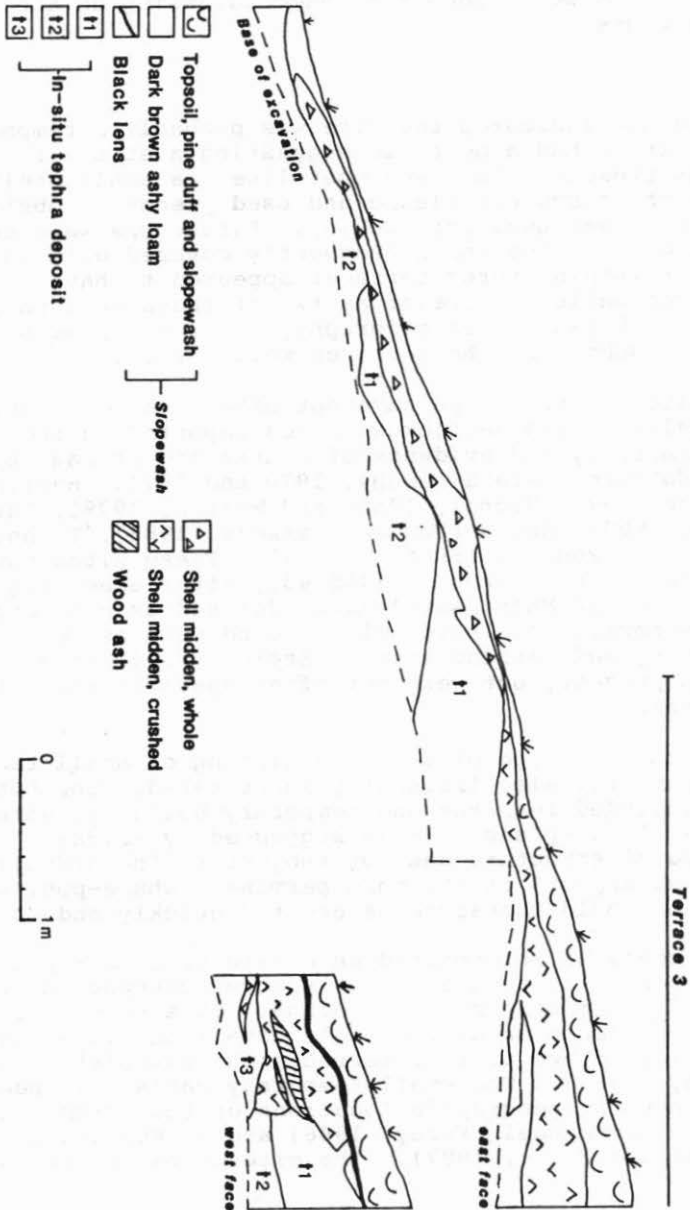


FIGURE 4. Terrace 3 section.

on the majority of the flakes. Only two showed evidence of use. One piece, probably the result of end shock while attempting to make an adze, had been subsequently used as there was grinding evident on one edge and on high points on the front. One other piece showed evidence of hammerdressing on the ridges of the flake scars.

Discussion

The evidence indicates the site was probably a temporary camp. One terrace had a posthole suggesting a structure of some form was present. This was most likely a small shelter within which the occupants flaked and used pieces of obsidian. A second terrace was used for cooking. Firescoops were dug into the terrace surface and subsequently covered with cockle shells. The remaining three terraces appeared to have minimal evidence of occupation. However as two of these were only trenched to establish the stratigraphy, it is not possible to state without doubt that the terraces were unused.

Small sites of this type have not often been documented archaeologically. Open settlement sites reported in the literature have generally had evidence of houses and storage pits, for example Motutapu Island (Leahy, 1970 and 1972), Hamlins Hill (Davidson, 1970; Nichol, 1980; and Walton, 1979), Kauri Point (Green, 1963), Aotea (Fox and Cassels, 1983), Tolaga Bay (Jones, 1983) and Pouerua (Sutton, 1983). These sites could be termed kainga, which Groube (1965:43), after examining early European accounts of Maori settlement, defined as consisting of 3-4 houses forming a cluster of compound with associated cooking, dumping and latrine sites. Storage facilities were probably also present, but were not often specifically noted by the observers.

However another type of site, consisting of small temporary huts, was apparently also frequently encountered. The huts or shelters included lean-tos and temporary buildings with round or rectangular floor-plans. It is suggested by Prickett (1982:119) that this type of structure was not subject to the symbolic and behavioural aspects of the more permanent whare-puni style of dwelling and could therefore be erected quickly and casually.

