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OTATARA PA: ARCHAEOLOGY AND MAORI TRADITION  
IN HAWKE'S BAY

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Otatara (N134/1) is the largest and most impressive of the many prehistoric Maori pa in Hawke's Bay (Plate 1), comparable in sheer bulk and extent of the settlement with One Tree Hill in Auckland. It is situated on the left bank of the Tutaekuri river just above Taradale and 11km from the centre of Napier; today it is an Historic Reserve managed in the public interest by a Board of the Lands and Survey Department. The remains of terraced Maori settlement cover some 27.6ha but the pa was originally larger as some 3ha of the lower slopes at Redcliffe have been quarried away since 1936 (Fig. 1). The site is essentially a hill pa extending over 0.5km of the eastern end of a 140m high ridge and two of its flanking spurs, which branch again around the heads of small tributary streams flowing south or east to the Tutaekuri. The underlying rock formation is limestone belonging to the Castlecliffian formation, which is overlaid by bands of compacted river gravels.

The visible remains consist of a multitude of artificial terraces levelled into the hillsides and numerous rectangular pits, some over a metre deep. The pits are often arranged in an orderly fashion in rows or blocks, and most are surrounded by a 'raised rim' of earth to divert storm water, as was the general practice on the east coast (Fox, 1978:19). The small terraces are presumed to be living places for families, the pits for the storage undercover of their supplies of kumara during the winter. It is difficult to be certain of exact numbers on which an estimate of the population could be based. It is probable that some living terraces were abandoned from time to time and were replaced by houses and pits built elsewhere in the pa. There are also several external pit groups, presumably sited in relation to the areas of cultivation, which may be contemporary with the occupation of the pa (Fig. 1).

Archaeologists have long been puzzled over the absence of large-scale earthwork defences at Otatara, commensurate with the extent of the pa and the population that the pits and terraces imply. Best (1975:295) recorded a "defensive light earthwork" with a central opening across a lower spur leading up from the river, (2 on Fig.1) and noted "a short line of similar earthwork on the top of a spur to the west" (probably 3 on Fig.1). He added that "there was no sign of circumvallation, of outer or inner ramparts, trenches (ditches) or scarps" and concluded that if Otatara was a fortified position, its defences must have consisted of stockading. Groube (1970:242) included Otatara in his Class I

pa, defended by terraces only, and stated categorically that "it had no transverse ditches cutting it off from the ridges that run from it". I, myself, whilst commenting on the anomalous position of the lower earthwork (2 on Fig.1) (Fox, 1976:22) had missed the upper line (3 on Fig.1). This was only discovered on a return visit in 1977 and confirmed from the air photographs (Plate 1). Other writers have cited the apparent absence of defences as an indication of the peaceful character of the prolonged occupation by the Kahungunu (Mitchell, 1944: 114).

The two transverse defence lines, though undoubtedly small scale earthworks, certainly exist. The lower is a composite construction some 80m long, aligned across the lower slopes of a spur which provides a relatively easy ascent to the main ridge from the river. The earthwork starts on the south at the edge of a small gully, now within the quarry zone. It consists of a bank and ditch facing east 1m high and 5m wide overall, up to the 2.5m wide entrance gap as noted by Best (1975:295). It continues northwards as a scarp backed by a terraced flat, ending at a semicircular projection 7.5 x 4m at the edge of the steep slopes. The earthwork is best interpreted as the foundation for a palisade on either side of a central gateway, with possibly a fighting stage on the projection at the northern end. It is noticeable that the chosen line is at a little distance from storage pits and other signs of occupation higher up the spur, though excavation might show the gap was illusory. The present appearance suggests a place for marshalling the defenders or for a ceremonial reception of visitors.

The upper line (3 on Fig. 1) marks the north-western limit of the settled area of the pa, though there are some scattered pits on the shoulder of the hill farther north. The line was well chosen, starting in a dip at the head of a steep sided valley which provided natural defence along the northern side of the pa. It crosses the 120m high ridge at one of its narrowest points and then fades out on the western slopes. The earthwork is inconspicuous, consisting of a low bank with a forward scarp 1m high; like the lower line, it was presumably the foundation for a palisade.

There was formerly a third line of defence at Otatara, which is known only from an air-photo taken by the Royal New Zealand Air Force in February 1936, before the major Redcliffe quarry workings had commenced above Springfield road. The photo (Plate 2:R.N.Z.A.F. 18 J/10) shows that Maori terracing was continuous over the upper slopes of the Redcliffe gravel spur, as well as another separate block on the northern side of the adjoining gully. Both these zones had been quarried away by 1969 when a recent air photograph was taken by New Zealand Aerial Mapping (Plate 1, and broken line on Fig. 1).

