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RESCUE ARCHAEOLOGY AT PUKETARATA PA (N129/46),
SOUTH TARANAKI

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Puketarata (N129/46) is one of a number of pa adjacent to the Mangimangi Stream valley near Hawera. The site occupies a headland that extends out into the valley and on both sides the ground falls away steeply to the valley floor below. The defences consist of a series of closely-spaced transverse ditches and banks, and, some distance away, where the headland widens and slopes up to the level of the surrounding countryside, there is a further single ditch and bank enclosing a large area of ground (Fig. 1).

Puketarata is one of the larger pa in the area near Hawera (Buist, 1960). The large outer area, with its long vulnerable perimeter, contrasts with the heavily defended inner area of the pa. There are surface indications of a large number of collapsed rua in the inner area of the pa and, in smaller numbers, in the outer area. On surface evidence the outer area could reasonably be interpreted as an attempt to provide some security for a larger population than was capable of being housed within the heavily-defended inner area of the pa.

In 1981 the New Zealand Historic Places Trust granted an authority to build a house within the outer area of the pa. This report describes archaeological remains uncovered by earthmoving over a period of one and a half days (25-26 February 1982).

Methods

Monitoring earthmoving is a means of collecting considerable information at a fraction of the cost of excavation and is often the only alternative to letting a site go without any investigation at all. The results invariably reflect the chronic shortage of time available to investigate features in detail.

At Puketarata an area of over 900 m² was stripped by machinery. Features showed up clearly in the yellow-brown subsoil and there was minimal inter-cutting of features. There was, however, insufficient time to investigate and record all the features that were uncovered. Effort was concentrated on recording the larger and more readily identifiable remains such as ovens, firepits and rua. To test the initial identification, features were watched

