



NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

A *Pou Rahui* from a North Auckland Eel-Fishery

Roger Neich

Auckland Institute and Museum

ABSTRACT

A wooden carved *pou rahui* post set up to mark traditional rights to an eel-fishing spot on the Taikirau River at Otiria in Northland is described. An oral history recorded in 1929 explains that it was carved at the conclusion of a dispute over access to the fishery. An estimate based on the number of elapsed generations would date this event to the late eighteenth century, thereby providing evidence for the pre-European antiquity of eel-fishing in this area. The carving applied to this post and the attitudes maintained towards it indicate that the *pou rahui* was a symbolically significant element of an eel-weir. In stylistic terms, this *pou rahui* is a very rare example of North Auckland three-dimensional woodcarving on an architectural scale.

Keywords: MAORI, EEL-FISHING, MARKER POST, ACCESS RIGHTS, SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE, NORTHLAND STYLE, ORAL HISTORY.

In her exemplary paper on the ethnoarchaeological reconstruction of Maori mass capture of freshwater eels, Marshall (1987) considers the sort of archaeological evidence that this activity may produce. Control of access and traditional rights to eel-fishing spots are discussed with special reference to the modern situation on the Kawakawa River tributaries near Moerewa and Otiria. While commenting on the continuity of form in the face of changing materials, Marshall (1987: 62, 68) gives some attention to the ritual and symbolic significance of the central posts (*pou*) which support the eel-weir structure.

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to another component of an eel-fishery that has implications for all the points mentioned above. This is a *pou rahui*, a post that marks rights to an eel-fishing area. A *rahui* is a mark to warn people against trespassing on a restricted area or against unauthorised use of a food resource. Admittedly, such eel-fishing markers are now very rare in museum collections, but their use seems to have been quite widespread in earlier times. Best (1925: 158) has given the personal names of three eel *rahui* posts set up in the Urewera district, one of which was activated by hanging a flax cape of the local chief on the carved post. A marker for an eel-fishery at Oraka near Putaruru in 1849 consisted of an old musket barrel thrust into the ground and decorated with reed plumes (Cooper 1851: 96). A carved door lintel of a meeting house, now in the National Museum, Wellington (ME 1472) is said to have served as a *rahui* for an eel-fishery on the Rangitaiki River.

The *pou rahui* that is the subject of this paper was made expressly as a marker for an eel-fishery and is therefore an extremely rare and important artefact in its own right. Furthermore, by an amazing coincidence, it stood on the Taikirau Stream, a tributary of the Waiharakeke Stream where the eel-weir studied by Marshall (1987: Fig.1, map) is situated. This *pou rahui* came to the Auckland Museum in 1929 with a traditional history extending back for six generations, thereby providing concrete evidence for the antiquity of the eel fisheries seen, still operating, on the Kawakawa River in 1984. On a conservative estimate, this traditional history would date the *pou rahui* to the late eighteenth century.



Figure 1: The *pou rahui* at Otiria at the time of its acquisition by D. H. Graham for Auckland Museum. Wiremu Ngawati is the man at front right. Photo: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

Soon after the *pou rahui* arrived at the Auckland Museum, an abbreviated account of its history, with some inaccuracies, was published in *The Sun* newspaper (July 17, 1929, pp. 11, 16) along with a photograph (Fig. 1) showing the post with its Maori owner. Given the Auckland Museum registration number 4255 (but later registered again as 22061), the *pou rahui* is recorded as being placed in the museum 'on deposit' (that is, on loan) from Wiremu Ngawati of Otiria.

According to information supplied by his grandson, Mr Walter Ngawati of Kawakawa (Walter Ngawati, pers. comm. 25 February 1991), Wiremu Ngawati's full name was Wiremu Ngawati Peia. The name Peia came from the Bay of Plenty, as his mother was from Maketu, but towards the end of his life Wiremu told his family to drop the name Peia

and use Ngawati to emphasise their Bay of Islands connections. Nevertheless, the full name of Wiremu Ngawati Peia is inscribed on his tombstone. Wiremu Ngawati belonged to the Uritaniwha tribe. In the old photograph (Fig. 1), presumably taken by David H. Graham, the museum officer responsible for bringing the *pou rahui* back to Auckland Museum in 1929, Wiremu Ngawati is the older man on the right. The man on the left is his son named Ariki Hanara Ngawati, the father of Walter Ngawati. The two women at the rear are also members of the Ngawati family. The photograph was taken outside Wiremu Ngawati's old family home in Otiria, which still stands, close to the Otiria railway station. This was a large family house used by T. W. Ratana as a 'halfway house' during his travels in the north. Wiremu Ngawati was a builder by trade and was also expert in Maori traditions and *whakapapa*. His family knew him as a stern strong man who always kept the peace among different branches of the family.

Several years later, D. H. Graham published a full account of the history that he obtained from Wiremu Ngawati (or Wi Rimu as he wrote it):

When collecting Maori relics for the Auckland Museum (1929) I was given a carved post which was used at one time to mark the preserve or Rahui of an Eeling-creek. Mr Wi Rimu Ngawati, of Otiria, North Auckland, was a descendant of an old-time chief, Pu Totara, some six generations back.

