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THE 'THREE-FINGERED HAND' IN MAORI WOOD SCULPTURE; A MYSTERY SOLVED?

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1. Background

By the early nineteenth century certain conventions had become well established in Maori wood sculpture. Prominent among these were the double spiral and the manaia. No less pronounced was the representation of human hands with only three fingers. The index finger was usually extended backwards as a kind of 'thumb.'

The origin of the 'three-fingered hand' has fascinated New Zealand anthropologists and ethnologists since the turn of the century. John Macmillan Brown, retired Professor of English at Canterbury University, was the first to go into print on the matter. In the early 1900s he recorded the result of discussions he had had with two old carvers in the Urewera. They had told him that five fingers made the figures - which represented spirits or gods - too human (Macmillan Brown 1907, in Phillipps 1955:17).

Then James Cowan noted that the first man to carve and decorate Maori houses was said to be Nuku-wai-teko or Mutu-wai-teko who had only three fingers on each hand (Cowan 1909, Ibid)

In the 1920s G.Graham published an explanation to the effect that Pere-tu, who featured in an old legend about Rangitoto Island, had only three fingers. This was not a deformity but an indication that he was descended from a reptile-god ancestor. Henceforth commemorative figures were carved with three fingers to show that they had god-like forebears (Graham 1921, Ibid).

In addition to the above, Phillipps (1955: 16,17) tells us that T. Herberley, one time Maori carver at the former Dominion Museum, always believed that Tiki (in some legends said to be the first man) had three fingers. When taxed on the question he showed what he could do in the way of carving human figures in wood. All had three fingers.

Then again, Hare Hongi of Ngapuhi told Phillipps (1955: 17) that there was a connection with the fact that the sacred Maori rubbing stick or hika used to produce fire was held with three fingers. Because of the importance of

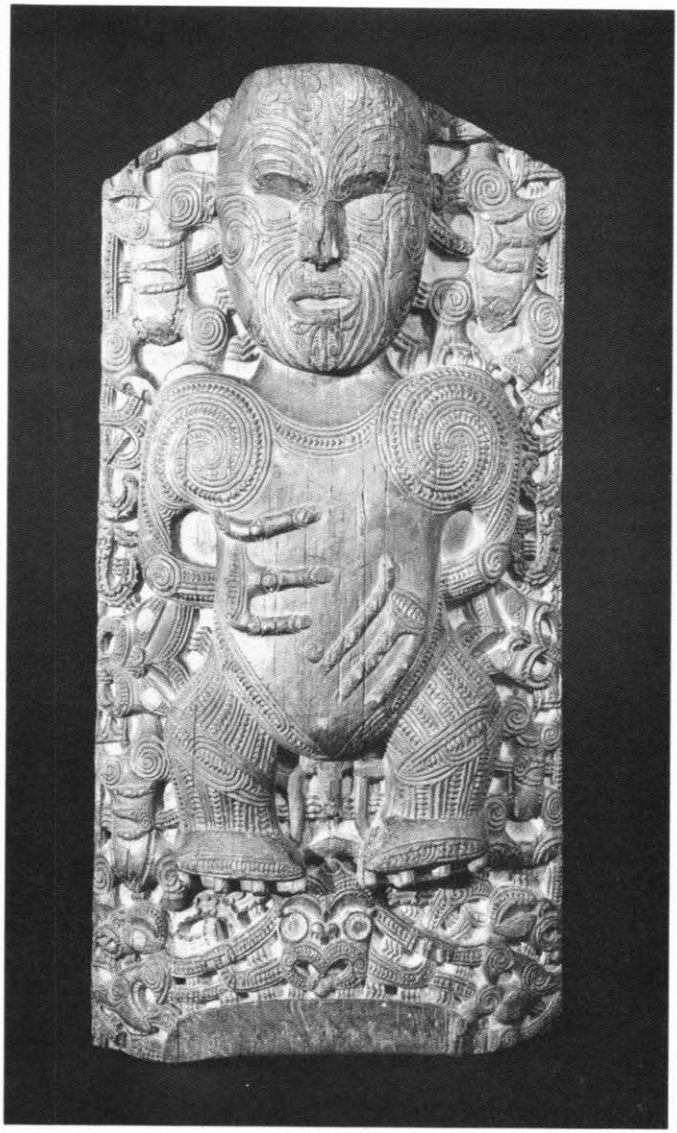

Figure 1. Part of a Kuwaha Pataka (storehouse doorway): style of Ngati Kahungunu tribe. Early Te Huringa I period (early 19th century). Height 92cm. Oldman Collection, National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Neg. No. B17579

this act, it was incorporated into figure carving.

