

A unique Māori fishhook: rediscovery of another Cook voyage artefact

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ABSTRACT: Examination of Māori fishhooks known to have been collected during Captain Cook's voyages of exploration (1768–79) suggests that ornately carved examples were extremely rare pre-European contact. One uniquely carved hook, held in the National Museum of Ireland, can be confirmed as a Cook voyage artefact through an illustration in an unpublished early nineteenth-century portfolio by Kenelm H. Digby, held in the New South Wales State Library, Sydney, Australia.

KEYWORDS: matau, Māori fishhooks, pre-European, carving, Cook voyage artefact.

Introduction

The Pacific voyages of Captain James Cook (1768–79) revealed to the Western world an entirely new vista of geographic and scientific knowledge (Beaglehole 1955, 1961, 1967). The first voyage was, in fact, a scientific mission organised by the Royal Society of London to observe the transit of Venus from Tahiti. The British Admiralty went to considerable lengths to ensure that on each of his voyages Cook was accompanied by learned men of science, their assistants and artists. The scientists included Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander, Georg and Johann Forster, Anders Sparrman, Sydney Parkinson, Alexander Buchan, David Nelson, William Hodges, John Webber and others, whose primary interests were botanical and zoological, rather than ethnographical. The importance of the 'natural curiosities' collected on these voyages of discovery was recognised, and many biological specimens – well documented with notes on localities and dates of collection – were taken back to England. They were later formally described and published, becoming type specimens for numerous species. In contrast, although scientists, officers and crew made extensive collections and observations of ethnographic materials, the objects themselves were often poorly documented (Kaeppeler 1978a) and frequently not highly regarded.

For example, in an address to the Dublin University Zoological and Botanical Association in 1856, the chairman, Dr Robert Ball, opened the meeting by saying: 'Tonight Professor Harvey favours us with some remarks on the inhabitants of the Fiji Islands, whose arms, etc., you see hung around the room. Collections of this kind have been sneered at but very improperly as a right knowledge of them is of great importance in the very difficult and very high study of ethnology' (Freeman 1949).

Māori artefacts were obtained by early explorers and taken back to Europe, but few were documented and many in museum collections cannot now be identified. Ethnographic artefacts known to have been collected during Cook's voyages that have endured to the present day represent the earliest exchanges between Māori and European, and are objects that have not been influenced by the impact of European culture and technology.

Many artefacts from Cook's voyages were distributed to wealthy patrons or sold to collectors of 'artificial curiosities' and, after 200 years of curio trading, most have now lost their association with those voyages. Hence, not surprisingly, few fishhooks can be verified as Cook artefacts (Kaeppeler 1978a, b; Paulin 2010). The date of collection of many fishhooks can be broadly established through museum catalogue records and known details of donors; however,



Fig. 1 Fishing hooks from New Zealand illustrated in Kenelm H. Digby's 'Naturalist's companion' (1810–1817: 215) (New South Wales State Library, Sydney, Australia: digital order number a155030).

many hooks passed from collector to collector and original details have been lost. Today, artefacts from Cook's voyages are represented in almost every major European museum (Kaepler 1978a, b; Paulin 2010), and more than 100 smaller museums and private collections throughout Europe hold collections of early Māori artefacts (Hooper 2006; Arapata Hakiwai, pers. comm. 2010).

The often haphazard composition of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century European museums reflected the then widely held belief that the diversity and complexity of nature was positive proof of the existence of a divine creator. This encyclopaedic approach is well demonstrated by Kenelm Henry Digby's 'Naturalist's companion', a portfolio prepared from specimens and objects in the museums of Trinity College and the Dublin Society in Ireland in the early 1800s (Digby 1810–1817). This portfolio, now held in the New South Wales State Library (Sydney, Australia), includes numerous illustrations of a wide variety of animals and birds, as well as of many

human artefacts, including two Māori fishhooks (Fig. 1). Digby's stated intention was to highlight to all 'but the most insensible mind wonder at the formation and the various properties, and dispositions of the Brute Creation'. Comparison of Digby's (1810–1817) manuscript with published catalogues from contemporary museums, such as the Leverian Museum (Holophusikon) or William Bullock's Museum, shows how close his conceptual work was to the layout and interpretation of these museums (New South Wales State Library 2001).

