

# Te Pokohiwi-o-Kupe:

AOTEAROA'S FIRST SETTLEMENT



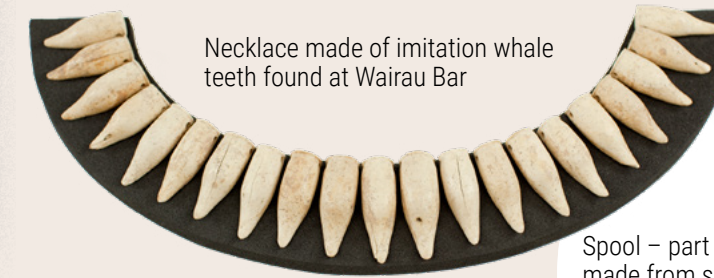
An interview with  
**Dr Peter Meihana**  
(Rangitāne, Ngāti Kuia,  
Ngāti Apa, Ngāi Tahu)

by Isaac Snoswell

Wairau Bar is a windswept gravel **spit** on the north-eastern coast of Te Waka-a-Māui / the South Island. Originally known as Te Pokohiwi-o-Kupe (the shoulder of Kupe), it is a peaceful place, seemingly untouched by people. Yet underneath the sand and gravel lies evidence of a once thriving village. Nearly seven hundred years ago, Te Pokohiwi was the site of the first major settlement in Aotearoa New Zealand's history. Today, it is a wāhi tapu, a sacred place where some of our earliest tūpuna rest. Isaac Snoswell talked to Massey University historian Dr Peter Meihana to find out more.

**spit:** a narrow point of land projecting into the sea

**ISAAC:** What do we know about the first people who settled in Te Pokohiwi?



Necklace made of imitation whale teeth found at Wairau Bar

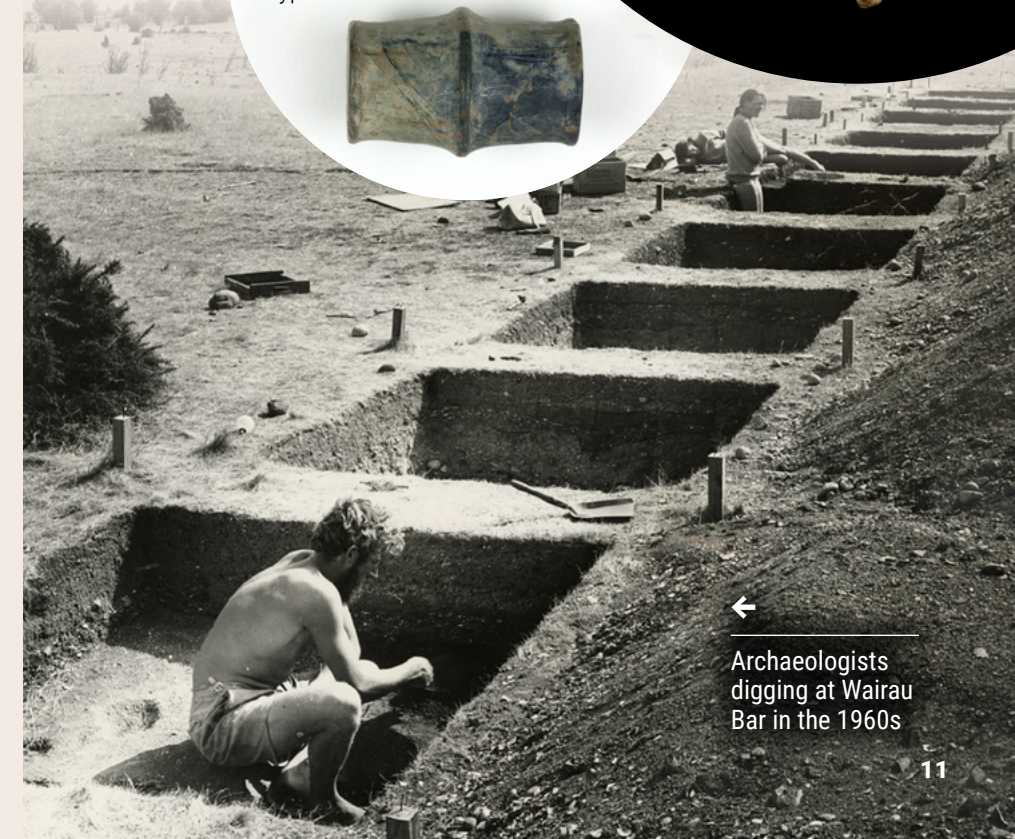
**PETER:** Te Pokohiwi has revealed some exciting facts about our earliest tūpuna. The site includes three major burial groups. Excavations of kōiwi tangata – ancestral remains – have given us insights into who these people were, how they lived, and where they came from.

From studying teeth and bone remains, scientists have found that, as children, some of the people buried at Te Pokohiwi had an East Polynesian diet. This means that they are very likely to have been born outside Aotearoa. In 2010, scientists made another discovery to support this theory. While re-examining artefacts that were first dug up in 1947, they noticed a small chisel. The chisel was made from a type of shell that isn't found in Aotearoa, but is common throughout tropical Polynesia. One of our tūpuna must have carried it all the way from what is now the Cook Islands or the Society Islands.

