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THE KAURI POINT SWAMP

F.W. Shawcross

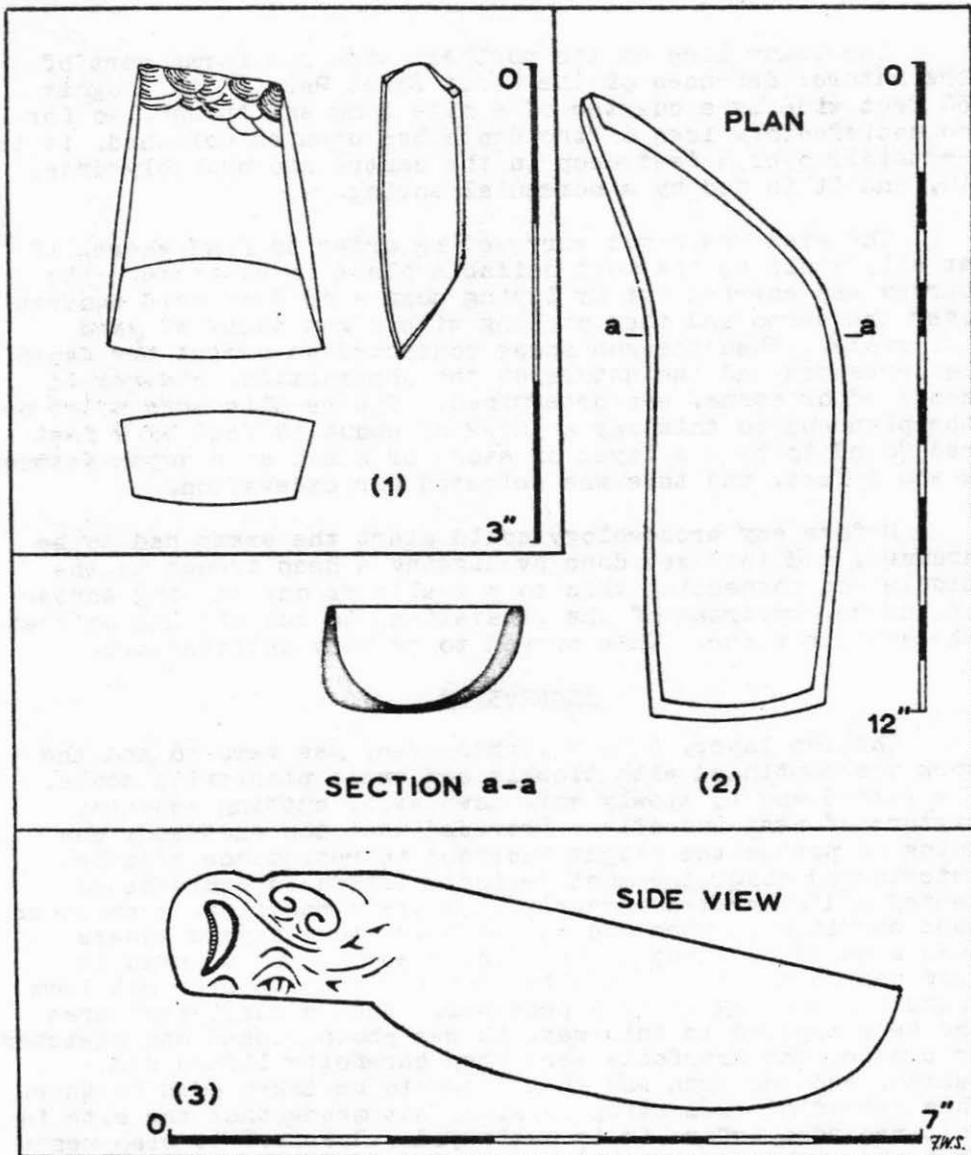
The Swamp lies on the northern side and forms part of the natural defences of the Kauri Point Pa. It is roughly 50 feet wide by a quarter of a mile long and though, so far, no satisfactory idea of the depth has been established, it is certainly over 5 feet deep in the centre and probably under 10, and it is fed by a perennial spring.

