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MAHURANGI: SITE SURVEY AND ETHNOHISTORY

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Abstract

An archaeological site survey of the west coast of the Mahurangi Harbour was undertaken. The aims were two-fold: firstly, to record sites in an area not previously investigated, and secondly, to investigate the relationship between site and resource distribution, making use of traditional and historical evidence where relevant. This revealed a correlation between pit distribution and soil type, which also defined the historically observed distribution of primary forest. An interesting continuity between Maori use of the area, which resulted in forest retention, and early European settlement, which resulted in forest clearance, is demonstrated.

Mahurangi lies on the east coast of North Auckland and is that area surrounding the Mahurangi Harbour which runs from Warkworth, south-east 13 km to Mahurangi Heads immediately north of Puhoi. The land bounding West Mahurangi, with which this report is primarily concerned, is extremely dissected and consists of series of hills and valleys running at right angles to the coast to form an indented coastline with many headlands. From the west coast of the harbour the land ascends to meet the Kaipara watershed about 10 km inland. Mahurangi soils are predominantly derived from non-calcareous sandstones and mudstones of the Waitemata Series; this results in a heavy, poorly drained soil type, largely unsuitable for prehistoric agriculture, and at contact natural forest cover had been retained over most of the area (Rogers, 1961: 261; Rutherford, 1940: 126).

The survey was carried out with two objectives, firstly to investigate an area in which little archaeological work had been done; only 20 sites had been recorded between Puhoi and Warkworth and 19 of these were from the Mahurangi Heads/Puhoi area. The second aim of the project was to examine the relationship between site and resource

distribution. For this reason an arbitrary geographical area, i.e., the west side of the harbour, was chosen for study in detail rather than a more superficial study of the whole harbour. Because an interpretation of site distribution purely in terms of economic determinism seemed inadequate, note was also taken of both traditional and early historical sources.

The method employed in recording was simply to traverse the coastline, and properties of landowners adjacent to the coastline. This meant that country up to 2.5 km inland was covered by foot. Aerial recording of sites much further inland was attempted from a light aircraft at 500 ft. This did not prove successful because of the dissected nature of the area, the small number of inland sites, and the time of year (early August).

Sites were recorded in the New Zealand Archaeological Association recording scheme.

TRADITIONAL EVIDENCE

Repeated conquest of the Kaipara/Mahurangi area has meant that traditional evidence is confused and largely dates late in the sequence. The blanket term Wai-o-hua is used by Smith (1897: 34) to cover a number of vaguely defined tribes which traditionally were the first inhabitants of the Auckland/Kaipara region. The Ngati-awa tribe also occupied Kaipara for a time before their movement north. Under Maki, the Kawerau, a derivative tribe of Ngati-awa, defeated the Wai-o-hua of Kaipara and occupied the west coast, from the South Head of Kaipara down to Manakau Heads, besides territories on the east coast including Mahurangi.

Ngati-whatua battles with the Kaipara tribes (Wai-o-hua and Kawerau) resulted in their conquest of the Kaipara area about 1730-40, on geneologically based estimates of age (Smith, 1897: 72) and their conquest of the Auckland Isthmus about 1750. These defeats decimated the Wai-o-hua and meant that the Kawerau were reduced to the status of a subject tribe, although they continued to occupy certain areas such as Mahurangi until historical times (Graham, 1918b: 219). Previously the Kawerau had been intimately mixed with Wai-o-hua and now elements of both these groups were to inter-marry with Ngati-whatua (Graham, 1918a: 89) to produce the Ngati-rongo branch of Ngati-whatua.

Ngati-rongo assistance of Kawerau in a campaign against Ngati-paoa of the Tamaki area to the south, resulted in Kawerau giving the Puhoi area to Ngati-rongo. Smith (1897: 98) reports that

Ngati-rongo were later to occupy all of West Mahurangi and force the Kawerau across to the North Head and Te Kapa regions. Although this conflicts with other accounts (Graham, 1918a, b), the amount of tribal inter-marriage may explain the confusion.

Disputes over fishing rights with Ngati-paoa of Tamaki, and their incursions into the area, were later the basis of Ngati-paoa land claims on European purchase.

Longstanding enmity with the Ngapuhi of Northland led to the decimation of Ngati-rongo by the Ngapuhi under Hongi Heke in 1821, and the survivors fled to Whangarei or the forests (Otway, 1950).

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

European settlement began in the 1830s, although the area had been earlier visited by whalers and timber traders. Although he did not pass through Mahurangi, Marsden visited Kaipara in 1820 and noted the foods used - taro, fern-root, karaka, potatoes, kumara, pigs, fish and cats - that the people lived in villages, and the effects of Ngapuhi incursions.

> "The country has the remaining vestiges of a great population but is now thinly inhabited."
>
> (Elder, 1932: 290).

