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POUERUA PROJECT, PHASE II: THE FIELDSCHOOL EXCAVATIONS
AT A STONE WALLED PA, N15/224

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In December 1983 excavations were carried out aimed at the investigation of a small ancillary pa, south-west of the main Pouerua volcanic cone pa in the inland Bay of Islands, Northland (Fig.1). The objectives were: firstly, to carry out an excavation that was an integral part of a larger research programme, the aims and procedures of which had been specified by Sutton (1983, 1984); and secondly, to provide University of Auckland archaeology students with instruction and experience in archaeological methods.

Selection of site N15/224 for investigation grew out of Phase II of the Pouerua project, which in 1983-4 focussed on ancillary fortifications. There are five of these within two kilometres of the main fortification of Pouerua pa (Sutton, 1984:30). Three of these sites were selected for excavation. The choice of N15/224 stemmed from its unusual features. These consisted of a series of substantial stone retaining walls supporting seemingly defensive terraces, stone-faced defensive scarps, defined entryways through these defences, and an internal ditch on one side (Fig.2). The function of the last item, some, including Sutton (1984:32), had thought "might be a feature added in the early historic period which is related to gunfighter warfare". The well-preserved features and the proximity of stone-walled enclosures of probably historic age, combined to suggest the pa was built in the historic period. Finally, it appeared an ideal site on which to examine the function of various kinds of terraces.

The investigation was directed by Roger Green assisted by Caroline Phillips and Wynne Spring-Rice. Twelve students were involved, both third year undergraduates and first year graduates. Green was responsible for leading the general discussions and considerations of strategy which served as the basis for decisions about which areas would be dug. Phillips oversaw all the plan and section drawings, and Spring-Rice supervised the detailed plotting procedures in Area 2. All three supervised excavation procedures and note taking throughout the site as the situation demanded. Each student kept his or her set of individual notes, and the supervisors maintained a general notebook. While the site may therefore have been somewhat more fully documented in note form than it would have been on a typical dig, all the students benefitted from having personal experience of various kinds of recording. Students generally worked in more than one of the areas opened.

Each area addressed different archaeological problems requiring the use of a variety of techniques.

This unusual, if not unique, site had been mapped and described in some detail by Phillips (1980:158-160 and Fig.8) prior to the initiation of the Pouerua project. It has since been mapped in greater detail by Janet Leatherby and Peter Morgan as part of the overall map of the Pouerua project area. The map was completed during the course of our investigations to include the areas opened for excavation (Fig.2).

The excavation

Viewed in plan (Fig.2) N15/224 exhibits many features of the one phase site, built as a single integrated unit that involved a high degree of planning in its construction. Situated on a craggy hillock and naturally defended by steep scarps on two sides, it may be divided into two main areas. One is an inner elevated and artificially well-defended summit platform above the 142-143 m contour, defined by stone-faced defensive scarps and stone retaining walls. The summit zone was further defended by an interior ditch on the south-western side. The second area is the outer zone, 3-6 m lower and defined on three sides by terraces retained by substantial stone walls on their outer margins. The perimeter encloses an area of some 5600 m², with the inner zone extending 2000 m and the flat areas in the outer zone several hundred square metres less than that.

The defences. A long trench designed to provide a stratigraphic section was laid out so as to link the inner and outer zones, cut through the internal ditch, and take advantage of a gap where the stone retaining wall of the outer terrace had partially broken down. This has been designated Area 7 (Fig.2). Its excavations revealed that at the base there was a paleosol and underlying subsoil reflecting the stage before construction and occupation of the site. These layers were found both under the outer zone terrace fill and its retaining wall and under the fill behind the retaining wall that formed the perimeter of the summit zone. They may be joined to reconstruct a moderately sloping original surface that presented little natural defence and gave easy access to the hilltop (Fig.3).

On this slope the outer terrace retaining wall was constructed, employing carefully stacked rocks to yield a flat vertical face 1.8 m high with progressively smaller boulders thrown in behind it, and rubble behind that. It allowed the formation of, and retained, an earth cut-and-fill terrace surface behind. At the same time construction commenced on the inner defensive retaining wall on the summit perimeter.

