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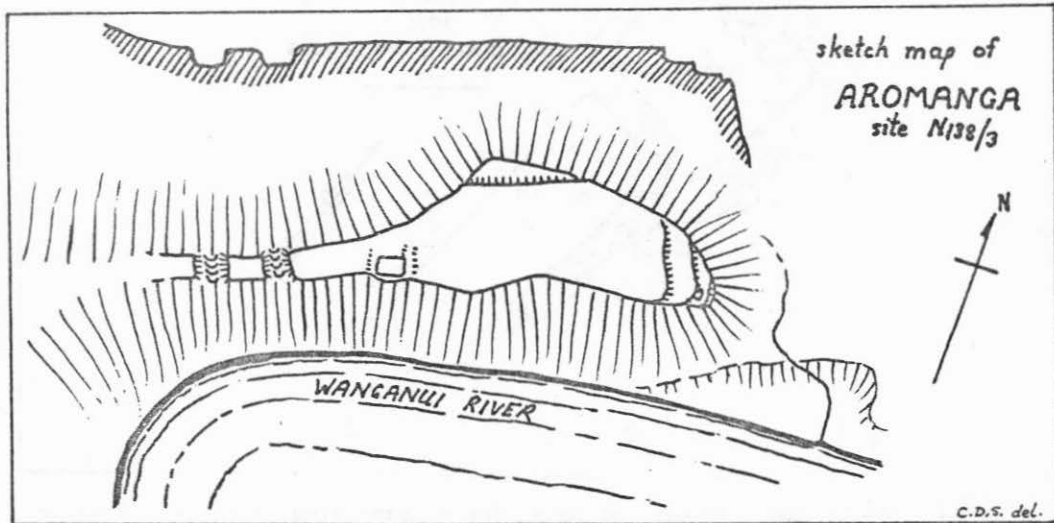
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WANGANUI - by C.D.Smart

The Wanganui region consists of two topographically distinct divisions, the flat, sandy coastal plain and the raised, deeply dissected interior. The Waitotara, Wanganui, Wangaeahu, Turakina and several smaller waterways give access to the interior and, in some cases, give access for an extremely long distance. In places the coastal plain ends abruptly in cliffs at the seashore but over a great distance merge into large expanses of recent sand dunes.

TYPES of SITE: Most known types of site find an example in this region, but the fortified pa is probably the most numerous. Nearly all varieties of pa exist, flatland and upland, on hill, headland, ridge and island. It is, however, the ridge pa which predominates. This is not surprising when the topography of the area is considered as there is barely a location from which the ridges and gulleys of the 'back country' cannot be seen. It is interesting to note, however, that the most common type of pa is in fact one which occurs on the end of the ridge and can thus be regarded as of the headland type. The nature of the defences is usually found to be determined by the steep sides of the ridge rather than the headland position and the sites are probably better regarded as being of the ridge type. Ditch and bank defences are seldom supplemented with any great amount of terrace and scarp and these, where they do occur, are commonly fairly small. Ditches, on the other hand, may be as much as 15 feet in depth and over 20 feet in width. Such size was possible when the ditch was constructed across the back of a narrow ridge, perhaps only 20-30 feet in all.



Pits occur in isolation and in groups on spurs overlooking the flat river valley floors although their discovery is usually accidental and in the more accessible areas so that their nature and distribution are little known. They are, however, a common feature of the pa sites. Surface pits vary greatly in both depth and outline, seldom over a maximum of some 15 feet in length. The

fully subterranean pit is well represented. The readily worked but solid 'papa' natural lends itself well to the underground store pit and a great variety of these are found on the Wanganui pa sites; square and rounded chambers, divided or single chambers, vertical and horizontal access holes, as well as double chambers and single, are known. A few examples of what can be termed 'house floors' (where an uneven ground surface has been either partially built up or cut down to provide a level floor) have been recorded on ridge pa in the Waitotara and Wanganui River areas.

The coastal sand dune areas abound in midden sites along with a scatter of ovens and working floors. Many artefacts associated with the Archaic phase have been recovered from the Nukumarū-Waverly coastal area although, as yet, no precise localities have been determined. Large and rich middens are known from the mouths of the four main rivers but those of the Wanganui River have suffered from housing and construction activities.

Of the other types of site, representatives are less common. The shelter at Kōhi Gorge with its finely decorated rear wall is well known. Examples of flax cultivations and many groves of Karaka trees are botanical evidences of former, and in some cases recent, occupation. Only structures in stone and 'canals' or drains are unrecorded for the Wanganui region.

In most instances preservation of sites is fairly good. Sheep graze over the ridges and sandy coastal plain and cause little damage once a good cover of grass is established. Ploughing has, of course, destroyed or softened some sites, as has also the spread of housing areas. The overall picture, however, is reasonably well preserved and should remain so for some time to come.

LOCAL ACTIVITY: An Archaeological Group has been formed in association with the Wanganui Museum. The membership of some 30 people have carried out many investigations in the field although no organised site recording has been done to date. In all cases so far, the group has discussed such history and associated information as is known concerning a particular site at a meeting prior to going into the field to inspect the site itself. It is hoped that both recording and excavation methods will be introduced to members during the coming summer. (I am indebted to Mr. D. E. Crockett, secretary of the group, for this information).

FUTURE RESEARCH: One obvious project which will undoubtedly prove most rewarding is a thorough investigation of the sand dune areas of Nukumarū and Waverly to establish sites belonging to the Archaic phase of Maori culture. By extending these investigations to the south it may be possible to locate similar middens around the mouths of the Wangaehu and Turakina Rivers. The considerable quantity of moa bones recovered from the Wanganui region indicates that an association of man and the moa is likely for this area too.

The nature of the substrate upon which many of the habitation sites have been constructed allows for an excellent preservation of evidence. The soft 'papa' is readily worked (probably with stone tools) and once a light cover of soil is established the pits and postholes remain in good condition. The preliminary excavation on the Tarata pa, Waitotara, revealed post and other holes in perfect condition. Details of dwelling and other perishable objects constructed on habitation sites can thus be studied.

These are only two of the more obvious possibilities offering.