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FIELD RECORDING IN THE WAIAPU AND TAPUAEROA VALLEYS, EAST COAST

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The following account describes the result of three weeks archaeological site recording in the Waiapu and Tapuaeroa valleys in the territory of the Maori people, the Ngati Porou. The area covered is shown in Figure 1.

The survey was carried out for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust as part of an overall programme for the identification and preservation of archaeological sites. Previous to this investigation only two sites had been recorded in the area, one on the N.Z.M.S.1 series N71 Hikurangi map and one on the N72 Waiapu map.

The Waiapu/Tapuaeroa river system is one of the largest on the East Coast and though the river is too shallow and fast flowing for easy canoe navigation, the valleys provide a walking route from the East Coast through to the Eastern Bay of Plenty. There is traditional and historic evidence to suggest that there was considerable Maori occupation around the Waiapu River mouth and that the river system may have been a communication link.

The findings from the survey do not suggest that a strong dominant group occupied the Waiapu River area in pre-historic times, or that there was much contact with the Eastern Bay of Plenty. It would also be reasonable to assume that the natural food resources would not have supported a large population. During the survey, almost no bracken fern or shellfish was seen. There are also few swamps or creeks suitable for eeling. The coastline is exposed with no sheltered bays for inshore fishing. However, in assessing survey evidence it must be remembered that the course and nature of the Waiapu River, and the coastline round the mouth, have changed greatly in the last hundred years. These changes may have destroyed many sites and certainly would have had an impact on the natural food resources.

Overall, there were fewer sites than expected. Table 1 sets out the class and number of sites recorded. Most of the sites are on the south side of the Waiapu River mouth, north of Ruatoria. There are some sites between Torata and Whakawhitira on the north side of the river. There were probably very few permanent settlements in the Tapuaeroa Valley. For the most part the site features suggest a rather isolated group of people in that the earthworks and distribution patterns differ from those of the Eastern Bay of Plenty and in other parts of the East Coast.

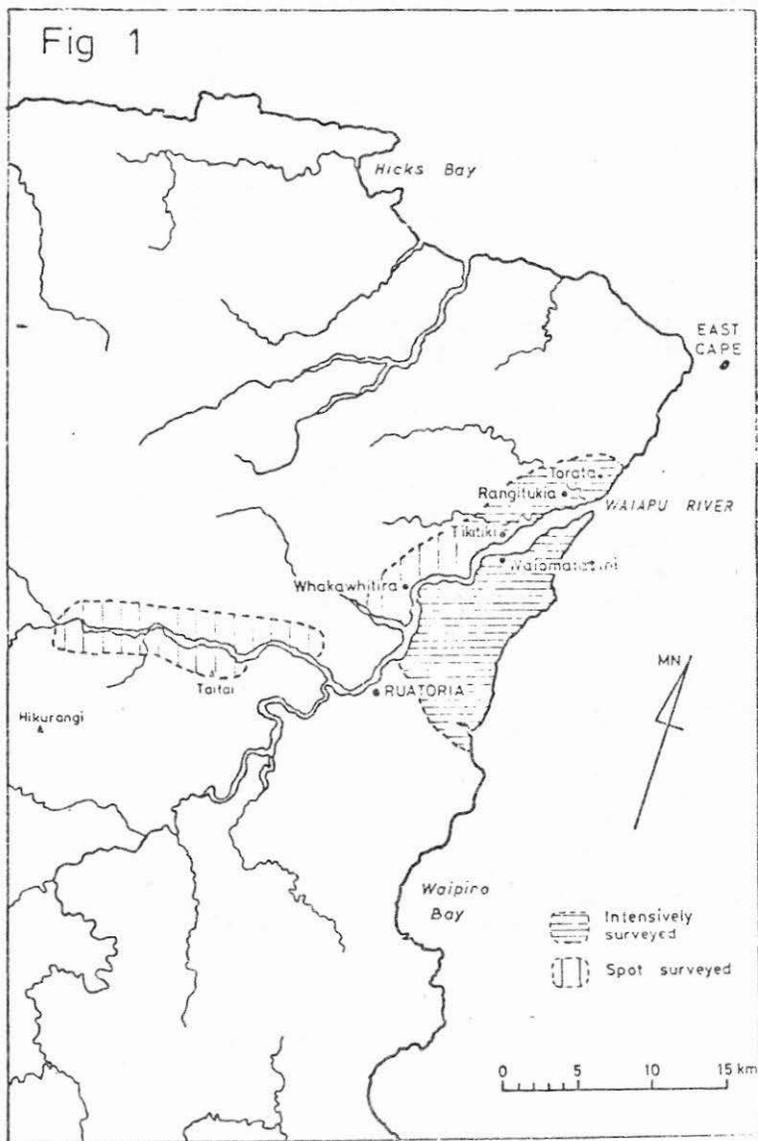


FIGURE 1. Map of the survey area.

SITE TYPE	N71	N72
Pa	3	22
Probable pa	-	1
Pit and terrace	1	20
Pit/complex	-	38
Terrace/complex	2	14
Agricultural field systems	-	2
Middens	-	-
Miscellaneous	-	3
	6	100

TABLE 1. Sites recorded in the survey area.

The pa, in general, are not strategically placed to dominate an area, and the earthworks are not of a monumental nature. Ditches tend to be shallow, banks low and terrace scarping minimal. There is little clustering of sites, i.e. around large pa there are few, if any small sites in close proximity. The nearest approach to clustering is the collection of small pa along the river terrace at Te Horo and the group of sites at Waioamatatini. The nature of the earthworks and the spaced distribution of the sites suggest that there was little threat from hostilities. In times of raids the population may have retreated to isolated refuge pa such as the inland pa on Taitai Peak.

Pits are by far the most common surface feature and the large number suggest a high population. On the other hand very few terraces were found. Even the larger pa have few associated terraces. This discrepancy between the number of pits to terraces may be due possibly to the fact that the sites recorded do not include some of the major living sites. Such pa or villages could have been on the flat land along the river and are now obliterated by farming or erosion by the river. The recorded pit sites and pa on the slopes and ridges may represent the storage places for the flat land pa.

In coming to any conclusions about pre-historic settlement patterns in the area, the following evidence and impressions from the survey seem significant. Evidence includes:

1. Pa, generally, are small and unobtrusive.
2. Artificial defences are minimal.
3. Pits are the most common site feature - even on pa.
4. Terraces are uncommon either as separate sites or in association with other site features.
5. Sites are spread out rather than clustered.

6. The highest density of sites is along the south bank of the Waiapu River mouth.
7. There is a lack of natural food resources - almost no bracken fern, little shellfish, few creeks or swamps and an exposed coastline.
8. No midden was observed.
9. There is much land suitable for cultivation.

Impressions gained from the survey include the following:

1. There were fewer sites than expected. This suggests a low density of population or that some living sites were not located.
2. The surface evidence does not support the idea that this region was a stronghold of the Ngati Porou people in prehistoric times. The early establishment of a mission station near the mouth of the Waiapu River may have given prominence to the district and promoted local historical tradition.
3. Settlement patterns in the region were probably influenced by changes in the river.
4. The spaced out distribution of sites and limited artificial defences suggest that there was little threat from raids or from population pressures.
5. The sites recorded may have been largely storage places for flat land pa and villages that have been destroyed by farming and erosion.
6. The variety of types of pits and their well-defined features, suggest late prehistoric/post-European period.
7. Inland valleys and ridges were, in the main, hunting and gathering areas, and probably refuge places in times of raids.