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INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS IN THE HOLZGANG BLOCK,
WHANGAPOUA FOREST, COROMANDEL PENINSULA

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Excavations in the Holzgang Block of the Whangapoua State Forest (Figs.1-3) took place over three weeks in November-December, 1986. The aim of the excavations was to determine the nature of prehistoric Maori occupation of this steep hill country and to supply data sufficient to compare occupation in this block with occupation in the Brier Block on the western side of the Coromandel Ranges and in a similar environmental setting (Furey, 1983).

The Holzgang Block was purchased by the New Zealand Forest Service in 1983 and planted in pines in 1984. Late in 1984 Annetta Sutton and Michael Taylor carried out an archaeological survey of the block recording 41 sites, the majority of which were shell middens. The sites occurred primarily on long ridges or spurs, Almost two-thirds of the sites were in the northern half of the block.

Of the three sites initially chosen for excavation under Permit Number 1986/28, site T11/637 proved to be a natural feature with no evidence of human modification so a further site, T11/643, was excavated. Each of the sites was under the supervision of a separate director. Excavation commenced on 17 November 1987, with a team of 12. The three sites are discussed separately below.

T11/643

The surface evidence at this site consisted of a midden scatter visible through the grass, a terrace and basin shaped depression and another small terrace lower down the slope on the same ridge (Fig.4). Excavation was designed to determine whether there was any structural evidence associated with the midden and whether the terraces were natural features or had been modified in any way. A total area of 50.5 m² was excavated over seven days.

The stratigraphy was similar to the other sites excavated in the Holzgang Block - a thin layer of topsoil overlying a yellowish clay subsoil. Artefacts and features occurred at the interface of topsoil and subsoil.

Features excavated on the upper terrace included a midden dump, a fire with heat-cracked rocks and a firescoop with two large retaining rocks. The upper and lower terraces were

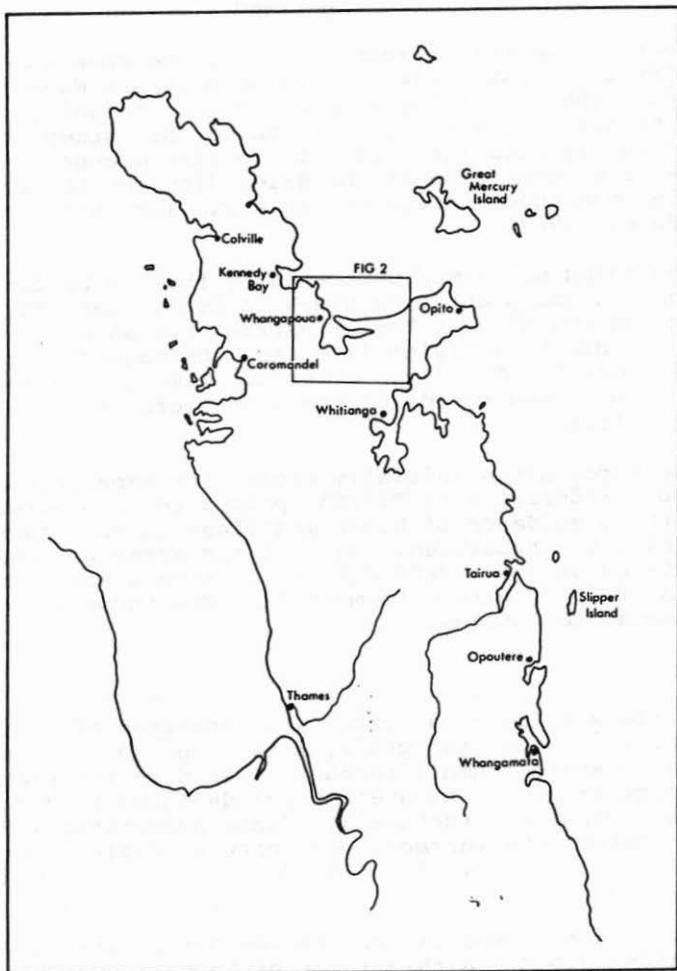


FIGURE 1. Coromandel Peninsula.

