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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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WAIRARAPA - by K.Cairns, Masterton

(An article dealing with this region appeared in the last Wellington issue, Vol.2, no.4. Mr. Cairns reports that the field inspection of sites has continued in all parts of the Wairarapa. The nature and original find-spot of artefacts occupies much of the time spent on research as does the gathering of traditional information - Ed.)

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WELLINGTON - by J.R.S.Daniels, Wellington.

Descriptions of Wellington sites have been published since the eighteenth-seventies, notably by Elsdon Best, and recently this work has been collated and revised by G.L.Adkin in the "Great Harbour of Tara". Thus there are ample references to consult before recording in the field. Unfortunately such publication means that the important sites have been well known for many years and have suffered fossicking and haphazard excavation as a result.

The WELLINGTON REGION: The area covered by the Wellington group extends north along the west coast to the Otaki River, a good boundary since the country beyond is dealt with in G.L.Adkin's "Horowhenua". Trips have also been made to the south Wairarapa and to Kapiti Island, the latter rich in the remains of Maori and European settlement, particularly of the whaling period. The Wellington district proper contains two distinct areas from the archaeological point of view; the land around the Wellington and Porirua Harbours to Futerua Bay in the north and the distinctly different southern portion of the Horowhenua dune belt. There are differences, of course, in the type of work to be done in these two areas. Around Wellington, for example, traces of pa and villages survive whereas middens have been scattered or built over or have been buried by shingle slides. In the case of the sandhill country erosion has destroyed many important settlement sites but is continually exposing middens and other material.

PA SITES: There were many fortified pa in the Wellington area but, with the exception of those built by the early Ngai-Tara people, earthworks appear to have been kept to a minimum, possibly because of the difficulty of digging into the hard Wellington subsoil. There are, however, some good earthworks and terracing on these older sites. Perhaps the best of these is the Makara pa described by Susan Davis in last year's Wellington Newsletter (Vol.2, no.4). This well preserved headland pa has a sizeable terraced occupation area defended by a ditch and scarp 7-10 feet high and 150 feet in length.

One of the best preserved pa in Wellington itself, the Rangitatau pa at Seatoun, is perhaps the oldest. Reputed to built by Ngai-Tara some 700 years ago, it consists of a terraced citadel area on a small headland some 200ft. above the beach and an associated village area, terraced and probably lightly defended, on more gently sloping ground some 300 feet inland. On the headland itself there are about fourteen terraces, some straight but most semi-circular in plan, encircling the round summit. These, together with the now shallow fosse in the ridge behind, are well preserved despite the action of Cook Strait winds and rain.

None of the later Wellington tribes seem to have equalled the feats of Ngai-Tara in earthworks construction, some sites appearing to be very lightly defended considering their importance. Even the vital Wairaka pa at Pukerua, described as the "gateway to the Wellington area", seems to have been safeguarded from behind by only a single ditch, across a wide open ridge, about 100 yards in length. Any other defences must have been in the form of palisading. Good natural defensive positions, requiring the minimum of earthworks, were of course used where possible. Such was the case at Pukerua Bay where a pa was built more than 300 feet above the beach, on a tableland flanked on two sides by deep stream gullies. On Kapiti Island the old citadel Katihe was built on a hill rising sharply from the valley floor at the north end of the island, the hill itself isolated from the ridge to the south by a deeply notched saddle, thus only a little artificial scarping was necessary. The size of the postholes still visible on this pa shows that only a small stockade was required to complete the defences.

Stockades were the main defence in the Otaki-Waikanae sand dune areas also although Peter Beckett records one instance of a small pa, built on a sandhill jutting into a swamp, defended by a ditch 6ft. deep and 7ft. wide, with a bank behind. To judge from early European evidence, however, this site must have been exceptional in southern Horowhenua and, like many of the small Wellington pa, must have been only a temporary refuge rather than an occupied site in the true sense. Most of the so-called pa built in this area in the 30's and 40's of last century would probably have been in the nature of stockaded kainga only. This was certainly so prior to the invasions from the north. One veteran of the war parties of the 1820's told S. Percy Smith that there were no pa in Horowhenua and their easy progress down the coast to Pukerua suggests that the people were unprepared for any sort of attack.

