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PETROGLYPHS IN COASTAL TARANAKI

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In an area bounded to the north by the Puniho Marae and to the south by Rahotu township are several examples of petroglyphs. Altogether ten examples of these have been examined and recorded (see Fig.1). Besides these there are two other examples of which the Taranaki Museum has photographs (one at Opunake (Griffin, 1970:12) and one at Oaonui) which have, as yet, not been relocated. No doubt there are other examples in this area which have either yet to be located or have been weathered beyond recognition.

All the known examples have been rendered on the volcanic rock common on this part of the coast. Most are shallow (with the exception of the Rahotu rock N118/58 (Plate 1) which because it is a slightly softer rock has deeper impressions) and consists of spirals. These spirals range in size from 5cm to 30cm across. N118/20, 58, 79 are found on pa sites; all others are located some distance from the nearest fortification. N118/71 is found in the intertidal zone.

Most of the glyphs consist of spirals (with the exception of N108/77 and N118/58). Two types of spiral are present as can be seen in Plate 2, a tight spiral (lower one) and a rather more loose spiral (middle one). If two or more spirals are on the same rock both examples are usually present.

N108/77 - This rock is known as Toka-a-Rauhutu and is now mounted on a concrete base at Puniho Marae. This female rock is said to have led Mount Egmont (Taranaki) from the centre of the North Island to the Taranaki Province. Some glyphs are present but are now too weathered to be seen clearly. A reasonable photo of it in its original position with the chief Minarapa leaning over it can be found in Maori History of the Taranaki Coast (Plate 3) by S. Percy Smith.

N118/20 - Glyphs are situated on the summit of a small ring ditch (see Plate 2). Two large rocks have a total of five glyphs which range in size from 5cm to 19cm in diameter. Three are on one rock and two are on the other.

N118/58 - Site consists of three lahars enclosed with a ditch and bank. Three separate glyphs are present, the most spectacular being the one depicted in Plate 1. The spirals on this glyph are about 17cm in diameter. The other two examples on this site occur on two separate rocks with a spiral on each, one 17cm and the other 18cm in diameter.

N118/70 - Isolated glyph consisting of a single spiral 15cm in diameter.

N118/71 - This site is in the intertidal zone (Plate 3). On one rock are glyphs consisting of spirals as well as other lines which in some places have been deeply eroded by wave action and as a result are difficult to follow. The glyph in Plate 3 is approximately 6m north of the other and consists of a single spiral which also has been slightly eroded by wave action.

N118/72 - Four spirals are depicted on the one surface of the rock. Two spirals are 14cm in diameter and the other two are 8cm in diameter.

N118/79 - This is a small glyph situated on Tarahihi paa and consists of a single spiral approximately 15cm in diameter. It is very faint and can only be seen if the light strikes it at a certain angle.

N118/91 - Isolated glyph consisting of a single spiral 30cm in diameter. Badly weathered.

N118/92 - This glyph is situated on the summit of a small lahar which has no visible signs of human occupation on it. Five spirals are present on a large rock, two at the western end side by side and on the eastern end three in a triangle (two on the bottom with one in the middle on top).

N118/93 - This is an isolated spiral on a rock in the middle of a paddock and is approximately 20cm in diameter. It is very weathered.

As to the actual significance of these petroglyphs several possible explanations have been put forward. These include boundary stones, stones of religious significance, idle doodlings and it has even been suggested that they show that the Maoris originated from Red Indians! The local Maoris themselves either do not know or are not willing to explain the significance of these petroglyphs.

In 1848 F.D.Bell while investigating the Tapuae Block just south of New Plymouth and north of the area under study in this article wrote, "At the pah and in many places in the district are set up marks either on trees or stones where distinguished warriors fell in battle" (Bell, 1848). This may explain these glyphs but unfortunately he does not say what form these 'markings' took. They may also have acted as boundary markers between two or more hapuu or whaanau although, as yet, no proof has been found that they actually served this purpose.

