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A TE ATIWA IVORY FIGURINE

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The Taranaki Museum recently obtained a small carved ivory figurine (catalogue number A92.483). It was found approximately 26 years ago, probably in the vicinity of Puketapu pa (Q19/157), Bell Block, Taranaki. This figurine is compared with a similar item already held by the museum.

THE SITE

Puketapu was a major coastal pa within the territory of the Puketapu hapu of the Te Atiawa confederation. What remains of this pa can be seen as a small hill at the western end of the runway of New Plymouth Airport. The sacred nature of the pa is alluded to by S. Percy Smith (1910:268) who also mentions that by the beginning of the twentieth century much of the site had been 'blown away by the winds, and parts are covered by sands from the beach, which is immediately below it' (Ibid). He also states that pallisading could still be seen on the pa up until the early 1850s.

As the sands have shifted Puketapu has, over the last 100 or so years, been fossicked by a number of people, among them H.D. Skinner (Freeman and Geddes 1959: 12) and local collectors, Percy Johnson and Miles Sutcliffe. Over 200 artifacts have been identified within the Taranaki Museum collection as having come from this pa, making it the largest known collection of items to come from one site within the Taranaki province. These are currently under study by the author. Judging from the type of material which has been recovered from this site there is a very high chance that the figurine came from Puketapu pa.

PUKETAPU FIGURINE

Made from whale ivory, possibly Orca, the figurine has a maximum length of 48mm (Figure 1). It has obviously lain exposed to the elements for some time as one side has suffered considerably from the effects of sand blasting. The design features on the other side remain intact.

The figurine is that of a female with legs drawn up so that the feet rest on the abdomen. The hands rest on the chest. Unfortunately the treatment of the feet and left hand are unknown due to sandblasting. The right hand is intact. This hand has one digit curved back towards the shoulder while the other two digits are slightly curved, parallel and are oriented towards the

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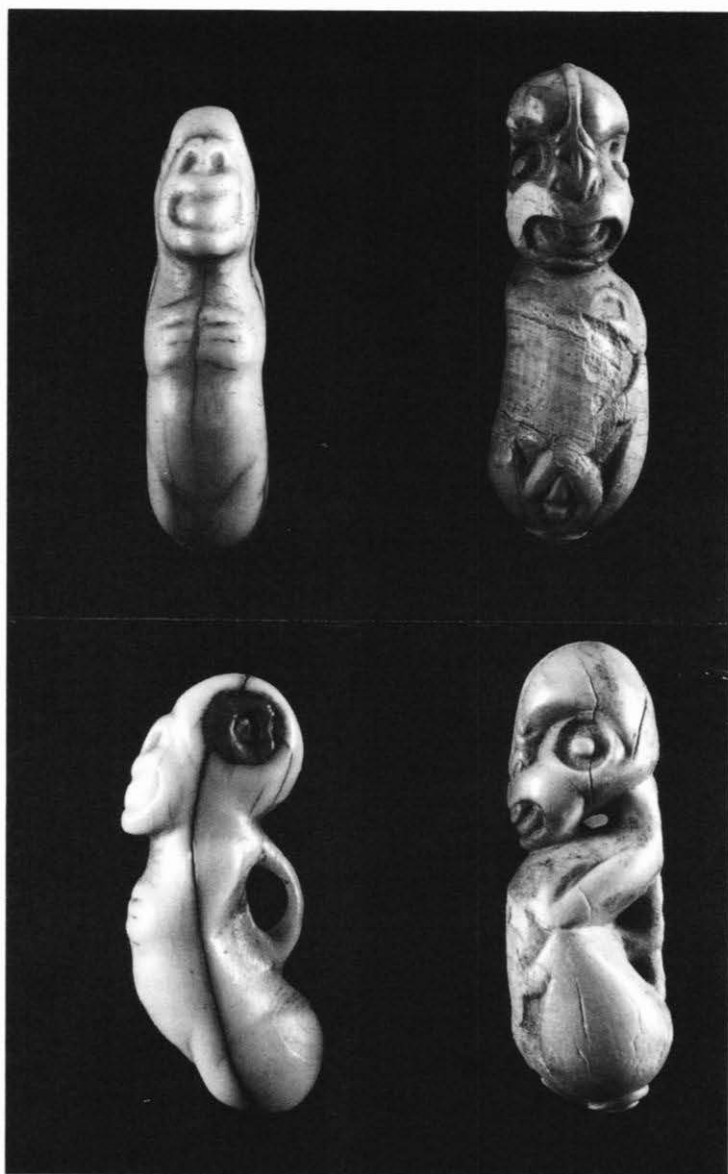


Figure 1. Two Te Atiawa ivory figurines. Ngamotu figurine (A76.743) on left, Puketapu figurine (A92.483) on the right.

centre of the body.

The face has been delicately carved. The treatment of the nose is reminiscent of several Te Atiawa wood carvings. A central ridge extends from the top of the nose over the top of the head.

Prominently portrayed is the vulva, as is generally the case when female figures are represented on wood carvings from the Te Atiawa area, under which is a curious raised concentric design.

When viewed in side profile the figure forms an "S" shape and again this feature is reminiscent of many wood carvings from Te Atiawa. In the curve of the spine, behind the stomach area, a narrow strip of ivory has been retained which is perforated in two places, perhaps, although unlikely due to the size and shape of the holes and lack of obvious wear, to allow for the attachment of a suspension cord.

NGAMOTU FIGURINE

The Taranaki Museum holds one other similar figurine (catalogue number A76.743) (Figure 1). It was given to Albert Bayly in 1854 by Poharama Te Whiti of Ngamotu (modern New Plymouth). Bayly gave it to the museum in 1919. It is also made from whale ivory. The item measures 44.5 mm in length. The sex of the figure is unknown. Only the upper legs are depicted and these are drawn up towards the abdomen. Both hands rest on the chest. The mouth is open with the tongue slightly protruding, above which are two nostrils. One eye has red sealing wax while the other simply has the central peg.

The body of this figure is 'C' shaped with an attachment loop in the small of the back. The loop shows clear signs of wear. This piece is clearly designed to be worn either around the neck or from the ear.

DISCUSSION

These two items help define a pendant/figurine type which is rare in material culture from the Taranaki region. As is probably to be expected similar design elements are used on these as are often found on wood carvings. Wood and ivory are clearly amenable to carry similar design units. The Puketapu item has been carved with much more attention to detail than the Ngamotu example.

While the Ngamotu figurine clearly functioned as a pendant the manner in which the Puketapu example was used is less clear. It is unlikely, on the evidence of the remaining section of ivory in the small of the back, that it

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was worn in the same manner as the Ngamotu example.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Chris Jacomb, Canterbury Museum for commenting on an earlier draft and Linda Tancred, Taranaki Museum for photographing the two items.

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