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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A WANGANUI RIVER TRIBUTARY - THE UPPER RETURUKE RIVER

David Butts
Manawatu Museum
Palmerston North

New Zealand prehistorians have made little effort to assess the strategic importance of the Wanganui River in the prehistory of the North Island of New Zealand. Surpassed only by the Waikato River, the Wanganui River has a catchment area of 7,296 km^2, a total length of 312 km and has an average flow of 8,000 cusecs (Krenek,1968:49). From the north western slopes of Mt Tongariro, the Wanganui River flows north-west to Taumaranui where it swings southward at the junction with its tributary, the Ongarue River. The three major tributaries are the Ohura and the Tangarakau (draining from Taranaki to the west) and the Manganui O te Ao (the largest confluent, originating on the western slopes of Ruapehu). The Retaruke flows into the Wanganui from the east between the junctions of the Tangarakau and the Ohura, about 184 km upriver from Wanganui. The Wanganui River is navigable up to and beyond this point by shallow draught vessels (see Fig.1).

The majority of the present population lives in the area from Pipiriki down to Wanganui, mostly on the left bank. "From Pipiriki to the mouth of the Retaruke the valley consists of a series of narrow, spectacular gorges" (Krenek,1968:52). Little sign of human activity is now seen until approaching the open country towards Taumaranui. At the time of European contact it was much different.

> "It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than the present aspect of the valley and the sight which greeted the Europeans when they first penetrated the area. The river was teeming with life. Innumerable kainga and pas followed the river on both sides and even the difficult middle section of the river was once occupied by 23 settlements, which made use of the level spaces often found above the steep walls enclosing the river".
>
> (Krenek,1968:52)

Estimates of population for the Wanganui River and tributary settlements range from 4-5,000 to 30,000, the lower end of the scale probably being the more accurate, though the evidence published to date provides no real means of assessing this. Kumara was the main cultivated crop until the 1840s, grown on the flights of river terraces which follow the river throughout its course. Lampreys and eels were caught in river weirs and traded inland, while the forests were rich with bird life and berries. "Much of the work involved in providing food was seasonal. Eels were caught mainly in autumn, lampreys in winter, whereas summer was

