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New Zealand's First Recorded Post-Contact Epidemic: Untangling The Tale Of Rongotute And Te Upoko O Rewarewa

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Introduction

According to Percy Smith, the earliest post-European contact epidemic to strike Maori was called *te upoko o te rewharewha*:

[T]he great epidemic known as 'Te-upoko-o-te-rewharewha,' ... occurred ... [it] is said in 1790. One of the Nga-Puhi accounts of their expedition to the South, under Patu-one and Tuwhare, says that they learnt from their prisoners that they were attacked by the epidemic at the same time that the ship of Rongo-tute was wrecked at Wairarapa, when they killed and ate the crew.

The mystery that surrounds this ship, commanded, as native traditions say by Rongo-tute, has never been cleared up. There is more than one tradition about it, the main facts of which are that the vessel was wrecked and all the crew killed and eaten. The locality of this catastrophe is sometimes given as Queen Charlotte Sound, at the north end of the South Island, sometimes at Palliser Bay, Wairarapa. The following quotations from the voyage of the *Coquille*, Vol. IV, may perhaps throw some light on the story:—'It is said that a Scotch gentleman, who was inflamed with the idea of civilising New Zealanders, embarked in 1782, with sixty people, and all kinds of indispensable articles for cultivating the soil; his project being to establish himself on the banks of the River Thames or in Mercury Bay, and to teach the natives the art of cultivation, but no news has ever been heard of him since he sailed.' This was written in 1825.

I know not on what authority the date of the great epidemic is fixed at 1790; but it seems to me it might be any date within ten years of that time, and quite possibly as early as 1782 or 1783. (Smith 1910: 59–60).

In fact, just about everything in Smith's account is incorrect. Tregear (1904: 17) notes that Rongotute was probably Cook himself: 'Rongo was the

Polynesian and Tute the European name (on native lips) of the great voyager.' Treagear's point has been reiterated by Salmond (1997: 123; 127-128), who suggests that the account is a garbled version of the incident where ten of Cook's men were killed by Maori in Queen Charlotte Sound in 1773. The situation of the 'Scotch gentleman' to whom Smith refers, and to whom he relies on for epidemic dating, has been considered by Mack (1997). The source of the story is identified and no 'Scotch gentleman' ever set out for New Zealand. Hence this gentleman cannot be the source of any epidemic, nor can he be used to date any epidemic. Most recently, Church (2011) has argued that the Rongotute epidemic, which he identifies with Cook, is identical to another epidemic in the lower North and upper South Islands, named by other sources as rewharewha, and this epidemic was responsible for depopulating these regions early in the post-contact period.

The purpose of this article is to present as full an account of Rongotute's epidemic as possible, with a view to casting light on the earliest epidemic in New Zealand's post-contact history, a history relevant to archaeologists with an interest in early Maori demographics. The article will identify the first written mention of Rongotute, trace the development of the Rongotute story and propose an epidemic diagnosis. It will draw conclusions regarding the meaning of the epidemic's name, and find that Smith's and Church's conflation of the Rongotute and rewharewha epidemics are unsupported. Finally, while Cook did introduce disease into the Sounds, there is little evidence it depopulated large parts of the lower North and upper South Islands.

Richard Taylor And Rongotute

The earliest written record of the Rongotute legend is in an 1846 diary entry made by the Reverend Richard Taylor, recording a conversation with southern Taranaki locals:

They spoke of the first ship which ever came to this part it visited Wakatu (Nelson) and at first they thought it was a cloud and then a floating island, the considered the sailors as gods. They call the Captain's name KoRongotute and say he gave them balls which when thrown set everything on fire and which could not be extinguished. (Taylor, Vol. 4, 1 June 1846: 32).

The record of this event was separated in time and distance from Cook's visits to the upper South Island. However, Cook's expedition did note that some people they encountered in the Sounds came from the north (e.g.

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Salmond 1997: 123). There is another connection between Cook in Arapawa and the Wanganui region. On the basis of objects collected and observed during Cook's visits, Simmons (1987: 42) identifies a group Cook encountered in the Sounds as coming from the Wanganui-Taranaki coast or Horowhenua. But there is no association of any epidemic with Rongotute. Nor is there any account of a shipwreck, nor killing of his crew.

