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SHORTER COMMUNICATION

ROUND HOUSES IN NEW ZEALAND PREHISTORY

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In a short communication in a previous volume of the "Newsletter", Alan Taylor referred to two annular ditched enclosures, associated in each case with a linear bank and ditch, on the Manukau Harbour (Taylor 1968; 125). One of these sites, at the mouth of the Oruarangi Creek, measured 18 feet in diameter, and was apparently ringed by a low bank and a shallow outer ditch. No excavation was undertaken, but Taylor refers to the site as a "house".

The second site recorded in the article, at Waitomokia pa, was also 18 feet in diameter, and surrounded by a low bank and ditch. Taylor, despite his cautious use of parentheses, seems convinced that these tiny ring-ditch structures do in fact demarcate ancient house settings, and he even produces for the reader a sketch purporting to represent a round house of the type illustrated by Phillips in his "Maori Houses and Foodstores", plat 30.

In August 1967, the author excavated a site of this kind on Skipper's Ridge, Opito Bay, Coromandel Peninsula (report forthcoming). The site showed, prior to excavation, as a ring of lush grass, 6 metres in diameter and one metre thick - almost exactly the same size as the two recorded by Taylor, and excavation was undertaken in the hope of uncovering just such a round house as those to which Taylor refers. In fact, the ditch was cut into an agricultural soil carbon-dated to c. 1818 A.D., and was totally devoid of any internal features such as post-holes. Since white potatoes were recorded in the Thames area before 1800, and since the ring-ditch must have served some agricultural purpose, being situated in a garden, the most likely interpretation is that it was simply a potato-clamp, being composed of a soil covered heap of potatoes, the soil coming from the shallow encircling ditch, and the ditch serving to drain the site. Such structures were apparently used until recently in many areas of the North Island, and Buck records the use of surface clamps for sweet potato in Northland.

The author does not wish to deny the existence of the round house in New Zealand prehistory - for they were recorded by several eighteenth century observers, but in most cases they seem to have been rather flimsy, and there are no mentions of encircling ditches. However, in the opinion of the present writer, there is no reason to see the Manukau structures as anything but the remains of surface storage clamps.

The linear ditches and banks at the two sites on the Manukau also merit some discussion. Taylor suggests that the Oruarangi Creek example, consisting of a bank 18 inches high and 324 feet long, fronted by a shallow ditch for 125 feet of its length, could be a boundary marker. This opinion is almost certainly correct. However, he suggests that the bank at Waitomokia, 200 feet long and 3 feet high, was a defensive bank for a nearby pa. This bank is constructed of scoria and soil, and is also fronted by a shallow ditch. Complexes of low scoria banks demarcating ancient fields can still be seen covering many acres in the vicinity of the volcanic cones of Wiri and McLochlin's Mountains, to the south of Auckland. Certainly, a bank such as that at Waitomokia would present a most peculiar form of defence, especially as defences such as this are certainly not recorded by any early authorities. Surely these structures are simply field boundaries, as Taylor in fact suggested himself for the Oruarangi Creek linear bank.

The majority of prehistoric surface remains away from actual pa earthworks, in New Zealand's agricultural north, and can usually be interpreted in an agricultural context. If all the small circular ditches in the North Island were houses, and if all the low scoria banks were pa defences, then clearly New Zealand archaeology would need rethinking urgently. The tendency to assume that all small earthworks are houses has already created chaos with the interpretation of the extremely numerous rectangular pits scattered over large areas of the North Island.

Taylor, A. A Manukau Coastal Site. NZAA, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1968, p. 125.

Further references will be published in Bellwood, P.S. Excavations at Skipper's Ridge, Opito Bay, Coromandel Peninsula. (Forthcoming)