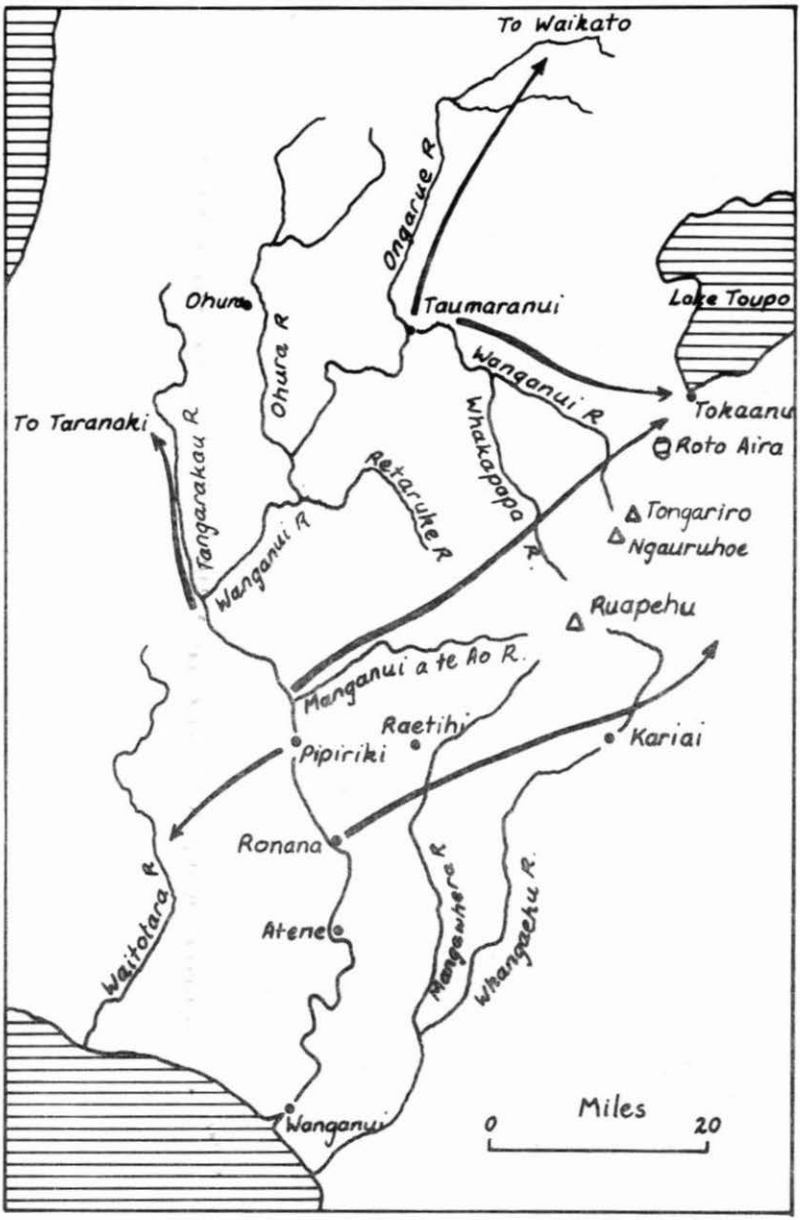


FIGURE 1. Wanganui River Catchment early routes.

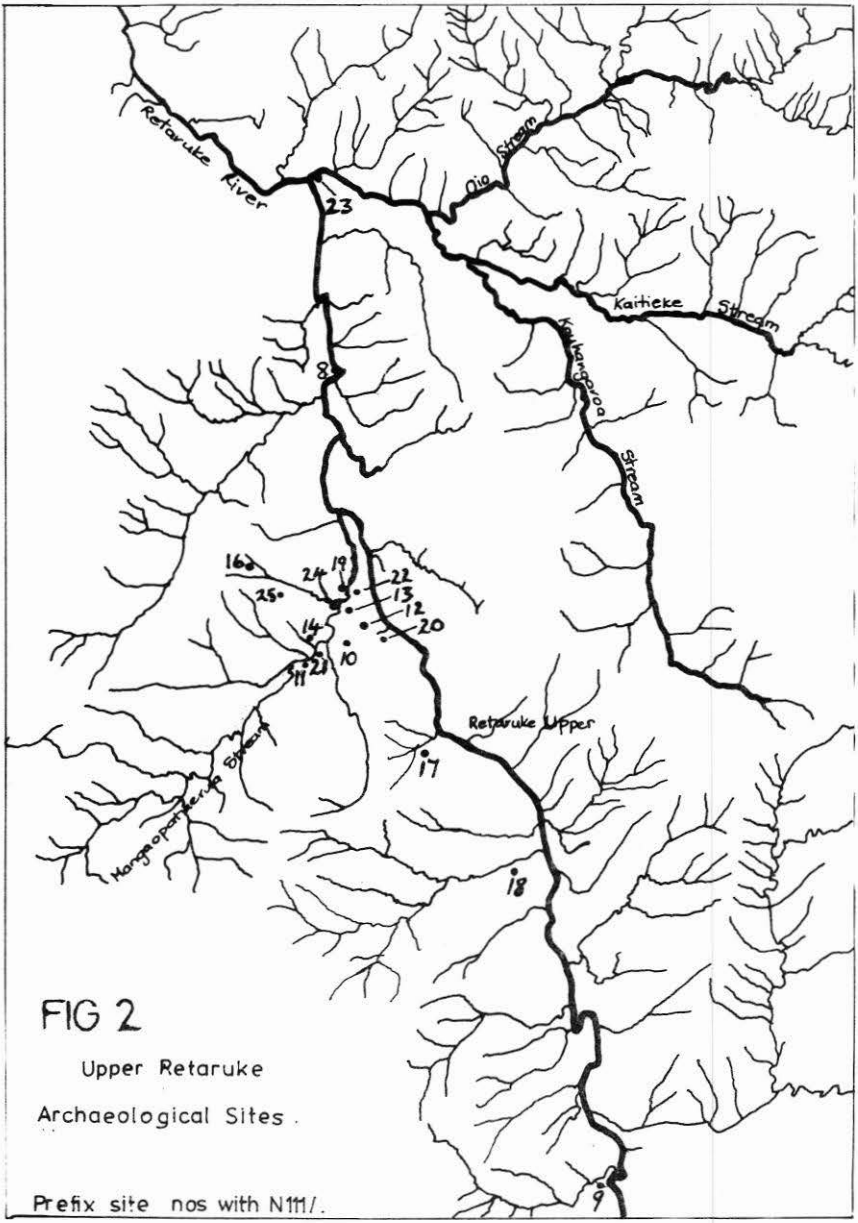


FIGURE 2. Upper Retaruke archaeological sites.

the season for sea fishing. Taken together with the agricultural tasks of planting, weeding and harvesting, there was a sequence of work throughout the year". (Krenek,1968:53).

