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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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by J .R.S. Daniels

Whitireia Peninsula forms the southern side of the entrance to Porirua Harbour, about 20 miles from Wellington City. While only about a mile and a half across it forms a distinct geographical entity and contains some sites of quite considerable archaeological interest. The peninsula is joined to the land to the south by the narrow, low-lying neck of land between Titahi Bay and Kahotea. For the most part hilly, it rises to a height of 340 feet at Whitireia, (Mount Cooper) the prominent hill from which the peninsula takes its name. This has been cut away sharply by wave action on its western face to form cliffs some 100 to 200 feet high, but on the shores of the inner harbour there are small flat areas and shingle beaches at the foot of the hills. It is on these areas and on low spurs running down from the hills that most of the Whitireia sites are found.

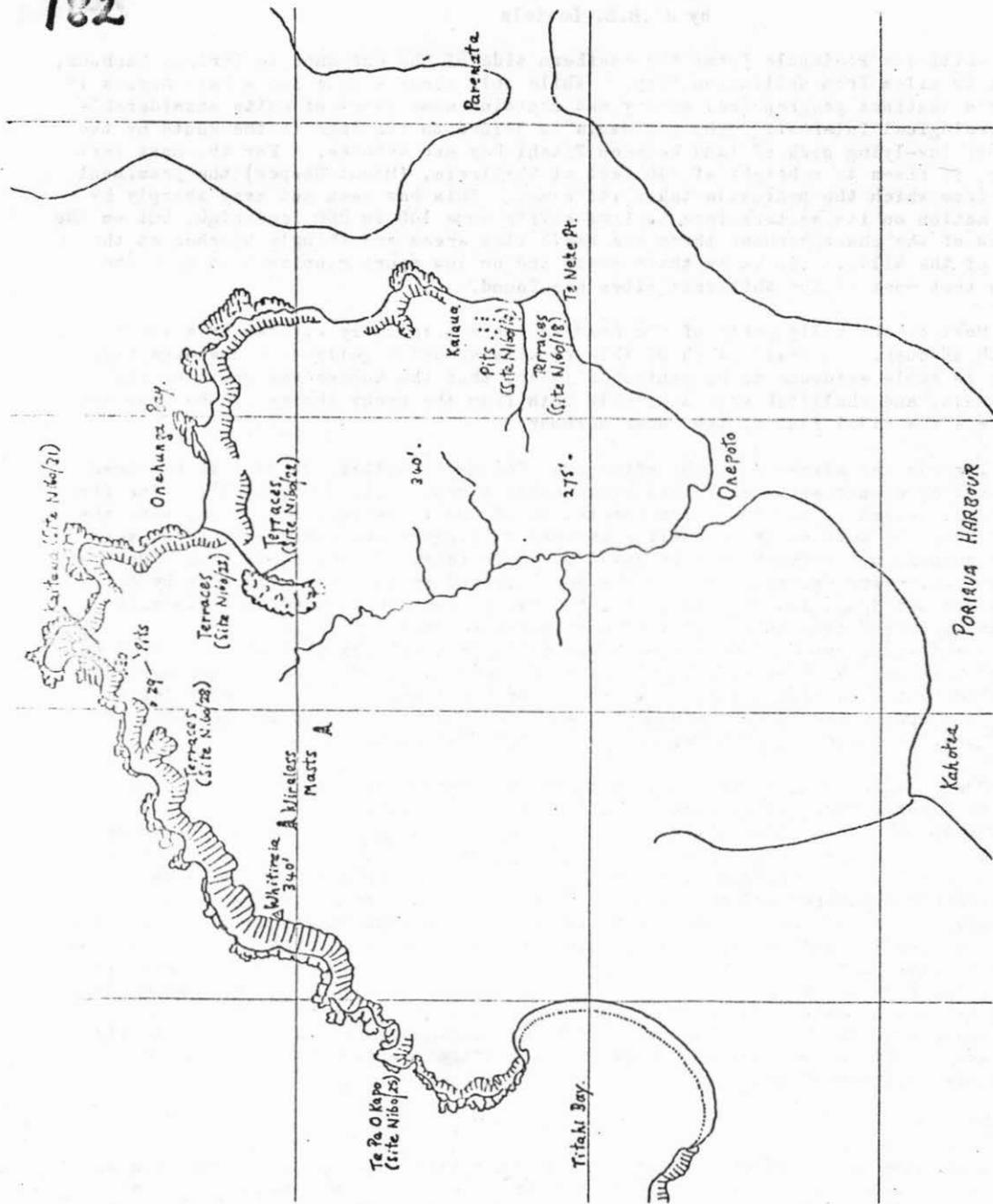
Most of the hilly parts of the headland were originally covered by a light growth of bush. A small patch of this remains around a gully near Onehunga Bay. There is ample evidence to be mentioned later, that the kumera was grown on the peninsula, and shellfish were available both from the rocky shores of the open sea and from the tidal flat of the inner harbour.

