

## An examination of photographic records pertaining to the architecture of Rua Kēnana and the community of Maungapōhatu, 1911-16

Peter Wood

**ABSTRACT:** New Zealand's architectural history, while in no way a culturally comprehensive documentary, has found a special place for Kēnana's isolated Te Urewera community. Credit for this can be attached to Hiona, the remarkable circular temple Kēnana constructed that has, in no small way, become an icon of Māori architecture. However, it is not well appreciated that, by the time of Kēnana's detention, the ritual functioning of Hiona had been largely abandoned. Indeed, the community of Maungapōhatu needs to be understood as having an architecture of two phases. Hiona was constructed in 1907 during a period of optimism for Kēnana and his followers. However, by 1911, Maungapōhatu was in significant decline and in 1914 Kēnana began to systematically reconstruct the architecture of his community. Hiona was abandoned and a more conformist meeting house, Tānenui-a-rangi, was built. At the same time Kēnana reclassified the physical boundaries of the village, clearing areas of dwellings and establishing new spatial hierarchies concerning tapu (sacred) and noa (common) values. In this paper I will be examining in detail the extraordinary photographs available of Maungapōhatu from this timeframe to extract characteristics of the architecture. While some attention will be given to Hiona and the establishment of the village, the emphasis of the research is placed on the second reconstruction period with attention being given to the discernible architectural significance of the changes. In particular this will address Hiruharama Hou, Kēnana's twin gable house which remained a constant above the village and whose architectural role has not yet been sufficiently explored.

On the 9th September this year several hundred members of Tūhoe met in the remote Te Urewera village of Maungapōhatu to formally agree to the pardon of Rua Kēnana, the Māori prophet who was violently, and illegally, arrested there on sedition charges in 1916. The circumstances and significance of Kēnana's arrest, and the subsequent decline of Maungapōhatu, have been largely overlooked by mainstream New Zealand history.<sup>1</sup>

New Zealand's architectural history however,

---

<sup>1</sup> While we might hope that the judicial and racial travesty of these events can be isolated to problems of history more contemporary events in Ruatoki provide proof, as if it were required, that as a nation we are yet to so easily throw away our colonial uniforms. See Rae "The War on Terror in Ruatoki."

while in no way a culturally comprehensive documentary, has found a special place for Rua Kēnana's isolated Te Urewera community. Credit for this can be attached to Hiona, the remarkable circular courthouse Rua constructed that has, in no small way, become an icon of Māori architecture. That said it is not well appreciated that by the time of Kēnana's detention the ritual functioning of Hiona had been largely abandoned. Indeed, the community of Maungapōhatu needs to be understood as having an architecture of two phases. Hiona was constructed in 1907 during a period of optimism for Kēnana and his followers. But, by 1911, Maungapōhatu was in significant decline, and in 1914 Kēnana began to systematically reconstruct the architecture of his community. Hiona was abandoned and

a more conformist meeting house, Tānenui-a-rangi, was built. At the same time Kēnana reclassified the physical boundaries of the village, clearing areas of dwellings and establishing new spatial hierarchies concerning tapu (sacred) and noa (common) values. In this paper I will be examining photographs available of Maungapōhatu from this timeframe to extract characteristics of its architecture. While some attention will be given to Hiona and the establishment of the village, the emphasis of the research is placed on the second reconstruction period with attention being given to the discernible architectural significance of the changes.

This research relies upon historic photographs of Maungapōhatu, so, before beginning

properly, it is necessary to provide a short background to explain how it is that a village distinguished by its geographic seclusion should have been so well documented in this way. The short answer here is that photography, as an instrument of newspaper reportage, was drawn to the infamy of Rua Kēnana despite the difficulty of the terrain. The origin for his notoriety is located in racial and religious politics of the late nineteenth century, and especially the shadow of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki, whose militant activities in the 1860s were still fresh enough so that Pākehā New Zealand at the turn of the century still lived with some anxiety of a Māori uprising. The complexities of this period, including Rua Kēnana's claim to be the spiritual "son" Te Kooti had prophesied, cannot be summarised here without excessively simplifying the complex social and cultural tensions of the day.<sup>2</sup> However, it would fair to say that despite the remoteness of Maungapōhatu, the rest of the country was never isolated from the popular presence of Rua Kēnana as an emblematic figure for religious heterodoxy and corresponding political dissent by Māori. The principle

---

<sup>2</sup> For a full account of both Te Kooti and Rua Kēnana see Binney *Mihaia* & Binney *Redemption Songs*.