However, an association between Rongotute and an epidemic is found in an 1848 notebook entry of Richard Taylor's. This story was probably collected by William Baker, Taylor's assistant (Church 2011: 101). The notebook records the killing and eating of a European crew by Maori, and associated disease, but there is still no shipwreck.

Very many years ago, before many of the full grown men now living were born, a vessel commanded by a person whom the natives called *Rongotute*, touched at Arapawa where they committed such excesses that the natives became exasperated and, having murdered the whole of the crew, they cooked and ate them. This is said to have taken place before Te Rauparaha came from Waikato. Having stripped the vessel of everything they thought useful, they left her stranded on the beach. The plates which they had obtained from the patterns drawn on them, were called te upoko o rewarewa doubtless in consequence of their having been afflicted with a disease so called which resembled the smallpox, marking their bodies all over. These they broke up and having drilled a hole threw them they wore them as breast ornament. One article which they got is said to have been shaped like a mere and was consequently highly prized. It is now in the possession of some person belonging to the Nga ti hene tribe. The natives say this was the first time they ever saw iron. The spike nails they sharpened, and having fixed them on a handle like a native adze which was beautifully carved and ornamented with pieces of shell and smeared all over with the resin of the Tarata – *Pittisporum crassifolium* – which when hardened so the gum the lashing together that it cannot shrink. This was carried in their belts when they went to fight and called kai tangata. (Rhys Richards 1993: 12, citing Taylor n.d.).

Official documents locate Ngati Hine on the Wanganui River, where the story was probably collected, in 1870 (*Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives* 1870 A11: 3-10).

Seven years after Baker collected his record, Taylor published a version of the Rongotute myth. It differs in important ways from earlier accounts.

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Rongotute, whose arrival had been dated prior to the arrival of Te Rauparaha to Kapiti, is now identified as having arrived before Cook. Additionally, mortality arising from the epidemic, previously unmentioned, has become 'great numbers.'

The natives of Cook's Straits have a tradition that some vessel arrived at Arapawa, Queen Charlotte's Sound, before Captain Cook; they call the captain *Rongo tute*. The crew committed such excesses, that the natives became exasperated, and took the vessel, killing the entire crew, and eating them; having stripped the vessel they left the hull on the beach. Amongst the plunder were a number of dinner plates, which from their pattern were called *Te upoko o Rewarewa*: as this is the name of a disease which many years ago broke out amongst them, and destroyed great numbers, it may have been given, from its being a spotted pattern, the disease appearing to have resembled the small pox, by leaving marks all over their bodies. These plates they broke up, and having drilled holes through the fragments, wore them as ear and breast ornaments; one thing taken is said to have been shaped like a *mere*, and was therefore very highly prized. It is still in the possession of someone belonging to the Nga-te-hine tribe. The natives say this was the first time they ever saw iron, they made adzes of the spike nails. (Taylor 1855: 207-208).

Under the heading 'An Account of an Ancient [European] Navigator called Rongo-tute,' John White published another version of the story:

In the days of old, and in the days when the very old people of these days (1842) were very young, a vessel came to Aro-pawa..., and *Rongotute*...was the name of the chief leader...of that ship; and the crew of that ship were evil, and committed evil on the Maori people, so that the Maori people, being so annoyed and disgusted with them, and so enraged by the evil of their ways, attacked the ship, took her, and killed all the crew. These were cooked and eaten. This act was committed a long time before Te-rau-paraha migrated to the south from Kawhia, to the Whanganui-a-tara...The Maori collected the ropes from the masts, and from the sails, and from the ship, and the ship was allowed to drift on the beach, where the various things on board were taken by the Maori and the dinner plates were broken by the Maori and bored in the pieces, which were worn by the people instead of the greenstone hei-tiki. Now, the figures on some of these pieces of plate were not unlike Maori trees, and hence these imitation plate hei-tikis were called Te-upokoo-rewarewa (the head of

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rewarewa) [*Knightsia excelsa*, also known as the New Zealand honeysuckle (Salmon 1986: 54-5)], as the Maori thought the figures on the plates were like that Māori tree... But it was not long after these Europeans had been killed and eaten by the Maori that an epidemic came on all the district. This was a fever, and little punctures were on the body of the invalid, and thousands of Maori people died of this disease. From this ship a weapon was obtained which was not unlike a Maori mere pounamu, which is still in possession of the chiefs of the tribe called Nga-ti-hine; and that was the first time iron was seen by the Maori. The nails were rubbed on stones to make them have a sharp point; these nails were then put on a long spear. Other pieces of iron were made into axes like our stone adzes which we call kapu. For these carved handles were made and to these dogs' hair of our Maori dog was tied, and pieces of paua shell were inserted, and these were also rubbed over with the gum of the tarata (*Pittisporum eudenioides*). Tree. One of these axes was called by the name Kai-tangata. (White 1888: 120-121).

