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# RED MERCURY ISLAND (WHAKAU) ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY 1992

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the results of an archaeological survey undertaken during November 24-30 1992 on Red Mercury Island. The island is part of the Mercury Islands, a group of seven islands located a few kilometres off the northeastern side of the Coromandel Peninsula adjacent to Kuaotunu-Opito.

The islands in descending order of size are Great Mercury, Red Mercury, Stanley, Double, Middle, Korapuki, and Green islands. With the exception of Great Mercury (which is privately owned and farmed by Fay Richwhite) and Stanley, the islands were gifted to the Crown in 1971 by the Ngati Karaua, Ngati Whanaunga and Ngati Hako iwi. Stanley Island was purchased by the Crown from Ngati Maru in 1858. Great Mercury was sold to Europeans in 1868 by its combined Ngati Hei, Ngati Maru and Ngati Tamatera owners (Simmons n.d:9). Ngati Hei are presently seeking revestment of the nearby Ohinau islands which were taken under the Public Works Act about 1930 in order to build a lighthouse. In addition there are several smaller islets and stacks.

Although the vegetation on the Mercury islands is often regarded as pristine, there is little doubt that it, like that of most of New Zealand's offshore islands, was considerably modified prior to the arrival of Europeans (Davidson 1990, Hayward 1986). The six Crown owned Mercury islands are scenic and nature reserves and refuges for many threatened species of birds, reptiles, and invertebrates, and at least 10 species of rare plants including the unique milktree. They are administered by the Department of Conservation, Waikato. Access is by permit only. On-going work related to the conservation of endangered species on the islands is a major thrust of the Conservancy's Conservation Action Plan (Thomson et al. 1992), which is also targeted towards the protection of cultural, historical, and archaeological resources. To this end archaeological surveys are progressively being conducted in association with other work on the islands.

There is evidence (poorly documented until recently) on virtually all of the smaller Mercury Islands of Maori occupation or resource exploitation, usually in the form of terraced garden areas, ovens, middens, working floors, and obsidian flakes. A report and assessment of the archaeological resources on all the islands in the group is presently in preparation (Ritchie in prep.).

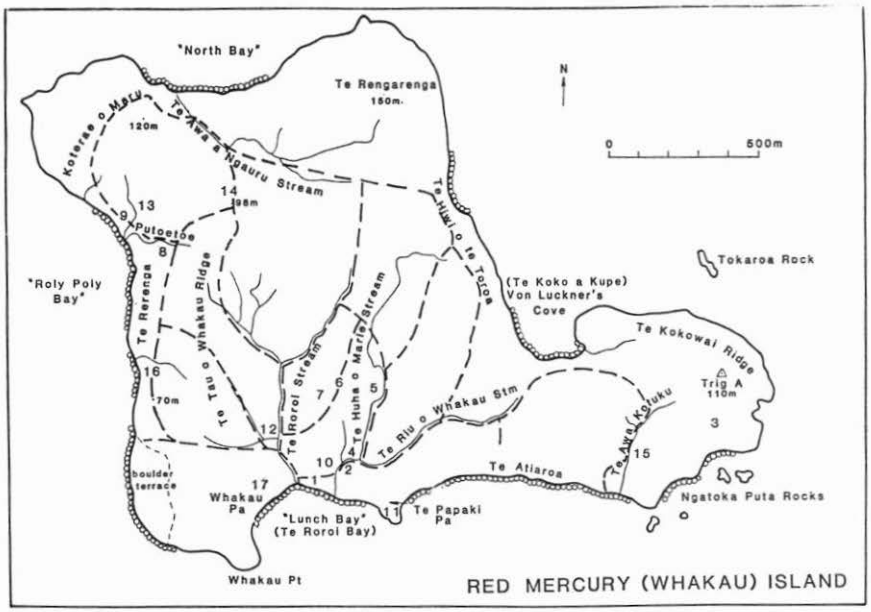


Figure 1. Map of Red Mercury (Whakau) showing the location of the 17 recorded sites on the island. The Maori placenames are derived from Mountain's (1911) survey plan prepared for the then Maori owners. The site numbers are the official site numbers, i.e. U10/1 to U10/17. They are as follows: 1. garden area?/midden, 2. open settlement/midden, 3. stone walled terraces, 4. garden area, 5. garden area?, 6. pit, 7. pits, 8. midden scatter, 9. hut sites, 10. lithic working area, 11. Te Papaki pa, 12. stone alignment/ garden area, 13. house? platform, 14. house site?, 15. garden site?, 16. gardens, 17. Whakau pa. The map also depicts the main track network. Other tracks have also been established to facilitate kiore eradication work.

