

# **The Kaiapoi Pa**

## **Background**

In the early 1670s, Ngai Tahu Maori migrated to the South Island and the North Canterbury area from the North Island, in search of food and land. They fought and defeated the Ngati Mamoe who had been living here at the time.

## **The Pa**

The Pa was built about 1700 by Tu Rakautahi, the Ngai Tahu chief. It was built on a peninsula between modern-day Woodend and Waikuku that was about five acres, and extended into a lagoon. The surrounding environment made it easily defensible. The neck of the land to the peninsula was very narrow and surrounded by a deep ditch. A palisade defence was set up preventing an attack from the lagoon side. The other possible approaches for attack were guarded by gates which could be easily defended, one facing the lagoon and two opening up to the neck of the lagoon. There was also a thick forest near the pa. Because of these, the Pa was considered to be impregnable.

It was a prosperous time for the Pa and Ngai Tahu. Food was gathered and stored there to be distributed out to the local Maori who did not live at the Pa, and major decisions affecting the local Maori were also made there.

## **Background to the Siege of Kaiapoi Pa**

The causes of the siege lay in an incident about three years before the actual event took place. A Ngati Toa chief, Te Rauparaha, had come down from the North Island, fighting and killing South Island Maori at Kaikoura and Omihi. The Ngai Tahu were suspicious when Te Rauparaha and his men arrived at Kaiapoi pa claiming to be greenstone traders. They attacked before the Ngati Toa could, killing eight chiefs and causing Te Rauparaha to retreat back to the North Island. For two years he bided his time at Kapiti, planning revenge for the insult he felt he had been dealt.

He made a bargain with the English captain of a ship which saw them carried down to Akaroa where the Ngati Toa attacked the Pa there and destroyed it, taking the chief to Kapiti to torture, and killing many other inhabitants. However, this was still not enough revenge.

## **The Siege of Kaiapoi Pa**

By now it was 1831. On the night the Pa was first attacked, the majority of the young men were away at Port Cooper acting as escorts to the visiting Chief Tairaroa from Otago. The people who remained inside the pa closed the gates and waited. Te Rauparaha also waited in the hope that he could starve them out, signaling the beginning of the siege.

The Otago chief collected the men with him and returned to the pa in the night, creeping quietly through the scrub and then racing through the lagoon to the pa with minimal casualties. The Pa was far better equipped once they returned to withstand the Ngati Toa.

The siege lasted for three months, despite limited food resources within the Pa. The Pa itself was too difficult to destroy so fire was decided on to chase the people out. The Ngati Toa gathered scrub from nearby, dried it and stacked it up around the Pa. The Ngai Tahu pulled it down repeatedly but eventually enough was put out that would cause a fatal fire with the correct wind.

### **The Fall of Kaiapoi Pa**

After months of waiting, the Ngai Tahu lit the accumulated scrub on fire during a Northwest wind in the hope it would drive off their attackers. This would have been successful had the wind not changed to a Southerly, sending smoke and fire back into the Pa itself. This created a gap in the defences, allowing the Ngati Toa warriors to enter the pa, capturing or killing most in there. They found little resistance, but some, about 200, escaped through the lagoon, leaving the once great pa abandoned.

### **Aftermath**

Once victorious, the Ngati Toa retreated to their camp at Massacre Hill to celebrate, where the captives were bled to death in preparation for the feast, according to personal accounts. This was the final insult.

Disputes over the initial cause of the hostilities exist. Chiefs of the Ngati Toa were killed and eaten, which could not go unavenged. As a result of the siege, there has been confusion over the true name of the Pa. Reverend J W Stack published a book in 1893 called 'Kaiapohia: the Story of a Siege' leading many writers after him to use this name, creating a belief that this is in fact the real name. In reality, this name is an insult.

Kaiapoi means 'to swing the food in' as the Pa was quite isolated and food had to be swung across the lagoon.

Kaiapohia means 'the piling up of bodies to eat' an insult since this is what the Ngati Toa did.

### **Sources Used**

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