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FORTIFIED AND SETTLEMENT SITES IN THE WAITAKERE WEST COAST AREA

by J.T. Diamond

In an article in the Newsletter of the N.Z. Archaeological Association, Vol. 3. No. 4, entitled "South Taranaki", Mr. A.G. Buist states on page 21 under the heading "Further Research" that "when the task of recording is completed, the most pressing problem to solve will be the nature and purpose of the numerous small defended sites."

This problem also arises regarding the sites on the west coast of the Waitakere Ranges situated some 25 miles by road to the west of Auckland city. This coastline 16 miles in length stretches from Whatipu on the north head of the Manukau Harbour to Motutara at the south end of Muriwai Beach. For the first 5 miles there are shifting sand dunes reaching back to cliffs up to 300 feet in height. From just south of Karekare Bay and on to Motutara the coastline consists of precipitous cliffs rising abruptly from the sea, and varying in height from a couple of hundred feet up to 900 feet. There are numerous bays along this coast, some with almost sheer cliffs rising steeply behind them, while others have long narrow valleys running back into the Waitakere Ranges. It is on the headlands dividing these bays and on the usually narrow dividing ridges between the streams that the pa and settlement sites of the Kawerau tribe who inhabited this area are to be found.

Tribal traditions are meagre and documentation is not comprehensive. The existence of pa sites along this coastline is mentioned, but in only a few cases can their exact location be found. Except for a pa in the swamp at Te Henga (Bethell's Beach) and several island pa, the other sites are all on headlands or steep ridges.

To obtain more details of these sites, I am making a survey of them and from this detailed information have found a definite pattern emerging in their layout and construction. In practically all cases, pa and settlement sites are small although many of the headland pa could have been extended over a much greater area and so saved the construction of several other small pa in the immediate vicinity.

In very few cases has a ridge been levelled, but rather terraces have been cut into it on the sheltered side. There are usually a couple of terraces, one above the other, with a very occasional third terrace mostly at one end of the ridge or headland. The terraces along the side of a level ridge will vary between 9 feet and 18 feet in width, but the most common width is 12 feet while their length can be as much as 60 feet without a break in the level. Mostly a terrace will continue for about 25 feet where there will be a step up or down of about one to two feet and then the terrace will continue on again for another 25 feet or so.

If the ridge tends to fall away, terraces of an average size of 10 feet wide by 12 feet long are cut into it on the sheltered side with the floor as

often as much as 9 feet below the slope of the ridge. Earthworks in the form of ditch and/or bank do not seem to have been used in the defence of the sites so far surveyed. Possibly with the abundance of timber trees in the immediate vicinity, the Kawerau people found a row or two of palisades quite effective. Because of the lack of earthworks usually associated with pa sites, I at first considered most ridge sites to be settlement sites, but after studying the information so far to hand, I have decided for the time being to adopt the following method in classifying settlement and pa sites.

Settlement sites are those found on the more accessible ridges back from the beaches and within reasonable distance of fresh water or fishing rocks. The most important feature however, is the abundance of midden material found in their immediate vicinity, together with pits usually higher up or on the highest part of the ridge. Pits as large as 24 feet by 12 feet have been found above settlement sites.

Pa sites are those on more inaccessible headlands and high ridges which in the case of headland sites usually have sheer cliffs sometimes as high as 300 feet on three sides, and in the case of ridge sites, a steep drop on at least one side. Midden material on what I classify as pa sites is practically non-existent, only a very few thin outcrops being found and these only after careful searching. In practically every pa site surveyed to date, pits are absent. If they are found in association with a pa site, it is on the highest terrace or dug out of the top of the ridge above a terrace. These pits are small in size, the largest so far being 8 feet by 4 feet and in no case have I found more than two on a site.

These details then give some idea of the type of sites constructed on the west coast of the Waitakere Ranges, and the method I have used to date to classify them.
