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FIELD SURVEY OF THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE COROMANDEL
PENINSULA NEAR PORT JACKSON

By J. T. Diamond

In January 1960, while camped near Darkie Stream on the road to Port Jackson on the western side of the Coromandel Peninsula, I noticed that practically all the ridges running down to the coast from the Moehau Range (which rises steeply to nearly 3,000 feet thereabouts) had pits and terraces or platforms on them. These ridges were usually narrow with steep sides, well adapted for defence, but I was not able to find any indication that sites were defended by earthworks. In view of this plus the fact that I had not found any previous reference to the sites, I again camped, in January 1962, on the coast about 100 yards north-west of Darkie Stream.

From this base I traversed the country half a mile back from the shore, for this seemed to be the limit at which pits and terraces were to be found. Owing to the colossal amount of evidence of occupation over the whole of the coastal area stretching for nearly five miles south-east of Darkie Stream and north-west for almost a mile, I decided to limit the area for my survey to half a mile south-east from Darkie Stream (NZMS.1. Sheet N39 (Moehau) 841984 N26) to Paritu Stream (836997 N26) nearly a mile up the coast to the north-west.

This section on the western side of the Coromandel Peninsula is 63 miles from Thames and six miles from Port Jackson which is almost at the extreme tip. The coastline of the area is strewn with granite boulders averaging 2 feet in diameter. There is a shingle beach 60 yards long, then cliffs rising steeply to 50 feet above their boulder-strewn base extend for a third of a mile before falling away to another stretch of boulder-strewn coast. Darkie Stream, fast-flowing and about 15 feet across, is confined to within a quarter of a mile of the coast in a narrow gorge which rapidly expands into a valley 200 yards wide at the coast, with the stream itself flowing out to sea on the south-eastern side. Two smaller creeks having their sources within the area are not more than 4 feet across but nevertheless they are fast-flowing and clear even after the dry weather.

The north-western end of the section consists of narrow steep-sided ridges over 500 feet high. It is along the tops of these ridges, only 12 feet across in places, that pits and terraces are found in profusion. The south-eastern end contains several low spurs leading down to the valley while on the boundary is a ridge with an almost sheer face to the north-

west but falling away gently on the opposite side. This ridge is extensively terraced for over 100 yards while pits and terraces are to be found on the spurs. Also marshy ground and a flat showing signs of having been cultivated are located in this end of the section.

The aim of the survey was to plot the type of pits and terraces to be found in the section and compare them with those found in the Waitakere Ranges above the Manukau Heads, for my previous visit showed that various features in these two widely separated areas were similar. As in the Waitakere Ranges, there are numerous small sites consisting of either pits with one or two terraces or just one pit and a terrace. These small sites were usually found at the end of a spur or a connecting saddle. Within the section is a raupo swamp, two marshes almost dry, one showing signs of having been divided by an earth bank, the other with piles of granite pebbles on the banks surrounding it, and an elevated piece of ground with heaps of pebbles and boulders indiscriminately located over its surface. On this latter area pohutukawa trees grow in profusion, the largest being 32 feet in girth 2 feet above the base with roots extending over a heap of pebbles. Other pohutukawa trees growing over the heaps are 24 feet and 21 feet in girth. No pohutukawa trees were under 10 feet in girth and even a lone puriri tree nearby is 18 feet in girth.

A group of seven circular pits was found, but in the main pits were rectangular. Only three pits were located on terraces. Terraces varied greatly in size but in practically all cases they were dug back into the ridge, the earth at the sides being left intact, thus enclosing them on three sides. Defence works such as ditches or banks were entirely absent in the area and I could not see how any of the terminal pits, terraces or platforms on the ridges could have been any part of a defensive system. Where the top of a ridge was widest only the area nearest to the steeper side was utilised, pits and terraces being formed as close as possible to this edge, usually in a single line, while the rest of the ground was, as far as I was able to observe from surface evidence, left untouched. Many of the observations outlined apply to sites in the Waitakere Ranges, including Pukearuhe site on a high ridge at the head of Henderson Valley on the eastern side of the same range.