The Red Mercury survey was undertaken in conjunction with kiore extermination work by other DOC staff on the island. The objective of the latter exercise is to enhance the habitat for the long term survival of saddlebacks and little spotted kiwi which have been transferred to the island, along with other resident endangered species.

## RED MERCURY: THE ENVIRONMENT

Red Mercury is the easternmost (and furthest from the mainland) island in the group (see Fig.1). Like the other DOC administered islands (i.e. excluding Great Mercury) it is bushclad, but differs in that it is relatively large in

comparison (225 ha) and the only one with permanent running streams. The island is about 1.6km from north to south and 2.1km from east to west at its broadest point. Except for Lunch Bay (Te Roroi Bay) and the southern end of Roly Poly Bay, the entire island is bounded by steep cliffs, in places up to 100m high. The highest point, Te Rengarenga (154m asl) forms part of the northern cliffs. From here most of the island's streams flow towards the south coast.

The island is composed of a complex sequence of interstratified basalt flows, breccias, scoria and tuff beds, intruded by dykes (Hayward and Moore 1972:12). There are boulder beaches around most of the coastline. The southern end of Roly Poly consists of an extensive bush covered boulder flat, two to three metres above sea level. The sheltered flat behind the boulder beach at Lunch Bay is the favoured camp site now and has obviously been so in the past. This area is watered by two streams. While a landing is usually possible at one of three recognized landing spots, Roley Poly Bay, Von Luckners Cove or Lunch Bay, it is often difficult to land at the favoured landing site, Lunch Bay, and none of the landings are safe all weather anchorages.

The vegetation includes numerous stands of old pohutakawas but the greater part of the island is covered in dense scrub- mapou, mingimingi, hangehange, kawakawa, taupata, and rangiora. A notable stand of tawapou exists on site U10/17 behind Lunch Bay.

## HISTORY

With the exception of the small Green Island, all of the Mercury Islands have traditional names that have Polynesian antecedents; Ahuahu (Great Mercury), Whakau- "encircling" (Red Mercury), Kawhitu (Stanley), Moturehu (Double), Atiu (Middle), and Korapuki (Hauraki Maori Trust Board). Maori placenames recorded on Mountain's (1911) map of Red Mercury (Whakau) are reproduced on Fig.1. It is still generally accepted (somewhat in the absence of evidence to the contrary) that the people who first settled along the eastern Coromandel, possibly as early as 800AD, were among the earliest Polynesian settlers to become established in New Zealand.

In pre-European times the islands were part of a domain which encompassed Great Mercury, the adjacent mainland and the smaller islands. The wide diversity of terrestrial and marine resources and ample evidence of their exploitation suggests that this area was as favourable as any in New Zealand for comfortable human existence.

The resources included pockets of fertile soils, a long growing season for taro, yams, kumara and gourds, mixed forests for birding and timber, plentiful seabirds, abundant marine resources and relatively warm sheltered waters, good sources of raupo, flax, ti cordyline, and pingao, fine grained basalt from

Tahanga for adze making, cherts and sinter from Great Mercury, and easy access to the obsidian sources on Mayor and Great Barrier Islands, and at Whangamata.

Irwin (1985:17) surmised, based on the huge quantities of flaked stone including adze pre-forms around the shore, that Huruhi Harbour on Great Mercury Island, appeared to be an important secondary processing and distribution centre for Tahanga basalt at an early time.

Visits to the smaller Mercury islands were an integral part of a cycle of seasonal exploitation, so the sites on each island, rather than being duplicates of those on the mainland, represent a discrete part of pre-European activity in the area and its impact upon the resources and the wider environment.

There is little visible evidence of European activity on Red Mercury Island (other than c.1960-1970 boaties campsites at Lunch Bay) but an incident earlier this century has left its mark in the form of a placename- Von Luckners Cove. During the First World War a German naval officer Captain Felix von Luckner and other Germans were captured in the Pacific Islands and subsequently detained on Motuihe Island in the Hauraki Gulf. In late 1917 Von Luckner and some selected crew made a well planned bid for freedom by means of a small motor launch which they seized. Von Luckner sailed around Cape Colville safely but engine trouble and persistent leaks in the vessel forced him to shelter in the cove which now bears his name on the north side of Red Mercury Island.