The river was used extensively as an access way for communication and trade with Taupo, Bay of Plenty, Waikato and inland Taranaki. Canoes could go beyond Taumaranui and all the major tributaries were used. The Retaruke could be navigated for 19 km.

The Wanganui River went into a period of decline during the 'Hau Hau' crisis in the 1860s. The area became depopulated and trade patterns were disrupted. Added to these troubles were the ravages of diseases introduced by Europeans. Though conditions improved in the 1880s and 1890s, the Maori population was never to re-establish itself to anything like its former presence.

Historians have not yet provided comprehensive coverage of the catchment area of the Wanganui River. The published works of Downes (1923, 1976) and Chapple and Veitch (1939) are useful starting points for further research. There is a need for an ethno-historical interpretation of the rich early accounts of the Maori communities along the river. The writings of the missionaries H. Williams, J. Buller, O. Hadfield, J. Mason, R. Matthews and R. Taylor may be of particular interest in a study of this kind.

It is with this introduction in mind that I now wish to offer my observations relating to the Maori occupation of the upper Retaruke Valley (Fig.2).

Upper Retaruke

The lower Retaruke meets the Wanganui River at Whakahoro. The area under discussion here is that section of the Retaruke River above the junction with the Kaiteke Stream. The valley runs in a NNW - SSE line with the river flowing from the south to north. The upper Retaruke River valley varies from about 240 m to 960 m above sea level.

The topography of the upper Retaruke valley has been created by a narrow river which has cut down through pumices and 'papa', resulting in a series of terraces which quickly give way to the rolling piedmont and sharply rising ranges on either side of the valley. The soils in the valley are central yellow-brown pumice soils (Ngaroma - Tapuwai) which are moderately leached. These Taupo pumice derived soils are situated on mudstone, sandstone and greywacke bases and originally supported a podocarp forest. The soils on the flat to gently undulating and rolling topography are presently suitable to supplementary

visited during this field trip (N111/8 and 9) are on left bank ridges. These are strategically positioned, with steep banks and partially encircling river and stream courses forming natural defensive barriers. Terracing has been recorded on site N111/8 and palisades have also been known on this site (McNaught, pers. comm.). There are areas suitable for kumara plantations close to these sites on river terraces. There is no evidence for such activity at present. The only obvious structure was a rectangular semi-subterranean feature on site N111/8. Other evidence of pits on this site may have been obscured by the dense secondary vegetation (some of which could be well over 100 years old). The ditch defenses on the two pa sites are cut into pumice and vary greatly in size. Site N111/9 is different from site N111/8 in that it is further up the ridge from the Retaruke but this is only in order to gain the optimum defensive position. The defence of both sites is essentially the same. Although a more systematic survey of these sites and their immediate surrounds may add further important information, the essential nature of the sites can now be seen. Both sites have advantages of observation of the valley floor, up stream and down, defence is provided by topography and additional earth works with palisades on at least one site. The interpretation that these sites were possibly used mainly as a place of retreat in times of stress is suggested by the remainder of the settlement pattern to be described below, the size of the defended areas and presently observable features there and the presence in site N111/8 of river boulders stored inside the line of supposed lateral palisades which could be used to bombard an attacker. N111/9 has some evidence of a small stone working area. This includes obsidian flakes, and small flakes of fine grained greenish sandstone which possibly result from adze manufacture. This material can be obtained from the Retaruke River close to the site. Such evidence may indicate periods of occupation at times other than those of stress. Further research on this site is severely hampered by the destruction caused when a logging road was cut down the centre of the ridge. The area of industrial evidence has been demolished, except for small portions, and the ditches almost completely filled to facilitate the roadway.

