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EXCAVATIONS AT TAIRUA (N44/2), 1958-1964: A SYNTHESIS

Kevin Jones

ABSTRACT

A major excavation at Tairua in 1959 has been published, but excavations in 1964 have yet to be reported. The areal extent of the site as revealed by the two major excavations is described and has made possible some generalizations about activity areas in Archaic sites.

INTRODUCTION

Excavation of the Tairua site in 1959 played an important part in Green's analysis of the economic basis of early settlement in the North Island of New Zealand. The results of a further excavation in 1964, however, have not been reported in any detail. The extension of site plan which this later excavation achieved makes Tairua one of the first truly areal excavations in New Zealand, and the distributional information so obtained may be useful for comparative purposes. A generalization about the disposal of flaking debris is made.

PART I

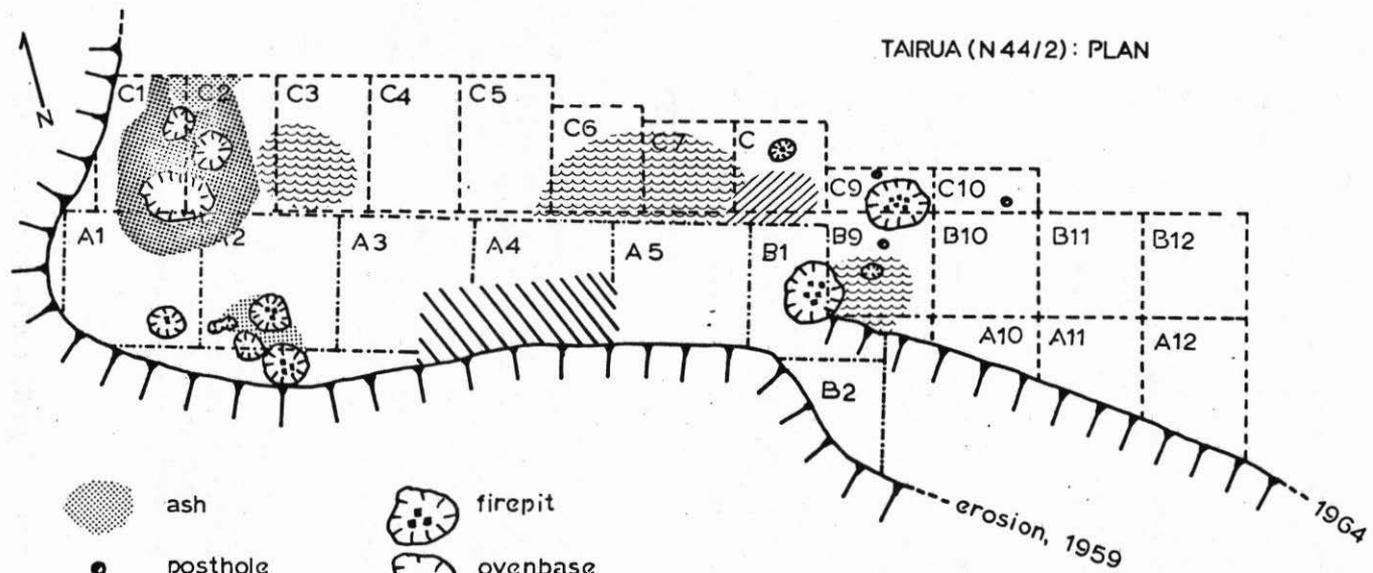
i. Site location

Tairua Harbour on the south-east coast of the Coromandel Peninsula is sheltered by a series of sand dunes which are fronted by the Pawanui Beach. A small rock-girt island, three-quarters by one and a half kilometers in length, is situated at the mouth of the harbour and is joined to hill country in the north by a low sand tombolo one and three-quarter kilometers long. The harbour has a well-sheltered entrance to the sea south-east of this island, locally known as Paku Island (200 m a.s.l.). The Tairua site is close to Paku Island and is one of a complex of sites on the harbour side of the tombolo. There is a pa on the island itself.

ii. Excavation procedure

Excavations proceeded in three main phases: a small test excavation in 1958, two major excavations in 1959 and a major excavation in 1964 (undertaken because of the impending destruction of the site area for property development). The aim of the 1959 series of excavations was to investigate certain problems which had arisen concerning the economic basis of the Archaic phase in the North Island, particularly issues associated with the exploitation of moa (Smart, Green and Yaldwyn, 1962: 234-244). Apart from the test excavation, the first two phases of excavation were conducted in nine foot squares divided into quadrants; the first five of these (A1 to A5) being excavated in the 1959 phase of excavations

