Matiu/Somes Island Maori history

People have been visiting or living on Matiu for centuries. The island was used as a temporary refuge and, on at least three occasions, as a stop-off point by migrating iwi (tribal groups): Ngai Tara in about the 15th century, Ngati Tama and Ngati Mutunga in 1835 and then Te Atiawa later in the same year.

Matiu discovered and named

Matiu was given that name centuries ago by Kupe, who named the island after his niece. He also named nearby Mokopuna and Makaro (Ward Island), the other main islands of Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington Harbour). Kupe is traditionally known as an explorer who discovered and named many places around Te Moana-a-Raukawa (Cook Strait).

Figure 1. Map of Te Whanganui-a-Tara showing the location of places mentioned. After A. Ballara in D. Hamer and R. Nicholls (editors) 1990. *The Making of Wellington 1800–1914*. Wellington, Victoria University Press.

First settlement on Matiu

According to stories handed down over centuries, Te Whanganui-a-Tara was first settled by Tara and his kin probably in about the 15th century. Tara and his kin came to Wellington from Hawke's Bay. They initially occupied Matiu and explored the harbour and vicinity, before establishing their permanent home on Te Motu-kairangi (Miramar Peninsula). Te Whanganui-a-Tara is named after Tara, as is Te Papa-o-Tara—a rock on the southern end of Matiu.

Iwi associations with Matiu

By the end of the 18th century Whanganui-a-Tara was occupied by Ngati Ira, an East Coast iwi which had married into Ngai Tara. In the early 19th century, Ngati Ira settlement was mostly at Petone and Waiwhetu and along the eastern shoreline of the harbour. At that time, there was no permanent settlement on Matiu, but it was a refuge, a place of temporary resort in times of war. Limited resources on the island made it an unfavourable place for long-term occupation.

From about 1815 tribes in the north of the North Island acquired muskets and their raids triggered movements of people throughout the North Island and the northern South Island. In

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the mid 1820s Te Whanganui-a-Tara was settled by Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama from North Taranaki. They were part of a confederation of tribes under Te Rauparaha that had migrated southwards from Waikato and Taranaki and had gained ascendency in the Te Moana-a-Raukawa area. By the late 1820s, Ngati Ira had been driven from their settlements, and their refuge pa of Tapu te Ranga at Island Bay had fallen to the newcomers.

In 1835 Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama seized the brig *Rodney* and used it to transport themselves to the Chatham Islands. Te Whanganui-a-Tara was left in the hands of another North Taranaki iwi, Te Atiawa. Matiu was again used as a stop-off point, both by the outgoing Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama and by the incoming Te Atiawa.

Evidence of the centuries of occupation

Two fortified villages—Te Moana-a-kura and Haowhenua—were erected on Matiu by Ngati Ira under the leadership of Te Rongo-tu-mamao in the 18th century. Te Moana-a-kura is located at the northern end of the island and is well protected by steep cliffs. The main features visible today are terraces, one of which contains the grave of 2 year-old Mary Rudman (died 1872). The Maximum Security Quarantine Station probably now occupies the site of Haowhenua Pa. A remnant of midden (a deposit of food and cooking waste) is located near the hospital building. A recent analysis of a sample of midden demonstrated the presence of a range of shellfish, fish and birds, along with dog and tuatara. Some of the shellfish had been brought to the island from the mainland.

Figure 2. Te Moana-a-kura. The pa occupied the northern end of the island from inside the loop in the road to the cliff-edge. The site was chosen primarily for its strong natural defences. (Photographer: Kevin Jones, Department of Conservation.)