

# TAU RAPA : The Maori Canoe Stern-post.

By GILBERT ARCHY, Director.

Maori art in wood-carving ranges from the crude dramatic vigour of defiant stare-eyed effigies, through the figure sequences and involved patterns of house carvings, door lintels and gables, to the delicate intricacies of flutes and feather-boxes. But in all this manifold variety, can anything be said to surpass the graceful strength and rhythmic liveliness of the prow and sternpost of the war canoe; particularly the latter, which draws together the converging lines of the after sheer, carrying them high up in a fine sweeping terminal curve?

The paired ribs which strengthen the *tau rapa's* lacework pattern seem also to issue directly from the tapering lines of the stern, but in such subtle harmony with the whole outline as not to compete with, but rather to complement, the latter's emergent unity with the hull. Indeed, so easily does either lead the eye away from the up-curving stern, that I have sometimes wondered which is the fundamental structure, and whether the *tau rapa* should be considered as a panel whose fragile openwork needed strengthening, or as a pair of upwardly directed curved bars with a fringe of lace-like spirals.

It will probably be agreed that the first interpretation is correct: it is in accord with the curved panel form of the fishing canoe stern-post and with the general form of high stern-posts in Polynesia; besides it is not in the nature of the wood-carver to append frills or fringes to the outline of his structure; he prefers, instead, that his pattern should be contained within the structural form.

The form and the general outline of the stern-post have been described before; but there are some details that seem to have escaped record, and it is hoped that the discussion which follows will neither prove uninteresting as an analysis nor lessen our appreciation of the beauty in form and pattern of the *tau rapa*.

The general design, then, is a curved panel reinforced by a pair of more strongly curving ribs. These spring from the front of the base, approach the hinder border as they rise, and then

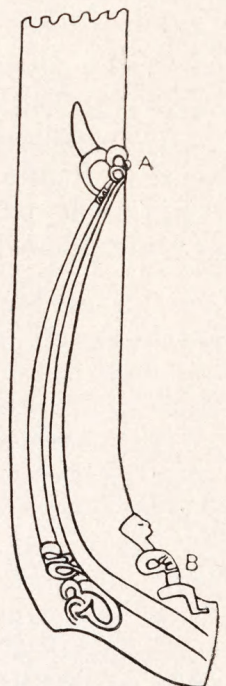


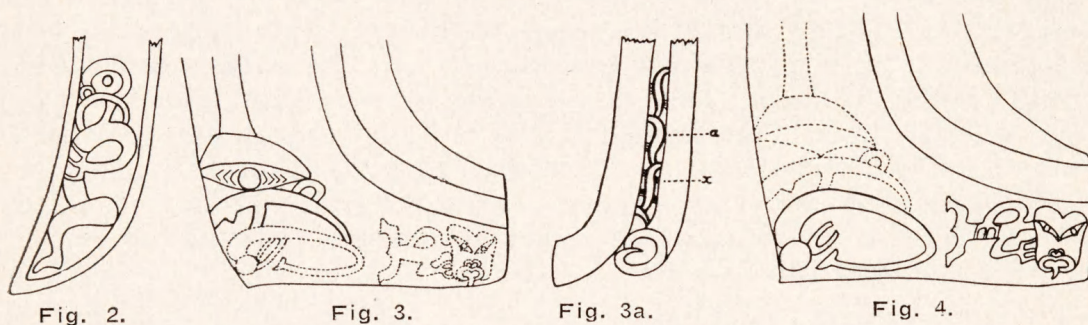
Fig. 1.



sweep upward and forward to meet the front margin about quarter way from the top. (Text-fig. 1, A.)

At this point the ribs are more slender and converge to be grasped in the mouth of a *manaia* figure. At the base of the stern-post there is a human figure (B) facing forward and looking into the canoe. The remainder of the panel consists of double spirals and small details to be mentioned below.

The human figure (B) at the base of the *rapa* is in a seated position and usually is rendered in a fairly naturalistic manner. In some examples, it projects freely forward from the front margin (Pl. 41, figs. 1 and 2), but more often it is contained within it, though still retaining its naturalistic form (Pl. 41, figs. 3 and 4). In a few cases, however, this figure is completely stylized (Pl. 41, figs. 5 and 6) and incorporated into the general openwork pattern. It is interesting to note that in most of those so rendered the lower jaw is omitted and the neck is telescoped into the open mouth; the facial details and the limbs take on the form of a series of loops, which, when their anatomical import has been clearly apprehended, give one an understanding of the smaller details in the openwork pattern. (Text-fig. 2.)