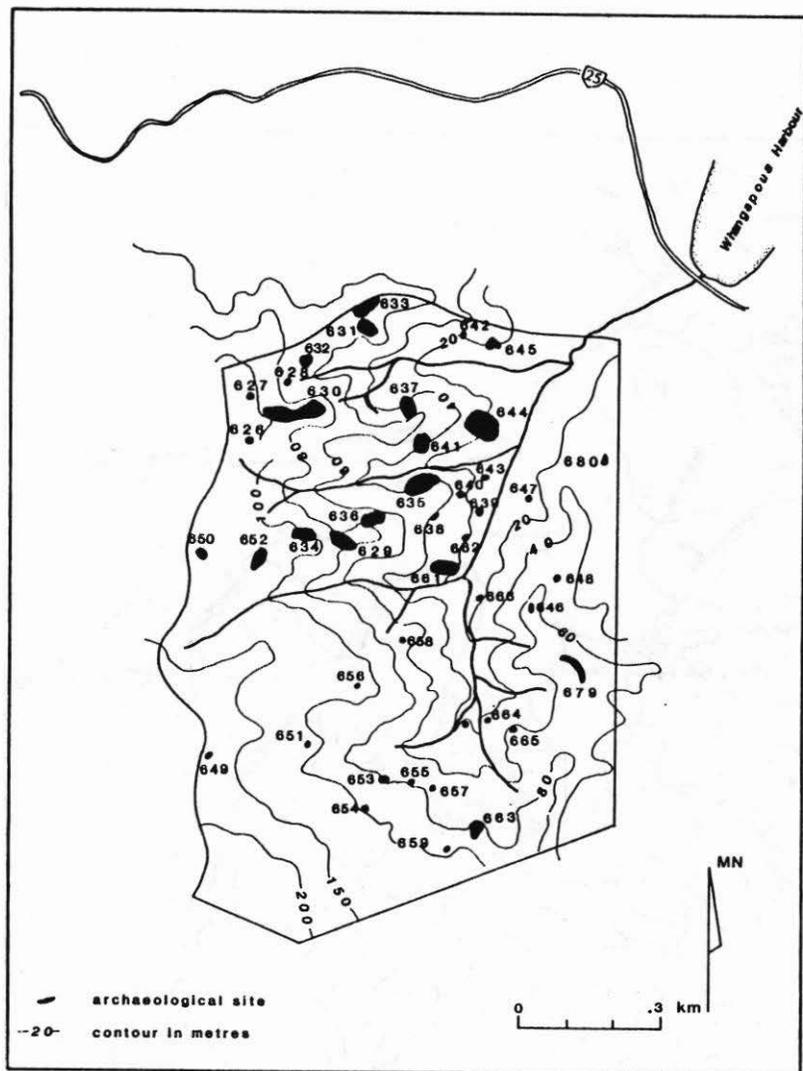


FIGURE 3. Location of sites within Holzgang Block.

natural features with no modification by way of cutting back into the scarp or building out at the front of the terrace. The basin-like depression was revealed as a hole formed by a falling kauri tree which had been burnt after it had fallen. At a later date the natural basin was used as a sheltered position for an open fire and shellfish were dumped nearby. A total of 33 obsidian flakes were recovered and, also, an adze of hornblende andesite (identified by Prof. Black, Department of Geology, University of Auckland). The adze was fully polished, of quadrangular cross-section, 69 mm long, 32 mm wide and 15 mm thick at the centre.

The evidence suggests very transitory use of a natural terrace. The firescoop with retaining rocks would appear to have been used for warmth and it is possible that a small temporary bivouac was built in the vicinity, leaving insufficient sub-surface remains to be recognised during excavation.

T11/644

Site T11/644 is described on the site record form as a set of eight terraces located on a forked ridge, approximately 100 m above a small stream (Fig.5). Seven narrow terraces (up to 3 m wide and 4-5 m long) run down the crest of the south ridge fork. A larger basin shaped terrace (approximately 4.5 m wide by 6 m long) lies at the top of the northern ridge, and is separated from the southern terraces by a sloping area of exposed shell midden. A further terrace, noted on the site record, and 50 m down the north ridge, has been truncated by a bulldozed track.