Porirua was always a sought-after area for Maori settlement, and it has been occupied by a succession of tribes since early times. (I. Best, 1914). The first of these, according to Best's interpretation of the traditional evidence, were the Ngai Tara, who settled the coastline between Wellington and Porirua. These were later joined, not without some friction by their relatives the Ngati Ira. Most of these people were driven either to the South Island or into the Wairarapa by the Ngati Toa and Ngati Awa raiders in the 1820's, so that Best found that his chief source of information on the Porirua area was from Wairarapa Maoris. From this, and from the present-day inhabitants' surprisingly scanty knowledge of the history and place-names of the area, it is clear that many of the Whitireia sites must have belonged to the earlier Ngai-Tara-Ngati Ira occupations. It is actually fairly easy to pinpoint the pa and kainga of the later inhabitants from the accounts of such European observers as Wakefield, Brees and Dieffenbach.

Most of the sites described by Best in the remarkable field-archaeological tour de force already cited remains intact, although housing and roading have completely obliterated the sites at Kahotea and a group of terraces was destroyed by the cutting of a tractor track at Onehunga beach in 1960. The larger terraced sites are still well defined, but some smaller features such as pits have been considerably weathered and trampled by stock and are now rather indistinct. Generally the sites are a good indication of both the limitations and possibilities of field work in Wellington. Spectacular or extensive field evidence is rare, and defended sites are rarer still. Te Pa-o-Kapo, the miniscule pa on Whitireia, is one of the few in the Porirua area. Best's conclusion that refuge was sought in the heavy inland bush in time of attack certainly seems to be the logical one. This means that the typical Porirua site is the small open terrace group, usually (but not always) associated with pits. The Whitireia sites of this type are particularly interesting.

Terraces

There are five sets of terraces on Whitireia Peninsula. These vary from a set of four short scarps flanking a low ridge (Site N160/23) to a remarkable series of large cultivation terraces rising steeply to over a hundred feet above the beach (Site N160/28). The distinction between habitation and cultivation terraces becomes obvious on a close examination. The former follow a definite pattern. Usually a gentle slope near the end of a spur, as in the cases of sites N160/18 and 20, has been terraced. These two sites each have four terraces cut across the full



width of the spur, with scarps about three or four feet high, and in the case of Site N160/18 there are a number of smaller discontinuous terraces, some crescentic in shape. In neither case does the length of terraced spur exceed 200 feet, and the longest terrace measures just over 100 feet. Both these sites bear traces of midden refuse, and Site N160/20 has, on separate terraces, two rather indistinct raised-rim pits, the interior measurements of which are 16ft. 6 inches x 7ft. and 7ft. 6 inches x 6ft. 6 inches. Site N160/18 also shows traces of depressions which may have been pits. There is no sign of any attempt to defend these sites, although they are situated on narrow spur-ends.

Site N160/23, now destroyed, consisted simply of two terraces, each 50 feet long and 40 feet apart, cut into opposite sides of a low ridge. A number of water-worn stones were noticed nearby (in 1959) but no definite signs of occupation.

These sites are very different from the fine series of cultivation terraces (Site N160/28) on the slopes of Whitireia itself. Here a small seaward gully, opening out as it approaches the hill-ridge above, has been completely terraced to a height above the beach of 100 feet. The longer terraces at the top measure up to 300 feet in length. Although fairly regular they are not all continuous and often merge with ones above or below. They vary in width from a few feet to six or seven yards, with scarps of two to five feet, and taper off in length as the gully narrows towards the beach. There appears to be no doubt about the use of the terraces. All indications point to cultivation. The site is in a gully separated from the cold southerly winds, and very sunny. Gravel, an inevitable sign of kumera cultivation, is quite evident on the surface of the terraces, and Best in 1914 noticed gravel and shells in the grass on the slopes above where the wireless masts now stand. Finally there are no traces of middens or pits near these terraces and the site is so well preserved that these would be very noticeable if present.