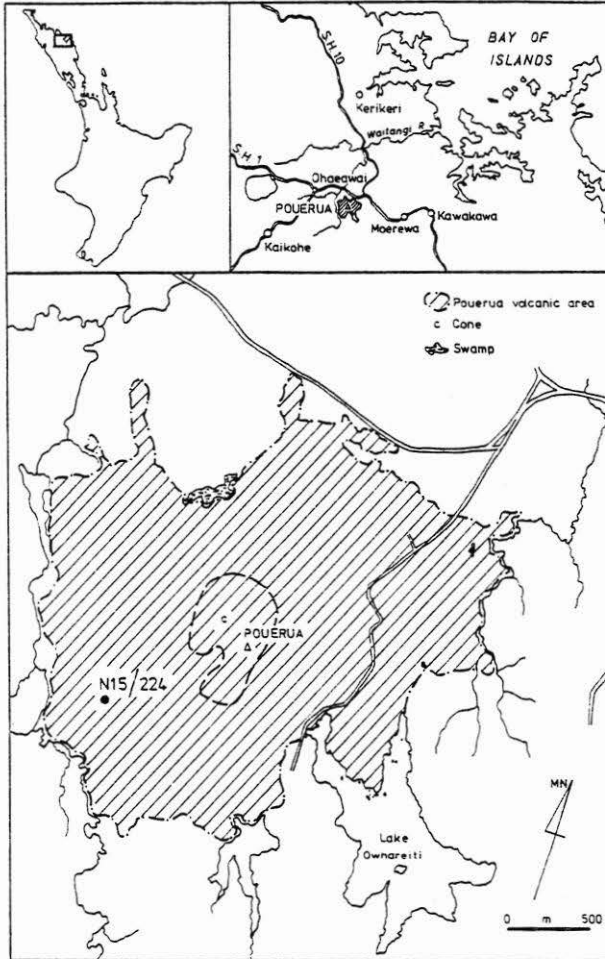


FIGURE 1. Location map.

At the base of this a shallow broad ditch was dug, so that combined with the retaining wall it presented a 3 m high barrier where there had previously been a fairly gentle slope.

It was not possible to determine whether palisade posts were placed along the edge of the stone retaining walls, because the trench took advantage of broken sections through the walls. Substantial postholes were located elsewhere in the outer defensive wall (see below), so it is very probable that palisades were incorporated in the outer defence. A square was laid out on a more intact portion of the inner defensive wall but no sign of postholes could be found.

Approximately 4-6 m back from the summit edge a small fill terrace was located, with a stone-faced front in which were found two large, deep postholes indicating the erection of a major wooden structure, possibly of a defensive nature.

Excavation on the outer zone terrace revealed very few finds, the main one being a scoop firepit. In fact there was little occupation debris or charcoal in any of the rubble or earth fills, suggesting that this was the first time this particular hillock had been extensively used or modified. The restricted amount of debris in layers deriving from the occupation of the pa also suggested that it had not been of long duration and was stratigraphically a once only event. Post-occupation destruction seemed to be fairly minimal, confined mostly to slumping, which had been increased by recent stock grazing, causing the collapse of some of the stone structures.

On surface evidence the internal ditch ended approximately 4 m before the steep natural slope on the western side of the site. The gap meant that along the ascending ridge there was an easy access to the summit zone. The excavation of Area 3 showed that the ditch had been completely filled by a major collapse of the inner zone wall, and was not an entryway as had been suspected earlier. The ditch in this location was very similar in form to that in Area 7.

The inner zone. Three features in the inner platform zone were chosen for examination. Area 4, represented the only pit depression on the site. Unless the pits had all been completely refilled, it seemed that this pa did not function as a defended food store. The pit was located on a little knoll and on surface evidence was very small. Excavation showed it to be a shallow, bin-like pit and not an entryway to, or indication of, something larger. It would appear that semi-subterranean pit storage of kumara was not one of the activities associated with this site.