carriers of this message were the newspapers of the day, and especially those in Gisborne and Auckland, for whom the memory of Te Kooti lent Maungapōhatu the spectre of insurgency. The *Poverty Bay Herald* is described as being especially antagonistic toward Kēnana activities, but the other important newspaper covering the events at Maungapōhatu, the *Auckland Herald*, had a more engaged albeit conflicted coverage.<sup>3</sup>

In 1908, and again in 1916, they sent a reporter to the village to make direct observations. The first of these was at the invitation of Rua and produced a culturally-biased, but remarkably tolerant, view. The second visit carried a far more malicious motive in that the reporter was a part of the armed police detachment sent to arrest Rua in 1916. For the purposes of this research, it is pertinent that both these excursions included a photographer specifically to visually record the significance of Maungapōhatu. On the first occasion it was George Bourne (1875-1924) and the second Arthur Ninnis Breckon (1887-1965). It is from the images available from these two photojournalists that this paper is drawn. Although it might also be said that their

---

<sup>3</sup> Derby *The Prophet* pp 40-41.

images also represent the extent of conventional architectural knowledge we have gleaned from Maungapōhatu.

Invariably, architectural attention has focused on Hiona (Zion), the extraordinary tiered, circular and symbolically-ornamented council house dedicated to the governorship of Rua's community. It is easy to see why it has enraptured researchers so. Against the familiar background of gabled whare forms Hiona appears with an entirely exotic and alien architectural presence.<sup>4</sup> Derivation mythologies that link it to biblical precedents serve to heighten architectural and theological signification, and it is telling that upon Rua's arrest, in 1916 - on charges of sedition - armed police were photographed in front Hiona, as though proof were required that the threat contained in this architecture - the centre of his persuasion - had been neutralised.

While the focus on Hiona is deserved, it has inadvertently obscured the fact that it was one building in a highly-stratified and spatially-complex compound of structures. Maungapōhatu was divided into two distinct

---

<sup>4</sup> Bourne "'Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house at Maungapohatu"

precincts, one inside the other. The outer realm contained the prosaic functions of the community; ordinary domestic dwellings and cooking houses. The inner *pa tapu* was separated by a fence with two gates, entry through which required all over the age of 12 to change their clothes and purify with water. The sacred realm contained, according to Rosenfeld, Hiona, the House of the Covenant (containing an English Bible), a bank, and Hiruharama Hou - "New Jerusalem" - the house shared by Rua and his wives placed on high ground and where private liturgical services were conducted.<sup>5</sup>

For colonial Pākehā – and the photographer was no exception - the spatial and ritualistic complexity of this village would have remained mostly invisible, and it is understandable that architectural attention has been placed on "Rua's Temple" as the most obviously divergent and threatening element.

Rua is mentioned in the *Poverty Bay Herald*, in 1907, as nearing completion of "his great temple" in which he planned to accommodate a council of 80 members for the lower chamber, and another 12 for the upper, over