Official documents locate Ngati Hau on the Whanganui River in 1870 (*Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives* 1870 A11: 3-10). White's account may have been cribbed from Taylor's 1855 published account (Richards 1993: 14), but this does not account for attribution of the incident to a different Wanganui tribe. Additionally, the second unpublished account of Taylor, mentions Rongotute's visit as occurring *before* Te Rauparaha, while his third published account mentions *before* Cook. White's account, by reverting to Te Rauparaha to establish timing, is closer to Taylor's unpublished journal, which is unlikely to have been available to White. Perhaps White, who worked as a government official on the Wanganui River in the early 1860s, had his own local sources.

At no point in any of the three accounts linking Rongotute to an epidemic – William Baker recorded by Taylor, Taylor and White – is there the suggestion of anything more than a localised epidemic.

Possible Source And A Parsimonious Diagnosis

An illness with symptoms including spots was recorded aboard the *Resolution* before the ship arrived in Queen Charlotte Sound in October 1774. Just out from Tahiti in June 1774, where they had been since late April, naturalist Johann Forster noted in his private journal:

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I had gotten an eruption over all the body & took Physick to carry it off, which did me a deal of good.... Several people complained of these eruptions: they are small & less than grains of millet; red, & in some parts of the body very thick, are itching & prick as needles do.... (Hoare ed. 1982, Vol. III: 533).

At about the same time his son George disapprovingly reported sexually transmitted disease on board, contracted from the crew's contact with Tahitian women (Forster 1778: 404).

It is unknown whether such an illness was aboard the *Adventure*, but given it also arrived in New Zealand via Tahiti, it seems probable. If the on-board 'eruptions' were the source of the te upoko o rewarewa epidemic, as the arrival in Ship Cove was in October 1774, then the disease must have remained infectious amongst the crew for about four months. Thus the epidemic was probably not viral, as a virus would burn out quickly in a small ship-sized population. Nor were there any recorded on-board deaths from the disease. These few facts may allow a diagnosis. Primary syphilis symptoms arise three days to three months after infection. Secondary symptoms arise four to ten weeks following the primary infection. Secondary syphilis can involve spotting as a symptom, and people remain infectious for some years, accounting for transmission into New Zealand. Syphilis is not immediately life-threatening, accounting for the lack of on-board mortality from the disease.

How would syphilis be passed on to Maori? Sexual hospitality is known to have been practised by contact-era Maori. Cook's sailors certainly slept with Maori women in the Sounds when they arrived from Tahiti. Maori men from the North Island, known to be visiting the Sounds, were also likely to have slept with local women – and the North Island is where the epidemic story originates. There is circumstantial evidence for the epidemic symptoms recorded in the Rongotute legend as being those of secondary syphilis and a plausible disease vector can be identified.

Distinguishing The Te Upoko O Rewarewa And The Rewharewha Epidemic

There is a history of confusion of te upoko o rewarewa, most likely dated about 1774 and which I have suggested was syphilis, and a later epidemic amongst Maori recorded variously as korewarewa, rewarewa, rewharewa, and rewharewha (Pool 1977: 118; 1991: 45, Figure 3.1; Church 2011; Mitchell and Mitchell 2004: 93, 149). In addition to the false 1790 dating

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introduced by Smith, much of the confusion surrounds the similarity in names.

The account recorded by Taylor relates the name *te upoko o rewarewa* to the patterning of the ceramic plates plundered from the Europeans following their killing. White explicitly adds reference to the rewarewa tree. Richards (1993) suggests White was wrong to make this aboreal connection and, following Smith, suggests Taylor intended to record this epidemic as ‘*te upoko o rewharewha*’:

Taylor had learned Maori in the Wanganui area where he heard the glottalised *w* of that dialect as *w*, and wrote it so, though it corresponds to *wh* in other dialects. In the Wanganui dialect, the pattern on the plates was called *Te upoko rewarewa*, and White, not recognising the Wanganui dialect's glottalised *w*, wrongly interpreted Taylor's *rewarewa* as referring to the tree now called the New Zealand Honey Suckle, and inserted a story not in Taylor on the patterns in the plates being like the flower of the honey suckle (Richards 1993: 14).