Excavations covering a total area of 124.5 m² (Fig.5) were designed to test the nature and relative functions of the terraces and to define and sample the midden. Areas A (5 x 5 m, C (6 x 7 m) and D (6 x 3 m) were excavated to test for structural occupation on the largest terraces. A further areal excavation (Area B - 4 x 5.5 m) was designed to locate evidence of other occupational features on and between two small, narrow terraces. Trench 1 (3 x 1 m) was to test a shallow surface depression, thought to be a storage pit, and two longer trenches (12 x 1 m and 5 x 0.5 m) were excavated at right angles through the midden (Trench 2). These midden trenches were intended to define and provenance the midden with respect to the excavated terraces and to extract samples for dating and analysis.

The excavations revealed evidence of house structures on the largest two terraces and showed the midden to be a shallow and discrete deposit of fragmented shell - mainly pipi and cockle. The smaller terraces and depression were shown to

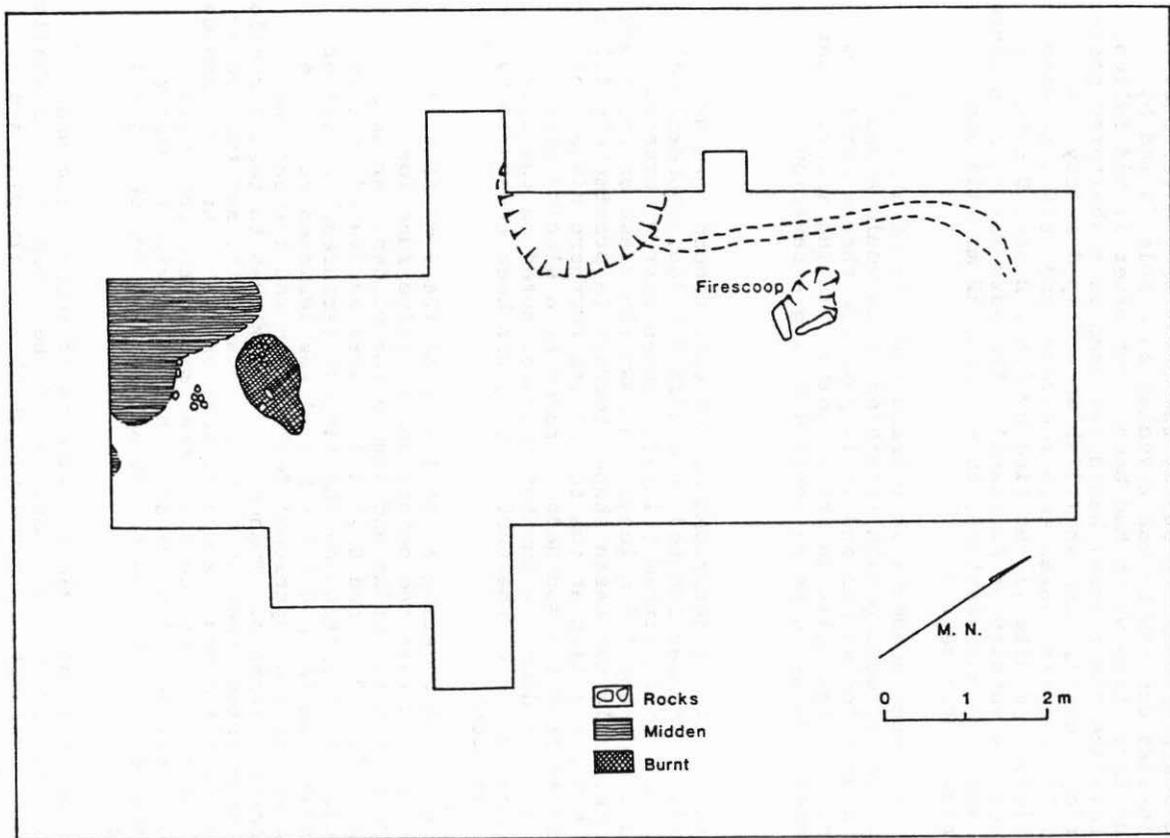


FIGURE 4. Excavated area of site T11/643.

be natural features with no conclusive evidence of human occupation or use.

