

EARLY HUMAN HISTORY

TANGONGE WAHAROA

KAITAIA LINTEL

Curated From The Te Ahu Museum Collections



Drain laying out in Pukepoto, Kaitaia in 1920 when the waharoa lintel was found. Northwood Collections, Te Ahu Museum.

In 1913, the Reform Government passed the Kaitaia Land Drainage Act. Short of fertile land in the Far North, the government recognised the need for swamp land to be drained and converted into acreage for cropping and farming.

Part of the work that grew out of the Act was the drainage of the Tangonge swamp, near Kaitaia. This was once an area that was either a significant kumara field or a set of weirs for farming eel.

The Tangonge swamp required many years of hard work from a large labouring crew to return the land to a state fit for farming. One of the men working on the crew in 1920 was George Watson.

As George was hand digging a drain on the boundary between Old Land Claim No. 8 and Section 51, Ahipara parish, he came across a carving embedded in the clay at the bottom of the swamp.

What George had found was what came to be known initially as the Kaitaia Lintel and later as Tangonge Waharoa. Estimated at being over 600 years old, it is 2.32 metres long and 39 centimetres high. It is carved in a style less intricate than later whakairo.



Tangonge Waharoa, Kaitaia Lintel. Auckland Museum.

The design is debated but includes what appears to be a human figure in the centre, with arms outstretched and linked to manaia at either end. The manaia are identified variously as either lizards or birds or dogs.

The whakairo is likely to be Tōtara or Podocarpus Laetus mountain Tōtara.

The whakairo was initially identified as a lintel (or pare) which would have hung over a doorway. However, this is now in doubt as the taonga is carved on both sides indicating it is more likely to have been displayed over a gate or entrance way. In common usage it is still identified as the Kaitaia Lintel.

Initially broken in two, the whakairo was mended, and over time passed through hands before eventually being incorporated into the collections of Auckland War Memorial Museum, where it resides today.

The origins of Tangonge Waharoa are uncertain. Most historians agree the style of whakairo links back to eastern Polynesia. Mid-Twentieth Century anthropologists saw a connection with the designs of statues on Easter Island.

Later, researchers suggest Tangonge Waharoa is linked to Raiātea in the Society Islands. Raiātea (often identified as Hawaiki) is identified as the point of departure for Māori on their journey across the Pacific, including to Aotearoa. Carvings that Cook acquired in Raiātea closely resemble the style and construction of Tangonge Waharoa.



Tangonge Waharoa, Kaitaia Lintel at Te Ahu Museum in 2015, Kaitaia. Auckland Museum.

Tangonge Waharoa is one of the most significant taonga for the Te Rawara iwi. It represents endurance, beauty and utility, and is a source of great pride, mana and identity for the iwi. Tangonge has been adopted by Te Rūnanga o Te Rarawa as its logo and is visible throughout Kaitaia and across the rohe.

Because of this importance to the people of Te Rawara it is hoped that Tangonge Waharoa will one day soon return home to Te Hiku o Te Ika.

This would enable the mana whenua to be close to one of their most precious taonga and embrace the mana it emanates.

References:

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Usually displayed in the Auckland Museum, in 2012 Tangonge travelled back to Tai Tokerau. After a reception at Pukepoto marae it was displayed at Te Ahu Heritage Centre for several years. It returned to the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 2016.

Pictured from left to right: Bernard Makoare (Auckland Museum Taumata-a-Iwi), Philip Cross (Chair Te Ahu Museum), Te Rarawa kaumatua, Hami Piripi (Chair Te Rarawa), Roy Clare (Auckland Museum Director) and Haare Williams (Auckland Museum kaumatua)