Although isolated instances are known of the other site types mentioned above, the most coherent pattern is now documented for the valley of the Mangaopatuerua Stream and the associated terraces of the upper Retaruke into which it flows. On the upper Retaruke terraces at the entrance to the Mangaopatuerua valley there are a number of stone-working and oven sites. Three pits (one now completely filled in by farm activity) add to the complexity of the pattern. Working floors and oven sites extend back into the valley on suitable spurs and terraces. These may be more extensive than currently known because most of the sites currently known have been exposed by land development

feed crops, but use is limited for commercial food crops. The steeper upland soils are related to the central yellow-brown earths, but much less useful for cropping than those lower in the valleys. The maze of water courses in the valley are clearly seen in Figure 2. The only geological resources of present note are pumice and coal. However, from the perspective of prehistoric Maori technology, the presence of greywacke, a very fine grained sandstone (greenish in appearance), coarser grained sandstones and quartz are of importance.

Accurate climatic data is lacking but information from local residents suggests that the climate is mild enough to provide a sufficient growing season for kumara. However, there are years when frosts extend into the growth season, destroying crops.

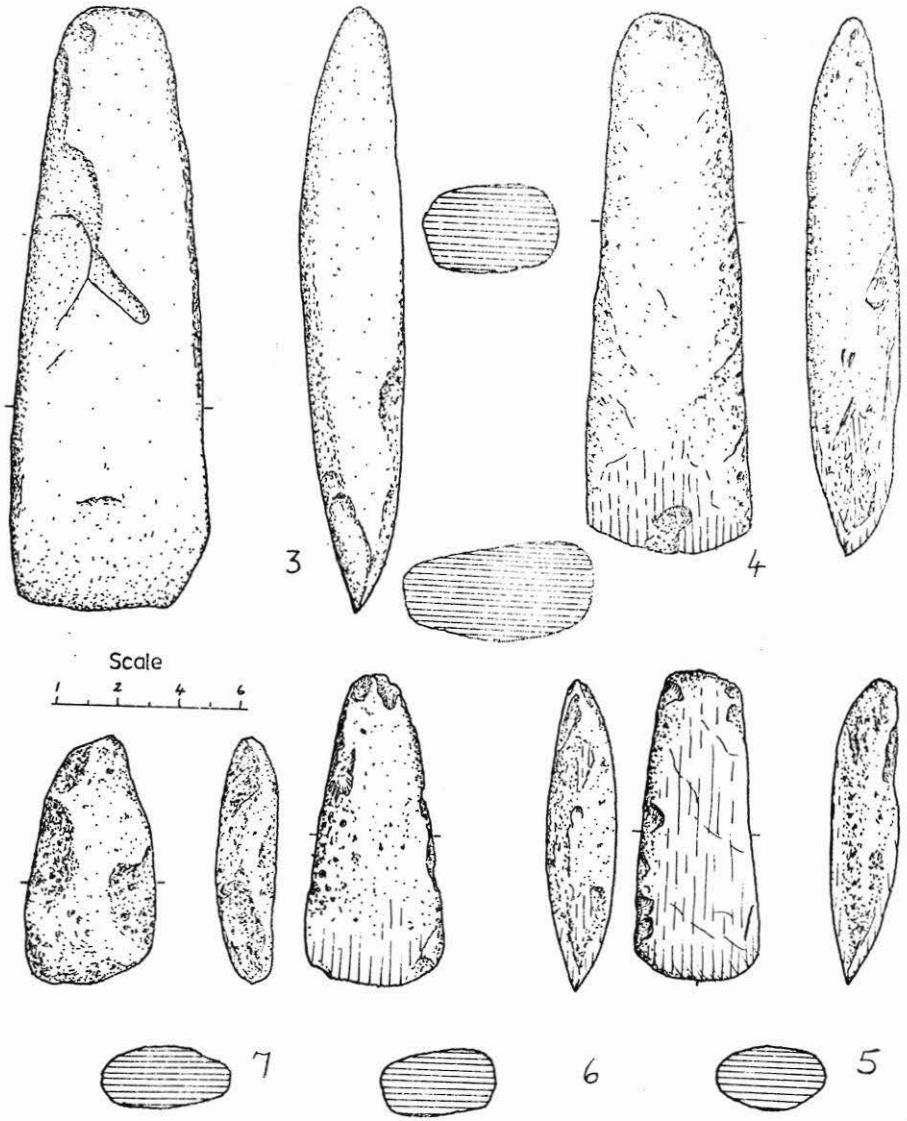
Present day land use in the upper Retaruke concentrates on mixed livestock farming. Most of the native forest was cleared from the more accessible terraces by 1917. Farmers are still breaking in areas of piedmont and some steeper country, as well as draining swamps. It has been during the process of land development that most of the archaeological evidence discussed below has been located.

