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# A METAL PA KAHAWAI OF DUBIOUS PROVENANCE

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In 2007 Ian Smith wrote on 43 metal pa kahawai from museum collections including one example from an archaeological context. This note is to add one more example from a museum context bringing the total to 44. I am sure that there will be yet more in other collections, both private and public, to be recorded.

It is not the intention here to restate the background to pa kahawai as this was well covered in Smith's original article and any retelling would be superfluous. Instead, as much of the artefact's personal history and how it fits with the other examples is examined. The provenance is presented but probably at best can only be relied on for the last few decades.

## **Provenance**

In 1994 the pa kahawai was donated to what was then the Porirua Museum and is now Pataka Museum of arts and cultures. It was part of a total of 176 artefacts donated at that time, 87 of which were traditional Maori objects. The collection was donated by the Parnell family of Tawa. The husband, James, had collected for many decades, mostly from auctions with a few from pieces purchased directly from retailers. It was his passing that had caused the family to make the donation. Unfortunately, with his death four years prior to the donation all the provenance about the artefacts was lost, excepting those few that still had labels attached.

The pa kahawai was one artefact that did have a label reading: 'Paua Fishing Spinner "Ngati Maru" Tribe Coromandle [sic] 1949' on one side and '278/16' on the other. It seems likely that this was the label attached when it was purchased by Parnell at an unknown date, but certainly some decades after 1949.

If the label was, as we surmise, an auction tag or similar then all the data contained on it should be taken with some scepticism if the author's experiences are anything to go by. Whether we can take the 1949 as the year of

discovery or perhaps another year significant to the history of the pa kahawai remains in question.

### Description

The pa kahawai is a 4 inch (100 mm) iron nail with a round cross-section and rose head bound to a curved section of paua shell. It is 78 mm long, 25 mm high and 19 mm wide. The nail shows no signs of flattening, but it is shaped into a re-curve.

The nail and paua are bound together using three different materials. At the shank end it has a binding of plaited twine. At the hook end muka



*Figure 1: Metal pa kahawai, Parnell Collection PM1994.152, with hook re-curve clearly visible.*



*Figure 2: Metal pa kahawai, Parnell Collection PM1994.152.*

(either harakeke or kiekie) binds over the top of thin (1 mm or less) wire which also binds.

## Interpretation

The hook is curved into a shape that Smith describes as a down-tilted point, very similar to the Canterbury Museum example E141.596 (Smith 2007: 73). Its length fits it into the 29% category, the second most common length. The twine is a later addition; traces of muka can be seen underneath. It would appear that the thin wire binding is either original or at least early on as this rests below the muka, though if the item was in use then bindings may well have been replaced more than once in its life. Here the term original may be interpreted as sequential rather than as a finite phrase.

The use of a wire nail does indicate a post-1870s date. The Nelson Examiner of 1873 has several advertisements for “Rose-head Wire Nails” which is the earliest primary documentary evidence the author has found for this type of nail. The addition of yet another wire nail to the 25 previously recorded strengthens the idea that the pa kahawai form persisted for several generations after the introduction of western materials. The recorded use of this form in Taranaki in the 1930s is therefore not unexpected (Smith 2007: 77).

As to the label provenance of ‘Ngati Maru’ and ‘Coromandel’ it seems as likely as any; it fits the known distribution of both lure and species. Given that the collector was not buying from original sources but from secondary ones any provenance is feasible. Of course the label may not have contained correct information, but we will in all likelihood never know.

## Acknowledgments

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## References

- Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle, Volume XXXII, Issue 123, 23 September 1873, Page 2
- Smith, I. 2007. Metal pa kahawai – a post-contact fishing lure form in northern New Zealand. In A. Anderson, K. Green and F. Leach *Vastly Ingenious: The Archaeology of Pacific Material Culture - In Honour of Janet M. Davidson*, 69–78. Otago University Press, Dunedin.