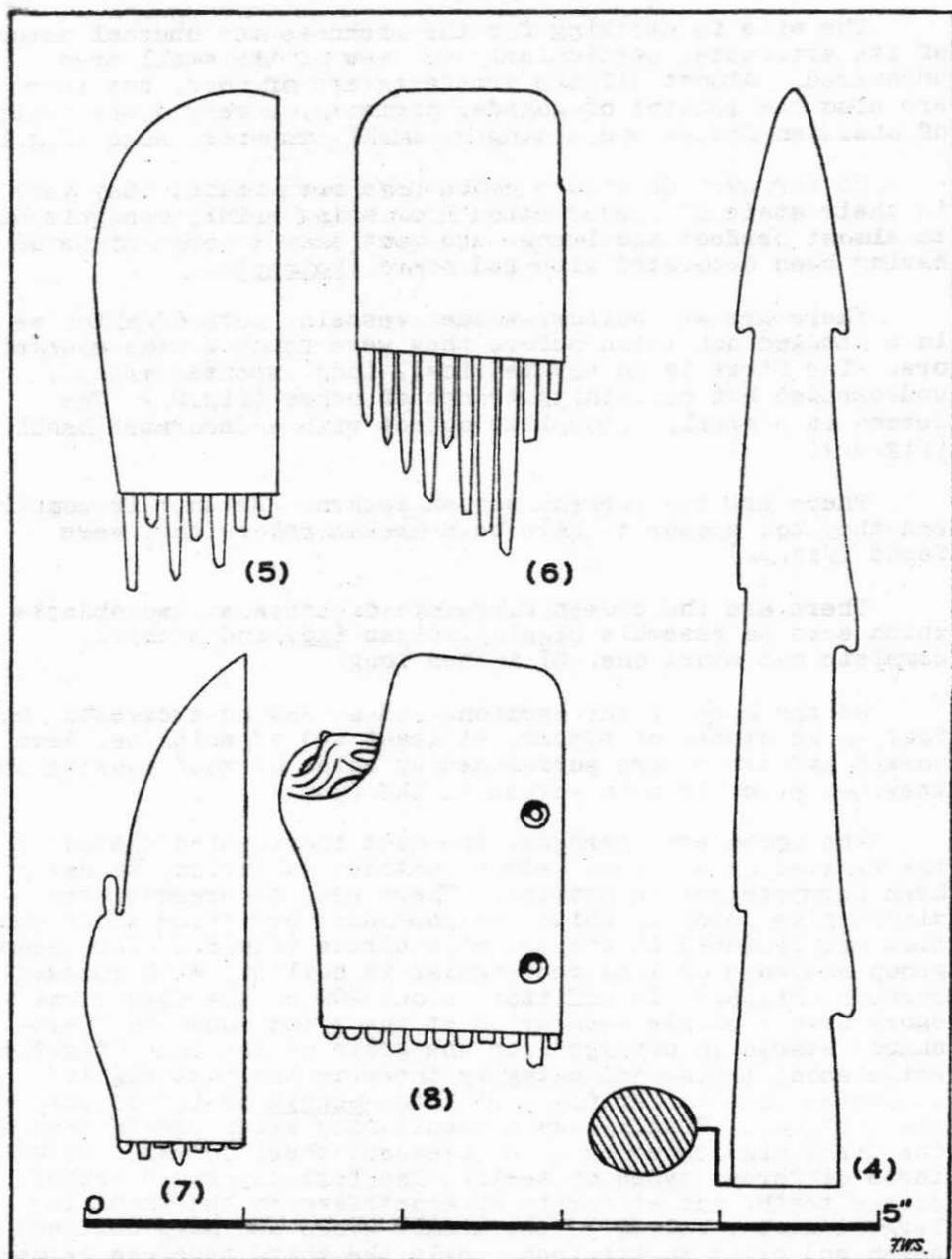
The area was first surveyed in order to find where, if at all, would be the most suitable place to excavate. The survey was carried out by laying down a grid of yard squares over the swamp and then probing with a gum spear at yard intervals. When the gum spear contacted an object the depth was measured and the nature of the obstruction, whether it was wood or stone, was determined. The results were noted on the plan and in this way an area of about 18 feet by 9 feet was found to have a layer of stone or shell at a depth between 2 and 3 feet, and this was selected for excavation.