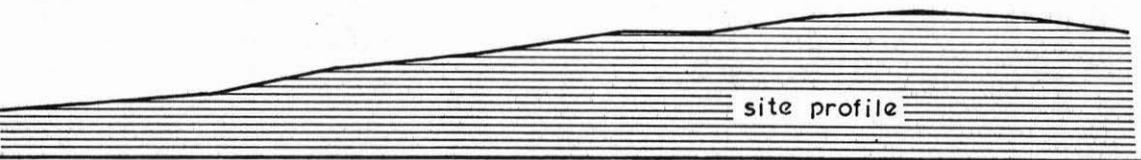
TAIRUA (N 44/2): PLAN



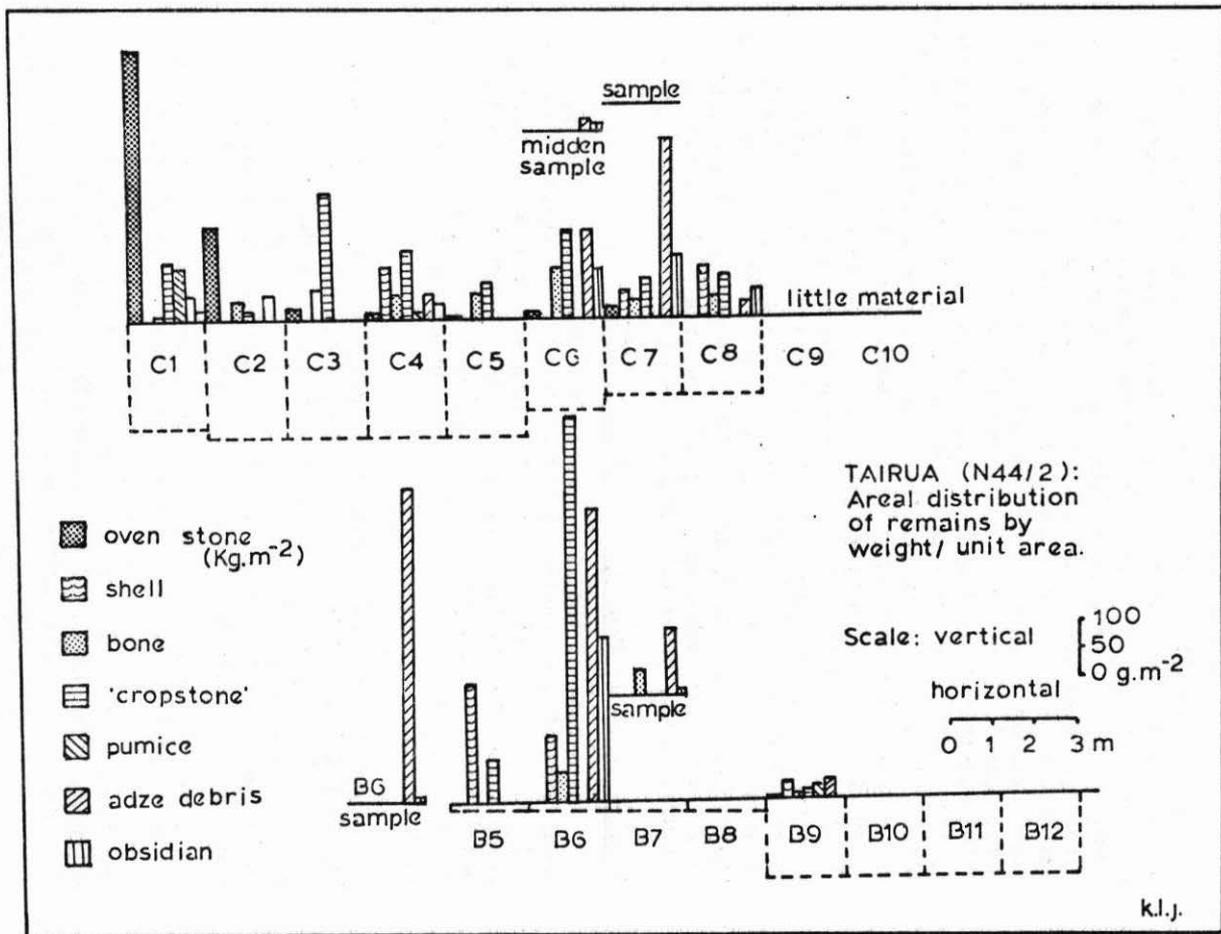
-  ash
-  posthole
-  firestone
-  adze debris
-  test excavation
-  firepit
-  ovenbase
-  shell midden
-  1959
-  1964

scale: 0 1 2 m

3
2
1 m.a.s.l.