The stratigraphy in all areas was simple. It consisted of a shallow turf and topsoil layer, which was the result of recent pasture on the site, overlying a base of hard yellow clay. A cultural deposit of a charcoal enriched loamy soil containing artefacts was found between the topsoil and clay in Areas A and C. This cultural layer had an average depth of 5 cm. Both terraces had evidence of cut-back scarps. Area C having also been contoured to form two levelled areas, the lower being basin-like in shape and extended in the front by the dumping of fill. The shell midden was in a loamy black matrix, only partially covered by turf, and lying directly on the natural clay. It covered an area 4 x 4 m with a maximum depth of 20 cm. No evidence was found anywhere on the site of a pre-pastoral topsoil, although several terraces contained shallow features of soft brown and black loamy soils associated with kauri gum and roots.

The house structures measured approximately 3 x 4 m and 3 x 3 m. The smaller structure was located on the Area A terrace (Fig.6). Only nine post holes were found in a very difficult matrix of mottled hard and crumbling clay. These post holes averaged 10 cm in diameter, were flared towards the top, and were over 30 cm deep. They outlined three walls enclosing a shallow fire scoop. A fourth wall appears to have been formed by the terrace's vertically cut back scarp. The Area 1 terrace contained 63 obsidian flakes and three flakes off a polished basaltic adze.

The larger structure was evidenced by 18 post holes on the Area C terrace (Fig.7). These post holes were also of an average 10-12 cm diameter and consisted of a brown/grey loamy fill in yellow natural clay or clay fill. Their depths, although difficult to determine along the built-out front edge of the terrace, were in the range 40-80 cm. The post moulds were round or oval in shape and flared towards the top. There was no evidence of a central row of posts or a porch, and no entrance way could be determined. Within the structure was a shallow fire scoop, slightly offset from the centre, which contained several fire darkened andesitic stones and chert flakes, and a small quantity of charcoal. Nearby were two large andesite stones which had been embedded into the clay surface, and a scatter of water rolled stones lay against and inside the western wall. One hundred and nineteen obsidian and chert flakes, an argillite adze chip and four quartz pebbles were found on the terrace. On the back ledge some large obsidian flakes were found along with a small hoanga, rectangular in shape and worn on three faces. Immediately outside the exca-