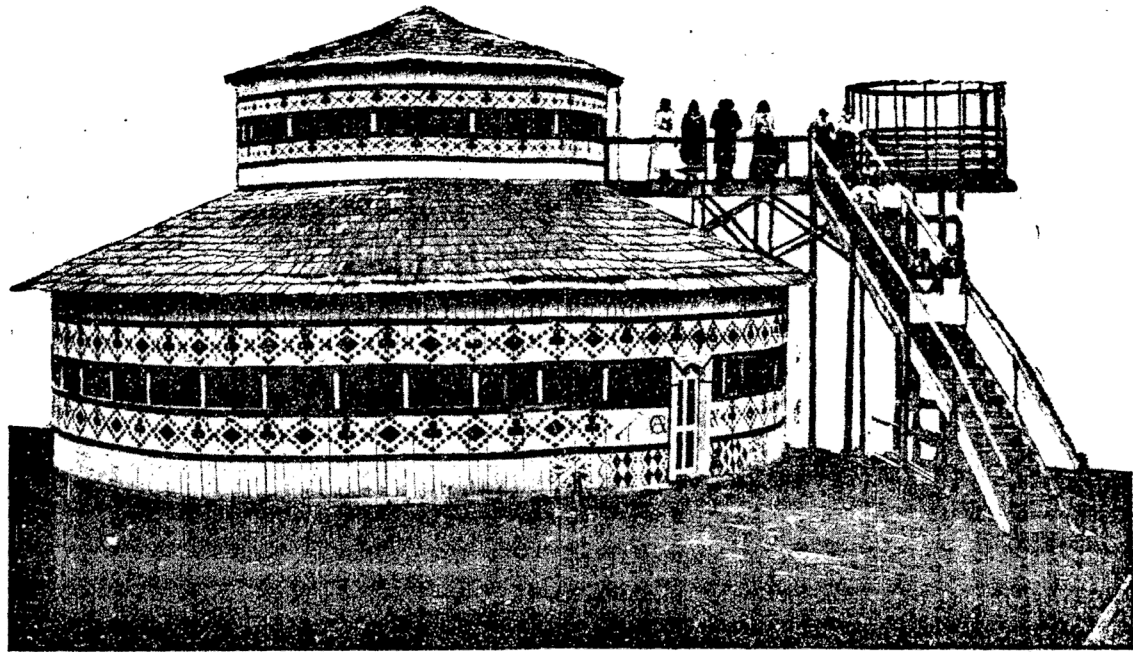


Figure 1: "Rua's Temple at the model settlement of Maungapohatu" *New Zealand Herald* (22 April 1908) p 9.

which he would occupy a throne as king. It ended on a predictably antagonistic flourish by emphasising the number of deaths (46), including children, due to the "absurd religious observances imposed by Rua on the people."<sup>6</sup>

However, the following year, *The Waikato Argus* reported that Dr James Mackintosh Bell, Director of Geological Surveys, had passed

through Wharekōpea (Maungapōhātu) where he had been cordially received by Rua, and found the settlement "wonderful" with the feature being a three-storey temple built in "the Egyptian style."<sup>7</sup>

In another account from Bell, in the *New Zealand Times*, he offered a fuller description of Maungapōhātu where he describes his amazement at the size and distinctness of a

<sup>5</sup> Rosenfeld *The Island Broken* pp 287-288.

<sup>6</sup> "Rua's Doings" p 3.

<sup>7</sup> "At Rua's Pah" p 2.

settlement in which cleanliness is strictly enforced. Perhaps it has something to do with a detached scientific eye, but Bell also provides us with some specific observations on the architecture of Maungapōhatu that is often lacking. While he iterates his enthusiasm for the circular temple, he also mentions the small tower access via an elevated gangway, from which speeches are made "in fine weather."<sup>8</sup> The temple itself is described as being gorgeously painted with a yellow, blue and white mosaic design that is "supposed to have some symbolic meaning."<sup>9</sup>

It is hard to say if anyone who read these reports would have been surprised, or not, with the object they found in Bourne's photograph of Hiona.<sup>10</sup> With the title "Rua's Temple at the Model Settlement of Maungapōhatu," Hiona is striking for its rejection of what we might think of then, and now, as a typical Māori architectural form.<sup>11</sup> And yet, while the distinctive shape, tower and patterning (if not colour) of Hiona are all evident, the grainy image of the temple (which is foreshortened optically and has had

its background removed for publication) appears a flat and modest achievement. Indeed, were it not for the political context (and stairs) it might easily be mistaken for a child's toy. The caption to the image - there was no accompanying article at this point - describes it thus:

This striking looking building was designed by the prophet himself, and the decorations, which consist of a line of aces of clubs and diamonds painted on the side of the structure, are said to possess some significance known only to Rua and his followers.<sup>12</sup>

But, in actual practice, if Rua's personal influence was seen to emanate from one spot it was his own dwelling of Hiruharama Hou rather than the community-minded Hiona. Located above the rest of Maungapōhatu, this building remained sacred even after Rua removed tapu from the rest of the site and began living further into the village.<sup>13</sup>

In architectural terms Rua's house, Hiruharama Hou is, on first impressions, far less impressive than Hiona. Formally it is composed of two gable-ended volumes in parallel with a linking verandah across the front, much in the model of a common late

colonial dwelling.<sup>14</sup> Its most obvious architectural important is given as its imitation of David's pattern for the temple built by Solomon, and described in 1 Kings 6.<sup>15</sup>

Rosenfeld has questioned the accuracy of this particular influence in her observation that columns are absent in the biblical description of Solomon's temple while they feature in Hiruharama Hou. Instead Rosenfeld finds a far more credible inspiration in Solomon's palace complex in which pillars feature. She writes:

In building a house with a verandah and pillars for himself and his wives, Rua identified his reign with that of Israel's wisest king, a polygamist like himself. Rua's *tapu* wife, Pinepine, live in a separate house, as did Solomon's Egyptian wife. Naming *Hiruharama Hou* for the "New Jerusalem" of Revelation indicated that Rua expected his millennial kingdom to resemble Solomon's reign of peace, justice, and abundance.<sup>16</sup>

The architectural significance here lies in the application of the columns in a form we recognise as the verandah. Extending across

---

<sup>8</sup> "Rua's Palace" p 6.

<sup>9</sup> "Rua's Palace" p 6.