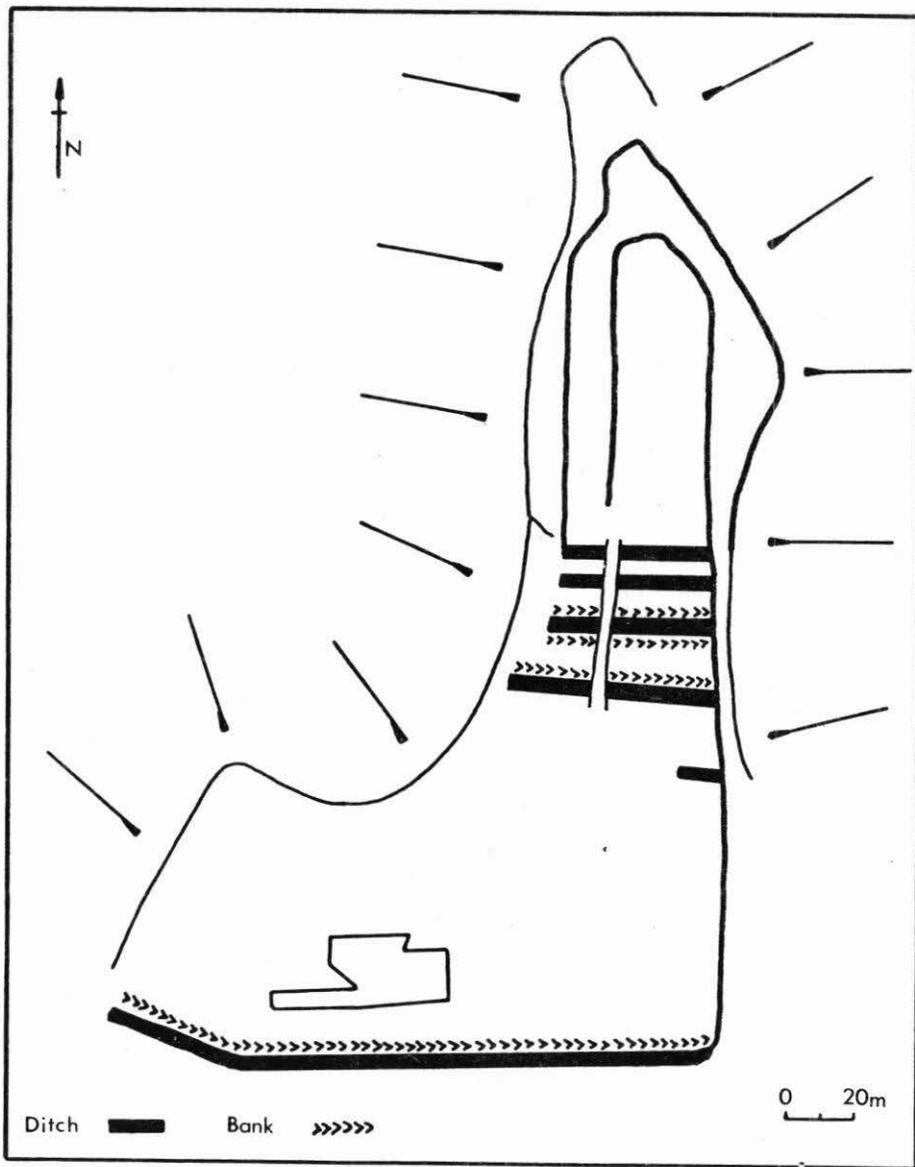


FIGURE 1. Plan of Puketarata showing main surface features and area of earthmoving - after tape and compass survey by Dr Buist and from air photographs.

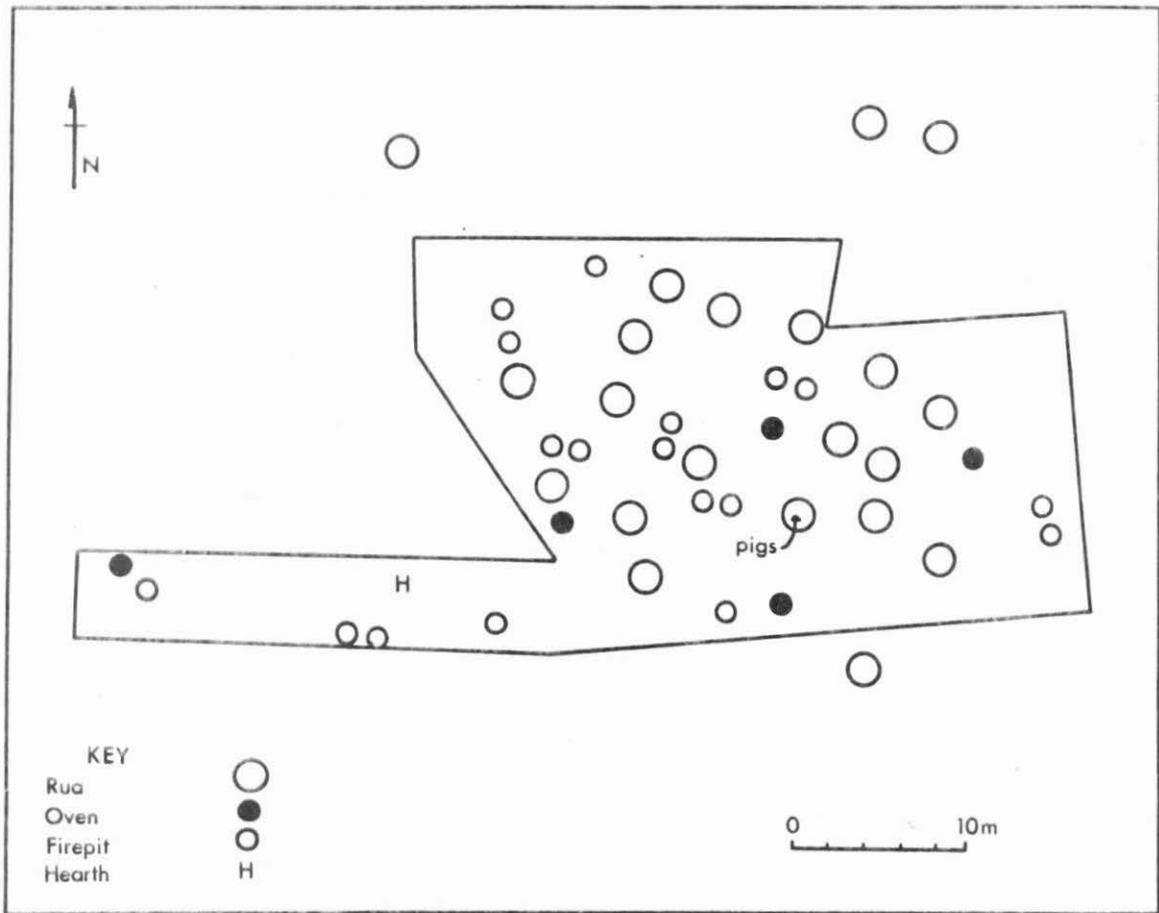


FIGURE 2. Main area of earthmoving: plan of archaeological features uncovered.

as successive spits were removed by machinery. Numbers of postholes were uncovered but, as a general rule, no attempt was made to record them all.

The recording was done with a plane table, supplemented by recording some features using a few fixed pegs.

Results

Features found included a stone-edged hearth, subterranean storepits (*rua*), ovens, firepits, scoops and postholes (Figs. 2 and 3). No shell midden was uncovered.