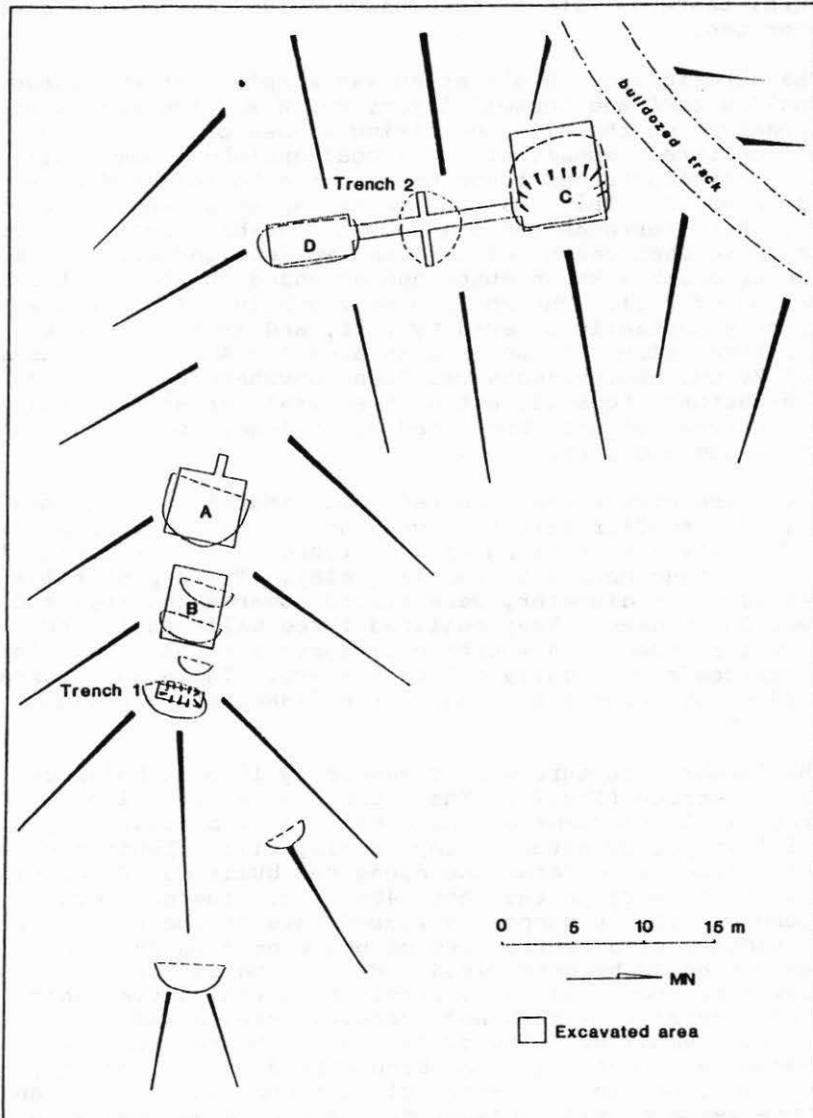


FIGURE 5. Site T11/644 showing excavated areas.

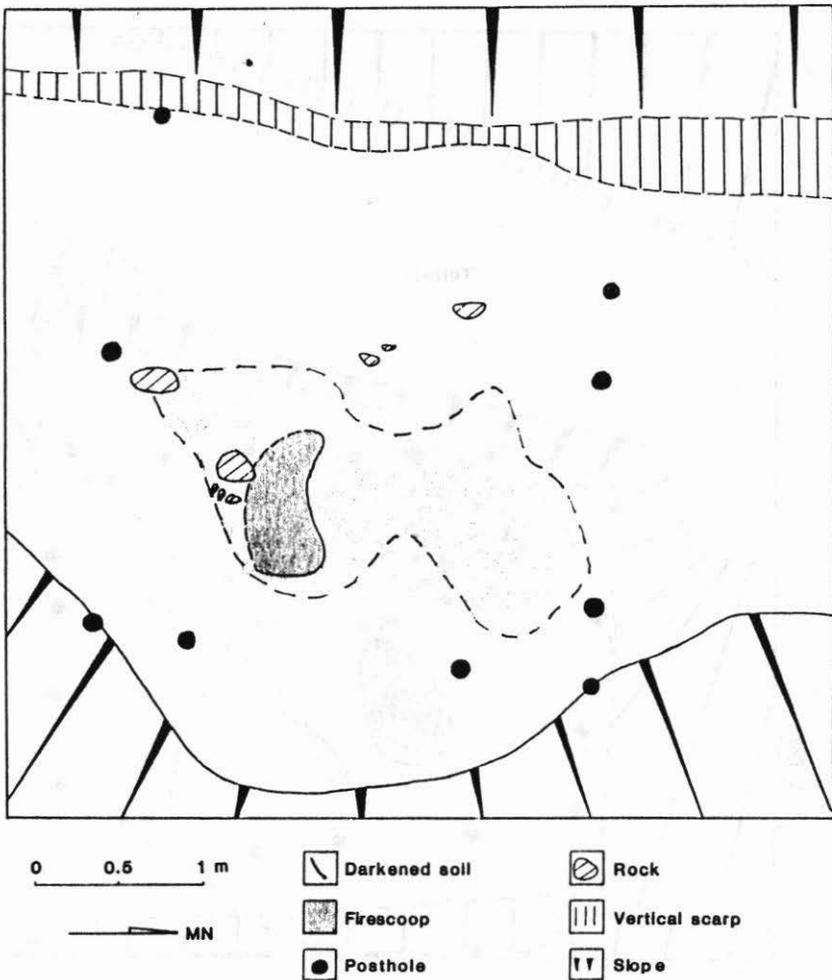


FIGURE 6. T11/644: Area A showing excavated features.

