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REPORT ON A SALVAGE EXCAVATION AT KAIAPOHIA PA, WOODEND (M35/7)

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Kaiapohia Pa is located approximately 25 km north of Christchurch and 2 km from the coast. Built on flat ground, it is surrounded on three sides by a large swamp formed behind ancient coastal dunes. It was '... the chief fortress and stronghold of the Maori tribe of Ngaitahu ...' (Stack 1906: 169) and '... most of the chief families of Ngaitahu had their headquarters there ...' (ibid: 187). The pa was put under siege by Te Rauparaha and his allies late in 1831 and eventually sacked and burnt (ibid.). It remains of great importance to the people of Ngai Tahu.

The Woodend Lions Club, together with the Kaiapohia Pa Trust Board, proposes to build an information/observation kiosk on the defensive bank near the southwest corner of Kaiapohia pa. Authority to modify an archaeological site was granted to the Woodend Lions Club by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, subject to the recording of subsurface remains likely to be damaged by the construction of the kiosk. The structure is to be built on poles set into the archaeological deposit. Rather than monitor the digging of the postholes, which would be unlikely to yield any useful information, a small salvage excavation was carried out before the construction of the kiosk. This took place during 5-6 October 1991.

THE EXCAVATIONS

According to hearsay evidence, the southern bank was formed, or at least modified, during the construction of the adjacent road. One of the aims of the current excavation was to determine whether or not the present bank is original. Three small excavations were carried out (see Figs. 1 and 2). The first was a 4 m by 1 m trench from the top of the defensive bank to the level area of the interior (squares A to D); the second was 1 m by 1.2 m just west of the northern end of the trench (square E) and the third was a 0.5 m square on the outside of the bank in line with the trench (square F, not shown on Fig. 2 as no archaeological features were encountered).

The trench and square F were excavated to see if the defensive bank was original and, if so, to determine the nature and construction details of the defences.

Stack describes the defences as being a combination of earthworks and palisades. 'Behind the wall of earth there was a double row of strong palisades, eighteen to twenty feet high, bound at the top and bottom with a tough kind of wood-bine called Aka' (1906: 179-80). A compacted earth bank composed of redeposited yellow-grey clay subsoil was found in squares

