PITS AT KAWERUA – MAORI OR GUMDIGGER?

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A cluster of pits (New Zealand Archaeological Association Site number N18/47) on the flat at the foot of Pukenuiorongo Bluffs, behind Kawerua, were recorded by Puch (1975). Excursions on several occasions into the gentle, manuka-covered hillsides all around Kawerua, have shown that much of this area has been dug over. In places the ground is pock-marked with shallow depressions and in other areas there are many distinct pits, of which those already recorded are the deepest and best preserved examples. This note seeks to determine whether all these pits were dug by pre-European Maoris or by gumdiggers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

MAORI PITS

The Maori dug pits most commonly for the lower portions of sunken, roofed buildings used for dwellings or storage (often referred to as “kumara pits”). Such pits show considerable variation, but several features can be used to assist in their recognition:

1. They are generally on topographic highs (e.g. hilltops, ridges, clifftops), as they had to be dry and were therefore dug in well-drained positions.
2. On flat or gently-sloping tops, Maori pits are usually regularly arranged in a row or series of rows. Pits on irregular or steep topography are more often irregularly arranged.
3. The earth dug from their pits was used by the Maori as fill to increase the size of surrounding terraces or was piled up around the pits as rims.
4. The shape of Maori pits is compatible with roofing designs. Roofs were built most commonly over a square or rectangular pit and were of gable or double gable design (i.e. triangular in section, with a ridge pole along the crest and two steeply sloping sides – Phillipps 1952). Occasionally roofs were built over circular pits with supports meeting in a central peak and radiating out on all sides in a conical fashion (Graham 1922). Circular pits found today, may also be depressions left when the roofs of subterranean pits collapsed (Daniels 1970). In some places roundly-domed roofs were built over rectangular or oval pits (Phillipps 1952).
5. Maori pits occur in clusters, generally consisting of a small number of pits. Sites with over thirty pits are rare.

The pits behind Kawerua differ markedly from Maori pits. The Kawerua pits occur in large numbers scattered over low, flat or gently-sloping ground, often poorly drained. They exhibit no regular pattern of arrangement and many of their shapes are irregular (e.g. polygons, “L-shaped” – Puch 1975, fig. 1). The
sandy earth dug from the pits is piled up irregularly in heaps, such as the mound recorded by Puch (1975).

GUMDIGGERS PITS

Early European settlers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dug pits for numerous purposes, including sawpits, waterholes for lubricating log-chutes, bullock watering holes, small mining shafts, artillery pits, wells and rubbish pits. Perhaps the most extensive pit-digging operations in northern New Zealand, however, were those associated with gumdigging. From the 1880s to 1920s kauri gum was of considerable value and thousands of men took to the gumlands of northern New Zealand to dig for this important ingredient of varnish and linoleum.

In the early days, surface gum was collected from the hills and ridges, but as this easily-collected gum became scarce, people turned to digging for subfossil gum that had been buried by the accumulation of forest litter, ash and sand for up to thousands of years. Gumdiggers went around with long spears prodding for this buried gum. The holes they dug can be distinguished only by their lack of distinguishing features. Flat, low-lying areas were often favourite places to dig, as successive layers of gum were often encountered. The pits that were dug were of all shapes, sizes and depths, dependent on the finds, the depth of burial and the whims of the digger. In some swamps, Dalmation diggers dug huge pits and trenches up to 12m deep and faced with timber (Reed 1948; 1964).

As the price of gum increased and its availability decreased, old gumdiggings were reworked and the earth and sand of dryer areas was sieved or in wetter areas put through gum-washing machines, to extract all the fragments of gum (Reed 1948). At times children would search through the earth heaps their fathers had dug out of the pits looking for small pieces of gum that could earn them an “all-day-sucker” from the gum-dealer.

The pits behind Kawerua are characteristic of those dug by gumdiggers. They are numerous, of all shapes, sizes and depths and are especially common on the flatter land. The sandy soil dug from them is generally scattered about in irregular heaps, although in places larger mounds of soil occur (e.g. in the midst of the pit cluster of Puch (1975)). Here a sieve had probably been located and the sand passed through forming a mound. This is supported by the absence of even small gum fragments in the mound.

HISTORICAL CONCLUSION

The Auckland University Field Club Scientific Hut was erected on the Kawerua site in the 1890s and used by the Jarvie family as a hotel and store for gumdiggers (Bollard 1972). The Jarvies bought gum from the diggers and stored it nearby before shipping it out every week.

Cockayne’s (1908) map of Waipoua Forest labelled the area behind Kawerua as “Gumland fern and tea tree”. Also on Cockayne’s map, an area between the
Ohae Stream and Wairau River, close to the sea and in sandy soil like the area below Pukenuiorongo bluffs, is labelled “Waipoua Kauri Gum Reserve”, proving that the area all around Kawerua where the pits occur was rich in kauri gum, and strongly supporting the conclusion that the Kawerua pits were dug by gumdiggers.

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REFERENCES