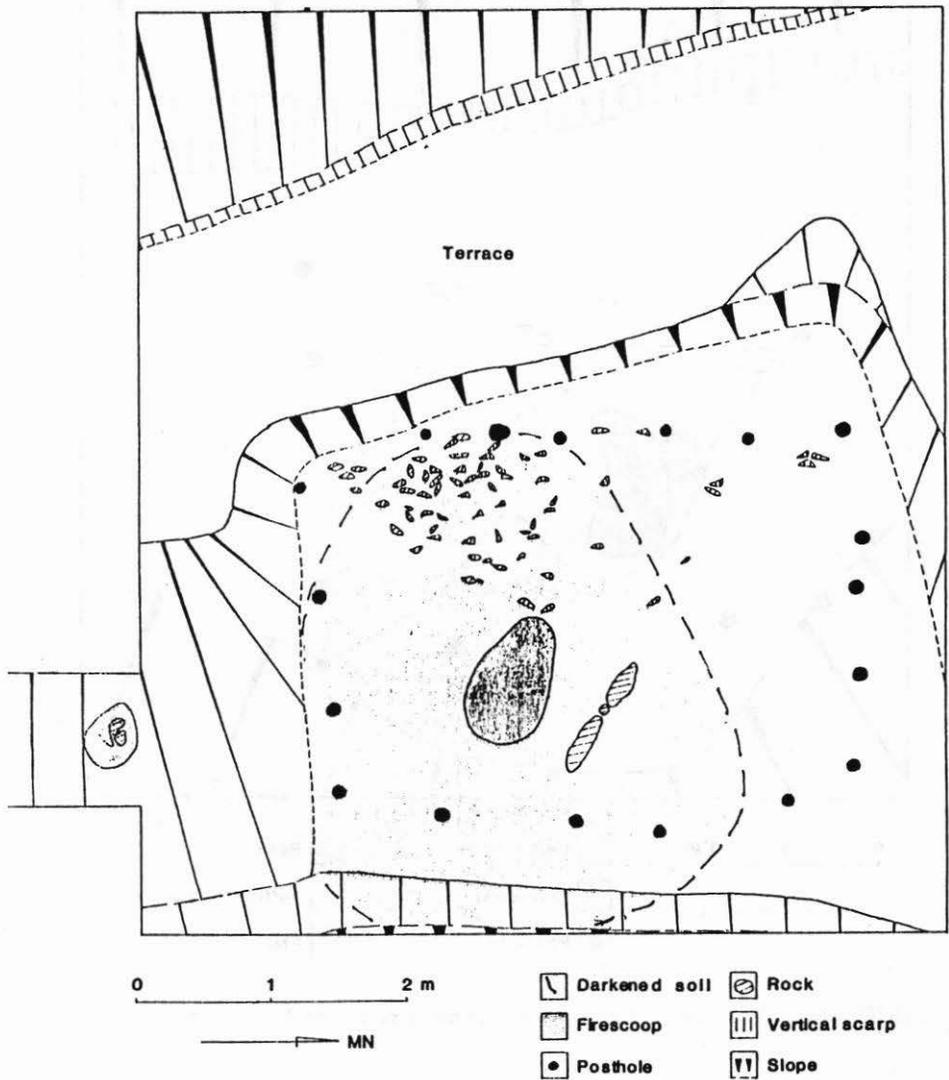


FIGURE.7. T11/644: Area C showing excavated features.

the terrace from the road edge to the back scarp (east-west axis) and at the southern end of the longitudinal axis (north-south). Additional squares were opened to check the areal extent of the midden.

The bulk of the midden filled a channel that ran diagonally through part of the terrace, but did not rise above a level ground surface. The deposit was 67 cm at its deepest.