However, Taylor had learned Maori in the north, where he'd worked before moving to Wanganui (Owens 2004). Additionally, Baker and Taylor probably did intend to connect the rewarewa tree to the pattern on the plates. The term rewarewa aptly describes the observed symptom of spots, which for Maori would have recalled the appearance of the wood grain of the rewarewa tree (Figures 1 & 2).

‘*Te upoko*’ translates as ‘head.’ The name might link the symptom of spots, resembling the grain of rewarewa wood, to their manifestation on the head. There is another possibility. In 1810, ‘*Te Upoko*’ was identified by Ruatara, in a conversation recorded by Samuel Marsden, as the ‘God of anger and death’ (Salmond 1997: 412). Salmond notes that Whiro is the common name for that god. *Te Upoko* may be an archaic form, which would explain its inclusion in a name coined about 1774. Maori understood sickness to be an earthly manifestation of supernatural disfavour and named epidemics to reflect this belief (see, for example, Henry Williams in Rogers 1961: 350). It seems reasonable, therefore, that accounts of the Rongotute epidemic correctly recorded its name as *te upoko o rewarewa*. It was Percy Smith's account, already erroneous in its date, that was responsible for adding the ‘h’ to the epidemic's name, creating further confusion between the early epidemics.

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Rewarewha, on the other hand, has become an accepted Maori word for influenza. It was first used by Hamlin (1842), who links it to influenza. Edward Shortland, a medical doctor, used the term in 1856 (Shortland 1856: 119). Buck (1910: 82) suggests the word *rewharewha* was derived from coughing as an epidemic symptom. He gives its etymological origin in the onomatopoeia of chronic respiratory problems arising from viral infection.

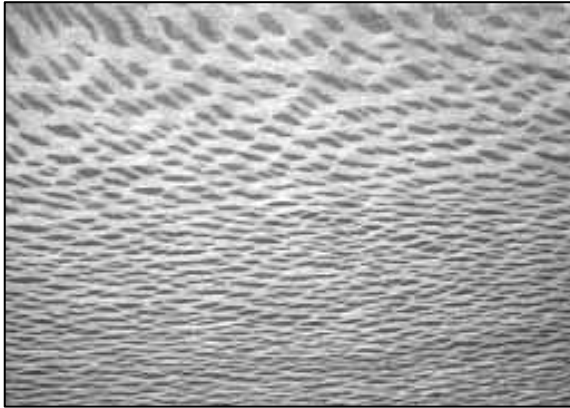


Figure 1 The spotted patterning of rewarewa timber
(<http://nzforests.co.nz/native-timber/rewarewa/>).

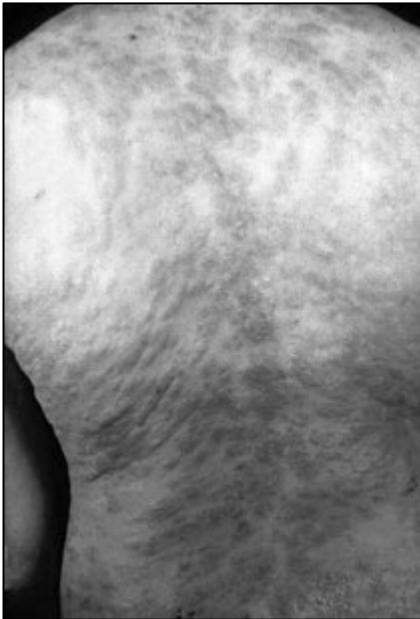


Figure 2. The secondary spotting symptoms of syphilis.
(<http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/images/back-209.jpg>).

In their spelling of Maori words, early missionaries used ‘wh’ for the aspirated ‘wh’ as well as ‘w,’ a practice that changed over the 19th century (see H.W. Williams in Appendix II, ‘Maori orthography’ in Rogers 1961). Their increasing use of the ‘wh’ spelling in writing allows a ready solution to much of the ‘major problem’ identified by Pool (1977: 118) of dating ‘the

progress of epidemics variously and confusingly referred to as Rewa-rewa and Rewha-rewha.’ The increasing European use of the aspirated ‘wh’ suggests that these various epidemics referred to by Pool, despite spelling variations, are the same.

