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TAI RUA, NORTH OTAGO

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Excavations at Tai Rua in coastal North Otago were first reported by Michael Trotter in the *New Zealand Archaeological Association Newsletter* in 1959 (Trotter 1959: 10-13, especially 12-13). Other reports by him on the site followed, culminating in a comprehensive report, fully referenced, 'Tai Rua: A Moa-hunter Site in North Otago', in *British Archaeological Reports*, International Series 62 (Trotter 1979).

I arrived in Dunedin from England in July 1958, with a joint appointment as a Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Otago and Keeper of Anthropology at the Otago Museum. My brief included archaeology, so keen to learn the character of some of the archaeological sites from the Otago Heads to the Waitaki River Mouth, I much appreciated Michael Trotter's welcome invitation to learn from his experiences. This was especially valuable during the setting up of the Otago Anthropological Society (OAS) in late 1959, with its interest in fieldwork.

Therefore in January 1960 I began a training excavation for OAS members at Tai Rua, taking over work at the site with Michael Trotter's approval. The site was numbered S136/1 in the New Zealand Archaeological Association Site Recording Scheme, later metricated to J42/1.

Trotter has described the site as being "at the northern end of a narrow strip of coastal flat land immediately behind the present beach north of the Waianakarua River... This flat is about 150 metres wide and its loamy top-soil thins out towards the beach giving way to sand dunes above high tide mark" (Trotter 1979: 205). Following work at the site between 1958 and 1962 Trotter defined in his field notes five areas in relation to their finds and environmental settings: Areas A and D, which lay between the coastal road that crosses the site northeast to southwest, and the beach, concerned with housing; and, for the area northwest of the road, Area B, with cooking; Area C with general activities, and Area E with butchering (see Trotter 1979, Fig. 13.4, reproduced here as Figure 1 for the locations of the areas). Trotter noted: "Although the stratigraphy varied considerably over the site, there was basically one main

occupational deposit which was divided into two, three or even four layers in some places” (Trotter 1979: Fig.13.3, reproduced here as Figure 2).

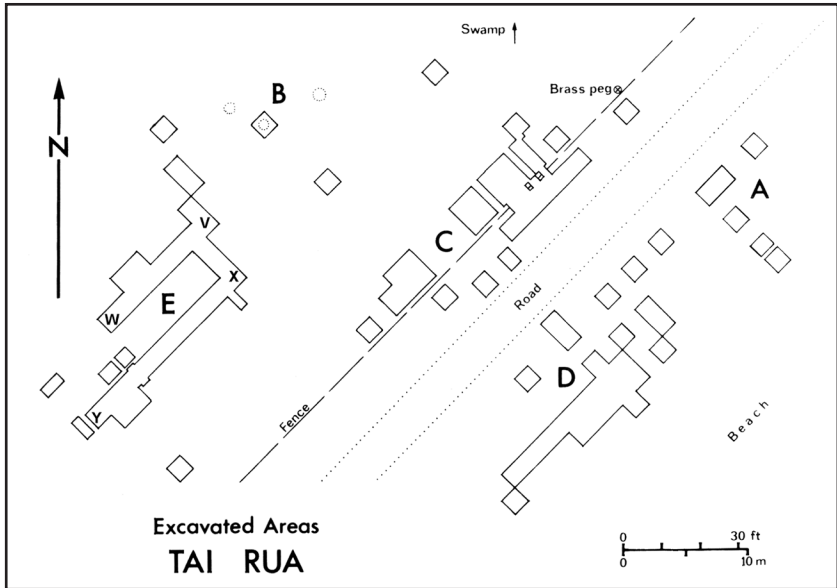


Figure 1. Plan of Tai Rua site (after Trotter 1979).

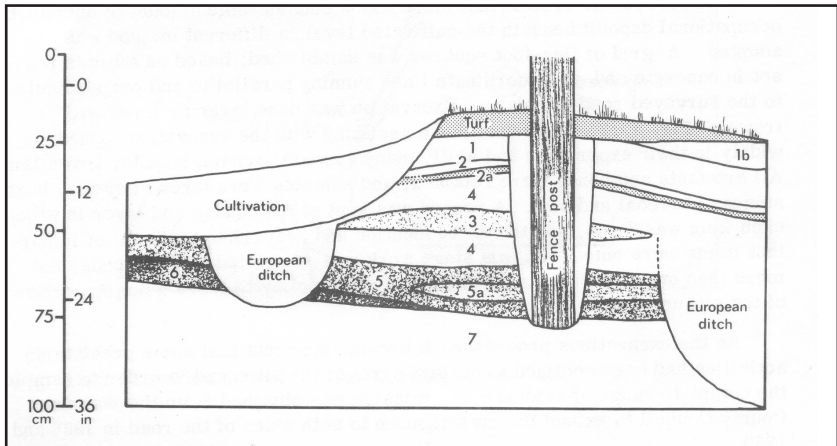


Figure 2. Stratigraphy at the fence line (after Trotter 1979).