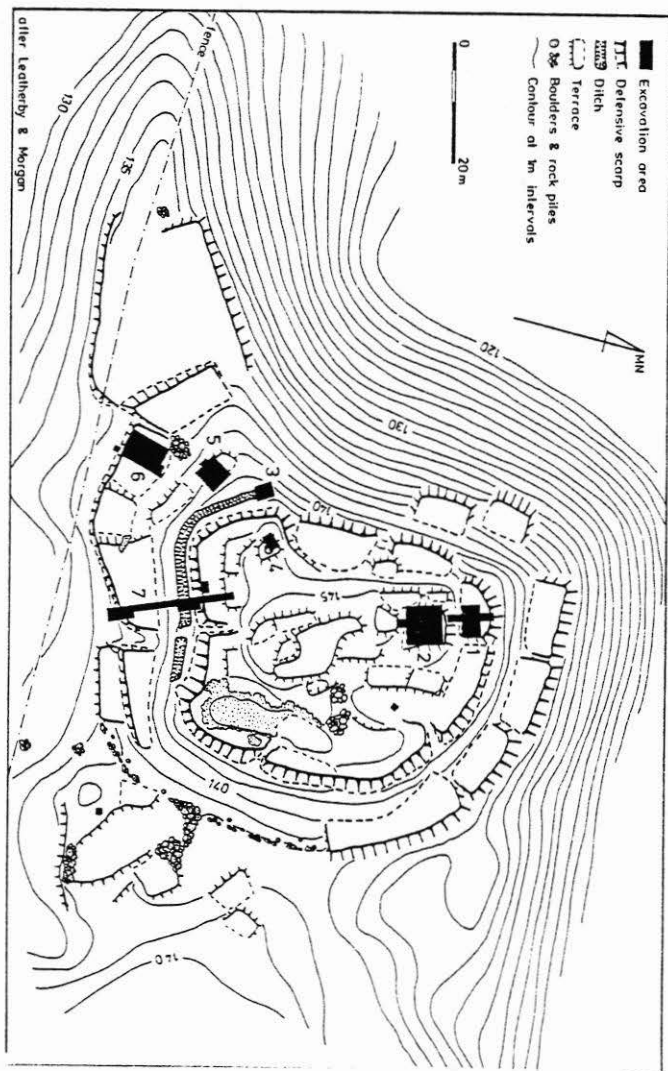


FIGURE 2. Map of site N15/224.

Areas 1 and 2 appeared to be related and were linked by a narrow trench. The section revealed that both were contemporary, single phase occupations. The terraces were constructed by cutting to the south, and filling to the north.

Area 2, was a large well defined terrace with a stone hearth in the centre. Experience elsewhere at Pauerua indicated that this was a house site, which should be defined by posthole alignments and contain a scatter of lithic materials. The latter expectation was quickly realised, but it was only at the end of the excavation period that the posthole pattern for the house (Fig.4) became evident. The house measured 4 x 4 m, and apparently faced west. It had a rubble pavement in the front, which extended into the south-west corner and to a lesser degree the north-west corner of the house. The house may have undergone some modification during its lifetime, since there was a firescoop as well as the hearth and an excess of postholes in some areas.

In contrast the much smaller terrace of Area 1 was almost entirely devoid of lithic materials and post and stake holes were at a minimum. However, three very shallow elongated depressions were revealed, one of which contained two small ovens (Fig.5). A small bin pit was also present. Charcoal was much more abundant in the occupation layer covering this terrace. Its function clearly differs from that of the adjacent residential terrace, and we interpret it as an outdoor food preparation and cooking terrace.

The outer zone. Adopting the same strategy in the outer and lower zone of the site, adjacent large and small terraces were again investigated. The small Area 5 terrace had a pathway leading on to its eastern edge, and post or stake holes indicating that some kind of structure of undefined shape stood on it. Lithic materials were again very few in number and in this case charcoal and signs of cooking debris were also lacking.

Area 6 was a larger, defensive terrace, which due to the press of time, was not as fully excavated as we would have liked. It did however, provide us with two significant outcomes. First, was the demonstration that adjacent to the outer edge of one of the stone retaining walls of the perimeter terraces, whose height of only 1.4 m was insufficient to declare it strictly defensive, there did indeed exist an alignment of palisade posts (Fig.6). They were not easily defined in the rocky fill.