One of the earliest published references to the rewharewha epidemic can be found in Taylor’s writings, further evidence that ‘te upoko o rewarewa’ and ‘rewharewha’ were distinct epidemics. In his 1848 book, Taylor describes what he variously spells as korewarewa or rewarewa as an epidemic. These spellings are synonymous with the aspirated later spelling of rewharewha. Rewharewha was ‘spread over the [North] [I]sland about forty years ago and carried off great numbers; whole families were buried in the same grave; it commenced with violent purging, the hair of the head and eyebrows entirely came off; it originated in the North of the island.’ He adds ‘violent pains of the head, throat and chest’ as symptoms (Taylor 1848: 86).

Taylor gave the two epidemics different dates. Rewharewha was ‘forty years’ ago, Te upoko o rewarewa was ‘many years’ ago and ‘before Te Rauparaha’ or ‘before Cook,’ depending on Taylor’s versions. Each epidemic had a different origin, with one starting at Arapawa at the top of the South Island, the other spreading from the north of the North Island, the former a shipping zone in the 1770s, the latter a shipping zone from the early 1800s. The epidemics differed in geographic spread. Rewharewha affected the entire North Island, while there was no indication that te upoko o rewarewa was anything other than local.

There is early evidence, by other credible observers, for Taylor’s dating of a major high-mortality epidemic across New Zealand around 1808. For example, James Hamlin dated such an epidemic to about 1808 (Hamlin 1842: 344-345). In 1849, Donald McLean, writing on the Whanganui River, dated a rewharewha epidemic to 1804–9 (McLean, entry dated 13 June 1849, Vol. 2: 31). Finally, in a journal entry of 20 July 1852, William Colenso recorded an elderly Maori informant telling him of ‘the coming of the Rewharewha, (the fatal contagious disease which severely scourged the natives about 40 years ago).’

Discussion

If Rongotute was Cook, and the related killings remembered by Maori occurred in the Sounds, this dates New Zealand’s first epidemic to about 1774 (Church 2011), not, as Smith does, to his unfounded date of 1790. There is one significant piece of extant Maori evidence, collected by William

Baker for Richard Taylor well after the fact, and a second, collected by John White, for an epidemic that might be associated with Cook. Apart from this association, the only other fact known about the epidemic is that spots were a symptom. The original account gives no indication of any Maori mortality. The sources provide no information on the location and spatial spread of the disease beyond the vaguest Arapawa connection and tribal traditions from the Wanganui region.

It is already known from European accounts that sexually transmitted diseases were co-present in Queen Charlotte Sounds with Cook's visits, and his men were the source. The spots reported in the Rongotute legend are consistent with the symptoms of the secondary stage of syphilis. These were symptoms evident aboard the *Resolution*, at least immediately following their sojourn in Tahiti, where many men had engaged sexually with local women, and where European sailors had previously infected the local population. Some four months later, still in the infectious stage, the British sailors arrived in the Sounds. The most parsimonious explanation is that Cook's crew did introduce an epidemic, it was syphilis, and this gave rise to the te upoko o rewarewa story. However, there is little evidence that the 1774 epidemic depopulated large parts of the lower North and upper South Islands. Indeed, if it was syphilis, it is unlikely that immediate, large-scale depopulation would have resulted. Syphilis mortality, if it results, takes between one and three decades to occur, and the disease has a greater influence on birth rates than on deaths.

Finally, the te upoko o rewarewa epidemic can be distinguished from the rewharewha epidemic in name, date, location and symptoms. That later epidemic is synonymous with the linguistically identical korewarewa, rewharewha, and rewarewa epidemics, a simple solution to a long-standing confusion in the demographic and historical literature. There is much more evidence that this later epidemic, dated about 1808 here, did cause widespread and considerable levels of mortality across New Zealand. Indeed, it is possible that this epidemic might explain the archaeological mystery of the abandonment, around 1810, of Oruarangi Pa and its vast trove of material objects, deemed by Phillips (2000: 119-120) to have been due to a tapu, arising for reasons unknown. But that is another story.

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