Spool – part of a necklace made from serpentine, a type of rock



Chisel unearthed at Wairau Bar, made from a shell that is only found in tropical Polynesia



Archaeologists digging at Wairau Bar in the 1960s



Wairau Bar midden



Māori oral traditions talk about the departure and arrival of waka. It was once thought that the ancestors of Māori arrived together in a “great fleet” of between seven and nine waka. Today, it’s generally believed that many more waka came over a longer period, maybe 150 years. Thanks to research done at Te Pokohiwi, we now have a pretty good idea of when these waka arrived.

The Wairau Bar site contains several large middens. These ancient rubbish dumps are filled with discarded animal bones, shells, and broken tools. Scientists have used a technique called **radiocarbon dating** to find out how old some of this “rubbish” is. By dating moa eggs and shells, they’ve found that people settled at Te Pokohiwi around 1280 AD, over seven hundred years ago.

Scientists have also been studying the **DNA** of the kōiwi tangata to learn more about their ancestry. The results show that the people buried at Te Pokohiwi were not closely related. This suggests that they didn’t all come from the same village or island. Instead, they were part of a large and diverse founding population.

**radiocarbon dating:** a method scientists use to estimate the age of biological material (such as wood, shells, or bone) by measuring how much radioactive carbon it contains

**DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid):** the genetic information in a cell that tells the cell what it is (such as skin, hair, bone) and how to grow



Awl (tool for piercing holes) made from the bone of a pouākai



Moa egg found at Wairau Bar, dating back to 1280 AD



Fish hook carved out of moa bone

### ISAAC: Why was Te Pokohiwi chosen as a site for settlement?

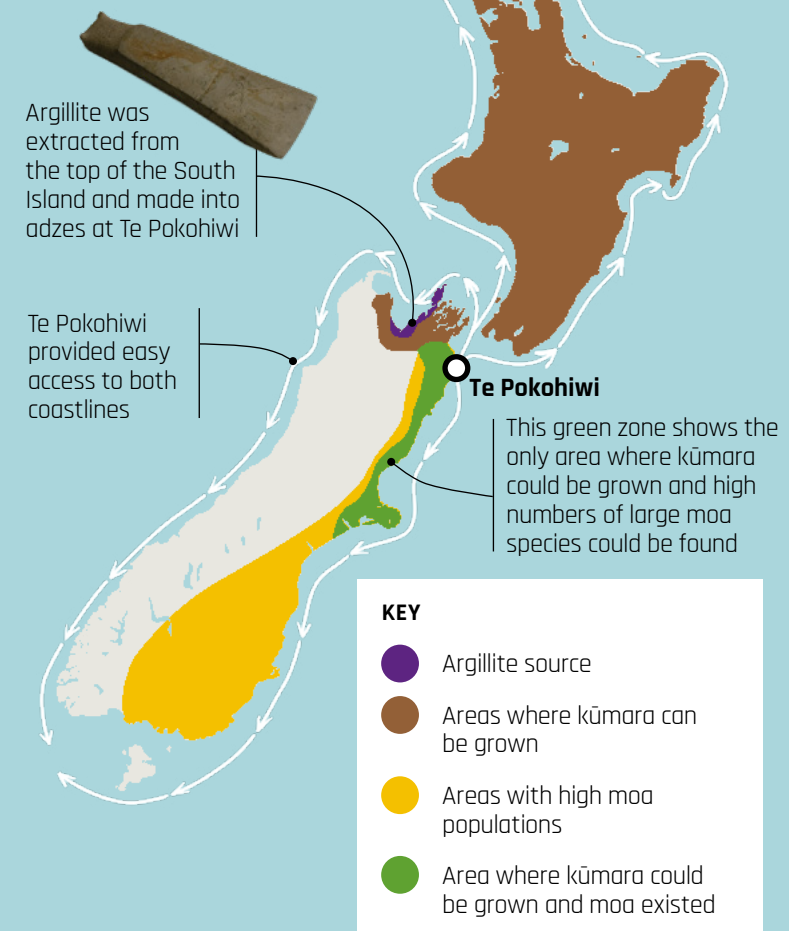
offered plenty of food. Nearby rivers and lagoons were filled with fish and kaimoana, while the climate made it possible for people to grow kūmara. There were also exciting new discoveries: giant moa roamed the forests, pouākai – the world’s biggest eagle – dominated the skies, and a large species of swan called poūwa waddled through swamps and wetlands. It’s hard to imagine what it would’ve been like seeing these fantastical birds for the first time.

Te Pokohiwi was also close to important sources of stone. Known to Māori as pakohe, argillite is a hard stone found only at the top of the South Island. Dozens of argillite adzes – axe-like tools used to chop wood and build waka – have been found at Te Pokohiwi. This shows that Māori discovered and started using argillite almost as soon as they arrived in Aotearoa.