In the east-west section, with the shell variously whole, crushed, burnt etc., layering was evident. There were no hangi or fireplaces. Some poor quality stone was found but was nowhere concentrated or in any great quantity. The small isolated scatters of midden related to the material in the upper layers of the main deposit.

Three in situ stakes were found extending into the clay at the base of the midden. They formed no regular pattern and further searching revealed no others. The shell around their bases indicated that they were positioned after at least some of the midden had been deposited. A single posthole nearby first showed beneath the midden and had no shell present in its fill. It pre-dates both the stakes and the midden.

Three small obsidian flakes were found in Area B, all near the surface of the midden.

The terrace appeared to be a natural feature with neither the back or sides artificially constructed. An irregular sloping surface caused by slumping and/or water erosion had been used as a shell dump.

From the surface Area C was a terrace with a central depression. Plant growth was slightly more lush within the depression than beyond it, which added to the impression of subsurface disturbance.

A rectangular grid was laid down to investigate this feature. A dense black layer evident in its western half appeared to be co-terminous with the depression on a north-south axis.

Additional squares were opened to provide a section from the back of the terrace through the feature. This showed that the terrace back was not artificially constructed and the nature of the exposed layering showed that the depression was unmistakably natural. Erosion and slope wash action, possibly after a tree fall, are offered as the most likely explanation for its formation.

vated area, to the south, was another firescoop which also contained fire darkened stones and obsidian flakes.

The evidence from T11/644 suggested an area of habitation marked by two structures on constructed or modified natural terraces. These structures, as well as the artefacts, fire features, and the small spread of midden indicate settlement on a secluded ridge on a more than temporary basis. The similarity of form and content, and the close proximity of the inhabited terraces suggest that they were contemporary occupations, although this cannot be determined archaeologically.

T11/648

Surface evidence at T11/648 comprised a very flat section of ridge top running north-south (Area A) and two terraces on its eastern side, one of which had a small depression. The terraces were adjacent to one another but separated by some 12 m (see Fig.8).

From previous experience in site recording it was expected that the ridge top would have evidence of storage pits and occupation, although none was evident on the surface.

Forestry access road number 67, put in during 1984, destroyed the front portion of the terraces but exposed a section through the archaeological deposits.

On the larger southern terrace (Area B) the road cutting showed a substantial midden extending over a distance of nearly 22 m; most in a continuous deposit but with small isolated scatters at either end of the main body. The midden appeared to be almost exclusively pipi and cockle, with pipi clearly predominating.

On the smaller terrace (Area C) the section showed a depth of dark soil below the topsoil far in excess of that apparent elsewhere.

Excavation strategy was designed to find whether the ridge top had been altered or used; whether the terraces were artificially constructed; to see if a relationship between the various midden scatters could be defined; and to investigate the depression on the smaller terrace.

On top of the ridge (Area A), 44 m² were opened up with no cultural evidence recovered. The natural stratigraphy of topsoil, mottled interface, and clay indicated that modification or truncation of the ridge top had not occurred. No artefacts were found.