On examining the curved strengthening ribs it will be observed that, while the anterior one is a plain bar without anatomical details, its fellow invariably ends below in a human head in profile, i.e., the *manaia* face (Text-fig. 3): this may be in relief from the solid (Pl. 41, fig. 3) or in pierced carving (fig. 5), in which case it is sometimes rendered by open-work loops (fig. 1).

In the stern-post of Te Toki-a-Tapiri (Pl. 41, fig. 1) a clearly represented arm passes from each rib to grasp its fellow; that of the front rib rises from an enspiralled shoulder-boss as is customary in the carving of an arm. This might be regarded simply as the individual fancy of a carver. The same pair of arms, however, are clearly represented (though without the hands) in fig. 2; moreover, if the small connecting pieces between the ribs be examined in the other *rapa* shown on pl. 41, it will be seen that, in each of them, a couple of these cross pieces are different from the others, and, indeed, are vestiges of the arms carved in more natural form in fig. 1. They are, therefore, a fundamental part of the structure or anatomy of the strengthening ribs which may perhaps be regarded as extraordinarily lengthened human



figures. I may add that these vestigial arms are not invariably present; they were absent from eight of the forty-four *rapa* I examined.

H. D. Skinner (J.P.S. 33, p. 235) has noted that the general effect of the curved ribs is to indicate the beak of a bird, or, as I would prefer to put it, the beak of a *manaia*; it might perhaps be this as well as being a couple of elongated human figures, for the Maori was not averse to superimposing one anatomical detail upon another. On the other hand, I have examined many extremely elongated *manaia* heads in the detail of wall carvings, and find that either the eye, the tongue or a tooth is always present, as if to assure us of what was being represented; these elements are absent from the *tau rapa* ribs.

In a stern-post in the Otago Museum, a photograph of which has been kindly supplied by Mr. Skinner, the details between the ribs are in the form shown in Text-fig. 3a.

Eliminating the small chocks (x) which are intended to act merely as connecting pieces, and which, as usual, have a decorative notching quite different from that of the skeuomorphic elements, we find the latter to be sinuously curved pieces (a) somewhat like a slug in shape. They can be perfectly matched by the bodies and limbs of reduced *manaia* fitted into long narrow spaces in wall-carvings, i.e., in the *pou-pou* of the carved house Rangitihī in this Museum.

On the solid basal portion of the stern-post two figures are carved on each side; one is smaller and only moderately stylized, while the other, though larger, is structurally reduced to a *manaia* head and an arm forming a prominent loop (Text-fig. 4). At first sight, this loop looks like the lower lip or an enlarged duplicate upper lip, of the *manaia* at the bottom of the reinforcing rib, but a closer examination reveals its true nature.

This loop is sometimes much elongated and its *manaia* form can be better recognized if it is presented in a more nearly vertical position, thus (Text-fig. 5):—

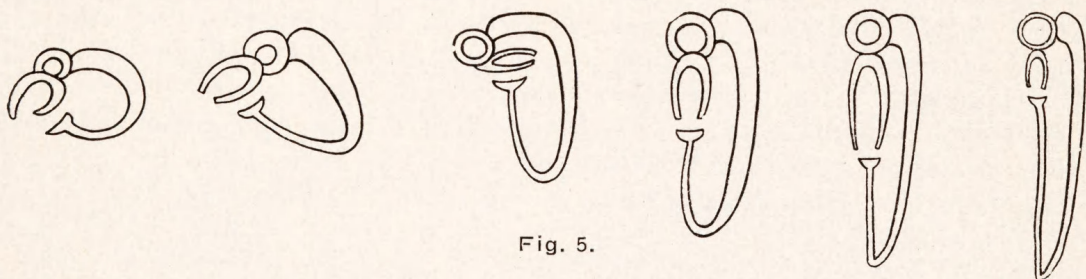


Fig. 5.

To observe these examples in the position they occupy in the *rapa*, turn the bottom of the page to the right.

These reduced or partial *manaia* are interesting instances of the Maori's utilization of anatomical details as design elements.