Pits. Fifty-one pits were plotted in the area but owing to the limited time at my disposal, I was not able to plot the isolated ones on the end of spurs or on saddles. The smallest pit was 6 feet square, the largest 30 feet by 9 feet. Narrow trench-like pits 5 to 6 feet wide and 18 to

20 feet long were the most common variety, but other rectangular pits with the breadth half the length together with square pits were found in conjunction with these throughout the area. The highest pits, situated at 500 feet above sea level, were on a narrow ridge at the north-western end while the lowest were at 50 feet, a quarter-mile back from the beach. Because a ridge widened out it did not mean pits were larger, in fact they tended to be smaller. Pits and terraces were found in close proximity but in only three instances were pits located on terraces. Pits were found singly between terraces, in groups or placed end to end. One set on a narrow ridge 15 feet wide was strung out for 139 feet.

The most interesting pits were a group of seven situated on the highest part of a ridge on the south-eastern side of Darkie Stream. Only three showed as depressions in the ground, the others were circular patches of healthy green grass easily distinguished from the poorer growth of the surrounding area. The three largest, 6 feet in diameter, were strung across the ridge 4 feet apart. One of the pits was sited 3 feet below the ridge on the steepest side. The group is similar to the rua-koviha as described by George Graham.² He saw this type used in the Kaipara as kumara storage pits over which were erected dome-shaped roofs thatched with raupo. The insides were lined with bracken fern and the kumara were stacked in the form of a pyramid, a small doorway allowing them to be extracted as required.

Terraces. Forty terraces of various size were plotted. The largest was 36 feet by 24 feet, the smallest 14 feet by 9 feet. Terraces were never so disposed that they would contribute to a defence system. On the tops of ridges terraces were found transversely and laterally always as close as possible to the steeper side of the ridge, while transverse terraces dug one above the other at odd intervals up a ridge were also as close as possible to the steeper side. Except for one example there were no lateral terraces along the sides of ridges even where there was a gentle slope. One feature common to practically all terraces was that they had three sides, the scarp at the back varying from 6 feet in height down to 2 feet. As mentioned above, only three terraces had pits dug in them; all the others plotted were level and showed no evidence on the surface of further excavation.

Middens. Although I searched carefully, often traversing the slopes at various levels, I did not find one midden in the whole area. Grass growth, erosion scars, cattle and sheep tracks showed no evidence of midden material on the surface or buried at a depth.

Food. Taro grew in places in the streams inaccessible to the cattle while karaka trees grew abundantly along the coastal cliffs and in patches back in the bush.

Pana, oysters, winkles, sea urchins, octopus and crayfish are found among the boulders off the coast. Fish are plentiful with snapper predominating. In the streams, some only a couple of feet wide, native brown trout abound, some up to 8 inches long. Also freshwater mussel and crayfish were found.

Artefacts. I found no artefacts, but Mr. Philip Ward, son of the owner, showed me various specimens that had been found in the surrounding area. They were all classic Maori types.

It would be futile to speculate as to the age of the sites, but by using my measurements and information, Dr. L. Millener, Associate Professor, Botany Department, University of Auckland, assessed the age of the pohutukawa trees growing on the heaps of pebbles as between 400 and 500 years old.

References

- (1) Diamond, J.T. 1961. "Fortified and Settlement Sites in the Waitakere West Coast Area". N.Z. Arch. Ass. Newsletter. Vol. 4, No. 2, p54-55.
- (2) Graham, George. 1922. "Rua-Kopiha. A Peculiar Type of Kumara Store Pit". Journal of the Polynesian Society. Vol. 31, p122-123.

BEACH MIDDENS ON THE COROMANDEL COAST

By R. Jolly and R. Green

The development of the Eastern Coromandel Coast as a resort area is threatening the destruction of numerous valuable middens on the dunes which invariably lie behind beaches along this coast. A number of these dune sites were recorded by the authors in an earlier survey¹ and others have subsequently been added. Moreover, during the last two years,