Finally, there were clear advantages to setting up a community between the two main islands. From here, people could access the coastlines of both Te Ika-a-Māui (North Island) and Te Waka-a-Māui (South Island), as well as the new settlements on either side of Raukawakawa Moana (Cook Strait). The sheltered spit acted like a focal point for the rest of the country – a central meeting place for waka from across the motu.

**PETER:** There are a few likely reasons. When our ancestors first arrived in Aotearoa, Te Pokohiwi would have felt instantly familiar. It was sheltered from the wind, provided easy access for waka to come and go, and

### RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO NEW ARRIVALS



## ISAAC: What was life like at Te Pokohiwi?

and tool-making sites. People would've spent a lot of time fishing, hunting, gardening, and exploring the landscape. We know from analysing the middens that the diet of New Zealand's first people was rich and diverse. Moa was an important protein source, and the bones of other extinct bird species have also been found. Marine mammals such as seals, porpoises, and pilot whales were eaten, along with dogs, birds, rats, fish, and shellfish.

**PETER:** Te Pokohiwi was a pā that was unique for its size. It was a busy place. There were houses, large cooking areas, places to gather and socialise,

The excavations at Te Pokohiwi show that our earliest tūpuna also had a rich material culture. As well as adzes, tools such as tattooing chisels, needles, awls, and fishing equipment have all been found. Many of the people buried at Te Pokohiwi were laid to rest with jewellery made from stone, shell, and whale teeth. Like the tools, these artefacts have an East Polynesian style.

Some of the adzes made at Te Pokohiwi have even been dug up in other parts of the country. Similarly, tools made from stone that is only found in the North Island have been uncovered here. This suggests that people came to Te Pokohiwi from all over the country to trade for taonga.



Moa leg bone found at the bottom of a hāngī pit

## ISAAC: How long was the village occupied?

history. The first peoples settled here in the thirteenth century. When the moa died out, around one hundred years later, the number of people living here would have decreased. Later, Ngāti Mamoe, Ngāi Tahu, and Rangitāne occupied Te Pokohiwi. Evidence of the large canal systems they built to manage fish stocks can still be seen in the landscape today.





## PETER:

Te Pokohiwi has been occupied at different times throughout our

Te Pokohiwi was also a highly spiritual place. In 2009, University of Otago researchers found five huge hāngī pits at the site. Hākari (feasting) was a cultural practice that brought communities together. These enormous hāngī pits were probably prepared for a tangihanga (funeral) or a ceremony honouring a chief. And it wasn't only the local people who were buried here. It's believed that some of those buried at Te Pokohiwi were returned here after they died. Te Pokohiwi might have acted like a spiritual homeland for people from across the country. Perhaps some of our tūpuna wanted to be buried in the place where it all began.

## TE POKOHIWI SITE

### KEY

-  Burial sites
-  Stone tool making areas
-  Natural water hole
-  Pits, ovens, and middens



Te Pokohiwi

Blenheim / Waiharakeke

## ISAAC: How is Te Pokohiwi, and its history, being protected today?

**PETER:** Rangitāne have a strong connection to Te Pokohiwi. Our tūpuna settled there, gathered food there, and buried our dead there. But this hasn't always been respected. The first burial was uncovered in 1939. The skull of Burial 1,

who would later be known as Aunty, was eventually returned to the site. But it was then dug up again and taken to the Dominion Museum (now Te Papa Tongarewa). Aunty was buried with a sperm whale tooth necklace and a moa egg, and these too were taken. For a time, they were even put on display in a Blenheim fish and chip shop.

The burials at Te Pokohiwi caught the attention of Roger Duff from the Canterbury Museum. During the 1940s and 1950s, Duff oversaw the removal of kōiwi tangata and taonga from the site. Rangitāne kaumātua Hohua Peter MacDonald tried to prevent the excavations. He complained to the police, confronted the government, appealed to the Native Land Court, and wrote a series of articles in the *Marlborough Express*. He was ultimately unsuccessful, but his community never forgot the ridicule that their kaumātua faced.

From 2008–2009, Rangitāne, led by Richard Bradley and Judith MacDonald, negotiated the return of kōiwi tangata to Te Pokohiwi. As part of the **repatriation**, they agreed for the



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Rangitāne lead the return of kōiwi tangata to Te Pokohiwi in 2009

University of Otago to study the burial sites and the ancestral remains. These research projects have taught us a lot about Te Pokohiwi and the people who lived there. Most importantly, the projects have also been designed with Rangitāne.

Today, Rangitāne own the land where the kōiwi tangata have been returned. They are concerned about the impact of the nearby wastewater plant on Te Pokohiwi and the lagoons. Tribal members regularly visit Te Pokohiwi and often take visitors there. But there is still some unfinished business. The taonga that were taken from Te Pokohiwi are currently held by the Canterbury Museum. Rangitāne hope that, one day, they will be returned to the Wairau.

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**repatriation:** the return of ancestral remains or cultural objects to an individual or community