More easily defined on the earthen terrace fill were the outlines of a building whose construction was of a type

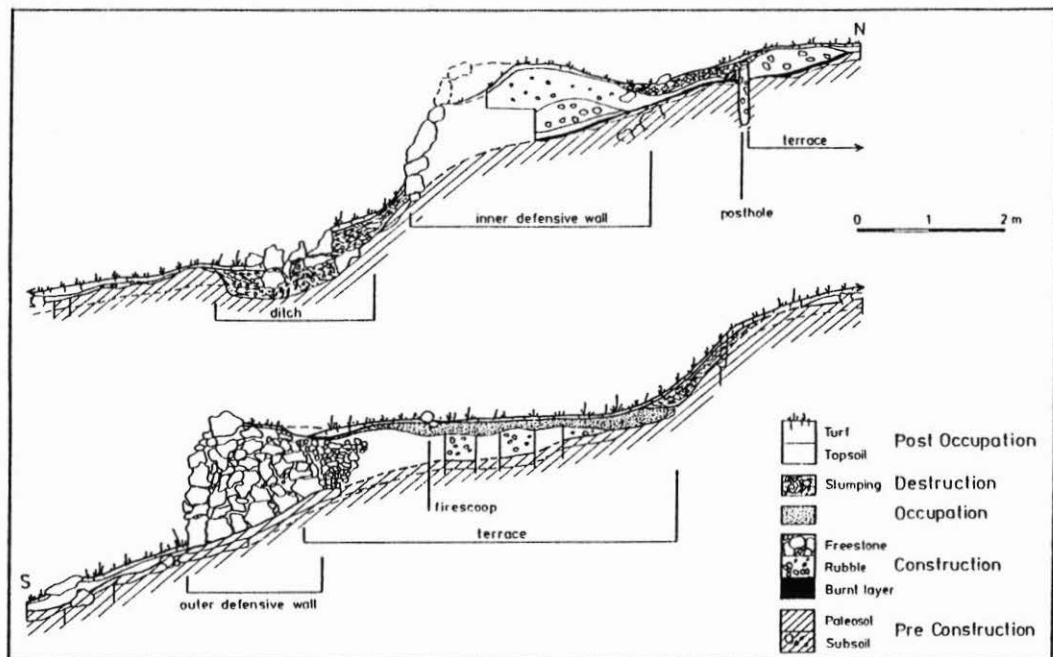


FIGURE 3. Section through the defences, Area 7.