site profile



and two others (B1 and B2 - see plan) at a slightly later date. It is unfortunate that these latter two squares have been misplaced by Smart on the published map (Green, 1973: pers. comm.). The consequences of this are not serious, however, since approximately a half of one of these squares (B2) extended over the dune scarp, and the 1964 excavations revealed that their area had not been completely excavated (Green, 1971: pers. comm.). Some erosion occurred between the time of the 1959 excavations and the excavations in 1964 which were conducted to 'recover a more complete assemblage of artefacts from the site' (Green, 1967: 82). During this 1964 phase sand overlying Bed 2 was mechanically removed and the excavation realigned on a slightly different bearing, giving rise to a number of small squares on the margin of the new excavation (B5 to B8 - see plan); the squares alongside the original excavation were excavated in 6 x 4 foot squares (C1 to C8) and (at a slightly later date) the rest, at the eastern end of the site, in 2 x 2 m squares (C 9-10, B 9-12, and A 9-12 - see plan). These last excavators also opened up a significant area of the upper cultural layer, previously only sampled (see Davidson, 1964).

iii. Stratigraphy and distribution of activities

The strata of the site comprised an upper cultural layer, consisting of a concentrated midden of mudflat shellfish species and adze flaking debris associated with a fossil dune surface, which sealed two distinct layers of sand. Beneath these lay Bed 2, varying in depth up to about 20 cm with occasional firepits as deep as 50 cm; Bed 2 was underlain by a sterile sand layer.

Charcoal originally collected from one of the ovens in Bed 2 had been dated to 879 ± 49 years B.P., thus dating the site to the 11th Century A.D. Green rejects a further date (collected five years later) of 443 ± 40 years B.P. as being probably contaminated. Subsequent obsidian hydration dating has confirmed the earlier of these two dates (Green, 1967: 83).

The site, remarkable for its being amongst the first truly areal excavations in New Zealand, displayed an interesting configuration of evidence, including a pearl shell lure shank; the stimulus for an article by Green (1967) on the East Polynesian derivation of New Zealand Maori material culture. The area of the site, approximately 25 x 5 m, displayed several distinct activity areas. At the peak and extending towards the rear of the fossil sand dune are a number of postholes,

unfortunately showing no readily interpretable pattern; associated with these are a number of firepits. It is tempting to interpret this area as the habitation area although the possibility of the postholes representing other structures, such as drying racks, might be entertained. The structural evidence does not allow any definite conclusions. However, the presence of lenses of fish and bird bone around the fireplaces and in this general area favours interpretation as the habitation area.

Immediately downslope from the 'habitation' area are the middens, consisting mainly of rocky shore shellfish species (Smart and others, 1962: 255-257); they are concentrated on the north side of the site and contain a high proportion of all the flaking debris from the site - see figure. In the lowest area of the site is a complex of ovens and, south of them, a cluster of smallish pits; some of these appear to have been firepits (op. cit.: 249).

Obsidian debris is scattered widely over the site except for the area of the ovens but the main concentration occurs in the midden with a very high proportion of small pieces. The area between the ovens and the midden (squares B2, C2 to B4, C4) contained a relatively high concentration of bone from larger species (dog and marine mammalian fauna) and a very high concentration of 'cropstones'. It seems likely, then, as Green (1971: pers. comm.) has argued, that this area had been used for butchering. This contention is supported by the area's strategic location between the ovens and the midden but unfortunately very little obsidian came from the area. If this were not the case, the situation would have been ideal for an investigation of butchering tools. Overall, concentration of obsidian is lowest in the rear of the dune in the same area as the posthole concentration.

Adze flakes occur as lenses in the midden and are not concentrated to any degree in any other area of the site.