With restrictions, some of these observations could be extrapolated to Mahurangi.

The attraction of the area to Europeans was the kauri timber to be found there, and from the 1820s on, camps of seamen up to 300 strong were engaged in cutting and dressing spars for the Royal Navy: the crew of one timber ship mutinied and were forced to cut through a small point a few hundred yards north of McElroys Point "in order to cool their heads" (Otway, 1950: 20). This now collapsed tunnel was actually cut through a headland pa.

Between 1833 and 1835 Rev. Henry Williams called in at Mahurangi five times, principally to visit G. D. Browne who had established a spar station in 1832. At that time Ngati-paoa occupied the area. Williams was to comment on the abundance of school shark taken during the season, and the importance of these as food (Rogers, 1961: 305).

In 1840, Mahurangi was visited by Felton Mathew, the first Surveyor-General of New Zealand, in order to ascertain its potential

value as the site for Hobson's new capital, Auckland. By this time, warfare had caused Maori abandonment of the area and Mrs Mathew was to comment:

> "I believe we have not seen a single Maori (or native) since leaving Wangari nor have we fallen in with the least trace of inhabitants"
>
> (Rutherford, 1940: 128).

This last comment is not surprising, despite the amount of prehistoric field evidence still visible, for at the time the area was in 'primeval' forest. The abundance of forest foods was commented on, particularly pigeon, duck, and pig.

The forested nature of Mahurangi at contact, not only provides important evidence for prehistoric Maori use of the area, but also provided the stimulus for early European settlement.

The area was purchased by the Government from Ngati-paoa and Ngati-whatua-maru in 1841. In 1844, when Bishop Selwyn visited Mahurangi, it was then transitional between a timber camp and permanent settlement (Keys, 1954: 33). The ready availability of timber also led George Darrock to begin ship-building, and in 1852 the first ship was launched from a small bay just south of Cowan's Creek. This industry was to become of considerable importance during the 1860s (Otway, 1950).

SITE DISTRIBUTION

An obvious feature is that site distribution is predominantly coastal (Fig. 1). Settlement was centred on the coast. The one deviation from this pattern is the inland penetration of sites recorded by Wynne Spring-Rice in the Puhoi area. It is significant that many of these sites are pits or pit complexes (Fig. 1), which are of assumed agricultural importance, while the Puhoi area is one of the two main areas suitable for prehistoric agriculture (N.Z.G.S.M. 1:250,000 Whangarei). The absence of agricultural evidence from the Warkworth area may be due to the amount of European disturbance there. However, Felton Mathew's observation that secondary regrowth occurred on the upper reaches of Mahurangi Harbour is indirect evidence of agriculture in this area also (Keys, 1954: 26). The vegetative cover described for this area constrasts with that described for the rest of Mahurangi, but is similar to that encountered when the expedition reached the Waitemata, where fern and scrub cover predominated (Rutherford, 1940).