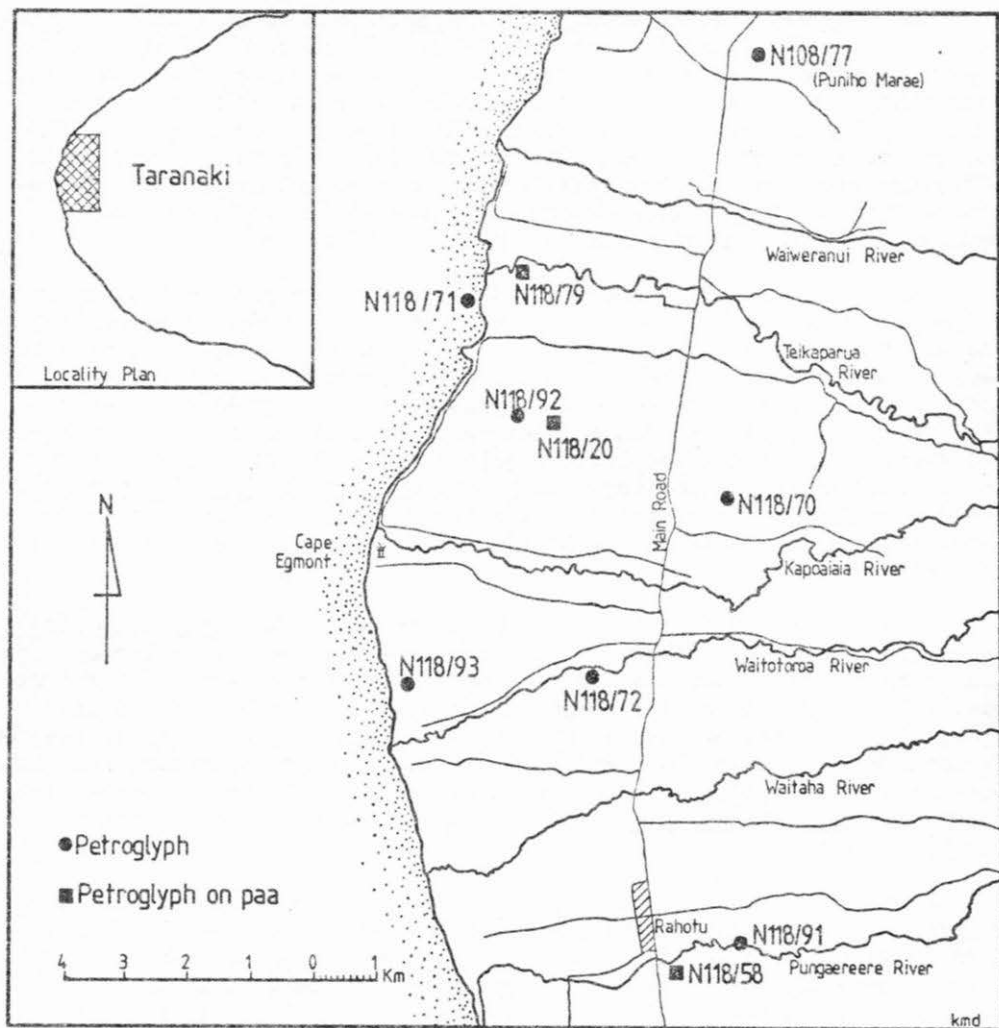


FIGURE 1. Location of petroglyph sites in coastal Taranaki.

The only glyph to have any definite religious significance attached to it is Toka-a-Rauhotu (Wharepouri, 1977). It is regarded as a female rock possessing great mana capable of causing death and there is a story concerning a party of Ngaati Tama digging her up and shifting her to another place but she returned that night to her old resting place and all of these Ngaati Tama died (Smith, 1910:33). Up to historic times offerings were left for her particularly on fishing expeditions (Wharepouri, 1977). Today on important occasions at Puniho Marae Toka-a-Rauhotu is dressed up in a piupiu and cloak and talked to.

When the Rahotu Stockade was being built by Armed Constabulary in 1881 a 'carved stone' was noticed on the hill on which it was being constructed and the following was recorded, "The natives know nothing of it as a land mark or as a gravestone marking the resting place of a chief, but say that had any such memorial stone been in existence, they would have known of it. They conclude that the carvings were made by the man who lived on the spot, chief of his people, who gave his name to the pah: made by him in his idle moments which were many". (Hawera and Normanby Star, 1881). The description given stated that the 'carvings' were very similar to those seen on the faces of the Maoris. This stone has yet not been re-located.