T12/617 could be interpreted as a site of this type, and the small temporary camps are probably more numerous on the landscape than the more permanent kainga. Site recorders in many parts of the Coromandel Peninsula have identified small sites consisting of two to four terraces and associated shell midden (Furey, 1981). The small temporary camps have been excavated at several geographic locations on the Coromandel Peninsula - at Coromandel (Furey, 1986) and at Whangapoua (Crosby, Sewell and White, 1987). The site contents were similar

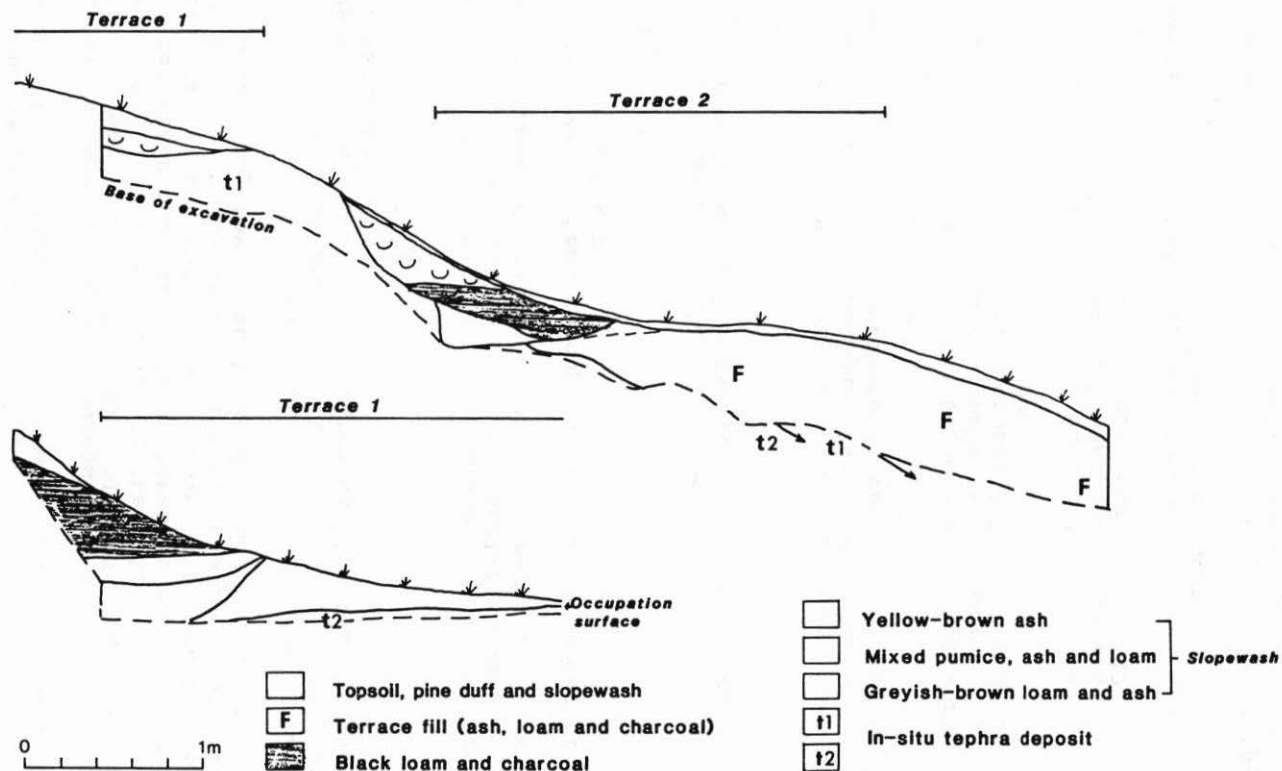


FIGURE 3. Terrace 1 and 2 sections.

to those found at Whangamata, in that there were small shell middens associated with very insubstantial structures, or scoop fireplaces with no structures. Storage pits were not present.

Different locations and resources were visited at certain times of the year (Firth, 1972:79). T12/617 is probably typical of many of the sites occupied during the collecting period of specific resources such as birds or forest foods. The site, situated close to the bush fringe, would have been in a suitable location for the exploitation of forest-related foods. Larger communal kainga may have been located closer to the coast.

Small sites like T12/617 with a limited range of occupational evidence represent the most basic level of site in the settlement system. The importance of sites of this type should not be under-estimated.

Conclusion

The site represents a small encampment occupied for a short period, sometime in the 17th century. Shellfish were collected from the Whangamata Harbour. Local stone materials were utilised.

The site was probably occupied by a small number of people, possibly a family group.

Acknowledgements

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