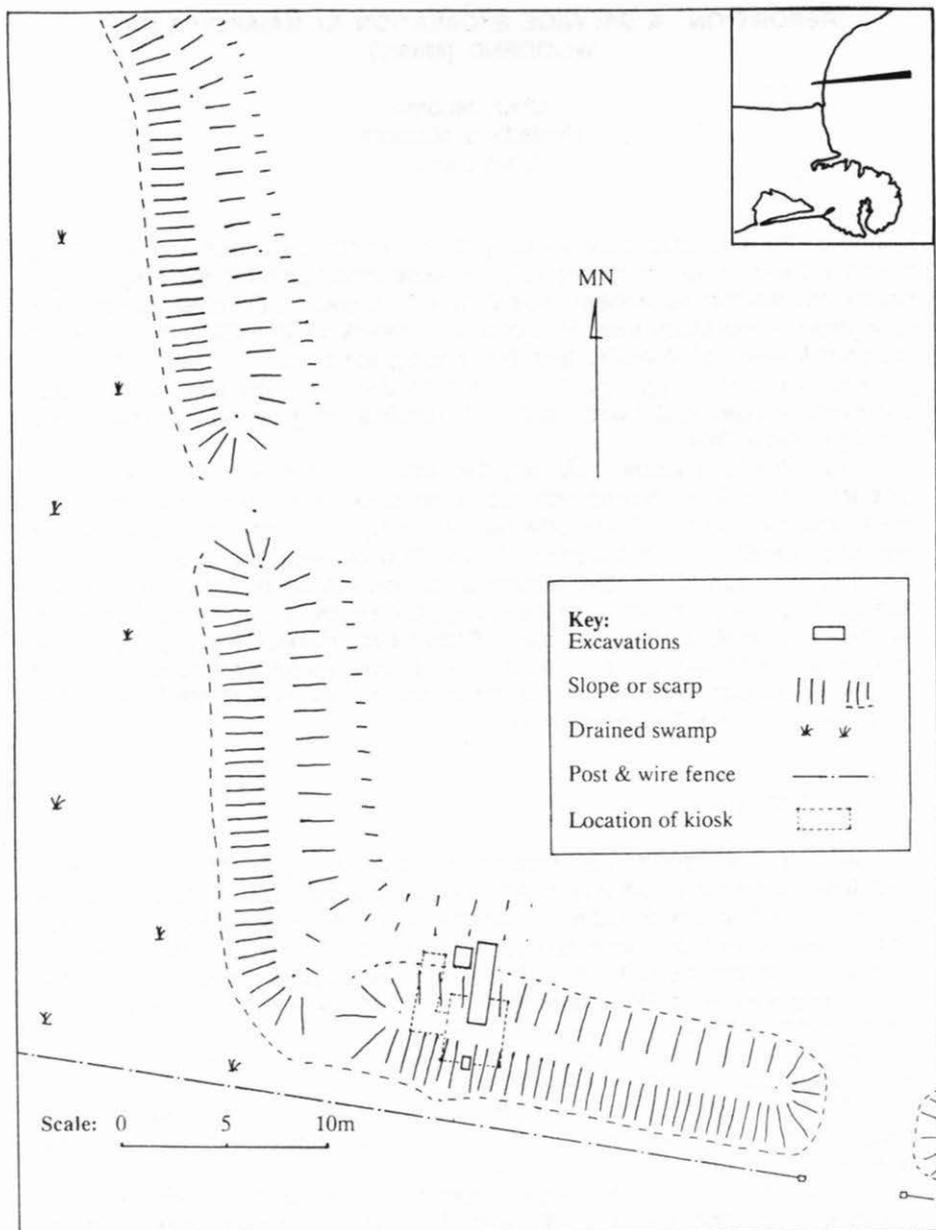


Fig. 1. Plane table survey of southwest corner of Kaiapohia pa showing location of October 1991 excavation and proposed kiosk.

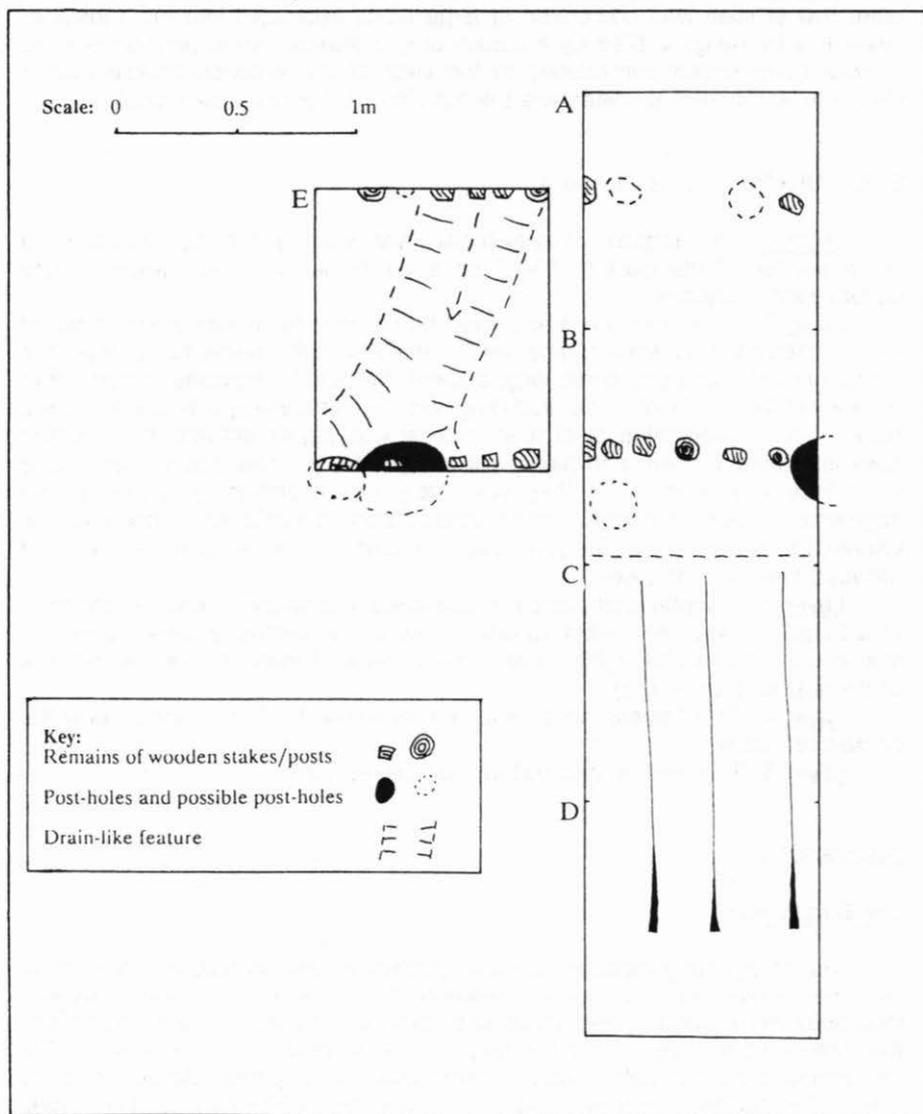


Fig. 2. Plan showing excavated archaeological features.

