



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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/>.

UNFINISHED NEPHRITE CEREMONIAL ADZES
AND ERASING IN HEI TIKI

Alan Taylor
Auckland

Unfinished nephrite ceremonial adzes

A characteristic of many ceremonial adzes or *toki pounamu* of the Traditional or Classic period (Davidson 1987:47) is the ground or polished surface terminating at the poll, in a natural or unworked state. This is observable also in some chisels and gauges. Illustrations of ceremonial adzes, chisels, and gauges can be found in Riley (1987).

Serving no obvious technical purpose (in hafting, for example), the unfinished adze poll can reasonably be regarded as a subtle, highly aesthetic decorative element within the total concept of the adze as an essentially non-functional symbol of authority or mana.

Alternative to an aesthetic connotation, is the possibility that the unfinished *toki poutangata* poll is related to custom, being identified with some specific myth or legend dealing with the working or genesis of nephrite during a particular historical or cultural phase. Both unfinished nephrite chisels and gauges share this possibility.

Erasing in hei tiki

Traditional nephrite hei tiki vary in form with some, however, having an identical feature in common: a fully or partly erased mouth. Hei tiki with partly erased mouths are illustrated in Skinner (1966). Reduced by grinding, the erasure is an historically undocumented characteristic of the hei tiki, and has no obvious functional purpose. Like the unfinished ceremonial blade, it may be related to a lost custom. Possibly the reduction of the hei tiki mouth symbolised death of a notable orator-owner: his voice stilled by death. Or perhaps an owner of the hei tiki was taken in warfare, into slavery and oblivion as a member of his tribe - with his oratory lost to his people. Traditionally Maori believed in slavery as a spiritual death.

There is another alternative. Perhaps *ka makutu*, witchcraft, played a significant part in the erasure of mouths in certain hei tiki; the mouth of the hei tiki's owner being ritually erased so as to deprive him of his oratorical skill against another tribe or hapu by a *tohunga makutu* in a rite similar to the one described by Best (1924:274). The hei tiki

being the medium in the rite.

References

- Best, E. 1924. The Maori. Wellington, H.H. Tombs.
- Davidson, J. 1987. From seeds to flowering: cultural change.
In Wilson, J. (ed) The Archaeology of the Maori:43-48.
Auckland, Penguin.
- Riley, M. 1987. Jade Treasures of the Maori. Viking Seven Seas.
- Skinner, H.D. 1966. The Maori Hei Tiki. Dunedin, Otago Museum.