The *manaia* figure (Text-fig. 6) whose beak or looped mouth grasps the converging upper ends of the reinforcing ribs is more



constant in form. It is a curious creature, for, besides the easily recognizable head, and the arm with its hand grasping the hinder rib, it has a curved conical hump carved either with a single face or with two closely approximated faces in line. I imagine this hump may be a second limb, or else the *manaia* body with the limbs close-pressed to the sides and represented by faces. Strange as this may seem, it is a condition frequently to be seen in larger carvings where its nature is more readily apparent. It arises from the habit of turning a hand or a foot into a *manaia* face; the carver has then only to shorten the arm and carve it on the body in low relief, with a large *manaia* face for the hand, to produce this result. Text figure 7 illustrates an example from a wall-carving in the Auckland Museum.

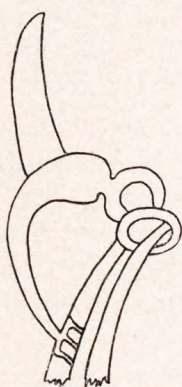


Fig. 6.

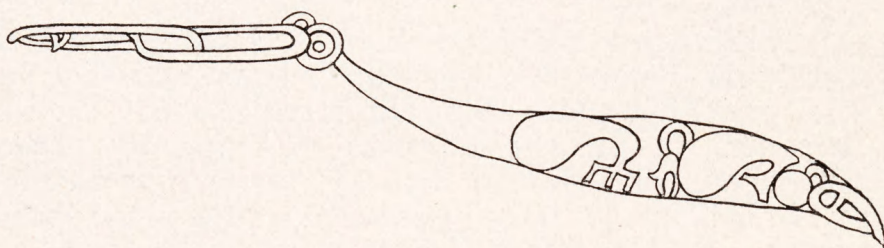


Fig. 7.

Turning now to the pierced carving which comprises the remainder of the stern-post, we may first discern, at the top of the panel (Text-fig. 8; detail from pl. 41, fig. 3) a highly stylized full-face, or at least its elements, i.e., the loops forming the dumb-bell shaped mouth, a pair of loops for nostrils, and solid eye-balls surrounded by a loop for the eye-brows. The same kind of face-rendering can be seen, less conventionalized, in a canoe-prow, at the middle of the central panel between the two large spirals.

The remainder of the detail consists of two rows, anterior and posterior, of double-spirals. In each row the spirals alternate with details which, on close inspection, are recognizable as just so much of a stylized *manaia* as will fit into the space between the spirals. Usually no more than a head and an arm are represented (Text-fig. 9a), as in the *manaia* on the *rapa* base. There may be room for an extra loop for a leg (b); but more frequently the detail is reduced to a head alone (c) and (d).



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9a.



Fig. 9b.



Fig. 9c.



Fig. 9d.



I cannot add to the above description of the stern-post design and the elements which comprise it any explanation as to what it is intended to represent or symbolize. There is, however, such constancy in the general design, and regularity in the disposition of even its smallest details, that it must surely have had some meaning, both to the Maori carver and to his fellows.

It is to be hoped that, if an explanation is ultimately forthcoming, it will rest upon reasonable influence and not on conjecture and romance. Perhaps some passage in legend or tradition may provide a reliable clue.

In conclusion, I append details of the *tau rapa* illustrated on Plate 41. Fig. 1 is the stern-post of the great war canoe Te Toki-a-Tapiri in the Auckland Museum: Kahungunu tribe, Poverty Bay. Fig. 2 is from a model canoe in the Oslo Ethnographical Museum. Fig. 3: an exceptionally fine specimen with beautifully rendered spirals, recovered from a swamp near Tauranga and presented to the Auckland Museum by Mr. F. Crossley Mappin. No. 4 was from a Ngapuhi canoe abandoned on the Pongakawa River, Rotorua district, during Hongi Hika's raid: Auckland Museum. No. 5 is in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia. No. 6 is in the British Museum; it belonged to the Ngapuhi chief Hone Heke, and was presented to the Museum in 1847 by Sir Everard Home.

I am much indebted to the Directors of the Oslo and the Pennsylvania Museums and the Trustees of the British Museum for the gift of these photographs of specimens in their collections.

For cultural reasons, this image has been removed. Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

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Archev, Gilbert. 1938. "TAU RAPA: The Maori Canoe Stern-post." *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum* 2, 171-175.

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