After making some small soundings in Area B to familiarise myself with the site, I began excavating a series of five-foot squares in Area E, which became two trenches, one 40 feet (12 m) long, the other 50 feet (15 m) long (see Figure 3, Trenches V to W and X to Y).



Figure 3. Trench X-Y, Area E.

Trench V to W was drawn in section. Artefacts and faunal remains were found in contiguous layers, corresponding to Trotter's Layers 5 and 5a, and into his Layer 6. The upper layer was a black silty sand which extended northeast towards the margins of an old swamp, but contained very little cultural material. The lower layer was a shelly midden, culturally sparse at its southwestern margins, but more dense, with up to three sub-layers, and artefactually more prolific towards its centre. There was no recognisable sterile layer between these layers and they could have been comparable in date.

The artefacts found were mainly of bone, there being 23 one-piece fishhooks (1 barbed), five composite fishhooks (one barbed), eight 'barracouta' fishhooks and 44 bone tabs. Stone material comprised three sinkers, five flake tools (with retouch), four drill points, four sharpening stones, one unfinished broken adze of indeterminate type and one tattooing chisel.

Many bones were found, but not examined in detail, including moa, dog, seal, sea-bird, fish and perhaps porpoise. A concentration of moa bones, mainly leg bones, was found on the southwestern margin of Area E, and to the northeast were some fragments of moa egg-shell.

In April 1960 a four day excavation, mainly by OAS members, was concentrated in Area C, next to the road. Here Trotter had found a posthole dug into the beach sand, his Layer 7. Therefore a number of contiguous five-foot (1.5 m) squares, previously unexamined, were excavated, in one of which was found a possible posthole, 10 feet (3 m) south of the one previously found by Trotter. The new find consisted of a circular brown stain, 8 inches (20 cm) in diameter at its top, which, when excavated, was found to have a tapering base, 8 inches (20 cm) deep. Although no more postholes were discovered in Area C, it is possible that more might exist to the east, under the road, where it was not possible to excavate.

Artefacts found during this excavation comprised two composite fish-hooks, one 'barracouta' fishhook, five indeterminate flake tools and small fragments of charcoal and red ochre. The faunal remains were similar to those found in the excavation of the previous January. The stratification was similar to that found in Area E.

Excavations were continued for three days over Easter 1961 in Area D, on the southeastern margin of the site, between the road and the beach, the main purpose being to seek posthole evidence perhaps comparable to that discovered in Area C in the previous year. A trench was opened up, again retaining Trotter's five-foot (1.5 m) square system, where 12 possible postholes were found dug into the beach sand (Figure 4). They followed the linear alignment of the trench itself, suggesting that other postholes might be found in the immediately adjacent baulk. Unfortunately lack of time prevented its examination.

However, in the five-foot (1.5 m) square at 43-48 feet (13.1-14.6 m) southwest by 48-53 feet (14.6-16.2 m) southeast of the brass peg datum point, at least four postholes were found beneath the cultural layer. More remarkably, at 53-58 by 53-58 (16.2-17.7 m), immediately below the same layer, was found the fill of an oval hole, which, when removed, revealed that the digging of the hole had involved cutting through a layer of yellow sand into clean clay. At the base of the hole there was a smooth oval depression in the clay, measuring about 19 inches x 17 inches (48 x 43 cm) along its axes, and 6 inches (15 cm) deep. On one side of this depression, adjacent to a log of wood revealed in section, there protruded nine pieces of wood up from the clay, forming an irregular arc on the depression's inside edge (Figure 5). Some of the wooden pieces showed what appeared to be tool marks. This depression, discovered on the last day of the excavation, was thought to have been a seating for a large post, later removed.

It was left *in situ* and covered. It was re-examined, however, in 1962, and again in 1968, when its presumed significance was re-affirmed.



Figure 4. Post holes, Area D.

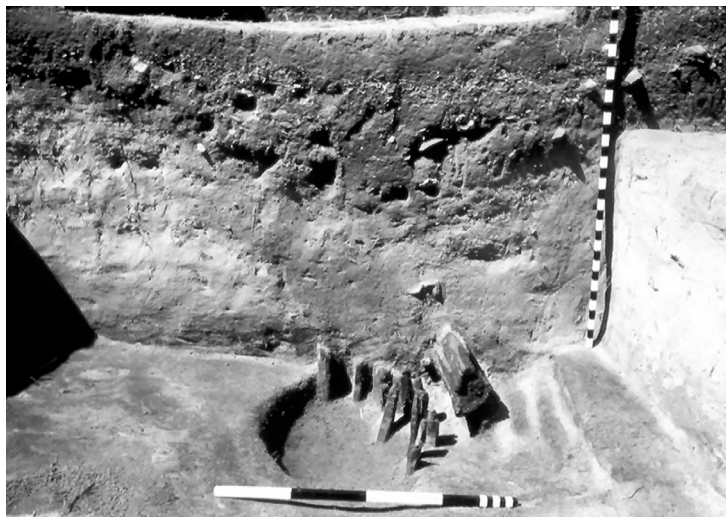


Figure 5. Large hole with pieces of wood in position, Area E.

References

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