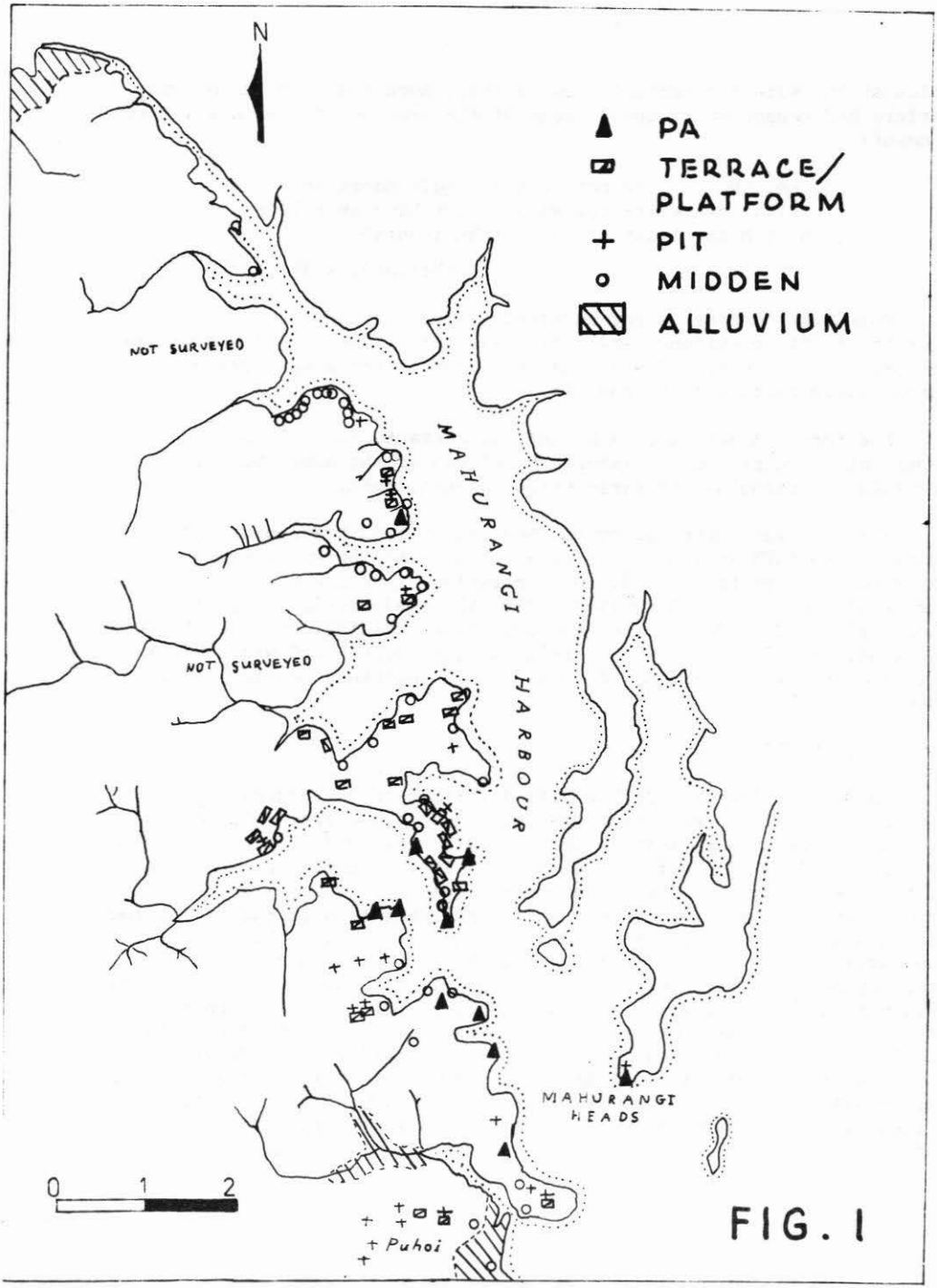
N
PA
TERRACE/
PLATFORM
PIT
MIDDEN
ALLUVIUM
NOT SURVEYED
NOT SURVEYED
MAHURANGI HARBOUR
MAHURANGI HEADS
0 1 2
Puhoi

FIG. 1

The clustering of pa sites to the south near Mahurangi Heads is of interest. It could be argued that this reflects the economic importance of fertile soil. However, none of the pa sites investigated had evidence of pits, while the low cost factor in human energy for distribution of resources by water transport precludes any interpretation of pa distribution around Mahurangi Harbour, purely in economic terms. Clustering of pa in this region then was probably determined by topographic and strategic factors, as well as resource availability. The close proximity of many pa sites definitely suggests that not all are contemporary.

One possible explanation of the numbers and clustering of pa in West Mahurangi, is that some are of considerable antiquity, and the different groups which successively occupied the area chose to construct new pa, rather than re-utilize old sites.

The apparent concentration in Figure 1 of middens to the north in the inner reachers of Mahurangi Harbour is misleading. Close analysis reveals a decline in numbers of structural features as one moves from south to north up the harbour, rather than an increase in midden deposition. This is because most of the structural features - pa, pits, platforms, terraces - were associated with midden while many of the more northerly sites were solely small shell dumps indicated by 3 metre x 5 cm exposures. The non-contemporary nature of many sites is stressed by the recovery of Mayor Island obsidian flakes and cores from some middens (Green, 1964), and sherds and pig tusks from others.

Middens consist of a variety of rocky shore and estuarine shell-fish, although the predominating shell-fish is, in all cases, the cockle, *Chione stuchburyi*, suggesting continuous use of the upper harbour resources. The number and size of many middens is indicative of the importance of estuarine shell-fish in the economy, and this is to be expected considering the huge areas of shell-fish beds exposed at low tide. The planktonic richness of the harbour is evidenced by the fact that Mahurangi is at present being used for commercial oyster farming.

CONCLUSIONS

Both the coastally restricted site distribution, and midden composition, indicate the importance of marine resources, particularly estuarine shell-fish. Although no evidence was obtained from the middens, traditional and historical sources (Smith, 1897: 92; Rogers, 1961: 305) indicate that school shark was an important economic resource.

Soil type over most of West Mahurangi severely restricted agricultural activities. This factor, together with the value of forest, both for refuge and as a source of materials and foods (Colenso, 1880; Cassels, 1972), led to retention of forest cover until historical times. Areas around Puhoi and Warkworth and other small pockets of alluvial soil were amenable to prehistoric agriculture, and the occurrence and distribution of pits demonstrates that this potential was realised. However, the gift of the fertile Puhoi area by the Kawerau occupants of Mahurangi to Ngati-rongo (Smith, 1897: 98) is suggestive that agriculture was not vitally important to Kawerau economy.

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