The Retaruke was surveyed in the 1890s and first occupied by Europeans in the early years of the first decade of this century. The area of the upper Retaruke is now termed Kaiteke. It has received little attention from historians and no previous attention from archaeologists so far as I am aware. After a visit to the Manawatu Museum, Mr Ken McNaught, a farmer of upper Retaruke, agreed to show me his private collection of artefacts and the range of archaeological sites of which he was aware. I consequently visited a number of sites with Mr McNaught on 21 July 1979. These are shown on Figure 2. The nature of these sites is briefly outlined in Table 1. Artefacts in the McNaught private collection, found in the upper Retaruke catchment, are shown in Figures 3 - 19 and relevant data is given in Table 2.

Settlement pattern

The range of sites located include two ridge pa, a number of working floors and ovens, and a range of terrace sites which may have been house sites or horticultural sites. Only sites known to Mr McNaught were visited. The sites visited are probably a representative sample of existing sites, except for swamp sites, none of which were examined, though some material has been recovered from these in the past decade (e.g. an eel weir).

The settlement pattern seems to concentrate on the left bank of the river, though this pattern is by no means exclusive. Both the pa sites



FIGURES 3-7. Retaruke artefacts in the McNaught collection.

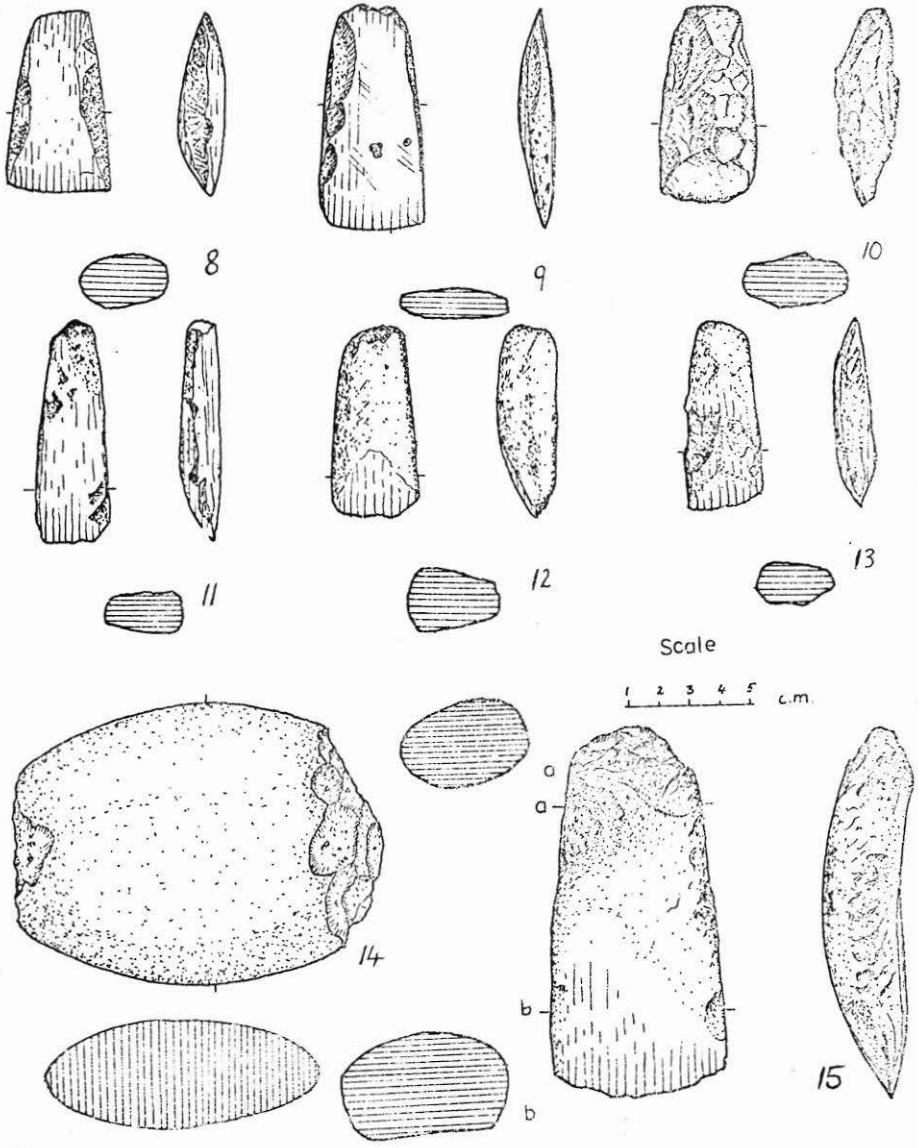
and cropping activities. Figure 2 shows the sites presently known in the Mangaopatuerua Valley. There is no known defended site immediately associated with the sites in this valley although N111/8 is in close proximity. There are few other places with such easy access to the upper Retaruke from the left bank. This ease of access, along with protection from predominant winds and maximum exposure to the sun appear to be the factors behind the location of the settlement on the left bank of the upper Retaruke.