The National Museum of Ireland collection

The collection of Māori artefacts held in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) includes 16 composite fishhooks (matau) and 14 lures (pā). Some of these hooks and lures were obtained during Cook's voyages, while others were collected in the late 1800s (Freeman 1949; Cherry 1990).

On Cook's second voyage, James Patten of Ulster sailed as surgeon on the *Resolution*. Patten later settled in Dublin. His collection of Pacific artefacts (including several Māori fishhooks), was subsequently presented to Trinity College, Dublin, around 1777. Another collection in Dublin came from Captain James King, who sailed on Cook's third voyage and who took over command of the *Discovery* following the death of Captain Charles Clerke (Freeman 1949; Cherry 1990). The items collected by King on the voyage were not presented to Trinity College until after his death in 1784; they were donated by his father, the Reverend James King, who was Dean of Raphoe in County Donegal. The Dublin Marine Society donated further 'curiosities' to Trinity College in 1792, which must also have been collected on one of Cook's voyages (Freeman 1949).

Most items in the collection of Trinity College were transferred to the National Museum of Ireland (established in 1877) in 1882 and 1885 (Freeman 1949; Cherry 1990), but the clubs, spears and other weapons were not transferred until 1894 (National Museum of Ireland 1895; Cherry 1990). It is unclear when the fishhooks were transferred, and no complete catalogue of the objects from Trinity College exists, so it is not possible to distinguish fishhooks collected by Patten from those collected by King.

In 1909, the museum purchased a collection of Māori artefacts from Dr Isaac Usher, who had acquired them from his father-in-law, Captain George Meyler. Meyler fought in the New Zealand land wars between 1860 and 1889, and had deposited some items in the museum in 1891. Further items were later added by travellers such as Dr James McKellar, and from other collections donated to the Science and Art Museum of the Royal Dublin Society, which has now become the National Museum of Ireland (Cherry 1990).

Unfortunately, the numerous items from New Zealand in the National Museum of Ireland were not clearly labelled and became mixed during reorganisation of the collections in the early twentieth century, to the extent that it is not possible to identify items collected during Cook's voyages from those in the Meyler and later collections (Cherry 1990). However, one composite wooden hook with a bone point (Fig. 2) held in the museum's collection (item NMI AE1893-760) is of great interest. It is stoutly made and has a detailed carving of a full human figure on the shank. This hook is one of two illustrated in the early nineteenth century by Digby (1810–1817) (Fig. 1, left). The second hook illustrated by Digby (Fig. 1, right) is also a composite wooden hook with a bone point and may possibly be item



Fig. 2 A unique composite Māori fishhook with a carved figure on the shank, almost certainly from Cook's second or third voyage (National Museum of Ireland, Dublin: AE1893-760).

NMI AE1893-761, which has a carving on the head of the shank; however, the illustration is poorly executed and does not allow a positive identification.

Discussion

Māori fishhooks with carved ornamentation collected by early explorers or recovered from archaeological sites are rare (Hjarno 1967: 44; Davidson 1984: 68; Furey 1996: 76; Paulin 2010). In his journal of Cook's first voyage, Sydney Parkinson illustrated nine Māori fishhooks, but only one – a large wood and bone composite hook (Parkinson 1773: pl. XXVI, fig. 6) – has any ornamentation, which is in the form of a carved figure, possibly a manaia (a stylised human figure with a bird-like head), on the snood knob (Fig. 3, left). The whereabouts of this carved hook, if it still exists, is unknown, and the remaining eight hooks illustrated are plain. No other Māori fishhooks with carved ornamentation are known among hooks confirmed as being collected during Cook's