Some of the best of the Wellington sites remain intact, notably the old pa at Seatoun and Island Bay which were built on steep headlands, unsuitable even for suburban housing. Most of the sites around the city, however, including Tara's original pa (several) on the Mirimar peninsula, have disappeared. Shingle slides now cover a series of old fishing villages on the south Wellington coast. In Horowhenua the erosion and changing river courses typical of the area have made it impossible to locate many of the important sites recorded or mentioned earlier.

PITS: Pits have been recorded on many sites around Wellington. None measured have so far exceeded 3ft. in depth and 7ft. by 4ft. in outline, and it is clear from their surrounding and arrangement that some, at least, of these pits were used for food storage. Groups of pits have been recorded at two pa; the Wairaka pa, near Pukerua, has rectangular surface pits arranged in one straight line along the top of the steep cliff overlooking the beach while the Makara pa, at Makara, a site on a sloping headland, shows a straight line of pits dug into the highest habitation terrace just inside the main defences. Some of the small terraced village sites around the Porirua Harbour possess quite large raised-rim surface pits, usually about two per site, and on the western arm of the harbour there are a series of much weathered circular surface pits on a grassy flat, possibly a former cultivation ground.

STONE WALLS: The use of stone walls, though not widespread, is interesting. Near Paekakariki, Peter Beckett recorded the use of a low stone wall to

strengthen the base of a palisade where the ground was too hard to sink postholes to any depth. This is the only recorded use of stone walls for defence in the Wellington area. The site was destroyed some 20 years ago so that it is now impossible to check on Beckett's details. At Fitzroy Bay a long wall about 4 feet high was apparently used as a retaining wall behind some cultivations and, on Kapiti Island, a series of stone walls are arranged in a rectilinear pattern to enclose about 7 acres of cultivable ground.

MIDDENS: On the more hilly Wellington sites the midden refuse would probably have been cast down the steep slopes and subsequently buried under the shingle slides. In other places, however, middens are still very noticeable. At Porirua they form an almost continuous line for three miles along the shore of the inner harbour and some, tightly packed in layers, measure up to 60ft. in length. Little bone is found, as a rule, in these middens although several large pieces of whale bone have been recorded.

There are also large midden areas, some covering two or three acres, in the foredunes of the Otaki-Waikanae belt. Near Waikanae there seem to be two distinct series of middens, perhaps dating from different periods. One series runs for about three miles along a high series of old fixed dunes, about half a mile back from the beach, containing broken shells (mostly small types) packed tightly in charcoal layers with small oven stones and some bird and fish bone. These middens have yielded a number of artefacts including small flake tools and some larger tools made from local river-bed stones. Quite a large number of struck flints were found close by one midden. Altogether, the inland middens of the Waikanae area, near as they must have been to the inland villages and cultivation areas, seem to have been centres of community life. On the other hand, the series of middens nearer to the beach are rather different. These consist of loosely heaped mounds of unbroken shells, including some larger types not found in the inland middens, with large amounts of pumice, many oven stones and some bone. Although some of these midden areas cover up to two acres of ground they contain few stone tools or other artefacts. There is, however, much material associated with the whaling period such as traces of hoop iron, mirrors and the usual rum bottles. None of these are found further inland so it appears that the two midden series are separated in time as well as space.

LOCAL ACTIVITY: The loosely organised Wellington group has been actively recording since the beginning of 1958. Many sites are now recorded in the national Site Recording Scheme. Only a single excavation has been carried out, at Makara beach, although several members took part in the preliminary excavations on the Tarata pa near Wanganui. A full scale investigation of this site, by both Wellington and Wanganui archaeologists, will be carried out this summer.

In order to coordinate and strengthen archaeological work in the Wellington area a meeting of over 50 people decided to form a Wellington Archaeological group. The meeting empowered an interim committee to provide a constitution for the new group and to maintain some organised activity in the meantime. It is hoped that the new group will come into reality early next year.