N111/11 is about 3.5 km up the Mangaopatuerua Valley on a terrace on the right bank of the stream. This site has oven debris and a range of stone material including obsidian, sandstone, greywacke and unidentified material. Artefacts recovered include files, one finished adze, one unfinished and one roughout. A greenish, fine-grained sandstone found locally seems to have been an important source of stone for adze manufacture. Preliminary observation of workshop debris and artefacts made of this material, suggests that it was not easily worked because it does not appear to have been easily flaked. This site seems to have been a working floor with associated cooking area, whether habitation was also present cannot be ascertained on available evidence.

No faunal remains have been observed in disturbed sites except one oven which had a few pieces of bird bone. The only other direct evidence of economy is the finding of two ko in the valley, indicating the presence of horticulture.

At the time Europeans first moved into the area many of the river flats and terraces were covered in bracken fern (Pteridium esculentum). This may indicate that some of the terraces were used for kumara growing and, after abandonment, had initially reverted to bracken fern. Only three pits and one possible pit have been recorded in the area. These pits are rectangular (only one has a raised rim) with quite distinct openings at one end. The three larger pits are situated on the outer edge of the river terrace. None of the rua or bell-shaped pits, so common in the Wanganui area, were recorded, though these may be present but not yet located. Rua are known to exist in the lower Retaruke area (at Whakahoro, for example).

The forest, with such species as totara, red beech, rimu, matai and kahikatea supports a wide range of bird life. The major economic species are likely to have been the pigeon, weka, kaka and huia, as well as parakeets. Though this list is not supported by archaeological evidence and is by no means complete, it is enough to indicate the potential of the forest as a food resource. The forest was also a source of berries. Wood suitable for canoes, palisades, tools and buildings was also provided by the native forest of the area.



FIGURES 8–15. Retaruke artefacts in the McNaught collection.

The rivers and streams host fresh water crayfish (Paranephrops planifrons) and the swamps contain an important source of food in eels. At least one hinaki has been retrieved from a swamp in the upper Retaruke.

In addition to adzes a limited range of artefacts was found. Stone pounders made of greywacke, usually taking advantage of a suitably shaped stone, have been recovered (McNaught collection). Often the only modification on these is the band of hammer dressed waisting between handle and body. As yet none of the anthropomorphic or grooved butts (as in patu onewa) have been located from this area. The former are not known south of Taranaki (Simmons,1971) though the latter are present in other parts of Wanganui (Wanganui Museum specimens).