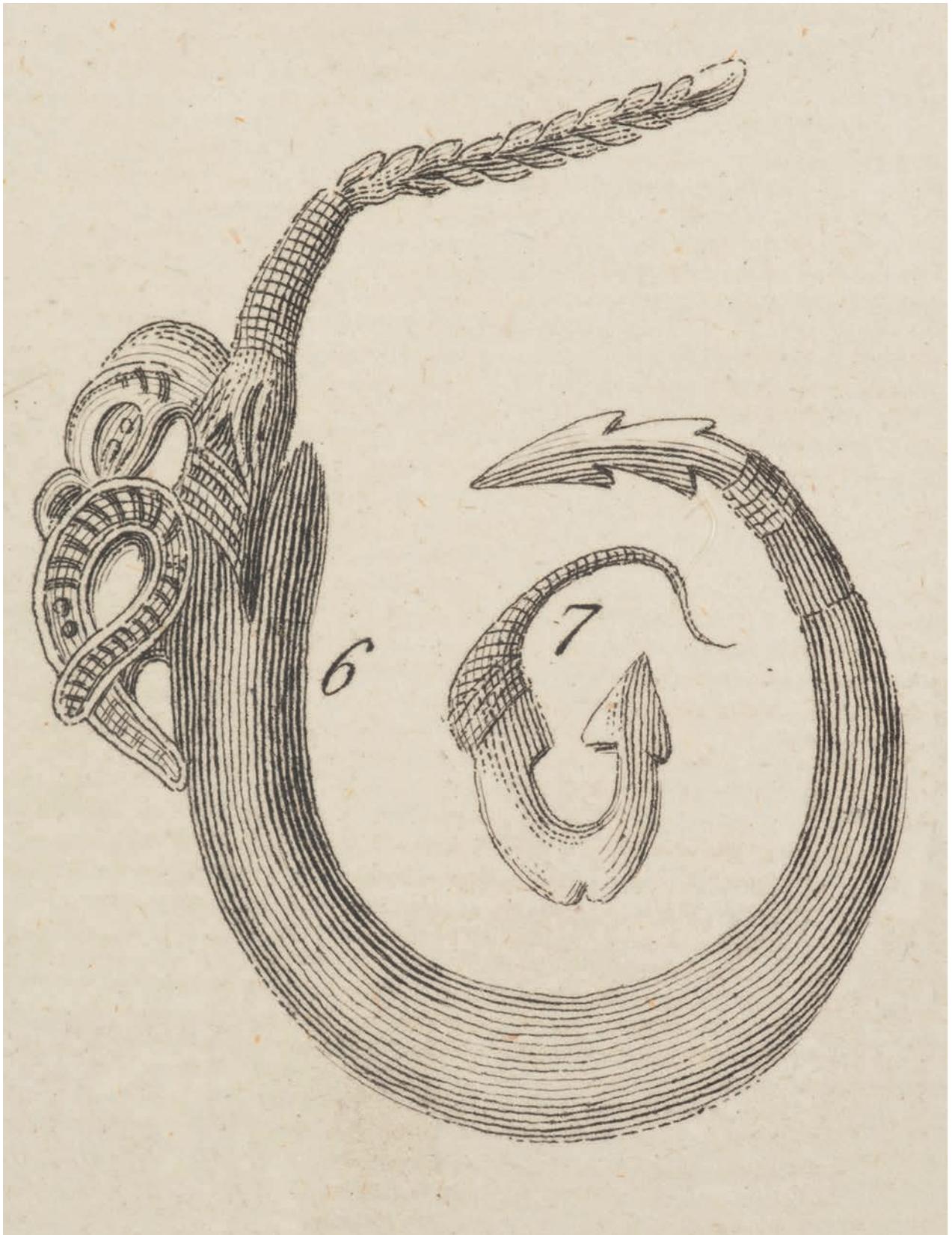


Fig. 3 A carved composite hook and one-piece bone hook illustrated by Sydney Parkinson from Cook's first voyage (detail from Parkinson (1773: pl. XXVI, figs 6–7)).

voyages. Nor are carved examples represented among hooks collected by other early explorers, or among hooks that have unconfirmed but possible links to Cook's voyages. In contrast, many fishhooks obtained by collectors and museums from the mid- to late 1800s often have ornately carved snood knobs, and some hooks obtained by museums in the early 1900s also have detailed and intricate carving on the shanks (Paulin 2010).

Many carved hooks, including examples ranging from those with carved masks to full human figures, are known from among hooks obtained by collectors in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Harry Beasley, Walter Buller, Alexander Turnbull and William Oldman collections). However, because these items passed from collector to collector and through various sale rooms in Britain before ending in museum collections, they generally lack detailed information on their origins or historical context. The two carved hooks in the National Museum of Ireland collections (NMI AE1893-760 and 761) must have been acquired by the museum prior to 1817, given the date of Digby's portfolio (1810–1817) in which they are illustrated (Fig. 1). Therefore, these hooks cannot be part of the Meyler or later collections.

