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NORTH TARANAKI ARCHAEOLOGY

- a review -

Buist, A.G., Archaeology in North Taranaki, New Zealand - a study of field monuments in the Pukearuhe-Mimi-Urenui area. (Monograph no. 3 of the New Zealand Archaeological Association) Wellington, 1964.

Archaeology in North Taranaki is the third monograph to be published by the Archaeological Association. The other two are J. Golson and R.C. Green's A Handbook to Field Recording (1958) and Green's A Review of the Prehistoric Sequence in the Auckland Province (1963). Dr Buist's volume is a milestone in the literature of New Zealand prehistory both because it is the first comprehensive archaeological survey of a major region of the country to be reported in monograph form since the introduction of the site recording scheme, and also because it is a modern attempt to analyze the Maori pa ("hill forts" or fortified locations) principally in terms of survey evidence, and to arrive at conclusions about their age, variety, distributions, and demographic significance.

The monograph can be said to have two major parts: first, several chapters dealing with technical and theoretical matters, and second, a check-list of 114 sites, of which 104 are pas. In addition, there is an appendix giving a synopsis of the one excavation carried out during the survey, that at Kumara-Kaiamo (see also: Parker and Buist 1961, and Parker 1962).

The volume begins with an Introduction to Maori prehistory and to field surveying in New Zealand. The First Chapter covers briefly the location of the survey area on the coast of North Taranaki and gives basic information on geology, topography, history of forestation, economic resources, and climate. The Second Chapter is a review of the Maori history of the region which concludes with a most important point. According to Dr Buist, there is no record of military action in the area. He therefore proposes: "Because there was no conflict between Maori and European in this area, it can be assumed that none of the existing Maori earthworks in this survey were constructed during the period of the wars of European aggression, but that all of them belong to a period prior to any European settlement" (p.18). Unquestionably, this is a highly useful deduction which is helpful in trying to estimate the age of the pas.

The Third Chapter is on types of field monuments. In addition to describing major categories such as pas, tracks and redoubts, Dr Buist introduces a classification of pas based not on the descriptive criteria of the site recording scheme (Golson and Green 1958; Mumford 1959), but rather on the number of "units" which make up a given pa. A pa is defined as an area of land enclosed by a ditch, bank and ditch, or a scarp (p.20). In Buist's scheme, all pas may be classified as either "Single Unit pas," "Double Unit pas," or "Multiple Unit pas." Thus, a single unit pa has a single platform or defended area "not rising by way of a scarp to any feature natural or artificial." Double unit pas are those where there are two platforms or where the platform is combined with a terrace (p.21). And so on. For "multiple unit pas" Dr Buist suggests the name

"pukearuan type". It is not clear why this term should be substituted for the former designation in a system which is otherwise logical and more easily comprehended.

It should be noted that this proposed classification supplements, but does not do away with the older classification of the site recording scheme. As with the older, it is descriptive. It is Dr Buist's belief, however, that "unit" description assists in avoiding subjective errors in recording. Moreover, it also has "the merit of simplicity and of being a clear and explicit definition, so that seldom if ever will difficulty be experienced in placing a pa in an appropriate category" (p.20). Lastly, Dr Buist feels such a classification ultimately reflects social organization, a conclusion which will be discussed at greater length below.

In the Fourth Chapter on the location of pa sites, Dr Buist describes Elsdon Best's original typology of Maori pas (Best 1927) and briefly criticizes it. Then he notes Golson's revision of Best's scheme (Golson 1957) and sets out the further modifications finally published in the site recording Handbook (Golson and Green 1958). It is his belief, however, that while such descriptive definitions of pa sites "are of great help in the local description of a particular feature, they do not form a satisfactory basis of classification" (p. 29). He states that "A topographic classification rather than a descriptive one would appear to have more logic to support it in this area where it is clear that any suitable feature has been used"(p.29).

Buist divides the survey area into four topographic regions: coastal, flatland, foothills, and ridge-tops. He then proceeds to discuss the number of pas in each area and analyzes them in terms of the three "unit" types he has set up. There are two initial conclusions. First, the unit types appear to be evenly distributed in the survey area. There are no correlations to be drawn between type and topographic area. Second, he arrives at a very provocative hypothesis: "Whilst there is no way of determining except by excavation which pas, if any, were contemporaneous, it can be safely assumed that pas were located in certain zones for carrying on particular activities regardless of the period or phase in which they were built. Thus the coastal pas would serve the fishing grounds, the flatland and foothill pas the agricultural areas, and the ridge-top pas would serve the forest activities of the Maori and provide secure refuge" (p. 34).

It is really in the Fifth Chapter that the field data and earlier discussion are best brought together and used to suggest conclusions about Maori culture. Dr Buist begins by asking two fundamental questions and sets about to answer them through analysis of the evidence in terms of types, regional zones, and topographic relief. The questions are these: Can the pas be ordered into a typological sequence? Can any inferences be made about the organization of the ancient inhabitants of the survey area? He reaches a number of conclusions which research in other areas may or may not support.

According to Dr Buist, neither history nor surface evidence is sufficient to permit the formation of a sequence of pa types. It therefore turns out that the best periodization possible is simply that there was first a period of pa building of unknown duration which was followed by a short period when gun-fighting entered Maori culture.