This carved post represented the end of a feud between Pu Totara and Pora Harakeke, who with his tribe would insist on poaching the Rahui (preserve) on the Tai Kirau Creek, near the present Otiria Railway Station. Wi Rimu Ngawati told me that his ancestor, Pu Totara, after many feuds and quarrels, caught Pora Harakeke in the act of poaching Eels from this preserve, known as a 'food basket'. Pu Totara came on Pora Harakeke unawares and caught Pora by the legs. Pu held Pora under the water and nearly drowned him; he was supposed to have sunk to the bottom of the creek. With sudden compassion Pu Totara dived in and rescued Pora Harakeke and restored Pora's life by making a small fire and holding him over the dense smoke head first, so resuscitating him. To mark the end of the feud and to prove the fishing rights of this Rahui 'bread basket', Pu Totara with Pora Harakeke's consent, had this post carved and from then on no more poaching by Pora Harakeke took place—or so the story goes. The post was used by Pu Totara and his tribe as a supporting post on the bank of the creek to anchor Eel-pots or nets and lines in fishing.

Prior to my securing this carved post, Wi Rimu Ngawati and his descendants used this story and post to establish the rights of himself and his family to the property in the vicinity of this post and creek in a Native Court case, and a title was given to him just the same as a surveyor's peg might mark the position of a farm or gold-digger's claim. The carved post was in an excellent state of preservation and is a most interesting relic of days gone by and of the custom of the Maori over an Eel-creek. Any poaching of a Maori preserve meant a fight and perhaps death to the poacher (Graham 1953: 133–134).

In its form (Fig. 2), the Otiria *pou rahui* retains much of the natural shape of the tree trunk from which it was cut, with a fork at the upper end behind the carved head. The fork has

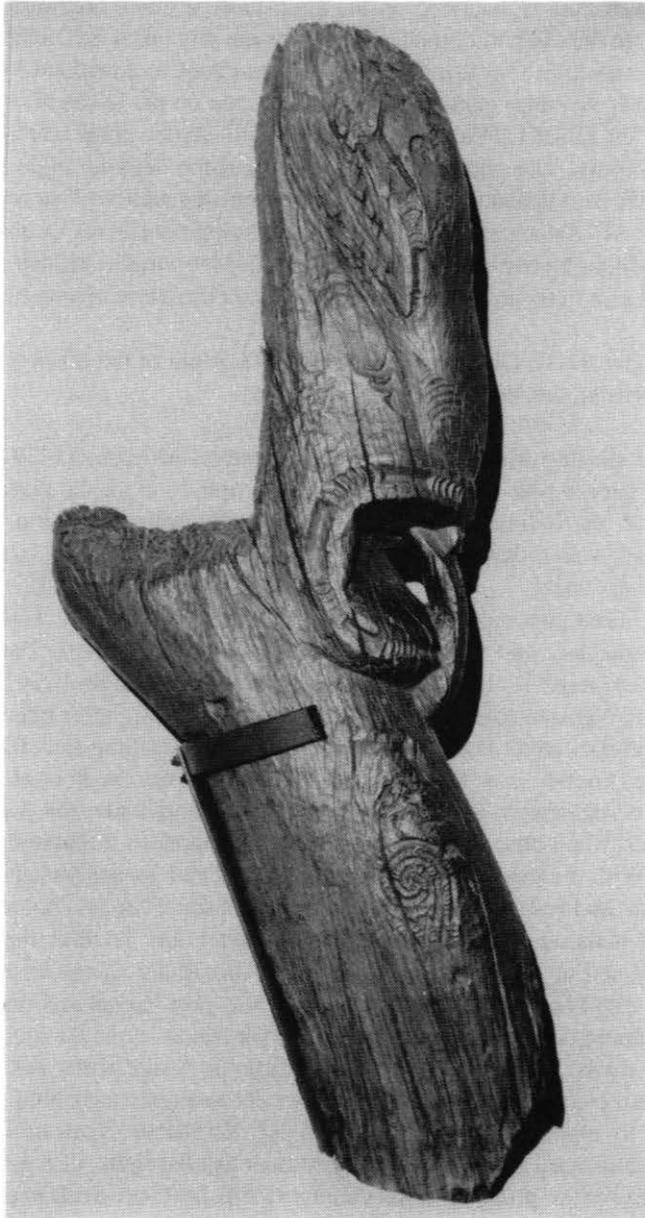


Figure 2: Side view of the *Otiria pou rahui*, Auckland Museum 22061. Photo: Mark Adams, Auckland Museum.