The 1936 photo also shows clearly a double line of transverse defences across the Redcliffe spur (1 on Fig. 1) barring the line of easy approach from the higher ground. The markings indicate a ditch between two banks, approximately 30-40m long. It is evident that the ditch was cut across the terracing and therefore was constructed at a later date. With the 30m high gravel cliffs on the river side, the gully on the north, and this transverse earthwork, the spur became a defensible unit, a separate pa in effect.

This is of particular interest in the light of Maori traditional stories which refer to two pa at Otatara in connection with the Kahungunu invasion of Hawke's Bay, a higher one called Hikurangi and a lower one, presumably named Otatara (Prentice, 1939:43). Both pa, which then were occupied by the Whatumamoe people, were attacked by Taraia and his Kahungunu warband. They had come from the north, first attacking pa on the coast at Arapaonui, and then Heipipi (above Glenvale) and were tempted farther south by reports of the abundance of food (White, 1887 (Vol.3):122). In the first stages of attack "people from the higher pa of Hikurangi came down to defend the lower" and vice versa, but after a feint by Taraia's forces, Hikurangi fell. "During the night the people of the lower pa dug a large ditch between the two pas, and this aided greatly in its defence" (Prentice, 1939:43). Taraia failed to take Otatara and so made peace.

On a first reading, the story seems implausible, but it fits with archaeological evidence. The air photo indicates that the length of ditch constructed at the lower pa was only about 30-40m, and with a labour force of determined men, it would have been possible to dig it overnight. Comparable figures from fortifications in Taranaki during the New Zealand Wars studied by Nigel Prickett show that 150 soldiers could dig as much as 300m of ditch and bank in a day though using iron picks and shovels (pers. comm.).

The story also helps to locate Hikurangi pa as being situated higher up the same spur, in a position which allowed reinforcements to move easily from one pa to the other before the ditch was dug. The most likely situation would be on the summit, where the spur joins the main ridge at 130m. This is a commanding position with an extensive look-out, naturally well defended by the steep slopes to the three valleys and by the narrowing of the ridge on either side. There is a short length (5m) of bank across the ridge on the eastern side and some defensive scarping around the adjoining head of the valley. Whilst the apex of the spur is obviously defensible, it is likely that the pa extended farther south to take in more of the flat top of the spur, on which there are several pit groups (Fig.1).

