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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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TUHUA OR MAYOR ISLAND, ITS IMPORTANCE TO MAORI HISTORY

by Hans G. Pos

On Friday, November 3rd, 1769, Captain Cook sighted the island Tuhua and named it Mayor Island. He spent a night sheltering by the steep bushclad hills which rose sharply from the sea. At this time the island belonged to the Ngaiterangi people of the Western Bay of Plenty.

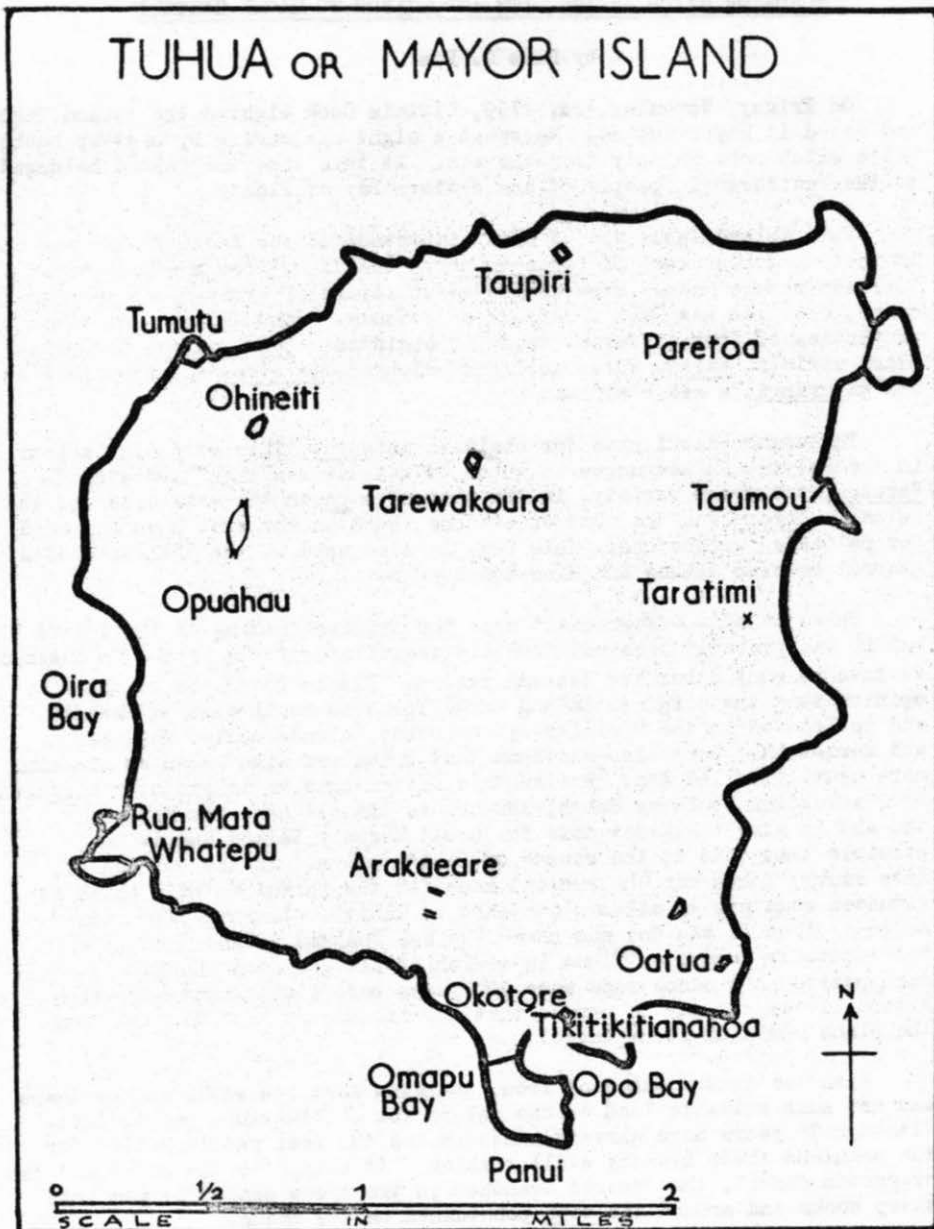
This island Tuhua was of great importance to the Maori for it was one of their major sources of tuhua-tuhua or obsidian, from which cutting implements were made. Even in the older layers of excavations in Archaic camps, obsidian has been found quite commonly. John White¹ describes the properties of four different types of obsidian: tuhua-tuhua, the common black variety, waiapu which is light coloured, paretoa, a green obsidian, and kahurangi, a red obsidian.

The common Maori name for obsidian is mata. This word also appears in the Polynesian languages in which it has the meaning "hard stone". Paretoa, the green variety, is the name of a pa on the east coast of the island. Waiapu was the name of a stone found on the east cape and used for polishing greenstone. This name is also used in the tradition of a quarrel between Ngahue and Hine-tua-hoanga.

There is some disagreement over the original naming of the island but it was probably received from its resemblance to an island in Hawaiki, as have so many other New Zealand places. Elsdon Best² was of the opinion that the original island named Tuhua is south-east of Hawaiki and is located in the vicinity of two other islands called Maui-pae and Maui-taha. Best also mentions that Tuhua was also known as Ahu-ahu, more usually called Ahu. But in this latter name he is probably mistaken for, according to Percy Smith, Ahu-ahu is the old name for Mangaia. Ahu-ahu is also the Maori name for Great Mercury Island and it is possible that this is the source of Best's error. In the opinion of Miss Henry, Tuhua was the ancient name for the island Me'etia which is situated some eighty miles south-east of Tahiti. Johannes Anderson³ suggests that it was Toi who named the New Zealand island Tuhua, for Toi reputedly landed on Tuhua in search of his grandson who had disappeared in a canoe race some 200 years before the great migration. Alternatively, it may be argued that the island derived its name from the black obsidian found there.

With the introduction of iron, obsidian lost its value and as there was not much suitable land on the island for cultivation, people left. Although 75 years have already passed since the last people sailed for the mainland their history still remains. It clings to the hills and the overgrown fosses, the crooked branches in the trees shaped by man into sharp hooks and around the tapu pohutukawa on the beach.

TUHUA OR MAYOR ISLAND



List of Fortified Sites:

1. Panui, a peninsula flanked on one side by Opo or South-east Bay, on the other side by Amapu or Western Bay. The peninsula is cut by a deep fosse on the most narrow point. The pa is about 100 ft. above sea level. It was here the people were still living 75 years ago.
2. Okotore pa.
3. Tikitikinahoa pa.
4. Oatua pa on Ruakikeno Point.
5. A small fortification north-west of Oatua.
6. Taratimi pa.
7. Taumou pa, a peninsula pa with a small landing in Taratimi Bay.
8. Paretoa pa.
9. Taupiri pa.
10. Tumutu pa.
11. Ohineiti pa.
12. Opuahan, fortified hill ridge.
13. Tarewakoura. Together with Taumou the strongest pa on the island.
14. Rua Mata at Oira or North-west Bay.
15. Whatepu pa, had once big cultivations.
16. Arakaeare pa.

Except for Panui, Paretoa and Whatepu most of the above named pa are strongholds probably only used in case of attack.

References:

1. White, J., Transactions of the New Zealand Institute. Vol.8 (1875).
2. Best, E., Stone Implements of the Maori.
3. Andersen, J., Maori Place Names.

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- Wilson, J.A., The Story of Te Wāhāroa.
 Gold-Smith, E.C., Transactions of the New Zealand Institute. Vol.17 (1884).