<sup>10</sup> "Rua's Temple" p 3.

<sup>11</sup> "Rua's Temple" p 3.

---

<sup>12</sup> "Rua's Temple" p 3.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenfeld *The Island Broken* p 287.

---

<sup>14</sup> Bourne "Hiruharama Hou, Maungapōhatu" 1915 [sic]

<sup>15</sup> See Cowan "Rua the Prophet"; Binney, et. al., *Mihaia* p 78.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenfeld *The Island Broken* p 288.

the double gable frontage, it is supported by a modulation of paired structural posts that support the verandah roof, and three larger pillars that serve both structural and symbolic purposes.<sup>17</sup> Photographs taken by George Bourne in 1908, for the *Auckland Weekly News*, show this clearly. In another view of Hiruarama Hou taken at the same time it is seen as viewed from Hiona.

In a wider panorama, also recorded by George Bourne in 1908, is visible a second verandah attached to what we would normally consider the rear of the dwelling.<sup>18</sup> Here the apparent pillars suggest that this verandah was treated just as seriously as that one addressing the road. Key differences between these photographs suggest that the date of 1908 for both may not be reliable. For example, in the first the windows appear to be boarded up - perhaps awaiting glazing? - and the roof appears unfinished with two planks disrupting the surface. In the second image the windows are open and the roof is a continuous material. The first image contains more small dwellings and while this may

---

<sup>17</sup> See Binney, et. al., *Mihaia*.

<sup>18</sup> Bourne "Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house alongside the village at Maungapohatu."

suggest a later date it needs to be balanced against the rawness of the road and surrounding lack of growth in the immediate landscape. In the second the road is softer and there are early signs of some regeneration in of the surroundings and suggests that the second of these two versions of Hiruharama Hou is the older, probably being taken during Bourne's 1915 to Maunapohatu.

In a photograph taken c1912-13 shows that the building element of Hiruharama Hou has received a dark stain while the verandah has been lightened to create a dramatic contrast between the two. What is also apparent is that the verandah returns along the length of the roof line overlooking Hiona. This is clearer again in a photograph of April 1916.

A central doorway on the longitudinal façade is discernible. While return verandahs are a common feature on Victorian villas nothing here suggests bourgeois affectation. Moreover, there is present a duality of orientation that would be considered a conflict in a Pākehā dwelling that insists on one façade. With Hiruharama Hou a dialectical reading of front and back is not possible. The verandah off the double gable orients the Rua's house itself toward an open

space that is further defined by a number of key buildings that surround it. In this sense it has something in common with a marae. However, the longitudinal verandah offers a formal alignment, and therefore spatial arrangement, with Hiona. It is also evident that the symbolism found on the gable verandah continues in some expression. Hiruharama Hou is, then, a house with two faces. The paradox this presents is visible in a remarkable image recorded by AN Breckon, the photographer who accompanied the armed constabulary sent to arrest Rua.<sup>19</sup>

Breckon positioned himself outside the porch of Maungapōhatu's traditional meeting house in such a way that he was able to completely obscure Hiona. The foreground is framed on the left by a pole, and to the right by the carved amo and raparapa (fingers) of the maihi (gable bargeboard). At the same time the background horizon is dominated by the profile of Maungapōhatu mountain. Between these two scales we find the picket fence that demarcates the pa tapu, then a line of armed police advancing on the topographically and architecturally dominant figure of

---

<sup>19</sup> Breckon "Members of the armed constabulary advancing close to Hiruharama, Rua Kēnana's house, Maungapōhatu" 1916.

Hiruharama Hou. Whether it was actually taken during the assault is dubious, but it serves to able demonstrate how the house "looked" in two directions simultaneously.

While it does not photograph well, descriptions of Maungapōhatu make a point of mentioning the "main street," that organises a linear shape to the village, and the spatial distinctions between tapu (sacred) and noa (profane) which gave Maungapōhatu a centralised hierarchy of inner and outer realms. Visually the former is immediately self-evident while the latter is established by a low fence that separated Rua's quarters (Hiruharama Hou), and Hiona (the courthouse), from the sleeping and, especially, cooking quarters. But in Bourne and Breckon's photographs it is hard to distinguish the pattern of the settlement from that of the land it follows. Which is to ask of Maungapōhatu, to what extent was it a planned or incremental development? Some answers can be found in Peter Webster's reconstruction of the village's plan.<sup>20</sup>

Webster first produced a map of

---

<sup>20</sup> Webster "Maungapōhatu and the Māori Millennium" p 201.