East Coast tradition has yet another explanation. Here it is maintained that Hingangaroa was the first carver. He had three sons, each of whom set up a carving school at a different place on the coast. As a consequence, ancestor figures in this area have traditionally had three-fingered hands (Ibid). For all this time, it should be noted, it was assumed that the protrusion backwards of the index finger in 19th century Maori wood sculpture was a stylised representation of a human thumb, and that the hands were carved as viewed from above.

Enter now Professor Terence Barrow who - in the fifties - came up with the most plausible explanation to date. He suggested that Maori ancestor-figure carvers superimposed avian features on those of a human. In a paper in the Journal of the Polynesian Society he wrote:

> "Frequently the three-fingered hand has a decided bird-talon appearance, complete with spur, or as in the North Auckland burial chests, the three-toed (or clawed) feet are the webbed feet of a seabird. From both manaia head and such a 'bird-claw' type of hand the bird-man idea receives strong support." (Barrow 1956:319).

Scant recognition seems to have been given to Barrow's observations. For example, in the early sixties, Sydney M. Mead put forward a number of imaginative explanations - none of them connected with an avian theme - and then suggested that it might have been artistic considerations which led to the three-fingered hand. Three fingers would be more aesthetically pleasing and certainly easier to carve than four (Mead 1961:244).

Gilbert Archey, in his 'Whaowhia: Maori art and its artists,' published in the late seventies, does not discuss the matter at all. Was there a hint of professional jealousy in this?

In comparatively recent times Barrow has reiterated his belief in an avian connection on more than one occasion (Barrow 1969:19, 1978: 54-59, 1984:36-37).

2. Chronology

In terms of the development of Maori culture, it is now generally agreed (e.g. Te Maori 1994) that the prehistory/history of New Zealand can be subdivided into four periods, the boundaries of which are by no means distinct. These are:-

Nga Kakano (the seed) period, 900-1200 AD

Te Tipunga (the growth) period, 1200-1500 AD

Te Puawaitanga (the flowering) period, 1500-1800 AD

Te Huringa (the turning) period, 1800 to present

It needs to be emphasised that, of necessity, the above is a very loose arrangement. It is more subjective and speculative than objective.

As far as this paper is concerned the period which most interests us is the late Te Tipunga - early Te Puawaitanga period i.e. around the late 15th-early 16th centuries.

3. The Burial Chests of the Far North

The carved burial chests which have been recovered from caves in the Far North (Fox 1983) comprise some of the earliest examples of what could be called Classic Maori wood carving - as defined by Barrow (1969:22) - still in existence. They owe their survival to the fact that they had been hidden in dry caves well away from prying eyes.

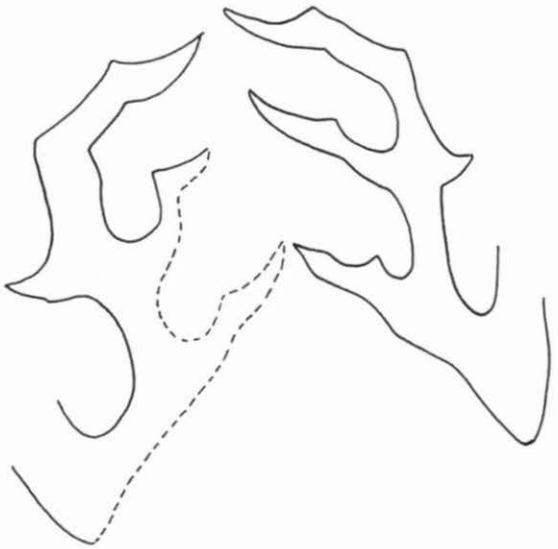

Figure 2. Outline of hands/claws from burial chest, Waka Tupapaku, Ngapuhi tribe, Te Puawaitanga period (1500 - 1800 AD). From a photograph by Brian Brake, p.17, 'Te Maori: Taonga Maori. 1994.

On the evidence of certain surface patterning Fox argues that some of these chests were being produced in the late 15th-early 16th century. One of them - of Ngapuhi provenance - featured in the Te Maori Exhibition (Te Maori 1994:17). It was classified as belonging to Te Puawaitanga period (1500-1800) but it is possible that it is even older than this.

