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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF
MUHUNOA WEST MIDDEN, HOROWHENUA

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G.L. Adkin (1948) recorded a considerable body of information relating to the archaeology of Horowhenua. No excavation has ever been undertaken to substantiate his observations, however, and areas surveyed systematically are few and small. Except in areas which he knew well and traversed with some regularity, Adkin's recording of archaeological features in Horowhenua should not be treated as being in any sense systematic. Research currently in progress should help to establish a better understanding of Adkin's methods and his rationale for recording some sites and not others.

One site not recorded, though almost certainly clearly exposed in a public road bank section during the period of recording, is the Muhunoa West Midden (N152/50) in the Ohau district of Horowhenua (Fig. 1). An examination of the map that Adkin (1948:Map 6) provides of the Tikorangi-Wera-roa area, reveals that no midden sites are recorded for this area, although a significant number of traditional sites are recorded. There is some evidence that Adkin did undertake at least limited field excursions in this area (T. Dreaver, pers. comm.). At the time of his work, however, he did not consider the area an important one in terms of observable midden sites (Adkin, 1948:39).

On a short visit to the area I observed a number of middens in quite a small area. It is possible that due to recent changes in weather or for some other reason, middens are now exposed which were not exposed during the period of Adkin's observations, though I would not consider this a significant factor in the absence of located sites in Adkin's published record. It is hoped that during the 1981-82 summer systematic surveying will be undertaken between Waiwiri Stream and Waikawa Stream (Fig. 1). Once surveying has been completed, a number of excavations will be undertaken in order to increase understanding of the site types recorded. This will be the first step in a study designed to examine Adkin's contention that he had documented high density and low density areas of midden remains.

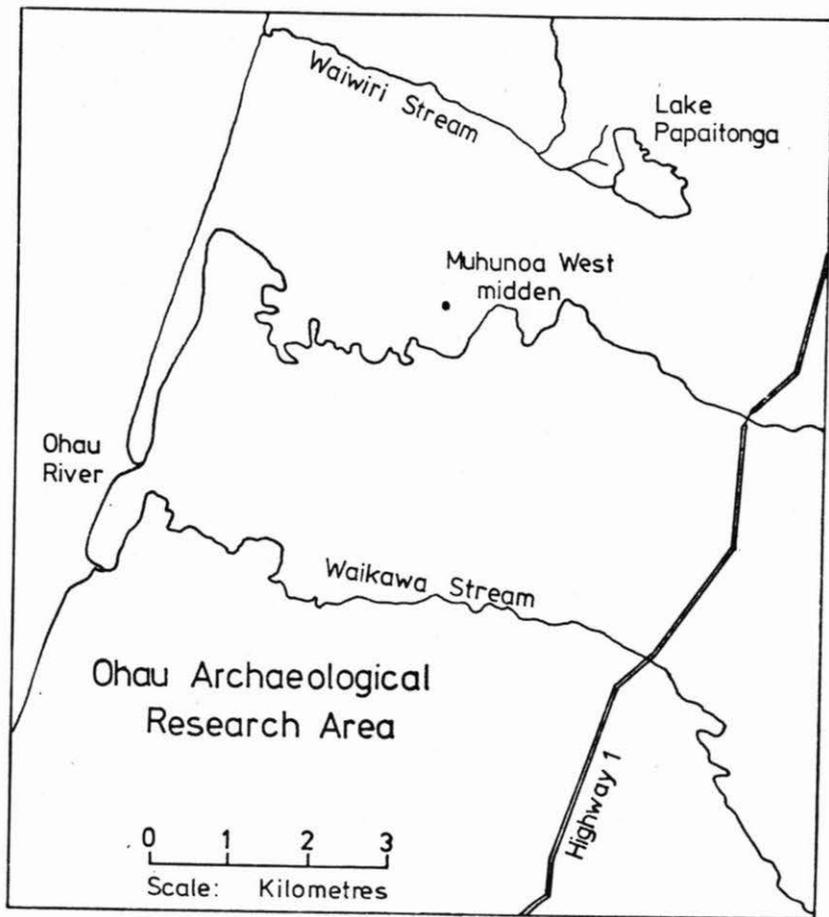


FIGURE 1. Location of Muhunua West midden.

As a result of a preliminary visit to the Ohau area in 1980, a number of midden sites were located with the assistance of Mr Tony Dreaver of Levin. Of these the Muhunua West Midden was chosen for the first excavation. Interest centred on this midden because, although it was about 3 km from the coast, it was apparently very similar in composition to middens immediately behind the foredunes. Predominance of

tuatua in these coastal middens was noted in the Muhunua West Midden, though the presence of fishbone in the exposed section was also interesting. The coastal middens have been noted for their very low incidence of bone of any sort (Butts, n.d.:4-6). Hence, it was supposed that the Muhunua West site may give valuable additional information, supposed to be not readily obtained from excavation of the more coastal middens.

