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AN UNUSUAL CARVING IN NORTH TARANAKI STYLE

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Early in 1967 a mechanical ditch-digger draining a swamp at Huirangi, in the Waitara Valley, North Taranaki, uncovered a carving of unusual form. It lay broken in half and buried in the spoil beside a drain (G.R. N109/847902) until September 1967, when one part was exposed by heavy rain. A further search located the remaining portion.

The carving was loaned to the Taranaki Museum where it was displayed until the landowner requested its return in 1975. After negotiation the carving was purchased in 1981 with an Internal Affairs "special grant" and although catalogued into the National Museum collection [M.E. 14335] was placed in the care of the Taranaki Museum.

Description (Fig.1)

All surfaces are decorated indicating intended use and viewing in a "free-standing" position. The carving has been executed from either side, with perforations to accentuate design. The base is roughly shaped, presumably as a support or attachment. Unfortunately the mechanical digger fractured and scraped the carving across the mid-point but the damage is not extensive. Conservation treatment was undertaken by the National Museum in 1982.

Three figures are represented. Between the upper portion of the base and the apical end of the completed carving are two figures in reverse, their heads opposed and lower bodies intertwined. The eye of the lower figure is uncompleted. In the topmost section a third figure is present, but unfinished.

The unusual "free-standing" form allows greater dimensional freedom than the flat surface of *epa* or other storehouse panels, where the linking and intertwining of arms and legs, crucial to the movement and design, "disappear" and "re-emerge" leaving the eye and imagination of the viewer to make the essential connection.

In contrast, being carved and perforated from either side, no features of the "free-standing" carving "disappear", but simply continue through the carving, behind the super-imposed figure, yet remaining visible and emerging in the correct position on the opposite side of the figure.

Another similarly unusual aspect of design is the fact that

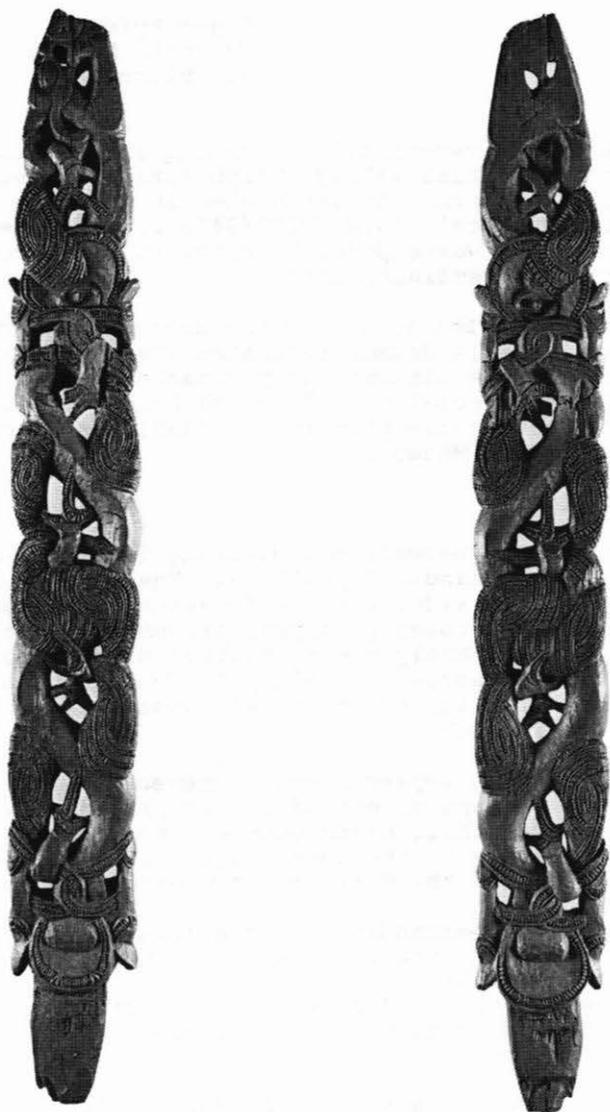


Figure 1. Free standing carving from Huirangi. Carved from Totara, 1125 x 140 x 50 mm. Left and right sides as viewed. Photo: National Museum.

the two main figures are close mirror-images in reverse. Not only is each figure almost exactly the same length (430 mm), but anatomical features of each are close replicas in reverse. The surface decoration of anatomical features follows the same pattern. The decoration is so keen-edged as to suggest the use of a metal chisel, but if this was so, the retention of the distinctive style argues against other European influence being present in North Taranaki at the time.

Function

It is obvious that the free-standing carving was created for a clear and definite function, though it is difficult to ascertain what this may have been; or to see where it would fit onto known types of decorated structure.

Few other carved artefacts show any similarities, but two weaving pegs (*туру-туру*) provenanced to Taranaki, demonstrate some parallels [National Museum M.E. 13842, OLDMAN 156].

Only two free-standing images (*teko-teko*) provenanced to Taranaki are known. One is in the Museum of Mankind, London [B.M. 1630]; the other, Musée de L'Homme, Paris [81.25.1]. Neither is similar except for minor surface decoration (Simons 1985:88-89).

Available ethnographic evidence suggests few comparable free-standing decorative elements either on or associated with the various forms of building. Angus illustrates a row of slender carvings fixed in the ground parallel with the long wall of a whare-puni at Otawahao, Waikato, (Angus 1847:Plate 25). A similar use of carved figures surrounding a mortuary structure at Kaipara is recorded by Polack (Polack 1838:136).

It would be easy to suggest that the function of the North Taranaki carving is similar to the pieces from Waikato and Kaipara. There are, however, sufficient differences in detail between the three examples to make such an explanation tentative.

Acknowledgements

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