Maungapōhatu's physical organisation as a part of his ethnographic doctoral dissertation on Rua Kēnana, in 1972.<sup>21</sup> He does not go into any specific detail as to how it was generated but details on the map itself state that it was compiled from a field survey in 1966, aerial photographs from 1949, and historical photographs from 1908 and 1916. Of the first two sources I can find no corroborating evidence, but we can be certain that the historical photographs consulted are the same as those discussed here.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, this illustration presents with an authority that is not altogether reliable. For the book he latterly derived from his doctoral research, Webster reproduces the same layout plan but in a modified form without further information concerning its derivation.<sup>23</sup> However, despite misgivings, I would use this second version to offer provisional reading of

---

<sup>21</sup> Webster "Maungapōhatu and the Māori Millennium" p 201.

<sup>22</sup> In small detail on the lower right hand corner the map acknowledges "Elizabeth Smith Cartography 1 VUW 1971." I have not being able to find additional information on this citation. Webster "Maungapōhatu and the Māori Millennium" p 201.

<sup>23</sup> Webster *Rua and the Māori Millennium* p 201.

Maungapōhatu's organization.<sup>24</sup>

Superficially the plan shows the village much as it appears in the photographs. A central corridor travels on a northeast/southwest axis up the ridgeline between two narrow gullies. At its top Hiruharama Hou is apparent as the largest structure in village, and at the other end Hiona's circular form is obvious. Directly northward of Hiona, but outside the pa tapu, is the meeting house Tāne nui ā Rangī. The broad pattern of Maungapōhatu would seem to be a linear hierarchy with Rua's personal quarters surveying the village below.

---

<sup>24</sup> The key differences between Webster's two versions concern detail of information, and the accuracy of interpretation. Generally, the book illustration contains more graphic material that increases the number and location of secondary dwellings, and provides a fuller speculative account of the boundary of the pa tapu compound. Demonstrable differences include correcting the date of the meeting house construction (from 1916 back to 1914) and particularly the relocation of the "council house and bank" from a prominent position just north of Hiruharama Hou to a position further northward and to a more obscure position amongst a collection of huts. Given the significance of the bank to the financial success of Rua's vision for Maungapōhatu this uncertainty is of consequence. If we are to take Webster's second version as his more informed and accurate example this poses a question concerning the actual purpose of the substantial hut that was the original location choice.

However, such an obvious reading is challenged by the architecture of Hiruharama Hou, which consists of a large verandah fronted, double gable bungalow whose orientation is ostensibly to the street and not the prospect.

The significance of this point can be found in one of Bourne's 1908 photographs which shows members of the Maungapōhatu community posing around a flagpole that occupies the clear space in front of Hiruharama Hou.<sup>25</sup> The impact is to reposition the importance of the house from a dominant position above the village to a far more intimate foreground context of ceremony.<sup>26</sup> If this is being conceived of as a traditional ātea, it is not an association made mention of in any literature I have read, but the formality of the situation suggests at least some civic responsibility. The flags are one instance of this but the formality of Hiruharama Hou's frontage is even more compelling.

However, it should be noted from Webster's plan that while Hiruharama Hou turns away

from the village vista it simultaneously aligns to the route to Gisborne. Then, and even less so now, it was a barely manageable track that those joining Rua's settlement in the early days undertook an arduous three-day journey on foot. Later it would be used as a track for moving stock, but it is clear that Rua saw it as becoming the major road between Maungapōhatu and Gisborne. With this in mind it is necessary revisit an observation by James Bell, that, when approached from this direction, Maungapōhatu could be seen at a distance of four miles. This, I suggest, fundamentally changes how we should interpret Webster's plan. Instead of one linear village following the ridge downhill, I suggest that it was actually composed of two separate entities linked not by the convenience of local topography but by a wider dimension that included socio-cultural boundaries (tapu/noa) and an ambitious vision for expansion.

In my view Hiruharama Hou is principally conceived of as a beacon for Rua's power and success - his mana - that would greet those travelling to (rather than through) Maungapōhatu from Gisborne.<sup>27</sup> Speculating

on the evidence available, arrivals would be brought toward the spectacle of Hiruharama Hou and its flagpole, eventually moving through the outer huts and cook houses but when actually reaching the settlement they would be sharply directed down the outer pa tapu fence, thus indicating that the entrance was always to be at the lower, northern end of the village.

This suggests a hierarchy whereby visitors would be required to move up the main track. However, I feel that this might have been more a compromise than an intention. It seems to me that upper reaches of Maungapōhatu were designed to present a credible scene of urban respectability very much in a Pākehā model although passed through a Māori filter.