Other than establishing a lookout on a high position, they did not spend much time ashore. Two days later the lookout on the hill signalled that two ships were approaching. Von Luckner's party managed to board and commandeer one of the vessels, the scow "Moa". They then made for the Kermadecs. However, their bid for freedom was shortlived. The Captain of the second vessel, sensing that the "Moa" may have been commandeered, headed straight to the telegraph office at Port Charles and advised the authorities in Auckland. They correctly deduced that Von Luckner may have headed for the Kermadecs and sent a naval vessel there which recaptured Von Luckner and his men shortly after their arrival (Von Luckner 1919).

## PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

Prior to the recent survey of Red Mercury, there were three published reports detailing survey work on the islands. Two of these involved Steve Edson's (1973) and Louise Furey's (1983) surveys on Great Mercury, and Phil Moore (1972a, 1972b) had reported three sites on Red Mercury. In addition six sites were recorded on Korapuki by Bruce McFadgen (1990) and recently Brenda Sewell (in prep.) has recorded a similar number of new sites on Stanley Island. Another dozen or so sites, usually identified by the presence of stone walls, have been reported over the years by members of scientific parties working on the other islands in the group (Atkinson 1964, Cameron 1990,

Cochrane 1954, Edgar 1962:4, Skegg 1962, Wright 1976).

Site investigations have been limited to Great Mercury Island where Stingray Point pa was tested in 1955 and 1956 (Golson 1957; Green 1963:69), and Waipirau pa in 1984 (Irwin 1985).

## SITES ON RED MERCURY (WHAKAU)

Prior to the 1992 survey on Red Mercury, only three sites had been recorded. During the course of the survey an additional 14 sites were recorded, the difference between the two surveys being largely attributable to the fact that DOC has established an extensive network of tracks on the bush clad island for poisoning operations. These enabled previously inaccessible areas to be surveyed (and there was probably more emphasis on locating garden areas and pits than in the earlier survey).

The location of the recorded sites is depicted on Fig.1 and summarised in Table 1. For more specific locational information on the more inland sites refer Ritchie (in prep.). Two "pah sites", Te Papaki (U10/11) and Whakau (U10/17) were marked on an early plan "surveyed at the request of the Native Owners" (Mountain 1911). Some tangata whenua acted as guides for the surveyor when the map was produced in 1911 and presumably advised Mountain of the pa names and locations. Both pa are situated in Lunch Bay on the south side of the island. Te Papaki encompasses a small headland at the eastern end, whilst Whakau occupies a broad flat terrace above the western half of the bay. There is no indication of ditch and bank type fortifications at either location, but the overwhelming concentration of midden, pits, lithic scatters and probable garden areas in the immediate vicinity and between the pa sites suggests that the lower reaches of the two sheltered stream valleys behind Lunch Bay were the main settlement areas, in fact the sites here are virtually contiguous. Determining the antiquity, duration and seasonality of occupation would require investigation of some of these sites.

An open settlement, U10/2, consisting of terraces, lithic scatters & midden near the mouth of the Te Riu-O-Whakau stream is arguably the most visually interesting site. The site was originally recorded as a midden (Moore 1973a), but this description understates the situation. It is clearly an extensive habitation area consisting of shell midden, terraces and scattered lithic debris (obsidian and basalt flakes) and a suspected garden area nearby (U10/4).

It seems likely that the abundant marine resources and frost free temperate climate of the Mercury islands and the more inshore islands like Motukoruenga, Motukoranga and Ohinau were quickly recognised by the earliest Polynesian settlers in the area and rapidly became an integral part of the annual subsistence cycle. Evidence of gardens on the islands seems to be well reflected by the archaeological evidence, but on Red Mercury identifying

presumed cultivation areas is difficult because of the nature of the terrain. There are several extensive and in some instances quite spectacular boulder fields within the bush on the island. Typically large aggregations of boulders are strewn 100m or more down the hillslopes to the valley floor, in effect forming massive natural rock gardens.

Amid these areas are numerous irregular but fairly level natural terracettes, some of which appear to have short sections of stacked or aligned stones, but for the most part these natural terracettes appear to be unmodified (they could have been utilized for gardening without any need to modify them). Gardens defined by neat stone alignments are relatively rare. The perennial streams nearby would have provided a ready source of water. In one area (recorded as U10/4) in the lower part of the Te Riu valley, the stream appears to have been straightened and channelled presumably for horticultural purposes. Numerous flakes of basalt were found in the stream channel (but no evidence of its quarrying on the island). The three pit sites found on the ridges on the island may well have been associated with kumara cultivation, as they are attributed in similar situations on the adjacent mainland, e.g. Skippers Ridge.

**TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF RECORDED SITES ON RED MERCURY**

| | |
|---|---|
| open settlements (midden, flake debris, terraces etc): | U10/2, U10/17 |
| garden areas (suspected): | U10/1, U10/3, U10/4, U10/5?, U10/12, U10/15, U10/16 |
| isolated midden scatters: | U10/8 |
| pits: | U10/6, U10/7, |
| hut sites: | U10/9, U10/13, U10/14 |
| lithic working areas: | U10/10 |
| pa sites: | U10/11, U10/17 |

obsidian flakes are very widespread

Three distinctly different shades and textures of grey basaltic flakes are evident amid the surface flake exposures on U10/2. One appears to be Tahanga basalt, another is similar in hand specimen to the boulders at Roly Poly Bay, and the other variant may also be locally derived. Some erosion is occurring of the cultural deposit at the point where the Te Riu stream turns towards the sea. A 2B style nephrite adze (Fig.2), believed to be South Westland nephrite (N.Ritchie/R.Hooker), was found protruding from the stream bank beneath a huge pohutakawa root whilst walking up the stream channel adjacent to the site. Obsidian flakes from both Mayor Island and a probable

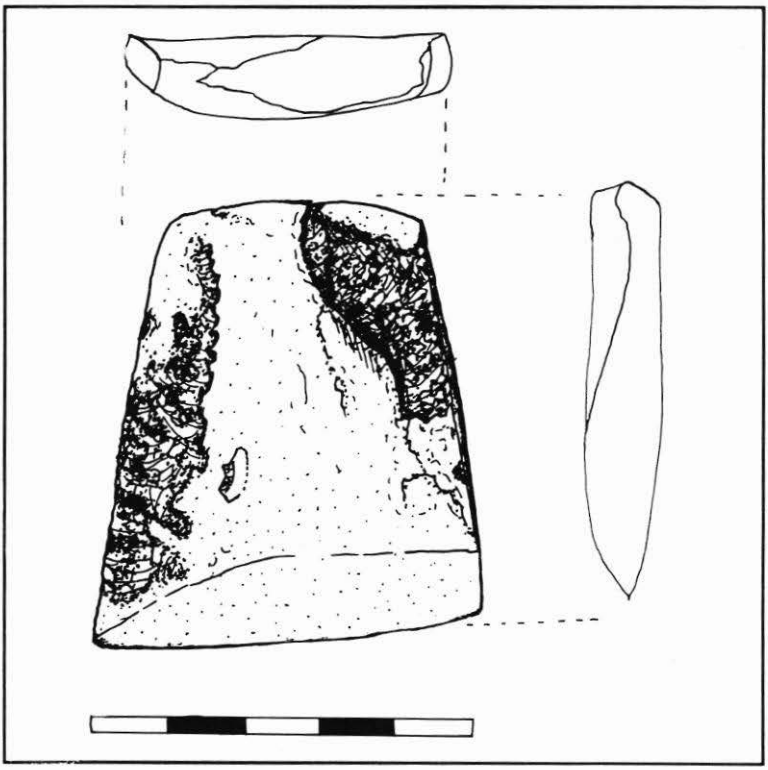

Figure 2. Nephrite adze (actual size) in streambank adjacent to U10/2, Red Mercury Island.

mainland source are present in the main sites and have been found at several locations on the island.

The visible shell midden, which is relatively sparse, is composed of limpets, gastropods, catseyes, black nerita (Nerita melanotragus), paua, and pipis. The latter must have been imported as there is no suitable habitat on the island. On the northern side of the island, principally east of Von Luckner's Cove there are haematite deposits, marked "Kokowai" on Mountain's 1911 map, but there is no obvious evidence of its exploitation.

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

As Red Mercury (Whakau) is principally managed as an ark for the survival of endangered species, access is strictly controlled by the Department of

Conservation at present. However, in the future as the numbers of endangered species numbers on the island build up to more secure levels, it is anticipated that guided groups will be allowed to land on the island. Because of its size, topography, interesting wildlife and well established track network, the island has tremendous potential for eco-tourism which could include the interpretation of archaeological features.


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