A-D alongside a double row of split (?totara) stakes with the occasional round post/stake interspersed. At the eastern end of the outer row, what appeared to be a large posthole dug into the subsoil was found. It seemed likely that the outer row at least was composed of large posts excavated into the subsoil at intervals with the gaps filled by a curtain of split stakes. An excavation (square E) was commenced immediately to the west of the exposed double row of stakes in an attempt to determine the location of the next major post.

STRATIGRAPHY (Figs. 3 and 4)

Layer 1. The topsoil. A grey-brown layer varying in depth from 5 to 10 cm at the top of the bank to 10-15 cm at the base. This was devoid of any occupational evidence.

Layer 2. A redeposited, compacted topsoil with fragments of fire-fractured stone, charcoal and shell (some whole shells, mostly freshwater mussel but some mudsnail, pipi and some large cockle); two small fragments of bone; and occasional fragments of wood, including two rows of stakes/posts parallel to the bank. The concentration of cultural material was higher between the palisade rows than outside them and higher still to the interior. This was the only layer to include any artefacts. They were very rare, comprising a percussion-fragmented 'flake' of nephrite, three small flakes of flint/chert, a flake/core of orthoquartzite and a flat, irregular piece of lead. All were found in the area between the rows of stakes.

Layer 3. A highly compacted, redeposited, yellow-grey subsoil in the form of a bank, echoing the visible surface shape of the defensive bank. Some of this material was visible lightly mixed with the layer 2 material near the bottoms of the stakes (see Fig. 3).

Layer 4. This appears to be a buried topsoil and is immediately below the compacted bank.

Layer 5. The undisturbed yellow-grey clayey subsoil.

DISCUSSION

The Stratigraphy

The stratigraphy indicates an occupational history as follows. A bank of well-compacted clay subsoil was formed on the surface of the existing topsoil. Postholes were probably then excavated up to a metre deep into the subsoil to the interior of this bank and the major palisade posts put in position. The intervening curtain of split (?totara) stakes was probably then placed along the line of the shallow trench (see Fig. 3) and attached to the palisade framework, followed by a further build-up of the bank. If the split stakes were added later, I would have expected to have seen some trace of postholes excavated for them and none was seen. An unlikely third possibility is that the stakes were pounded into position by heavy mauls. Neither of these two alternative