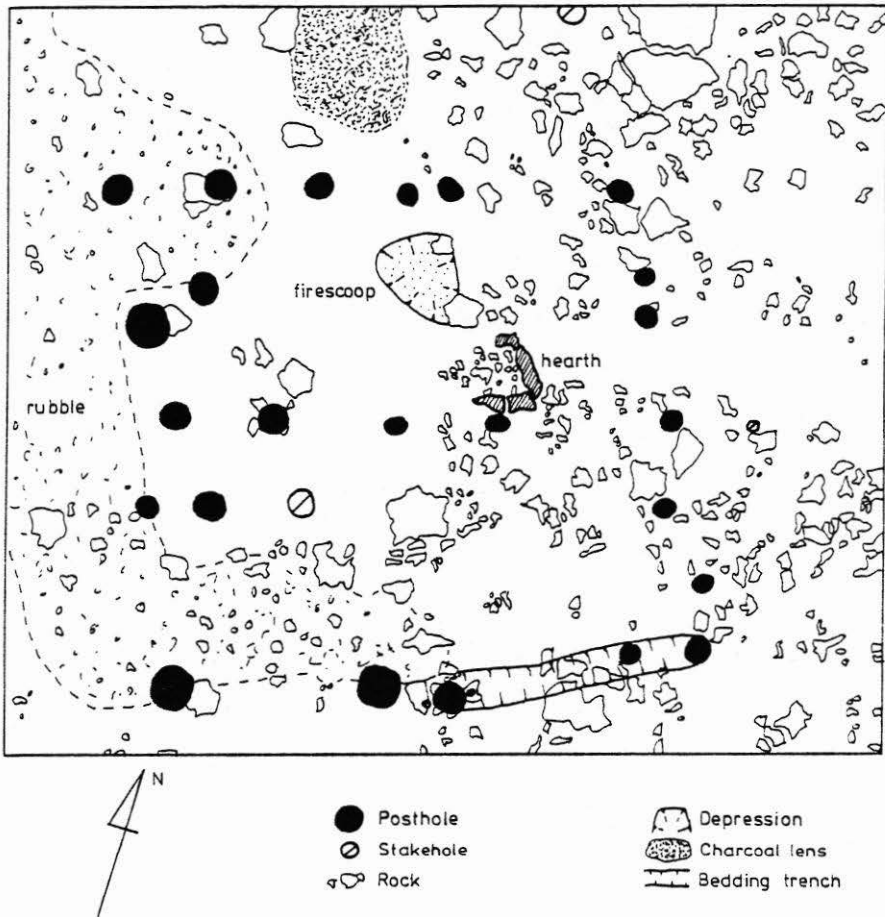


FIGURE 4. Plan of house site, Area 2.

not previously encountered at Pouerua. Around its perimeter was a shallow bedding trench and the postholes defined a narrow entryway, which contained a 'paving' of scattered rock. Bedding trenches are not unknown, having occurred along the walls of other structures in New Zealand. However, there was an unusual alignment of postholes across one end of the building's interior including one into a former firescoop, itself an indication of earlier usage of the terrace. Presumably this pattern of aligned posts would have been repeated at the next wall post to the east, but time did not permit us to demonstrate this. In contrast to the Area 2 house, the floor of this structure and indeed the whole terrace surface was devoid of lithic material. At this time we hesitate to suggest what the function of this building or terrace was, except to see it as not typical of those so far uncovered at Pouerua. Quite a bit of evidence in the form of lenses of charred material both on the structure's floor, and more especially outside its northern wall indicated that it had probably been burned.

Summary

N15/224 has been shown through excavation to be what its surface survey suggested: a one phase site, in which the planning of its construction and layout is highly visible. People certainly lived there, built houses and other structures within it, as well as cooked there. Unless the Area 6 building is some kind of above-ground foodstore, storage of crops did not seem to be one of its functions. Defence on the other hand was a primary consideration, and an inner and outer defensive system used both stone walling and stone facing, as well as ditching and palisading. While about the same area was defended in each case, the inner platform defences were more imposing.

The site is presumed to date back to the late prehistoric. Not only were no historic artefacts found there during excavations, but in other areas searched for ferrous and non-ferrous objects by metal detectors nothing of an historic nature was brought to light (Sutton, 1984:33). The shallow nature and the position of the internal ditch ruled out its use in gun-fighter warfare. The good preservation shown in the stratigraphic section suggests that the site is fairly recent. Occupation appeared to have been brief, with evidence for only minor changes being made in structural features during that interval.

This investigation was the first fieldschool exercise undertaken by the University of Auckland. The site proved to be a very interesting one from a research point of view. As a result, the authors feel that too much emphasis was