If we look closely at the surface patterning on this chest and particularly at the 'hands', it can be seen that the 'thumbs' are more akin to the spurs on the feet of a flightless bird. Since **the object of the surface decoration was to frighten away intruders** (Te Maori 1994:16) these are not hands at all, I would suggest, but the raised feet of a moa. They are portrayed, I would suggest, as seen from below by a hunter who had one cornered and it was trying to defend himself. This must have been one of the most terrifying experiences imaginable.

It is possible now to see the 'three-fingered hand' in a new light. Instead of a hand viewed from above it is, I would suggest, a moa's foot seen from below. The backward pointing 'thumb' is more logically the spur on a moa's foot. It should be noted in this connection that the spur on the foot of a flightless bird is typically in line with the outermost toe. It points slightly inwards as well as backwards. The thumb on a human hand of course cannot point backwards.

4. The Moa Connection

But were there moas of any size still living in the Far North in the 15th century? It would seem that there could indeed have been. It is now generally accepted that all eleven moa species - comprising two families and six genera (Worthy 1990:213) - had been hunted to extinction by about 500 years ago i.e. by about the end of the 15th century (Beverley McCulloch and Geoffrey Cox 1992:57). Because of the extent of its habitat, one of the last species to disappear was probably the large bush moa, *Dinornis novaezealandiae* (Worthy 1990:234). This species was found all over the North Island, in North-West Nelson, and in the Far South (Worthy 1990:220). It stood about 1.5 metres tall and weighed an estimated 170 kg (McCulloch and Cox 1992:43).

The large bush moa was the middle-sized one of the three *Dinornis* species. The largest moa, *Dinornis giganteus* - as a matter of interest - was one of the rarest. It was found mostly in eastern areas of the South Island (Worthy 1990:220). All three species were leggy, long-necked birds of almost cursorial habit as distinct from most of the other moas which tended to be medium-sized, heavily built, and graviportal.

It is quite reasonable, then, to suggest that the earliest wood carvers to use

Classical Maori surface patterns had a first-hand acquaintance with the second-largest species of moa. This being so, it would be extraordinary if a record of these most impressive birds did not come down to us in the art of those early carvers; and how better to represent them than as the protectors of the mortal remains of a revered ancestor.

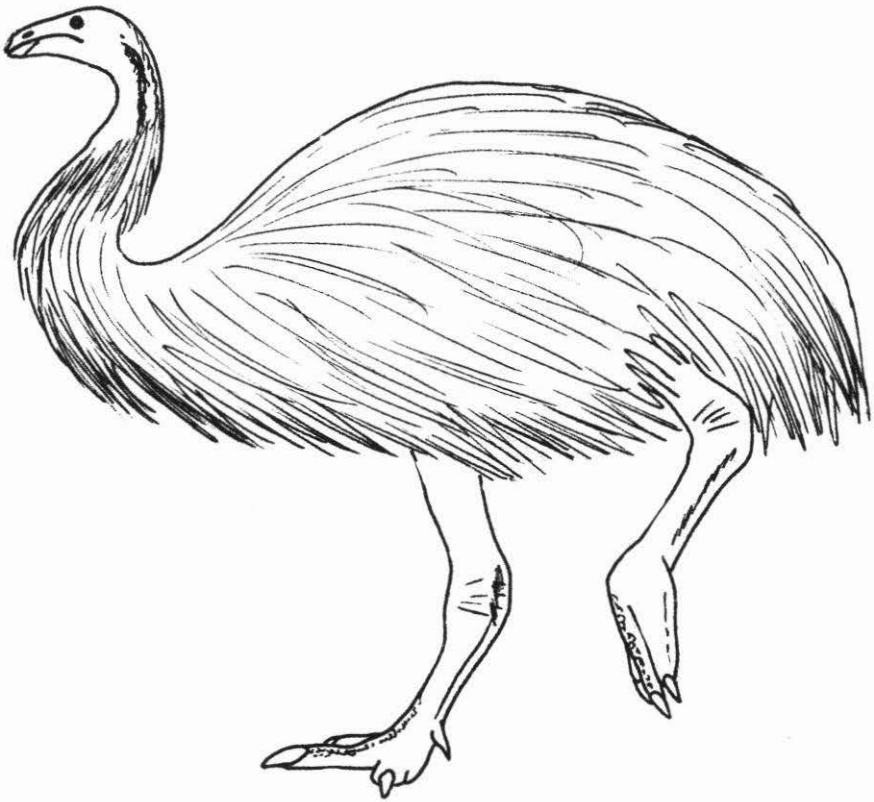

Figure 3. Dinornis novaezealandiae, *showing general appearance. It is estimated that this species stood 1.5 metres tall and weighed 170 kg. Credit: Geoffrey J. Cox.*

What evidence do we have that moas did actually defend themselves in the way suggested? A rock drawing from South Canterbury (McCulloch and Cox 1992:57) offers a clue here.