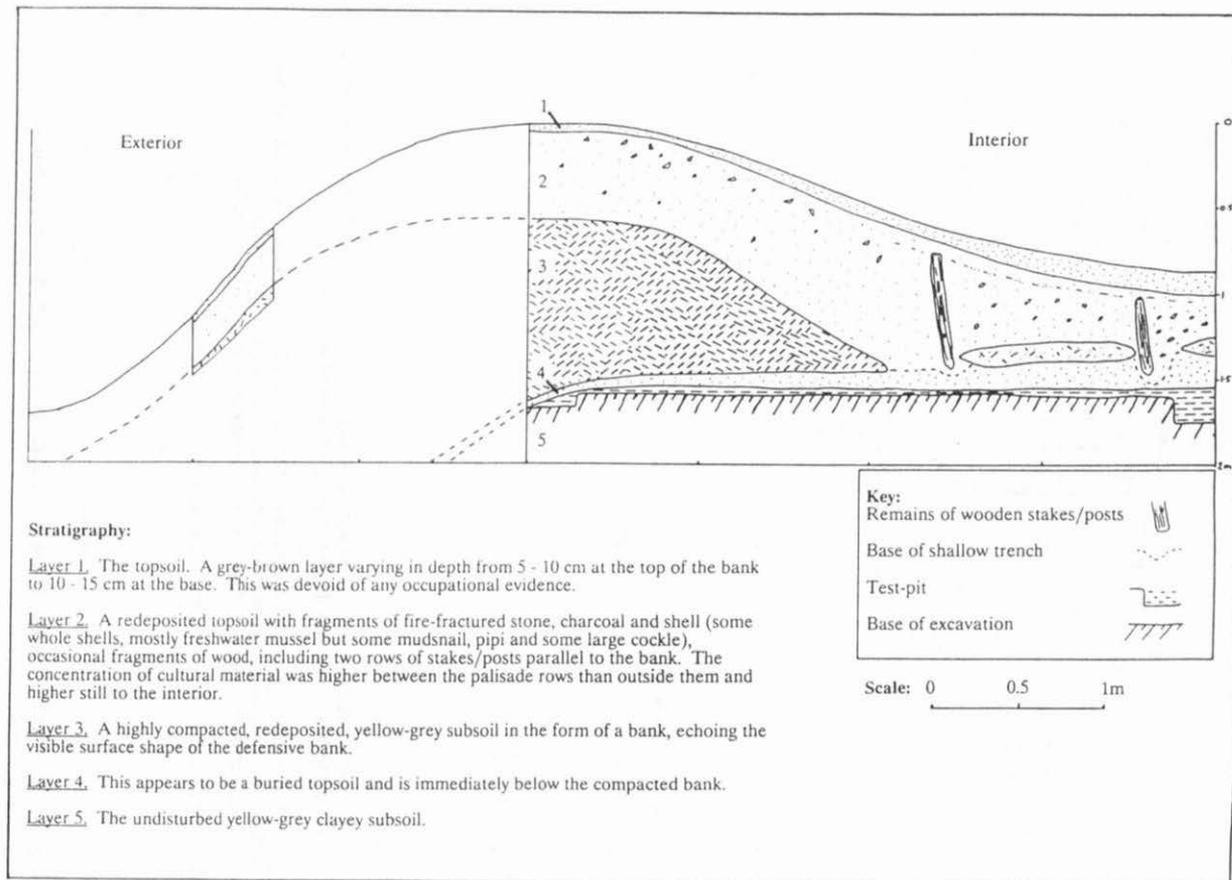


Fig. 3. Section drawing showing west bank of trench excavated through defensive bank. Squares A-D (N) and F (S)