Muhunua West Midden was located in a road section, where the road had been cut through a stabilized sand dune. The midden showed clearly as a single occupation layer of shell midden with ovenstones and fishbone also visible at the time of first recording. Excavation was undertaken on 28, 29 and 31 March and 9, 10 May, 1981. Four square metres were excavated in the grass strip on the bank above the road, on the road side of the road/farm boundary fence (Fig. 2). On the farmland over the fence, test pits indic-

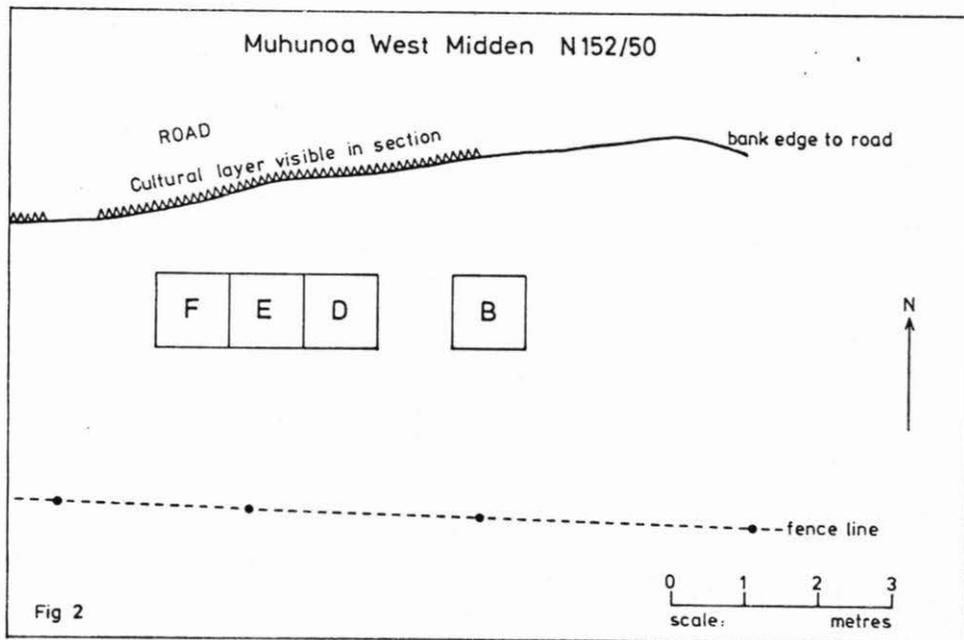


FIGURE 2. Plan of Muhunua West midden excavation.

ated that, although there was midden material present, it was very fragmentary and had almost certainly been disturbed by agricultural activities. On the bank at the edge of the road the midden material did not appear to be disturbed.

The midden sample was obtained in order to document the fauna and flora which had been exploited and to recover material for charcoal and shell C14 dating. It is not possible to tell the proportion of the total site remaining after road making activities. Calculations relating the sample to the whole site cannot, therefore, be made. Anderson (1973) has noted that such calculations are of dubious value.

Excavation revealed that the midden represents a single period of occupation, though this may represent intermittent use of the site during a particular time of the year or for one or more years.

Although detailed analysis of the midden material has not yet been undertaken, the following species have been noted during excavation and examination of a small sample of the midden recovered:

- Mollusca: tuatua (Paphies s. subtriangulata)
pipi (Paphies australis)
dosinia (Dosinia anus)
fresh water mussel (Hyridella menziesi)
triange shell (Spisula aequilateralis)
cockle (Chione stutchburyi)
frilled venus (Bassina yatei)
- Fish: snapper (Chrysophrys auratus)
Several other species may also be present though these are not yet identified.
- Bird: A few fragmentary bird bones were noted during excavation - as yet unidentified.
- Artefacts: One flake of grey obsidian and a volute shell which has been transversely cut across the body whorl were recovered during excavation.

Discussion

Tuatua is clearly the dominant species in the midden. It is not possible at this stage to comment on the relative proportions of the other shellfish species, though in the small sample analysed, pipi appears to be present in very small proportions. Evidence is clear for exploitation of the marine, estuarine and fresh water mullusca. Fish were brought to

the site as well as birds, though the birds were apparently the least exploited element of the local environment. Within the excavated area there was no evidence of building structures. Ovenstones were scattered throughout the midden. No intact ovens were excavated, however, suggesting the excavated area was peripheral to, or removed from, the actual cooking area.

Recent analysis of the coastal shell middens in Manawatu and Horowhenua, which are also predominantly tuatua but with little or no bone, suggests that they result primarily from the seasonal collecting, drying and stringing of tuatua for consumption during periods of lesser abundance (Butts, n.d.:9-10). The Muhunua West Midden has a more complex faunal component than these coastal middens, though the part of the site excavated had only the two artefacts mentioned above and has no evidence to suggest that tools, fishing gear, etc. were made at this site. At this preliminary stage of analysis, it is suggested that the midden is the remains of some temporary or seasonal activity and not a permanently occupied site. The predominance of tuatua suggests that this site may also result from the collection of shell fish for drying. The wider range of species present may merely reflect the advantages of a location away from the sand plains behind the foredunes. Access to this site would have been facilitated by travel up the Ohau River. The site is only about .5 km from the river.

Acknowledgements

For assistance with this research I thank Roger Fyfe, Jim Lundy, Mina McKenzie, Ginny Lee, Raemon Rolfe, Margaret Davy, Fay Butts and Horowhenua County Council.

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