This observation is similar to that made by Best (1927: 284), as Dr Buist notes, but unlike Best, he says there are no distinctive constructional features which could be used to set gun-fighting pas apart from earlier ones. The most favourable indication is a reverse one: there are pas in the area which could not, it seems, have been used during the gun-fighter period because they are overlooked by higher ground within range of gunfire (p. 41).

On the second question, that on ancient organization, Dr Buist proposes several very provocative interpretations. Four of these conclusions are summarised here:

First, since there is no certain evidence for change in pa construction practices, he assumes all the pas under study were "more or less contemporaneous". If so, they can be used together to draw conclusions about social organization (p. 37). It is his opinion that "pa dwelling" probably occurred only in the late phase of Maori occupation. He cites Green (1963) to support this view. It must be said here, however, that Green has described three phases of pa occupation in New Zealand, beginning an estimated five hundred years ago (Green 1963: 98-99).

Second, the single unit pa is the most numerous type (61) in the survey area, four times as frequent as double unit pas (14) and twice as many as the multiple unit type (29). Dr Buist sees the single unit pa as the prototype of all pas, and correlates them with family or small hapu ("clan") groups. He says it seems probable "the Maori pattern of living was one of dispersion rather than aggregation, and that the larger pas were fully occupied on special occasions rather than continuously" (p. 38).

Third, by analyzing pa locations in terms of the four topographic regions in the area, subsistence activities can be suggested. The most pas (37) are found on the flatland (others: coastal - 19; foothills - 22; and ridge-tops - 26). He states that it seems reasonable therefore that agriculture was the prime subsistence activity in view of these figures. This deduction appears true because Dr Buist holds that pas were obviously built where the people were situated (p. 39). A net-sinker was found on the highest ridge-top pa and seashells are found in all of the topographic regions.

Fourth, the distribution of pas makes it clear that they were not located "only in places of strategic advantage and importance" (p. 40). According to Dr Buist, the "pas are distributed along rivers and streams rather than about the boundaries of the area." One is not entirely sure what "boundaries of the area" means, but since he states the waterways were used as routes to the sea and inland, and also as a source of food, they surely were of strategic importance. The point then is only this: "It is obvious, then, that considerations other than defence from outside attack determined the location of a pa. It is concluded, once again, that pas were located where the people found it necessary to be" (p. 40).

Now in these conclusions there is one aspect which remains unclear. Precisely what function does Dr Buist believe the pas served in Maori life? At times, he seems to say they were places of refuge (p. 43). At others, he calls them "pa dwellings" (p. 37). At still other times, he proposes different kinds of use depending

on size, and speaks of single unit pas, for example, as places of "protected accommodation" for families or small clans (p. 38).

The solution to this question of pa function envisioned by Dr Buist may lie in his introductory chapter. If so, not all may agree with his interpretation. There he quotes from Peter Buck's The Coming of the Maori (1958: 137-143) where Buck states that with increased warfare toward the later period of Maori prehistory, the unfortified village (kainga) was abandoned in favour of the fortified pa (Buck 1958: 139). Buist holds that Green elaborates Buck's statement in his Review (Green 1963). In other words, it appears that Dr Buist sees a period when kainga were used and a later period when villages were pas. This thesis is not, however, the only interpretation of Maori settlement patterns in the literature. Best (1952:254) has said both pas and kaingas were in use at the same time. Golson (1957: 71) in following Best has said: "It is probably axiomatic that inhabitants of unfortified villages would have a pa at hand to which to retire in times of danger. At the same time it is usually taken for granted that some pa at least were permanently inhabited". Buist does not make reference to these other opinions.

This reading of his introduction may express the essence of Dr Buist's hypothesis about the evolution of Maori settlement patterns. It is only fair to point out, however, that his introduction is not entirely clear on this point, for he later states, "it will be obvious that I am dealing with only one component within later phases of cultural sequences. The earlier camp and semi-permanent settlements were not discovered in the area of the survey and therefore will not enter into the discussion" (pp. 7-8; emphasis ours). Are the other components in the later phases unfortified villages, or are these confined to the earlier period only?

The purpose and justification of field surveying is the full description of sites and not their classification according to a previously established typology or classificatory scheme. Some minimal filing system, however, is necessary for the retrieval of data if the information gained is to be of use. A simple typology may be helpful in systematically describing sites, but it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the recording of a site simply as a "headland pa" or "kainga", for example, does not constitute a full and useful description.

It is a pleasure, therefore, to see that Dr Buist has supplemented his "Check-list" of sites, which is the last chapter of the monograph, with four complete site descriptions which are clearly designed to illustrate and emphasize the importance of thoroughness in actual survey file records. The check-list itself, while only indicating in summary fashion the nature of each site, includes such vital information as coordinates, geographic locations, and pertinent comments about preservation.

A few last words must be made on the numerous plates, diagrams and site plans. The plans are field sketches and as such are perfectly adequate. Many of the line figures, on the other hand, have lost some of their clarity in being reduced in printing. As a result, some of the lettering and detail have been lost.

There is something very gratifying about Dr Buist's monograph. Here at last we have a well written book which proves there is something to be gained from hours spent site recording in the field. The site survey project is not simply a healthy way of accumulating "trophies" and filling in the map of New Zealand with small dots and numbers. Dr Buist has distinctly shown that survey findings can be analyzed and be made to yield some highly stimulating hypotheses and conclusions.

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