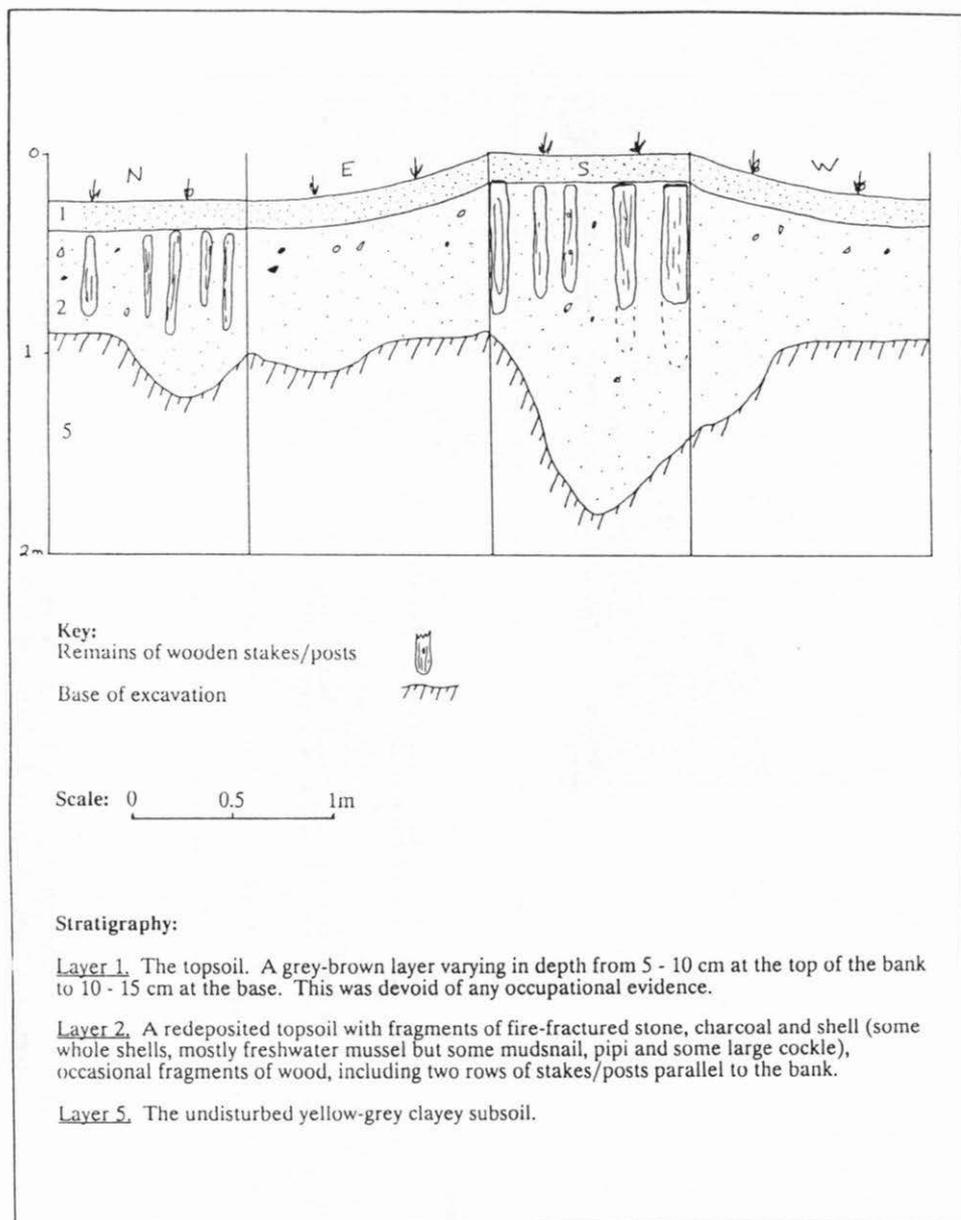


Fig. 4. Section drawing showing north, south, east and west baulks of square E.

possibilities accounts for the shallow trench beneath the stakes. It seems most probable that the palisade was completed first and that the additional soil depth came from packing soil around the palisades and increasing the height of the bank. Then, over an unknown period, erosional processes reduced the height of the defensive bank and increased the depth of soil down either side. The tops of the more intact posts/stakes were charred and the soil at the same depth as the charring showed signs of fire over a fairly wide area. This indicates that the defensive palisade was burnt to the ground – the charred layer being the ground surface at the time. Although the somewhat less well-preserved inner row of stakes did not have any charred portions remaining, the 'burnt soil surface' layer extended to a level immediately above them (see Fig. 3), and it is likely that they were contemporaneous with the outer row.

The Excavated Features

Two features in addition to those described above were discovered. The first was a shallow, rounded depression in the subsoil just outside the palisade line in square B of the trench excavation. There had been some loose soil above indicating that this may have been the base of a shallow posthole. The second was a possible drain running N-S across square E. Neither of these features is very easy to explain. The (?)posthole only extends a few centimetres into the subsoil and its post would not have supported much strain, although it may have been added some time after the original construction. It is midway between the two more convincing major postholes, lending some credence to the likelihood that it was associated with the palisade structure. It is interesting to note that no major postholes were found with the inner row of stakes. It is possible that they were tied to the outer row, relying on its major posts for bracing.

The drain-like feature would drain water in the direction of the bank. The only reasonable explanation for this is that it was draining the living area before the construction of the pa.

The excavation was too small to determine absolutely the nature of the defences here. For instance, it is possible that there were posts along the top of the bank and that the trench (squares A-D) missed them. However, this is unlikely, both in view of the absence of any wood remains from layer 2 on top of the bank, and because such posts were absent from the bank in excavations at other parts of the defences (M.M. Trotter, Canterbury Museum, pers. comm.). In addition, the two 'major' postholes were not fully excavated because of time constraints and because they extended into neighbouring squares. Although unlikely, it is possible that they were not the remains of palisade posts.

The Artefacts

The chert flakes (limestone flint) are likely to be derived from Marlborough sources, or possibly from a South Canterbury source. The nearest

orthoquartzite source is inland from Oxford, although there is another Canterbury source at Grays Hills in the McKenzie Country. The majority of orthoquartzite sources are in Otago. The piece of lead has the appearance of being a waste piece from a melting/casting operation – possibly from the casting of musketballs.

The Faunal Remains

All of the identifiable faunal remains (i.e. the shellfish) are of locally available species, especially the freshwater mussels. Nearby fresh water sources include the Ashley River and the stream draining the swamp around the pa. The others are estuarine species which are likely to have come from the estuary at the mouth of the Ashley River.

CONCLUSION

The bank is not of European construction. The defences consisted of a double row of palisades 1 m apart, to the interior of a compacted earth bank. The charred palisade stakes and posts, along with the burnt surface at the same depth, probably relate to Te Rauparaha's sacking/burning of the pa in 1831 (Stack 1906). The fact that the mixed soil of layer 2 contained a considerable amount of cultural material can be taken as an indication that the site had been occupied prior to the construction of the defences.

REFERENCE

- Stack, Rev. J.W. 1906. *The Sacking of Kaiapohia*. Published with Travers, W.T.L. *The Stirring Times of Te Rauparaha (Chief of the Ngati Toa)*. Whitcombe and Tombs, Christchurch.