Finally in 1976 a photo (Plate 1) appeared in the Taranaki Daily News under the heading of 'Rahotu Mystery Stone' and a few days later an Eltham man wrote to the Editor stating that he knew what the meaning of the stone was. "The carvings on the stone may be similar to those of the west coast Indian tribes of America and may be a link to the origin of the New Zealand Maori. This (carving) could be an old Maori planetary religious ceremonial stone with one spiral signifying the earth and the other the moon" (Taranaki Daily News, 1976). This hypothesis I feel needs no further comment.

As for the age of these glyphs all are most probably pre-European. However they are all weathering extremely rapidly and several (N108/77, N118/20, 79, 91, 93) have almost been obliterated. In the case of N118/79 I first saw this glyph five years ago and it was reasonably distinct but now (1979) it is very difficult to see and impossible in some light. However it must be remembered that up to about 60 years ago many of these stones would have been protected to a certain degree by being either amongst flax or in the bush and with the clearing of this protective cover wind erosion has set in.

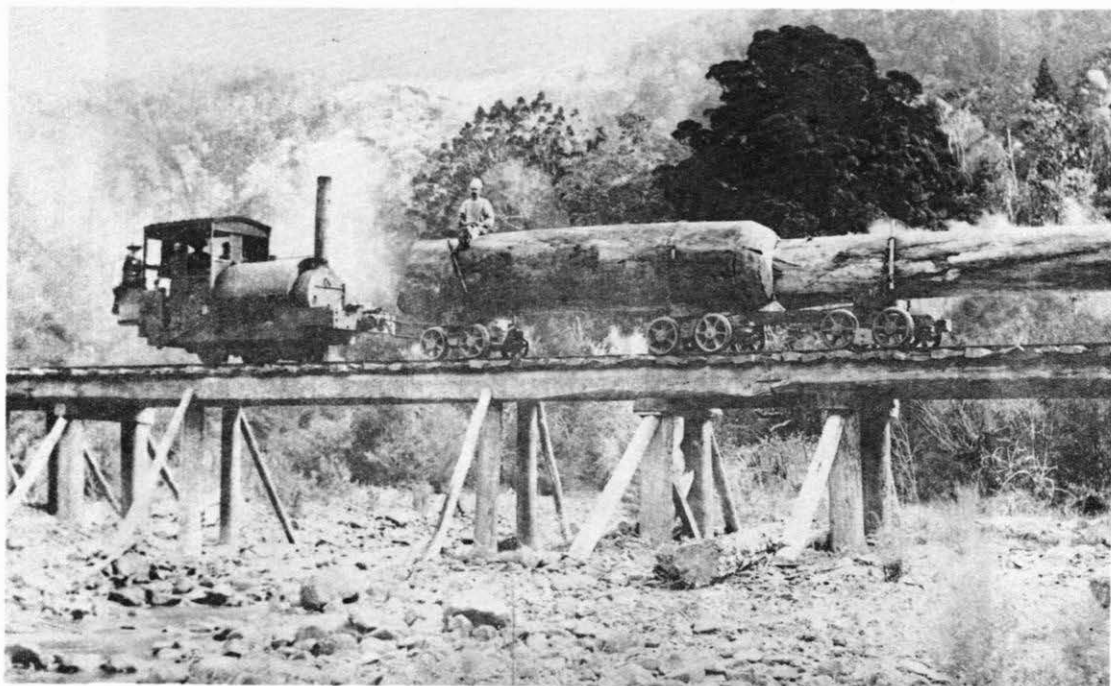
These glyphs are quite unique and this part of the Taranaki Coast has many fine examples. Why this part of the coast should have this number is open to speculation. No doubt more exist in this area and it is only a matter of finding out about them so that they can be recorded and photographed before it is too late and they are lost forever.