A similar but smaller series of terraces occurs on a steep face above Onehunga Beach. These are also discontinuous and very irregular, so much so that in some cases they are indistinguishable from natural slump terraces. They also show gravel on the surface, and their narrow width (never more than seven feet) does not make them appear at all suitable for habitation. Here again no pits or midden refuse are evident.

Pits

Pits are more subject to rapid weathering than some other archaeological features, and many groups of pits on the peninsula have probably been obliterated in this way. The most notable series which are not associated with terraces are a row on the grassy flat near Te Neke point. (Site N160/19). These are situated just a few yards back from the beach. There are six arranged in a line parallel to the beach, between five and twenty feet apart, and odd ones nearby. These pits are very indistinct, but they definitely appear to have been circular. Their average diameter would be about ten feet. The area nearby (between the terraced sites N160/18 and 20) is flat, sheltered and close to water. With its gravelly soil it was probably a cultivation ground.

Raised-rim pits on terraces have already been mentioned; these are rare in other situations. Site N160/30 comprises two such pits near a cliff-edge. Their inside measurements are 16 ft. by 9 ft. and 9 ft. by 9 ft. They have been almost completely filled in by weathering.

A Problem

Near these two pits is a strange feature (Site N160/29) which seems to have no connection with nearby sites, nor any clear purpose. This is an isolated formation resembling a small mound surrounded by a miniature ditch and bank, the outside measurements being 14 ft. by 12 ft. The centre is raised about eight inches above the surrounding ground. It is ringed by a bank about the same height, outside of which is a shallow ditch about a foot wide. The purpose of this can only be guessed at; it is certainly sufficiently clear in outline not to be confused with an unfilled pit. Nothing similar has been noticed around Wellington, but this "mound" does appear to be a rectangular version of the circular structure seen by Association members on the 1960 Conference field trip to Flat Point.

Near these last two sites is the Ngati Toa Kaitawa kainga, (Site N160/31) where a few hut-sites and three collapsed run poka are still evident. The beach middens at Onelunga (now scattered and covered by drift sand) were described as containing whale bone and post-European articles (E. Best, 1918) when examined by Best fifty years ago, so their association with Kaitawa, occupied in the 1840's, seems clear. Kaitawa may have been stockaded on its landward south side, but would not have lent itself to defence.

There is, in fact, only one pa site on Whitireia - the tiny Pa-o-Kapo (Site N160/25) near Titahi Bay. This was certainly only a refuge pa. It is on a small exposed headland, with sheer cliffs on three sides, the fourth defended by a fosse dug across a neck of land artificially narrowed to a width of 20 ft. The flat area of the pa measures 50 ft. square, and the only visible internal feature is one low terrace. It is interesting to see how the site has deteriorated since 1914, when Best described it. At that date the fosse, "six or eight feet deep", when he had first seen it in the 1890's had already weathered noticeably. Now it is barely four feet deep. Best also recorded "the signs of several hut sites and food stores." None of these are now apparent, and the crumbly rock of the headland seems to be weathering steadily.

These small refuge pa are common around Wellington, and there are a number down the coast south of Titahi Bay. However, the Ngai Tara-Ngati Ira inhabitants of Porirua built no earthworks pa. Even Whitireia hill itself, an ideal site for fortification, remains untouched. The few fortified sites around Porirua, such as the Taupo pa at Plimmerton and Matai-Tara at Pahatohanui, were built by Ngati-toa in the 1840's and occupied for only a very short time.

Whitireia thus illustrates several characteristics of Wellington sites; first the low proportion of fortified areas to the total population, and the use of most of these as refuges only and not for permanent occupation. Second, the extensive use of small groups of random terraces for occupation, and more rarely for cultivation. The short regular nature of the former, their situation on narrow spurs, and their association with pits and middens, sets them apart from the extended but less regular "open" cultivation terraces.

I feel that there are some lessons in this for the Site Recording Scheme. The category "terraces", as a major site type, begs more questions than it answers, for terraces were used for defence, as undefended habitation sites and for cultivation. This makes it vital that associated features such as pits or middens (or their absence) should be emphasised in recording.

The ultimate solution would be the classification of terraces (and pits) on functional lines. As a half-way house to this I would suggest the creation of a separate site type of terraces with associated pits, or even an entirely new one to cover undefended kainga (which is what many terraced sites really are) as a whole without having to distort the character of such a site by listing it as a pa or under some other unsuitable heading.

- 1. Best, Elsdon. Porirua and they who settled it, in Canterbury Times, March 1914.
- 2. - - Shell-middens of the Porirua district in "N.Z. Journal of Science Technology", V.1, No.4, July 1918.