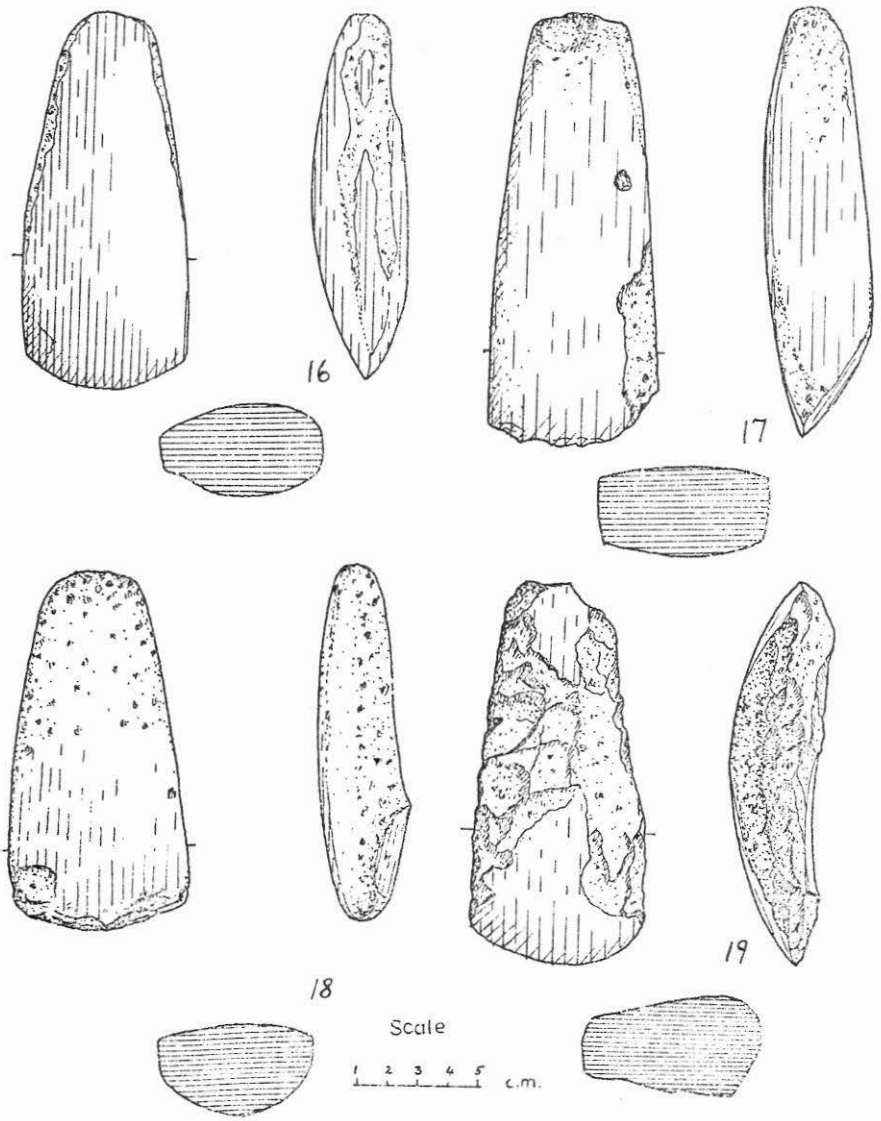
Hammerstones have been recovered in the upper Retaruke made of quartz, fine-grained green sandstone, greywacke and red jasper. Sandstone files, rasps and other finishing tools have also been recovered from working floors. In the McNaught collection one very fine obsidian chisel made from a flake has a bevelled blade 1 x 2 cm. Obsidian flakes are found on most stone working sites.

The only bone artefact recorded is the distal end of an awl made of bird bone (McNaught collection).

Regional assessment

Wanganui has been better served by archaeological investigations than its southern neighbours, Rangitikei and Manawatu, though it is limited to coastal areas and some initial investigations of the lower reaches of the Wanganui River (C.D.Smart,1960,1962; M.J.G.Smart,1961; C.D. and M.J.G.Smart,1963). Colin Smart (1960) suggested the likely possibility of finding archaic sites on the Wanganui coast, particularly in the Nukumaru-Waverley area. Though archaic artefacts have been located from the area, no sites have been positively documented as archaic.

A wide range of site types have been recorded for Wanganui. Flatland, upland, headland, ridge and island pa have been recorded in the Wanganui area. The most common type of pa located by C.D.Smart (1960:22) was "one which occurs on the end of the ridge and can thus be regarded as of the headland type". He also notes the simplicity of earthwork defences (C.D.Smart,1962:173), remarking on the characteristic wide and deep ditches across narrow ridges. The nature of these sites is often dictated by the steep sides of the ridges and surrounding water course (e.g. Operiki Pa, see M.J.G.Smart,1961). Pits were found on most pa in the coastal region and piedmont (C.D.Smart,1962:174). Reporting the results of excavations at Tatara Pa, C.D.Smart (ibid:182) notes



FIGURES 16-19. Retaruke artefacts in the McNaught collection.

that the most common adze type was the 2B; these were rectangular section, slightly convex surfaces, with unmodified grip, manufactured from locally obtainable stone.