Before any archaeology could start the swamp had to be drained, and this was done by digging a deep trench up the middle and connecting this to a shallower one cutting across the swamp, upstream of the excavation, to cut off and collect the surface water. This proved to be very satisfactory.

Excavation

The top layer, 6 to 8 inches deep, was removed and the work was continued with trowels and small plastering tools. The method was to slowly work downwards, cutting away the mixture of peat and silt. Provided that the excavator was quick to notice the slight increase in resistance made by waterlogged wood, the most delicate artefacts could be detected and excavated properly. Progress was slow, even under good conditions, when one worker might take a yard square down a depth of 3 inches in a day's work. But as soon as wood was found it was left in position and the peat cut from round it, leaving it on a pedestal. When a sufficient area had been exposed in this way, it was photographed and sketches were made; the artefacts were then carefully lifted and packed, and the area was then ready to be taken down further. This method of excavating is slow, but means that the site is well recorded before it is destroyed. However, it also meant that the work was uncompleted by the end of the season; only about half the area had been uncovered, and that to a depth of only 27 inches.





Artefacts

The site is striking for the richness and unusual nature of its artefacts, particularly in view of the small area uncovered. Almost all the artefacts are of wood, but there are also the remains of gourds, pigments, a very dense scatter of obsidian flakes and a single, small, unhafted adze (fig.1.)

So far over 65 wooden combs have been found; they vary in their state of preservation from being hardly recognisable to almost perfect specimens, and most seem to show signs of having been decorated with red ochre (kokowai).

There are two hollow, wooden vessels, both of which were in a damaged condition before they were found by the excavators. The first is an asymmetrical, long, spouted vessel, undecorated but containing traces of ochre (fig.2.) The second is a small, scoop-like object with a decorated handle (fig.3.)

There are two barbed, wooden spears. Neither is complete and they too appear to have been broken before they were found (fig.4.)

There are the broken fragments of at least two objects which seem to resemble digging sticks (ko) and a third, complete but short one, 31 inches long.

At the base of the section, and so far un-excavated, were four large pieces of timber, at least two of which had been worked and these were surrounded by chips of wood showing that they had probably been worked on the spot.

The combs are, perhaps, the most interesting feature of the excavation and seem, almost without exception, to have been asymmetrical in outline. There are, at present, two distinctive forms of which the commonest are those whose handles are finished in the arc of a circle (fig.5.) The second group are more or less rectangular in outline, with rounded corners (fig.6.) In addition, about 20% of the former category have a simple decoration at the point where the "arc-shape" starts to diverge from the grain of the comb (fig.7.), while among the second category there is the most highly decorated comb so far found with the manaia design on one side (fig.8.) Finally, as a result of a brief examination of the first sixteen combs to be cleaned, there appeared to be three different types of teeth. The first type has rather coarse teeth, cut at a rate of about five to the inch. The largest number belong to the middle group and have between seven and eight to the inch, while the third type has as many

as between twelve and fifteen teeth to the inch. It is interesting to compare these with a modern metal comb which has ten coarse teeth to the inch and seventeen fine ones to the inch. However, these are just preliminary ideas which may have to be altered when the collection is thoroughly studied.

The Age of the Site

So far there is no satisfactory evidence on this problem: however, the style of decoration and the adze as well as the closeness of the finds to the surface, suggest that they are Classic Maori. On the other hand, there appears to be no comparable collection of wooden artefacts certainly belonging to the Archaic Phase.

The excavation will continue in a second season, when it is hoped to complete the work, and this will involve tying in the swamp-finds with the sequence found in the excavation of the pa.

Preservation

When the site was left at the end of the season it was re-flooded and, barring deliberate interference or damage by stock, the remaining woodwork should not deteriorate. All the finds were kept damp and packed in polythene sheeting or bags. They were taken back to the Department of Anthropology at Auckland, where they are being cleaned and preserved. The methods of preservation employed are those described in "The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art", by H.J. Plenderlieth, and different ones are being used so that they may be compared and when published will serve as a guide to other workers who may wish to select special methods for their own purposes.

Finally, when the work has been completed it is hoped to keep the collection together and house it in a Museum, where, combined with an Excavation Report, it will be useful to others for the purposes of comparison.

Acknowledgments

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