an adzed plane on both sides, leaving a sharp ridge running out at the rear. The carver, probably a man of the local Uritaniwha or Ngati Hine, has given the figure a bulbous forehead continuing down to a broad nose. Below this is a wide open mouth with one tooth indicated at each side and a protruding tongue reaching out of the mouth and on to the

chest. There is no shaping of a body below the mouth, except for a spiral carved on each side of the trunk marking where the shoulders should be. Surface decoration is carved on the forehead, around the eyes, around the nostrils, around the mouth, and on the shoulder spirals. All of this surface decoration is standardised to a groove bordered by a single flattened ridge on each side. At intervals, the groove is crossed by groups of four to seven curved crescents of the type known as *unaunahi* (Mead 1986: 235). The base of the trunk is roughly sawn off, with some deeply eroded splits reaching up into the body. While at Otiria, the *pou* was unpainted but soon after reaching the museum it was given a coat of the usual monochrome 'museum red'. Total length of the *pou* is 150 cm and it is 98 cm from the base to the top of the fork portion. In section, the trunk is roughly circular, with a circumference of 72 cm around the head and 91 cm around the mid-body. The carving has all the soft appearance of stone-tool work but it is very weathered under the 'museum red' paint.

As related by Ngawati, this *pou rahui* also served as a supporting post on the bank to anchor eel-pots, nets or lines. This description of its use invites comparison with the *pou reinga* of an eel-weir, which were the strong permanent central posts articulating the actual structure of the weir and the detachable net section. As reported by Marshall (1987: 62), the *pou reinga* were often carved in human form, which befits a component carrying such a weight of symbolic connotations. Best (1929: 135) implies that both of the *pou reinga* at one outlet were thus carved. A sketch by E. J. Graham, reproduced in the volume of illustrations for White's *Ancient History of the Maori*, shows a 'permanent eel trap' set across a narrow channel with a full carved figure *pou* at each end (White 1897). Writing about eel-weirs in the Wanganui district, Downes (1918: 308) implies that perhaps only one of the *pou reinga* was carved and indeed his sketch (1918: Fig. 7) shows only one of the *pou reinga* surmounted by a carved head. Probably there was no set rule but it is interesting that Best (1929: 147) notes that the *mauri* of the eel-weir "was often placed underwater at the base of one of the posts at the *ngutu*, or outlet of a weir—the first post set up there, which was the right hand one", confirming that one post was more important ritually than the other. This recalls a similar ritual importance attached to the right hand weaving peg which is also often carved.

In terms of archaeological evidence, the *pou reinga* and the *pou rahui* are both marked by their carving as being the most symbolically significant components of an eel-weir. Judging by the proprietorial attitude assumed by Ngawati in the photograph and the fact that he only allowed the *pou rahui* to come to the museum on deposit, this symbolic significance was still strong in 1929.

Beyond the historical and scientific importance of this *pou rahui* in relation to eeling, it has further importance as a very rare example of North Auckland style three-dimensional woodcarving on an architectural scale done with stone tools. Many smaller North Auckland carvings have survived in museum collections, especially treasure boxes, flutes and feeding funnels. Larger pieces include several panels from food stores of various types, portions of canoes and houses (Simmons 1985) and burial chests (Fox 1983). Apart from the burial chests, it seems that this *pou rahui* is the only surviving large free-standing Northland carving and the only surviving large early Uritaniwha or Ngati Hine carving, although there is no information as to whether the carver was from these or some other Northland tribe. In fact, although there are clear stylistic relationships between this *pou rahui* and several of the other existing Northland carvings in the usual sinuous northern style, and especially with some of the Hokianga and Bay of Islands burial chests, the closest similarity is with a pair of small storehouse door jambs from Takahue near Kaitaia in Te Rarawa tribal area

(Simmons 1985: 66). Allowing for a translation from the flat panels of door jambs to the three-dimensional form of the *pou rahui*, this assemblage now helps us to visualise what other northern free-standing carvings such as *tekoteko* and stockade posts must have looked like.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank Walter Ngawati of Kawakawa for discussing this paper with me and for encouraging me to publish it.

REFERENCES

- Best, E. 1925. Tuhoe, the children of the mist. *Memoirs of the Polynesian Society* VI.
- Best, E. 1929. Fishing methods and devices of the Maori. *Dominion Museum Bulletin* 12. Government Printer, Wellington.
- Cooper, G. S. 1851. *Journal of an Expedition overland from Auckland to Taranaki*. Williamson and Wilson, Auckland.
- Downes, T. W. 1918. Notes on eels and eel-weirs (tuna and pa-tuna). *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute* 50: 296–316.
- Fox, A. 1983. Carved Maori burial chests. A commentary and a catalogue. *Auckland Institute and Museum Bulletin* 13.
- Graham, D. H. 1953. *A Treasury of New Zealand Fishes*. Reed, Wellington.
- Marshall, Y. 1987. Maori mass capture of freshwater eels: an ethnoarchaeological reconstruction of prehistoric subsistence and social behaviour. *New Zealand Journal of Archaeology* 9: 55–79.
- Mead, S. M. 1986. *Te Toi Whakairo. The Art of Maori Carving*. Reed Methuen, Auckland.
- Simmons, D. R. 1985. *Whakairo. Maori Tribal Art*. Oxford University Press, Auckland.
- White, J. 1897. *Illustrations prepared for White's Ancient History of the Maori*. Government Printer, Wellington.

Submitted 19 April 1991

Accepted 20 May 1991