Acknowledgements

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References

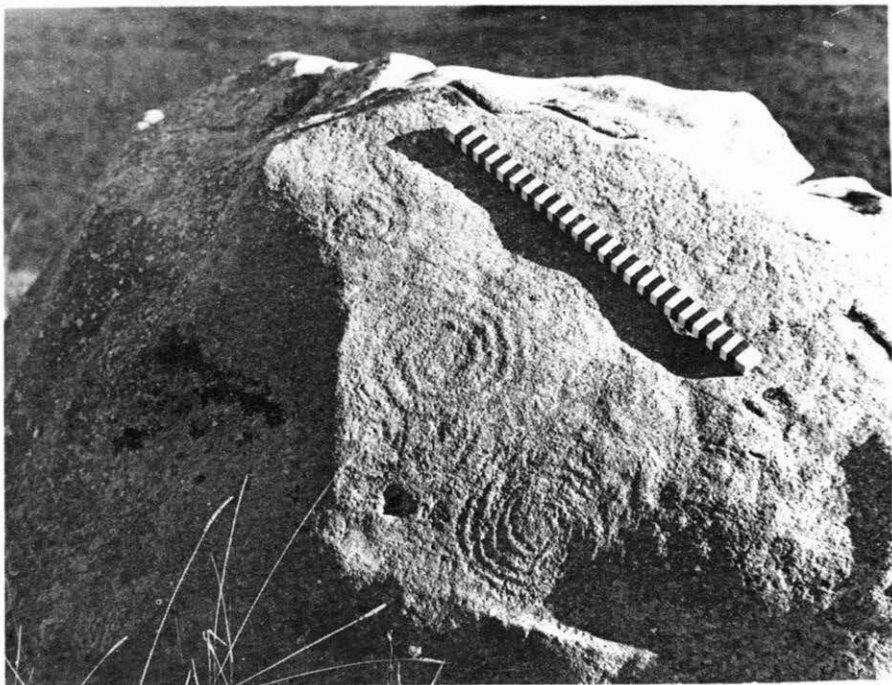
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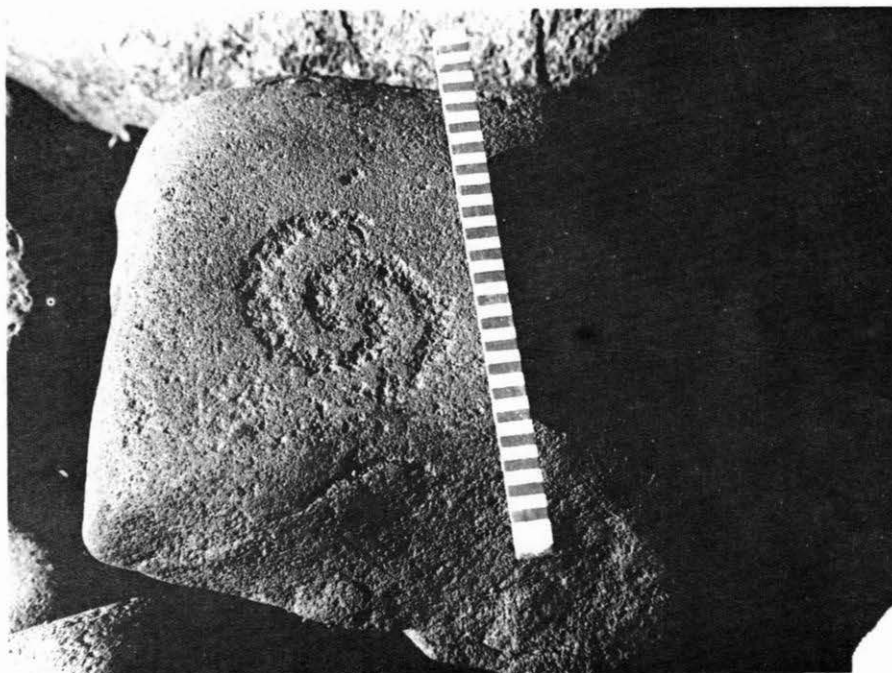
KENNEDY BAY Plate 3. Smythe brothers bush locomotive.
(Auckland Institute and Museum photograph).



TARANAKI PETROGLYPHS Plate 1. N118/58, Rahotu.
(Taranaki Newspapers Photograph).



TARANAKI PETROGLYPHS Plate 2. N118/20, Pungarehu.



TARANAKI PETROGLYPHS Plate 3. N118/71, Warea.