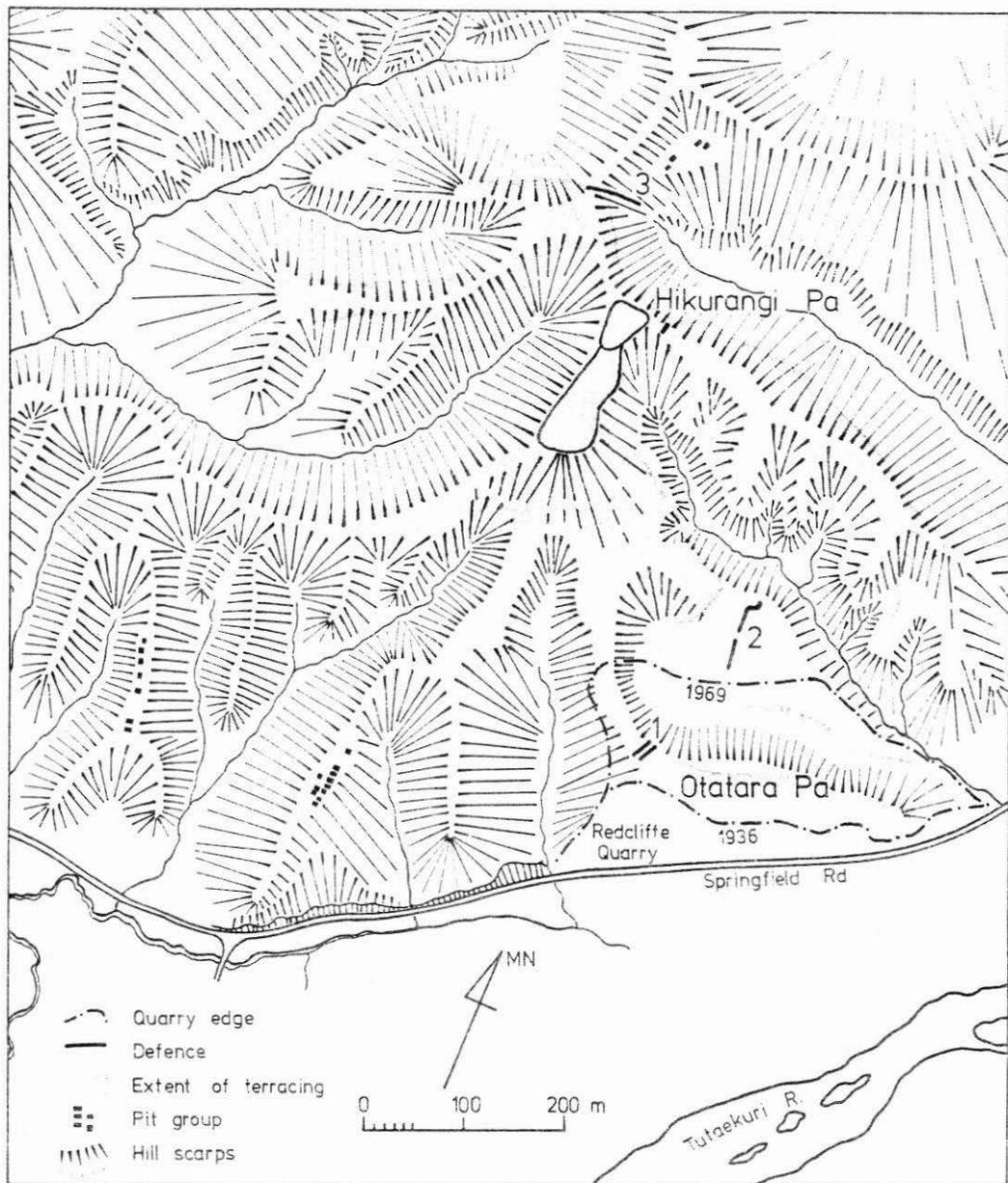


FIGURE 1. Plan of Otatara pa, N134/1.

The problem for archaeologists is how much reliance can be placed on the details of the traditional story. The story was not known to Elsdon Best when he wrote his account of Otatara in The Pa Maori (1975: 295), nor is it mentioned in his earlier articles (Best, 1901:132; 1918: 49). It is not among the local traditions of Hawke's Bay, published by William Colenso (1880, 1881) nor is it included in T.H. Downes' "History of the Ngati Kahungunu" in which Taraia's conquest of Heretaunga and the expulsion of the Ngati Mamoe is described (1915:78). In John White's Ancient History of the Maori, Otatara is mentioned as the principal pa of the Hatupuna, the Awanui-a-rangi, and the Whatumamoe peoples which was captured by Taraia, but without any details of the attack (White, 1887 (Vol.3):122). The same bald statement is repeated verbatim by Samuel Locke in his account of the historical traditions of the East Coast tribes (1882:455).

It therefore appears that the story was not written down till the early 1930s when W.T. Prentice was collecting material for the centennial History of Hawke's Bay (Wilson, 1939). It was also known to J.D.H. Buchanan when he was at Hereworth School, Havelock North, at that time (Buchanan, 1973:9). It is hard to say whether it reflects a genuine 'folk memory' handed down orally for over 300 years or whether the details are more recent embroideries added to rationalise what then could be seen on the site. Since a good observer like Best failed to notice the earthwork in 1927, it is unlikely that one of his contemporaries was more successful. On balance it seems that the story may be accepted at its face value.

Utilising both the archaeological and the traditional evidence, the Otatara sequence can be provisionally reconstructed as follows:

1. Two separate terraced settlements were constructed by Whatumamoe people, one on the lower Redcliffe spur named Otatara, the other at the junction of the spur with the main ridge named Hikurangi (Fig.1).
2. Both pa were attacked by Taraia and the Ngati Kahungunu in the early 16th century: Hikurangi fell. A transverse ditch and bank was dug rapidly to defend the lower pa.
3. Terraced settlement by the Ngati Kahungunu was extended over the main ridge as the population grew, as well as on to the crest and slopes of the adjacent spurs (shaded area, Fig.1). There was extensive cultivation on the lower slopes as shown by the numerous pits in the settlement and beyond. The whole area was known as Otatara.
4. Two lines of small scale earthwork defences were constructed to mark the final limits of the pa, one across the ridge facing north-west, the other across the lower slopes facing south-east. Both covered a line of relatively easy approach and are likely to have carried palisades.

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OTATARA Plate 1. Aerial photograph 4201/21, taken 4 August 1969.



OTATARA Plate 2. Aerial photograph RNZAF 18 J/10, taken 3 February 1936.



WAIKATO AERIAL SURVEY Plate 1. N66/24 — one of several major pa at the western edge of the Matamata Plain.