The above comments derive from surveys along the 55 km of coast from Waverley to Turakina, with limited observations taken from the Waitotara, Wanganui and Wangaehu river valleys, seldom further inland than about 24 km. The range of sites located in the upper Retaruke is not as wide ranging as in the coastal regions. The two pa located are headland ridge sites, thus indicating the extension of the most common type of coastal pa well into the interior. There is, however, an apparent lack of pits associated with such sites, though these may be located with more systematic surveying. This may, however, indicate that horticulture was not as important to the Retaruke people as it was to those on the coast and on the Wanganui River.

Little has been published on the artefacts of the Wanganui Maori and it is, therefore, difficult to compare. The importance of local materials for stone tools is indicated from the Tatara pa material as it is from material recovered in the upper Retaruke. The upper Retaruke artefacts are indicative of the later classic types and the absence of archaic styles may indicate a late occupation of the area, though it is more likely that archaic sites have not yet been recognised.

The distribution of artefacts made from the fine grained greenish sandstone found in the Retaruke River is also quite extensive in the Wanganui area (McNaught, pers.comm.). Contact with more northern areas is indicated by the presence of obsidian.

Conclusion

Given that the Wanganui River and its tributary valleys were known to be important lines of communication, it is not surprising that the upper Retaruke archaeology seems to fit into the pattern of the Wanganui archaeological landscape and artefact assemblage. It is important that the Wanganui River catchment be treated as a complete unit, although there may have been differing influences on different areas of the catchment.

There is need for systematic site surveying in the Retaruke River basin and its tributaries, in order to confirm the hypothesis based on known sites which is put forward in this paper regarding settlement pattern. There is also a need to locate midden sites which are absent from the records.

The potential of the Wanganui River catchment for archaeological research is considerable. Future research will enable us to document the development and changes in settlement pattern and lifestyle of the Maori communities which have utilised the Wanganui River catchment.

Acknowledgements: Without Ken McNaught's keen observations and long interest in the archaeology of the Retaruke River Valley, this paper would not have been possible. I thank him for sharing his knowledge and allowing drawings of artefacts in his private collection to be included in this paper. Thanks are also due to Don Cimino for allowing access to the collections of the Wanganui Regional Museum and the Manawatu Museum for supporting this research. Figures: Raemon Rolfe and Fay Butts. Typing: Margaret Davy.

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TABLE 1. Recorded sites in the upper Retaruke Valley.

Site No.	Site type and artefacts recovered
N111/8	Pa, transverse ditches, one subterranean rectangular feature.
9	Pa, transverse ditches.
10	Pit, rectangular.
11	Campsite, ovenstones, obsidian, sandstone files, 3 adzes- 1 finished, 1 roughcut, hammerstone. (Note that the term 'campsite' is used here to denote sites where occupation is evidenced but specific site type not determined).
12	Campsite, terraces, ovenstones, adze, sandstones.
13	Campsite, oven, obsidian, 1 roughout, 3 adzes, hammerstone, sandstone file.
14	Campsite, ovenstones, sandstones, hammerstones, small adze.
15	Campsite, ridge-top site, adze, terrace below.
16	Findspot, adze. (Note, the term 'findspot' is used where no other information is actually recorded for this location, though other evidence of occupation may be present).
17	Campsite, 2 adzes, grindstone, flakes, terrace.
18	Campsite?, 1 roughout, 1 adze.
19	Campsite, ovenstones, 1 adze, obsidian.
20	Campsite, ovenstones, 1 adze, grindstones.
21	Findspot, 1 adze.
22	Findspot, 1 adze.
23	Findspot, 2 adzes.
24	Findspot, sandstone file, grindstone.
25	Findspot, 1 adze.

TABLE 2. Artefacts in the McNaught collection.

Artefact	Site	Figure
Adze	on left bank Oio Stream	3
Adze	N111/17	4
Adze	N111/13	5
Adze	N111/15	6
Adze	N111/21	7
Adze	N111/17	8
Adze	N111/22	9
Adze	N111/11	10
Adze	N111/11	11
Adze	N111/18	12
Adze	N111/19	13
Hammerstone	N111/13	14
Adze	N111/8	15
Adze	N111/20	16
Adze	N111/23	17
Adze	N111/16	18
Adze	Wanganui River site unknown	19
Sandstone file	N111/24	Not illustrated
Adze	N111/25	"
Hammerstone	N111/14	"
Sandstone file	N111/13	"
Sandstone file	N111/13	"
Adze	N111/13	"
Grindstone	N111/24	"
Grindstone	Not known	"

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