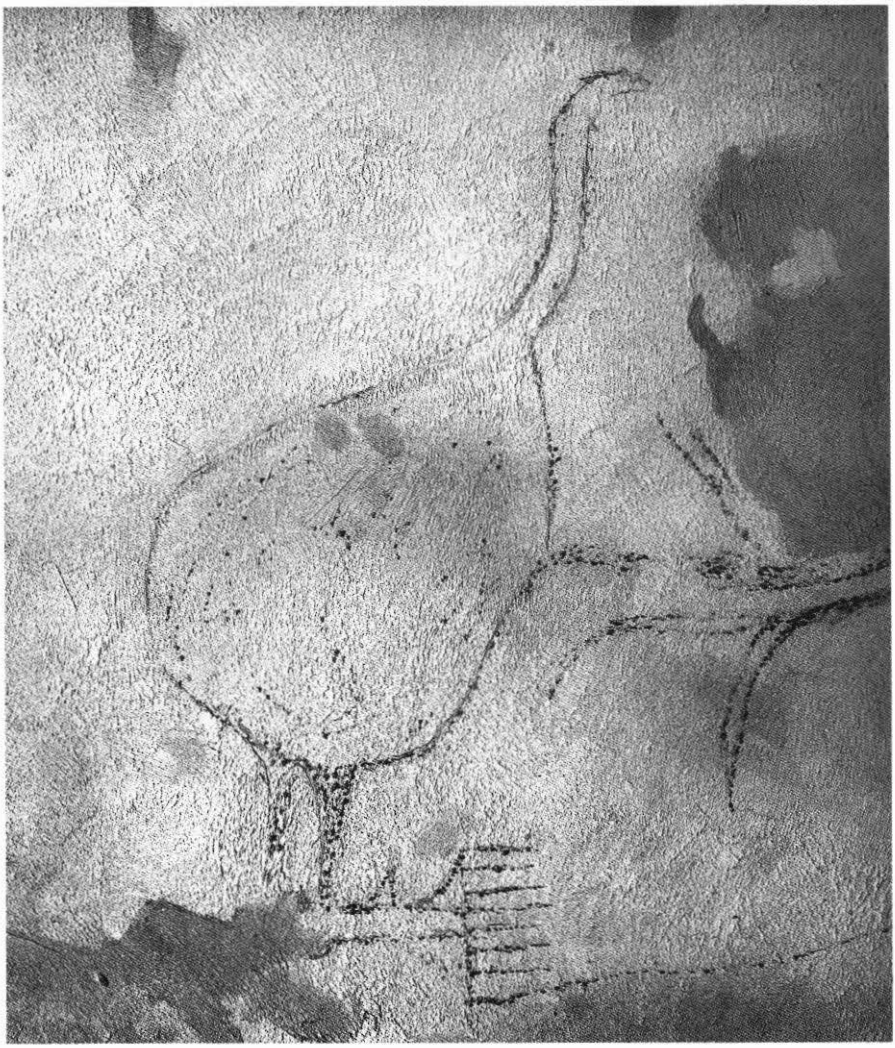

Figure 4. Rock drawing of a moa, South Canterbury. (Canterbury Museum)

The drawing strongly suggests that moas defended themselves by raising their feet and bringing them down with a raking movement. I have been assured professionally that this would have been a distinct possibility (Rob Lawrence, personal communication).

5. Loss of Original Significance

It is suggested that with the moa's disappearance, the original significance of the 'three-fingered hand' was soon lost. By the 19th century it had long been established as a carving convention the origin of which was explained differently in different parts of the country. As far as moas were concerned, nobody by this time knew anything about them - until Europeans started digging up their bones (McCulloch and Cox 1992:34-35).

6. Conclusion

By the early 19th century certain conventions had been established in Maori wood sculpture. One of these was the 'three-fingered hand.' It is suggested that the latter originated in the carved burial chests of the Far North which were hidden away in caves. The surface decoration on the earliest of these, it is suggested, represents the raised feet of a moa, the second-largest species of which was still living in the area at the time. The image was meant to scare off anybody who entered the hiding place. In the course of time the original significance of the 'three-fingered hand' was lost and what was originally the spur on the foot of a moa viewed from below came to be seen as the thumb of a human hand, viewed from above.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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