Green has suggested (1973: pers. comm.) that the general size of the site can be inferred from the area exposed by excavation and erosion along the beach frontage. The eroded beach frontage indicates a site length not more than 25 m and, unless erosion was very heavy, no more than 6-8 m of the depth back from the beach (i.e. the section as published) has been eroded. A site little more than 25 x 25 m square may therefore be inferred, of which about one quarter has been excavated.

PART II: Discussion of flake debris disposal

The impression given by the evidence is that flaking activities were quite separate from living areas, including the cooking areas, as might be expected on purely pragmatic grounds: obsidian debris would clearly be a danger in areas where people expect to conduct their everyday activities. On the other hand, flaking could have been done on mats, the items required selected while the work was in progress, and the debris subsequently removed to the midden. That flaking was actually done in the middle of middens, as the distribution of evidence suggests, would therefore be an unwarranted conclusion. Green reports (1971: pers. comm.) that a stone 'anvil' and a cluster of obsidian flakes were found quite near the suggested dwelling area.

At Heaphy River, as at Tairua, the proportion of flakes in the oven areas is very low (Wilkes and Scarlett, 1967: 197, 206), although, and in contrast to Tairua, the proportion of flakes present in the midden, with the exception of quartz flakes, is also very low. The Heaphy River evidence might, therefore, if taken at face value, appear to contradict the thesis stated above; viz., that distribution of flakes in sites can be expected to be low in areas where general activities are undertaken and higher in areas which are not focal points of activity, e.g., middens. But it is likely that at Heaphy River the flake debris was simply dropped into the mud surrounding the paving stones (an unusual feature in New Zealand sites), and was therefore no longer a danger to the people concerned. In a dune site like Tairua this would not have been possible and flakes were therefore dumped in the middens.

The pragmatically determined disposal of flaking waste is also confirmed by other sites in which details of the plan and distribution of activities are known: a house site in the Moikau Valley, Southern Wairarapa, was found to have high concentrations of flake debris (within the structure) distributed about the walls, towards the end opposite the fireplace and in the fireplace itself (N. Prickett, 1973: pers. comm.). Yet another site at Foxton has evidence of a windbreak (a curved line of postholes approximately at right angles to the prevailing wind) in the lee of which were found concentrations of flaking debris (McFadgen, 1971: pers. comm.). Teviotdale has the perhaps dubious distinction of being the sole person to have excavated a complete Moa-hunter village (the pattern of fireplaces, interpreted as 'huts', suggests a village), (Teviotdale, 1924: 2). While clearly not interested in flake materials as such, some of his asides in the description of the village do refer to the presence of flake materials: he records a shallow deposit of bone and shell in the swampy margins of the village with a disgruntled "but there I got nothing

but flakes of chert and quartzite" (op. cit.: 7); and elsewhere in the site at Shag River, amongst a heap of moa pelves, a dog skull, fish scales and other fauna, he found "no implements... except some large flake knives" (op. cit.: 8). This evidence is not conclusive but is at least consistent with the evidence outlined above.

III: CONCLUSION

The excavations undertaken in 1964 of the site at Tairua, Coromandel Peninsula, resulting in the site plan which accompanies this paper, indicate that activity areas in Archaic sites, as has been long suspected, are sharply differentiated. The disposal of flaking debris in known Archaic archaeological sites appears to have been determined by the need for removing dangerous debris from areas where general living activities were undertaken. A prime area for the disposal of flake debris is the midden, but the conclusion that flaking was actually conducted in the middens is unwarranted.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This synthesis of the excavations at Tairua was undertaken in the course of research into stone flaking technology and usage in the Archaic period. It is based on published articles, conversation with, and unpublished documentation (site plan and the data on activities) made available by the principal excavator, Roger Green. The readiness with which Green made this material available is greatly appreciated.

TOKOROA MOA-HUNTER SITE, N 75/1

Garry Law

Summary

The excavation of a small site used for hunting moa is reported. The site contains some structural evidence, obsidian artefacts, and Archaic adzes while faunal remains are restricted to one species of moa. Soils evidence suggests the site was formerly forested and occupation took place before a later soil formed under scrub. The function of the site is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The site, situated on a small stream flat, within a bend in the stream, is about half a mile west of the outskirts of Tokoroa (Figs. 1 and 2). The stream has a strong perennial flow and runs through gently rolling farm land about 300m above sea level. A little above the site the stream has been dammed to a height of about 2m and flows over a concrete weir. The farmer, Mr Davey, found the site over 30 years ago while ploughing, when he found a number of adzes and observed many obsidian flakes.