There is no question that the pa tapu operated with integrity, but this is not to conclude that it was the only spatial order in place, nor that it was primary delineator. Indeed, as a ritualistically organised enclosure the pa tapu, unlike the physical features, had the ability to change its spatial dimensions. With this in

---

<sup>25</sup> Bourne "Rua and followers. Maungapōhatu"

<sup>26</sup> Bourne, George "The flag pole at Maungapōhatu flying four large flags"

---

<sup>27</sup> It may also be significant that in 1899 surveyors had stayed at Maungapōhatu while investigating the

---

possible of a rail route from Gisborne through the area. Derby *The Prophet and the Policemen* p 43.

mind I would turn my discussion back to Rua's parliament house, Hiona.

I have observed how Hiona was presented to visitors, and has been presented by visitors, as an exotic artefact that is at once both deeply Māori in its Maungapōhatu context, but also alien to other Māori architecture. This, I feel, is an argument we quite like as it lends to Maungapōhatu's architectural evidence for both its architectural and theological uniqueness. And it may well be that this was what Rua Kēnana had in mind. However, this should not distract from asking questions concerning the architectural significance of Hiona.

The accepted account for the design of Hiona is provided by Judith Binney. She describes it as "the tabernacle Te Kooti was unable to construct" and provides a biblical derivation as follows:

It was a deliberate recreation by [Rua Kēnana] of the Temple of Solomon, and was almost certainly inspired by a coloured lithograph of the great mosque in Jerusalem, the Dome of the Rock. This building was often depicted in nineteenth-century illustrated family Bibles, and was sometimes labelled as "Solomon's Temple." Its open floor is said to be the rock threshing floor on which the original Temple had been built, the "Holy of Holies." The gold and blue mosaics on the

exterior of the mosque form a distinct diamond pattern. The building of Hiona was the statement that Maungapōhatu was the Holy City of Jerusalem at the time of the Kings.<sup>28</sup>

Deidre Brown edits Binney's explanation in her 2009 monograph on Māori architecture by stating that Hiona was "most probably" inspired in "proportion, arrangement and colour" by descriptions of Solomon's temple,<sup>29</sup> while in his 2004 essay Bill McKay simplifies it by directly stating its inspiration in the Dome of the Rock.<sup>30</sup>

In my view this is an excellent example of the inherent risks of limiting architectural influence to a single authorised narrative. It lends to the building a biblical association that reinforces an external appraisal of Rua's prophecy narrative. That is, Hiona is promoted as evidence that Rua did indeed believe in a profound and direct lineage to a time and place found in Holy Scripture.

However, I am not about to dismiss this proposition outright as, firstly, Binney is too good a scholar to be treated this way, but

---

<sup>28</sup> Binney *Stories Without End* pp 143-144.

<sup>29</sup> Brown *Māori Architecture* p 70.

<sup>30</sup> McKay "Māori Architecture" p 1.

secondly, because there is a compelling familiarity between the forms of the two buildings. Broadly they share a centralised shape featuring a stepped tower. Moreover, it is easy enough to find nineteenth-century etchings of the Dome of the Rock that show the ancillary Dome of the Chain prayer house whose diminutive relationship to its neighbour bears comparison that of Hiona to its circular viewing platform. A similar case could be made for comparing the ornamental features of each. But an argument can be made that challenges the singularity of this origin assertion on at least two aspects, one to do with erudition, and the other construction.

Of the former, Binney would ask us to accept, firstly, that Rua owned and used an illustrated bible, and secondly, that he would so easily have mistaken a picture of Dome of the Rock for Solomon's Temple when the latter is one of the few buildings that is described in detail in the Bible. On this matter Binney is asking that we afford to Rua a degree of literary and graphic ignorance in order to appreciate that Hiona has a biblical origin.

On the issue of construction, I would begin by stating the obvious: Hiona does not look like the Dome of the Rock, either. While I have



conceded that a broad formal comparison might be made between Hiona and some historical images of the Dome of the Rock I would also suggest that there are also many profound differences in this comparison, most particularly that Hiona does not have a dome. A counter argument here would be that Rua lacked the necessary material, means and knowledge necessary to construct a dome and reverted instead to a proxy in the form of a shallow cone, but this too would locate Rua pejoratively as less able or architecturally knowledgeable, and thus Hiona would also be positioned as an object of derivative decline.

However, the other great difference in the two projects suggests the opposite. The Dome of the Rock, in all images, is visibly octagonal. Hiona, to state the equally obvious, is circular. My observation here being that in timber a hexagon is a far easier architectural volume to construct than a circular one. In the explanation provided by Derby, Hiona's circular walls were made possible by immersing split timber in the nearby river until it had softened sufficiently that it could be bent around posts to hardened in place<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Derby *The Prophet and the Policemen* p 60. This unique description of Hiona's construction is given by Mark Derby but is not sufficiently referenced to test its

which affords to Hiona's construction both skill and resourcefulness.