In Area B squares were opened to provide a section through

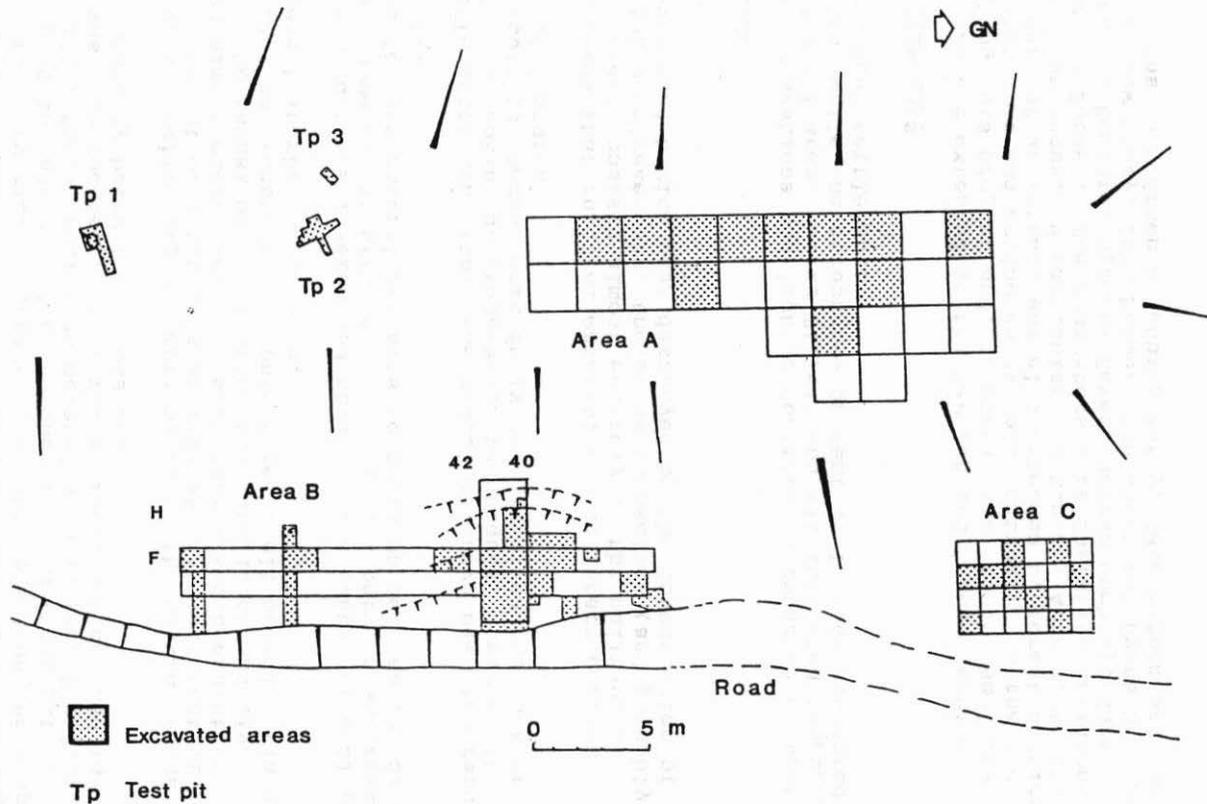


FIGURE 8. Site T11/648 showing excavated areas.

Test-pitting beyond these three main areas of excavation revealed two very small scatters of crushed shell on the sloping ridge top to the south of Area A, one of which (Test pit 1) had a small informal hearth associated with it (see Fig.8). Midden was also located on a narrow terrace, now covered in thick blackberry below the access road.

Despite preliminary assumptions about the nature, range and areal extent of activities at T11/648, it seems that it was used almost exclusively for preparation and consumption of food. No faunal material other than shellfish and five fish scales was recovered and only three small obsidian flakes were present in the entire site.

The midden was layered and thus not the result of a single episode. However, insufficient time elapsed between successive episodes for any natural deposits to build up between the different layers.

Differentiation within the midden may have been the result of differing cooking or preparation techniques, however, it is difficult to comment more fully on this given the lack of associated features.

It seems that cultural material on the intact portion of the terrace consists almost entirely of the build-up of sequential oven rake-outs, the ovens themselves (and possibly other evidence) having been destroyed by the construction of the road.

Conclusions

The excavations highlighted contrasting types of occupation within a small area. Sites T11/643 and 648 indicated temporary occupation, while the structures present at T11/644 suggested more permanent settlement.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to the New Zealand Forest Service for funding this project and, in particular, to Louise Furey in organising it and acting as overall controller in the field. A great deal of assistance was also extended by Forest Service staff at Whangapoua, in particular, by Lindsay Arthur, Acting O.C. for the Forest. The excavators were Christine Arvidson-Smith, Stuart Bedford, Myfanwy Eaves, Warren Gumbley, Kate Higham, Andrew Story, John Palmer, Sue Short and Lynne Steedman. Illustrations were drawn by Louise Furey, Kate Higham and Sue Short.

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