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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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SITE RECORDING AND SURVEYING IN THE OPOTIKI DISTRICT

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The Opotiki area in which I am working is mainly the Whakatohea tribal land, and can be loosely defined as the coast that stretches 12 miles east of Opotiki to the country held by the Ngatai tribe, and west 12 miles to the Ohope beach at Whakatane and country held by the Ngati Awa. Traditional Whakatohea land includes the whole of the Ohiawa harbour, the river systems of the Waiotahi, Waioeka, Otara and the Waiaua. The rich river flats and easy rolling foothills seldom stretch more than five miles from the sea. The weather is mild - some coastal land being almost frost free. The soil is rich, volcanic, free draining and in general well suited for growing the type of crop cultivated by Polynesians. In addition, marine resources were plentiful, and few of the people in the area lived more than an hour's walk from the sea. As the rivers are navigable for quite a number of miles by canoe, marine resources could be exploited by most of the people. Probably the easiest food supply to exploit was on the thousands of acres of mudflats around the harbour and swamplands along the rivers. The swamp birds are some of the easiest to catch and the eels so simple to obtain - and, sun-dried, so simple to keep. These were a source of high protein food that must have played an important part in the life of the people and one of the reasons for the high population of the Whakatohea area. Behind the rich flats are a few hundred thousand acres of 'Podocarp' forest.

I was persuaded to make a start at site recording just over a year ago. The sheer immensity of the job made me hesitate for some time. I have estimated that there are over 200 pas and countless village sites to be surveyed. I have so far completed 50 pa sites. I decided to concentrate on these because of the number being bulldozed out and for various reasons disappearing for ever.

I am attempting to divide the district into areas and to make a thorough search of each section before moving into the next.

With property owners - I find that a lot of them are unaware of what is on their land in respect of archaeological sites. I am

endeavouring to see the owners at least twice, once to get permission to go over their property and afterwards to explain the significance of what I find. This is time consuming but most farmers become very interested when they know what they have and are prepared to protect sites where possible. I consider this a most necessary and important part of site recording.

The pas themselves are fairly complex and quite extensive. A number of them have two or three 'ditch and bank' defence works. So far I have found only one pa that is a straightout terrace pa with no ditches at all, though others do appear to be terrace pas that have had ditches added later. In addition, there are a number of pas that are now covered in bush, and because of this are in an excellent state of preservation.

I have been concerned for a number of years about sites being destroyed in the Opotiki area and I felt we should get some experience in archaeology so that we could salvage some information from these. On my own property of 170 acres I have 12 village sites that I can positively identify. These sites have middens associated with them. Only one of these has been registered. I intend in the future to take an area of land and survey it thoroughly, and try to pinpoint every village site in that area. For the present I am concentrating on the pas.

The middens on my property are being destroyed quite rapidly - some have been taken by slips and are now buried at the bottoms of gullies. The bulls on the property seem fascinated by middens and have practically eradicated some of them.

About two years ago I decided to excavate a site on my property. It was one that interested me in particular because it was a few minutes' walk from the sea and only 100 yards to the tidal creek that not only gave access to the mudflats and their food supply but also to many miles of tidal creeks and the Otara and Waioeka rivers. Canoes would have been the normal means of travel for people and goods, so it is logical to assume that the first arrivals in Opotiki would have set up a permanent village in such a place. It had a road put through the site by my grandfather and about 1/3rd of the midden had been taken to metal the road for the bullock wagons and drays. The road actually ran across the midden.

The excavation of the midden was carried out by the Opotiki Historical Society. Unfortunately, as we are all amateurs, it is natural that it was done with a lot of enthusiasm and little finesse.

We were fortunate later by being visited by Miss Davidson, Mr McKinley and Mr Simmons. They were able to advise us on the methods we should be using and how to lay out the area.

The material found in the midden indicates that the site is an old one. We have recovered to date two Archaic adzes and some broken adzes, fish-hook material including part-made one-piece hooks, the unbarbed point section of a two-piece hook, a one-piece hook with a barb on the outside at the bottom of the shank, a number of stone 'minnow' shanks and one bone minnow shank, together with awls and drill points. Also, about twenty pounds of obsidian pieces and a few other artifacts have been recovered.

Outside the midden I have found what appear to be postholes, drainage channels, and a pit. I hope to get an interim report on the excavation published soon, but I feel that I would like to do quite a lot more on the site before it is abandoned.