So, we have a problem. In order to visually compare the architecture of Hiona to the Dome of the Rock we need to make some allowance for crude tools, techniques and materials to explain the differences. And yet the circular construction of Hiona provides compelling evidence not only of skill and determination but also a purposeful design decision to construct a circular and not a hexagonal plan. For Binney, and others, there is such a persuasive logic to Hiona's origin in the bible that we have not look any further. To be clear on this point, I am not denying any suggestion that Hiona, nor any other part of Rua's building works at Maungapohatu, is without biblical reference. What I would like to suggest is that the bible was, in all likelihood, not the only source of influence, and that there is one obvious reference locally worth considering.

---

veracity. The principle of soaking split timber is highly plausible (sawing timber reveals weakness in the grain of a log that splitting will avoid). However, the process of wrapping the softened planks around set posts does not, in itself, account for how the timber would have been fastened. However, it does suggest that the wall posts were set directly into the earth following traditional practices.

Today Rongomaiwhine is a remarkable meeting house in Waipapa a Iwi marae in Mōhaka, south of Wairoa. The origins of it, according to the *Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, are unclear, but due to a published image on its official opening, in 1902, we can be certain that it predated Hiona. The significance of this fact lies not only in the distinctive centralised form of Rongomaiwahine, but also in certain narrative associations.<sup>32</sup>

Formally Rongomaiwahine is not a properly circular plan but a series of wide facets that combine to create a sense of a circular building. This plan is in turn crowned with a steeply pitched conical roof capped with a ventilation stock. Subsequent renovations to Rongomaiwahine have not only removed the stock, and replaced the shingle roof with timber, they have also eliminated a small skylight window that is prominent on the photograph of 1902.

It is beyond my expertise and knowledge to say with certainty, but a direct comparison between Rongomaiwahine and Hiona is an irresistible one. It seems to me to be a

---

<sup>32</sup> "Maori group outside the round meeting house at Mohaka."

coincidence of profound proportions that two roundhouse buildings serving Māori Christian religions could be constructed in broadly the same region, and within five years, but completely independently.

I would allude strongly to Rongomaiwahine being understood as an architectural inspiration for Hiona. Proving this is probably not possible, and maybe not even be important, but I do have one small item of circumstantial evidence. This relates to the skylight on Rongomaiwahine. In the expanse of the large roof this small aperture could not have anticipated lighting the interior. While there are windows apparent in the exterior walls the interior would in likelihood have been relatively dim, in which case a small opening high in the sloping ceiling would have visually resonated as a bright break in the moody space. The metaphorical impact of this could have something to do with associations to Rongomai-wahine, the eponymous ancestral figure for the house. Tiaki Hikawera Mitira, who first published the 1902 photograph in his 1944 publication *Takitimu*,<sup>33</sup> provides a full history of Rongomai-wahine's importance. The element

I would extract here is that rongomai is the Māori term for a comet or meteor that is seen in the full light of day. I might then ask if the purpose of Rongomaiwahine's small skylight was exactly to stab a bright hole in an otherwise dark interior?

Whatever the particular case here I would also point out the significant symbolic role comets play for Māori prophet movements from Te Whiti o Rongomai through Te Kooti and Rua Kēnana. A photograph of Rua standing at the entrance to the pa tapu shows two examples, perhaps to be viewed independently upon entering and leaving.

This brings me back to the image of Hiona, which I think has too conveniently been made emblematic for all of Maungapōhatu. But at the same time have we ever stopped to look genuinely at this photograph? If we had it might have been observed that there are glazed skylights mounted on the upper most roof. They are modest, to be sure, and like the bent plates of the circular walls they indicate intention that supersedes accident or convenience. As at Rongomaiwahine the intention would seem to be to illuminate a dark interior, and we might ascribe cosmological significance to the symbolic

light. But could it also be that they are first and foremost windows, less concerned with letting in the day in than the offering views into a celestial nightscape?

This is a small point in a large story to end on, but it is the sort of distinction architectural historians need to be able to make if we are to hope that we might understand the architecture of Rua Kēnana.