The small carved mask on the head of the shank of hook NMI AE1893-761 held in the National Museum of Ireland superficially resembles a carved Māori fishhook in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, England (item 1977.818), which was obtained by Captain John Erskine in 1850, and another hook held in *Musée du Quai Branly*, Paris, France (item 1864 71.1887.14.18), donated by Sir Walter Buller (1838–1906). However, the date of collection of Buller's hook is unknown. Other hooks with similar carved masks are held in many museum collections; however, their dates of collection cannot be verified.

Wooden components of artefacts, including fishhooks, have not persisted in archaeological sites (Buck 1949: 197), except in a few waterlogged locations (Davidson 1984: 62, 109) and dry caves (Skinner 1924), hence the full extent of carving of pre-contact fishhooks is unknown. Early Māori fishhooks of the Archaic period resemble hooks from other areas of Polynesia, and can be distinguished from later hooks of the Classic period, which have more ornamentation and reflect a cultural change that began in northern areas of New Zealand. However, the distinction between the earlier and later styles relies largely on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evidence and undated pieces to construct a hypothetical sequence of change (Davidson 1984: 211).

The demand for artefacts by European tourists and collectors in the latter part of the nineteenth century resulted in the production of a large number of replica hooks that cannot easily be distinguished from earlier examples (Paulin 2010).

Kaeppler (2010) illustrated two composite Māori fishhooks from the Blackburn collection in Hawai'i. One hook (Kaeppler 2010: 356, fig. 513) is plain, lacking any carving, and has a provenance to Joseph Banks on Cook's first voyage. The second hook (Kaeppler 2010: 19, 356, fig. 512) has a richly carved mask extending over half the shank and pāua-shell inlays; its provenance is attributed to the London Missionary Society and Kaeppler states that it is referred to in a publication by Cousins (1895: '158–159' [error for 138–139?]). However, a comparison of the hook depicted in fig. 512 by Kaeppler (2010) against the hook illustrated by Cousins (1895: 139, fig. 32) shows that they are not the same object, because Cousins' hook has a small, crudely carved mask extending over only one-fourth of the shank, and a different lashing. Kaeppler (2010) described the Blackburn hook as: 'This type of ritual hook was used to catch fish for the gods, priests, chiefs, and chiefly women', but provided no reference for the source of this information.

There is no evidence that pre-European contact Māori produced ornate hooks for ritual purposes (Paulin 2010), and the hook illustrated by Kaeppler (2010) is most likely a late-1800s example made for the tourist trade. Māori ceremonies conducted before line-fishing expeditions involved the lines and hooks that were to be used to catch fish. The Reverend Richard Taylor noted several religious ceremonies connected with fishing and described how, the day before Māori went to sea, they arranged all their hooks around some human excrement, and used an incantation, or *karakia*, 'which will not bear being repeated' (Taylor 1855: 83). All available evidence suggests that these hooks were plain and for practical purposes, without ornate decorations.

Conclusions

Unlike many other richly carved Māori artefacts attributed to the voyages of James Cook (Shawcross 1970; Kaeppler 1978a; Davidson 1984; Coote 2000; Hooper 2006; Kaeppler *et al.* 2009), carved fishhooks that can be dated to pre-European contact are extremely rare. It is possible that pre-contact carved fishhooks were collected by early explorers but were gifted to wealthy patrons and remain in private collections, rather than being donated to public museums.

Detailed ornamental carving of fishhooks was not easily achieved until steel tools became available after the arrival of Europeans. The production of many ornate hooks in the late 1800s and early 1900s by both Māori and European forgers was in response to demand created by European dealers and collectors (Watt 1990; Day 2005; Paulin 2010). Māori were shrewd entrepreneurs and it is clear that these hooks were not intended to catch fish; rather, they were made to catch the eye of the Europeans. Ornate fishhooks are examples of a formerly rare category of taonga, or prized possession, that came to be specifically designed and produced for their desirability as trade items; this process mirrors that of the most internationally identifiable Māori symbol, the hei tiki (Beck & Mason 2010).

The National Museum of Ireland Māori fishhook NMI AE1893-760 (Fig. 2) is unique. The illustration in Digby (1810–1817: 215) (Fig. 1) confirms it as from Cook's second or third voyage, and it is the only known existing example of a Māori fishhook with elaborate carved ornamentation in the form of a full human figure on the shank whose date of manufacture can be reliably given as prior to the mid-1800s.

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