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STONEWORK FEATURES AT KARIOI, WEST COAST, SOUTH ISLAND

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Prehistoric stonework features in New Zealand are mostly heaps, rows, lines, retaining walls, and freestanding walls that were formed during the cultivation of natural stony ground, mostly in areas of young volcanic rock. Only in a few instances have stonework features been recognised as parts of the defences of pa, as retaining walls in storage pits, or as the lower walls of dwellings (e.g. Hayward 1981). The best known areas for prehistoric stonework are the Auckland and Kaikohe lava fields and several northern offshore islands – Poor Knights and Hen Island.

During geological reconnaissance of the Karioi volcanic complex, between Raglan and Kawhia, west of Hamilton, Roger Briggs (University of Waikato) and I came across several unusual and well preserved stonework features. These are part of a more extensive and little recorded prehistoric archaeological complex in Te Toto amphitheatre, on the Tasman Sea coast, about 10 km WSW of Raglan.

The amphitheatre extends for about 1 km along the coast and for 200-300 m back into the side of Mt Karioi and is surrounded by 100 m high terraces and gentle slopes from the boulder beach to the base of the surrounding cliffs. Scattered over many parts of these naturally rock-strewn (rock fall) slopes are a number of human-made or modified terraces and platforms, with evidence of cultivations in the form of cleared ground among stone heaps and rows, many of which have been damaged by stock. In several places there are large rectangular terraces (c.10 m across) surrounded on two or three sides by stone rows.

The two most interesting stonework features are:

(a) Defensive Stone Retaining Wall

A small but prominent hill near the southern wall of the amphitheatre (R14/661 721) has a moderately well preserved 20 m long stone retaining wall across the ridge that connects it to the slopes on the uphill, eastern side. The wall is 1 to 2 m high and is capped by a narrow, elongate terrace with the very steep hill rising up behind. There are no other obvious terraces on the hill, which is surrounded by near vertical bluffs around the other three sides. The most logical interpretation is that the hill was a small defended pa with a defensive stone retaining wall across the landward ridge. Similar sites have been recorded from Hen Island and the Poor Knights.

(b) Oval Stone Wall Enclosure (Plate 1)

On a low spur leading down to the sea near the centre of the amphitheatre, there are a number of stone heaps and a most unusual and well preserved oval stone-walled enclosure. The enclosure has a gap (doorway) on the uphill leeward side and its internal dimensions are about 2.5 by 3.5 m. The stone wall averages 1 m high and is a mixture of larger boulders and several courses of small cobbles. The enclosure is sited on a natural terrace, and 20 m away uphill there is another terrace with two rows of six subcircular depressions, which are most probably the remains of prehistoric storage pits. The most plausible explanation for the stone wall enclosure is that it is the low foundation wall or footings of a small oval hut.

There will obviously be some debate as to the age of this unusual stone wall enclosure. Is it prehistoric or of more recent historic origin? I believe it is more likely to be prehistoric for the following reasons:

1. There is no evidence of any other historic period structures or habitation sites in the rather isolated amphitheatre.
2. There is much evidence of prehistoric cultivation and some of crop storage and defence within the amphitheatre.
3. The enclosure is sited on a spur in apparent association with stone heaps and pits that elsewhere are mostly prehistoric.
4. The luxuriant growth of foliose lichens indicates an age no more recent than about 1950 (B.W. Hayward, pers. comm.).
5. Rectangular stone enclosures have been recorded in several prehistoric sites in northern New Zealand and a few, somewhat lower, oval and circular stone enclosures are known from prehistoric sites on the Poor Knights Islands (B.W. Hayward, pers. comm.).

Admittedly, the stone enclosure is among the best preserved of all the stone structures in the Te Toto amphitheatre and could have been built by a fishing or camping party in historic times, before the 1950s, but the evidence points more strongly towards an older origin.

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REFERENCE

- Hayward, B.W. 1981. Stone wall defences and stone-faced pits. *NZAA Newsletter* 24: 79-86.



Plate 1. Stone structure, Te Toto Gorge, Karioi volcano. Photo: R.M. Briggs.