Stone-edged hearth. Stone-edged hearths are generally considered as diagnostic of houses although not all houses have them (see Leach, 1972). One stone-edged hearth was uncovered at Puketarata and some effort was put into collecting more detailed information about features in the immediate area.

The hearth itself was rectangular and measured 40 x 50 cm. It was formed by five stones set on their edges. Immediately adjacent was a rake-out area containing ash and fine charcoal. A series of small postholes and other unidentified features were uncovered. The postholes were all of the order of 10 cm diameter and excavated examples indicated they were 15-20 cm deep. Some of the postholes contained wood remains and in one area further wood remains were found in what appeared to be shallow slots. Two larger holes were located and excavated. It is possible these are some sort of cache or 'bin' similar to those excavated by Smart at Tarata, N137/15 (Smart, 1962:178).

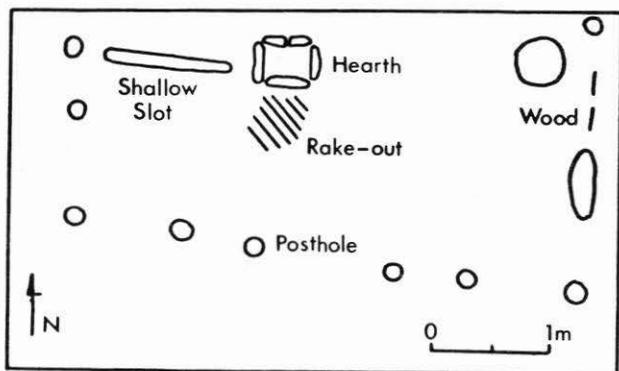


FIGURE 3. Plan of area about stone-edged hearth.

A small house of the order of 3 m wide and 4 m long is indicated. Such structures were reported by Marshall at nearby Waimate pa (N129/100) in 1834 (Marshall, 1836) and the remains of a house at the same site has been excavated by Buist (1962).

Subterranean storepits (rua). In the outer area there were isolated indications of the presence of rua and the movement of machinery caused the collapse of a few more. Most of the rua had been deliberately infilled but the presence of a pocket of air and the loose packing of the fill at the top of the chamber rendered them liable to partial collapse.

Eighteen rua were uncovered. Initially they appeared as a small circular hole up to a metre in diameter but growing as successive spits were removed. Some examples that were more closely examined were rectangular in shape towards the base and with the entrance adjacent to one wall of the chamber. Fill contained charcoal and, in some, occasional shell (including catseye and paua).

In one rua two pig skeletons were found. The skeletons were complete and were lying on the floor. The larger pig lay in the middle of the pit on its side. The second, also on its side, legs outstretched in the same direction, lay with its head adjacent to that of the first pig but with its body lying at an angle. Judging from the degree of fusion of distal and proximal ends of the femur and humerus one pig was more than four years old while the other was between 2 and 3 years old. Both pigs were probably male.

A carbonised cob of corn, without kernels, was also recovered from the fill of the rua. How this should be interpreted is not clear.

Ovens. Ovens were identified as deposits of fire-cracked stone and charcoal in large roughly circular holes. The recorded examples were all of the order of 2 m diameter. Stones were intermingled with and underlain by a dense deposit of charcoal.

Firepits. These consisted of a scoop up to 15 cm deep and over 50 cm diameter containing red and white wood ash and charcoal. The base of the scoop had often changed colour and been turned hard by the heat generated by the fire.

Scoops. This is a miscellaneous category and includes a wide variety of shallow features of indeterminate function. The largest were up to 2 m diameter and 20-30 cm deep. Most other examples were considerably smaller.

Postholes. The recording of postholes is the least satisfactory aspect of this type of work. Postholes were found in all the bulldozed areas amidst rua, ovens and firepits. There were so many that the pattern was beyond sorting out given the time available. A number of possible alignments were identified but were not recorded.

Discussion

The area uncovered was used mostly for cooking and storage. There were no intercutting features and it appears that there was only a single occupation. Obviously this conclusion applies only to the outer area: there is no information about the inner area of the pa.

Cowan (1923 II:187) reports that when military settlers occupied the country around Turuturumokai in 1866-1867 the Ngati Tupaea moved to Puketarata. It is possible that the outer area of the pa dates from that occupation. The presence of pig and maize would seem to place the occupation firmly in the 19th century. There were however no clay pipes or any of the other artefacts that would normally be expected to be found on sites dating from the 1860s. Nor is there any adaptation of the earthworks to gun warfare. For these reasons it is unlikely that the occupation was as late as the 1860s and the preferred estimate of antiquity is some decades earlier.

Acknowledgements

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