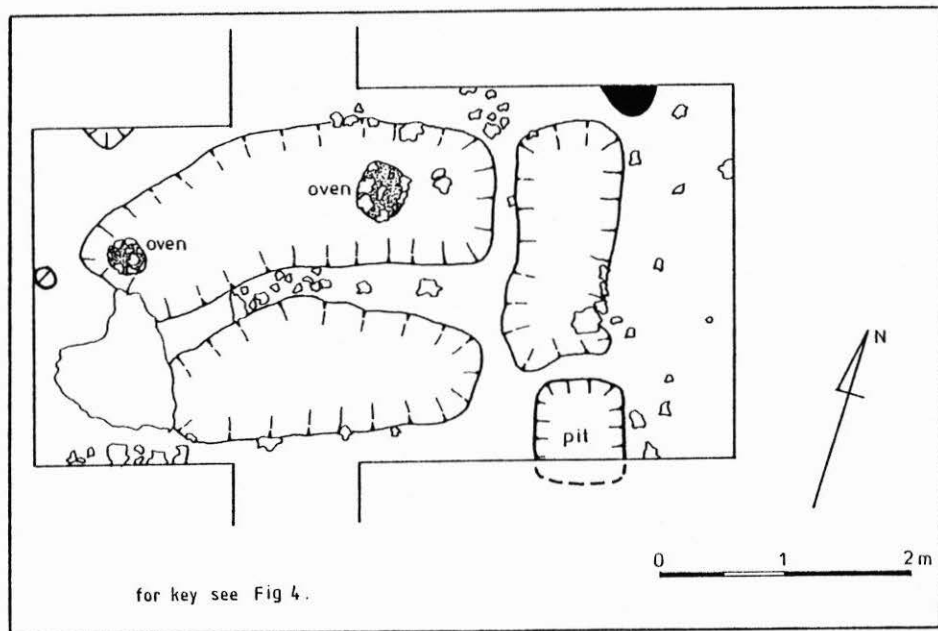


FIGURE 5. Plan of terrace, Area 1.

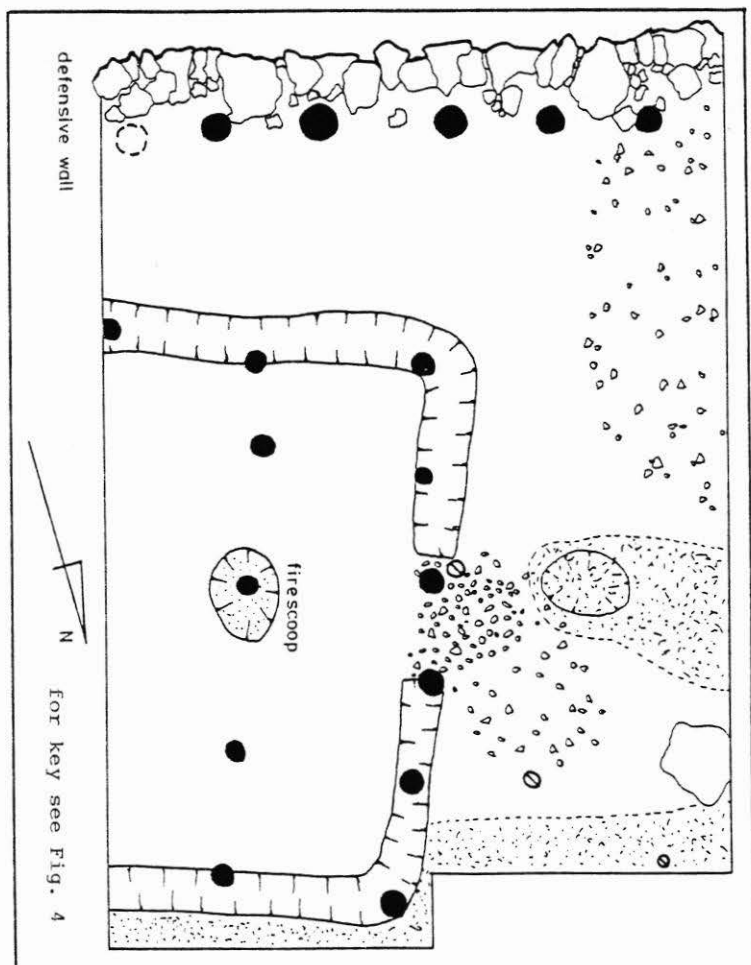


FIGURE 6. Plan of terrace, Area 6.

placed on acquiring the research objectives, at the expense of instruction in procedures and methodology. However, the students were involved in the excavation of what is still a very unusual site.

Acknowledgements

Students who were subjected to something of an experiment and made it work despite at times onerous field conditions deserve praise and thanks. They were Madhu Bhana, Robert Brassey, Pam Chester, Sandra Denee, Wendy Gibbs, Leigh Johnston, Keren Lilburn, Yvonne Marshall, Pauline Morphett, Nicholas Twohill, Ed Visser and Richard Walter.

To the regular Pouerua crew, and its director, Doug Sutton, we extend our sincere gratitude for the efforts that made it all happen.

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