

CHAPTER 8

WAHI TAPU

8.1 TE PUKE A RIA

In 1923 the Crown took a three-acre 'gravel reserve' or pumice pit under the Public Works Act.¹ At the 20 September 1964 meeting of owners, Lang Grace had pointed out that there were two Maori graves in the gravel reserve, and asked that, when it came to removing the hill, the remains be shifted to the cemetery. Dick Lynch assured the owners that 'everything will be treated with the utmost respect and nothing will be done to offend Maori people' (A7:89).

The hill in the gravel reserve was known locally as Te Puke a Ria and was a wahi tapu. Arthur Grace explained its significance in his submission to the Tribunal:

It was a prominent hill, because although not very high, the surrounding land was fairly flat. Te Puke-a-Ria was an old urupa from a long time ago. It was named after one of our old kuia whose name was Ria. Ria, like many women of those days, was frequently parted from her husband, because of the seasonal activities that men and women would engage in separately. One year, Ria's husband died while staying at Motiti, which is a landmark in the foothills of the Kaimanawa Ranges. It was not possible for his body to be returned to Turangi, so he was buried at Motiti. In the years following, Ria would climb to the top of the puke at Turangi, and call out and sing to her husband lying at Motiti . . .

Ria was buried on the summit of the hill where she had called and sang and it was named for her. Like all our sacred places Te Puke-a-Ria was a place which we cared for and respected. Although we were farming the land, our kaumatua would remind us to be careful to respect this place, making sure that nothing disturbed our Ria.

When the Ministry came in, the old people said 'That's a tapu hill. We have dead there.' During the negotiations, the Ministry had said that they would protect our tapu places and the places associated with our dead. But then later on they realised that the Ministry of Works needed the land where the hill was, and that in their plans the land was flat. The Ministry had decided that this area would form part of the Industrial Block in the new town, so that hill had to go. (A21(1):39)

The local people were very unhappy about the proposal to bulldoze Te Puke a Ria and asked to remove any bones found there. According to Arthur Grace, 'The Ministry sent their bulldozers in, but didn't recover any bones. They said they didn't see anything' (A21(1):40). The local people believed that, because of tight work

schedules, they had not looked properly and just proceeded with bulldozing the hill and levelling the site. Mr Grace commented:

My mother was very upset about this incident. A famous chapter in our history had been wiped out with no trace. She told us that one of the engineers, Jim McLaren, had said to her, ‘Oh there were all sorts of bones, how were we to know which ones were human?’ They could have asked us . . .

The old people had wanted to re-enter the bones after they were found. But now the bones were lost forever. They had been crushed and scattered over the whole area by the heavy machinery. This was a desecration of a very sacred place. The Ministry of Works had simply destroyed our wahi tapu. (A21(1):40–41)

Ranginui Biddle of Ngati Hine, a Tuwharetoa hapu whose marae is at Korohe, described the work of preparing the industrial area in his submission to the Tribunal. He was employed by a contractor who specialised in earth moving with heavy machinery:

1. *New Zealand Gazette*, 1923, p 875