---

<sup>33</sup> Mitira *Takitimu*

## REFERENCES

- "At Rua's Pah" *Waikato Argus* (4 March 1908):2.
- Binney, J., et al. *Mihaia: The Prophet Rua Kēnana and His Community at Maungapōhatu* Auckland: Bridget Williams Books, 1979.
- Binney, J "Maungapōhatu revisited: Or, how the Government underdeveloped a Māori Community" *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* (1983) 92(3):353-392.
- Binney, J. *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arirangi Te Turuki*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995.
- Binney, J. *Stories Without End: Essays 1975-2010*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2010.
- Brown, D. *Māori Architecture: from fale to wharenuī and beyond*. Auckland: Raupo. 2009.
- Cowan, James "Rua the Prophet" *Wide World Magazine* (1916) 38:229-37.
- Derby, Mark *The Prophet and the Policemen: The Story of Rua Kenana and John Cullen* Wellington: Craig Cotton Publishing, 2009.
- Hansen, F. Allen "Christian Branches, Māori Roots: The Cult of Rua" *History of Religions* 30 November 1990:154-178.
- McKay, B. "Māori Architecture: Transforming Western Notions of Architecture." *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* (2004) 14(1&2):1-12.
- Mitira, Tiaki Hikawera (J H Mitchell) *Takitimu* Wellington: Reed Publishing, 1972. <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-MitTaki.html>
- Rae, Murray A. "The War on Terror in Ruatoki" *International Journal of Public Theology* (2008) 2:277-291.
- Rosenfeld, J. E. *The Island Broken in Two Halves: Land and Renewal Movements among the Maori of New Zealand*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.
- "Rua's Doings" *Poverty Bay Herald* (29 August 1907):3.
- "Rua's Palace" *New Zealand Times* (26 March 1908):6.
- "Rua's Temple At The Model Settlement Of Maungapōhatu" *New Zealand Herald* (22 April 1908):3.
- Webster, P "Maungapōhatu and the Māori Millennium: a Theory of Messianic Movements Applied to the Cult of Rua Kēnana, a Tūhoe Messiah, and his New Jerusalem in the Ureweras 1906 to 1916" Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington PhD in Anthropology, 1972.
- Webster, P *Rua and the Māori Millennium*. Wellington: Price Milburn for Victoria University Press, 1997.

## IMAGES:

- Bourne, George "Huruarama Hou, Maungapōhatu" 1915 [sic] ATL 1/2-075709-F  
<https://natlib.govt.nz/records/23030683?search%5Bil%5D%5Bcategory%5D=Images&search%5Bpath%5D=photos&search%5Btext%5D=maungapohatu>
- Bourne, G. (n.d.) "Rua and followers. Maungapōhatu" Auckland War Memorial Museum - Tamaki Paenga Hira. TR650 B775-24.  
[http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am\\_library-photography-30038?k=Maungapohatu&dept=photography&ordinal=16..](http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/collections-research/collections/record/am_library-photography-30038?k=Maungapohatu&dept=photography&ordinal=16..)
- Bourne, George "Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house alongside the village at Maungapohatu" ATL 1/2-027115-F <http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=10441&l=mi>
- Bourne, George "Rua Kenana Hepetipa's wooden circular courthouse and meeting house at Maungapohatu" 1908 ATL 1/2-002915-F  
[https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22846139?search%5Bi%5D%5Bplace\\_aut](https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22846139?search%5Bi%5D%5Bplace_aut)

hority\_id%5D=-318425&search%5Bpath%5D=photos Accessed 27-11-2017

Bourne, George "The flag pole at Maungapōhatu flying four large flags - Rua's flag, the New Zealand flag, the Union Jack and a flag with the letters TET AHIPO visible" *Auckland Weekly News*. Auckland War Memorial Museum - Tāmaki Paenga Hira. PH-1976-6-24.

<http://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections/topics/photographs-of-a-prophet>

Breckon, AN "Members of the armed constabulary advancing close to Hiruharama, Rua Kēnana's house, Maungapōhatu" 1916, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 7-A3792

[http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.aucklandcity.govt.nz%2Fdbtw-wpd%2FHeritageImages%2Findex.htm&AC=QBE\\_QUERY&TN=heritageimages&QF0=ID&NP=2&MR=5&RF=HIORecordSearch&QI0=%3D%227-A3792%22](http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/dbtw-wpd/exec/dbtwpub.dll?BU=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.aucklandcity.govt.nz%2Fdbtw-wpd%2FHeritageImages%2Findex.htm&AC=QBE_QUERY&TN=heritageimages&QF0=ID&NP=2&MR=5&RF=HIORecordSearch&QI0=%3D%227-A3792%22)

"Maori group outside the round meeting house at Mohaka" ATL 1/2-029587-F photographer unknown.

<https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22300564?search%5Bil%5D%5Bcategory%5D=Images&search%5Bpage%5D=3&search%5Bpath%5D=photos&search%5Btext%5D=mohaka>