

A Maori hand weapon from Southwark

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IN AUGUST 1978 trial excavation was undertaken by the Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee (now part of the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology) at a site in Hendre Road, SE1 (TQ 3336 7865)¹.

In a dumped layer of brick rubble and clay, deposited in the late 19th century or later, a polished stone object was found (Fig. 1). It is a *patu onewa*, a Maori hand weapon (*patu* = weapon; *onewa* = dark grey stone). Its maximum dimensions are 380mm × 98mm × 30mm (15in × 4in × 1¼in), and the three surviving pieces (the bulk of the original) weigh 930g (2lbs). It is made from a metagreywacke, the source of which has been identified from a thin section as perhaps the Taringatura series, South Island, New Zealand². The shape is typical, i.e. a spatulate blade tapered at its lateral margins and distal end, and, towards the proximal end, a tang or grip with a central hole and pommel. The latter has three grooves on each side of a central ridge. The hole was to secure a wrist strap of flax (*Phormium tenax*) or dog skin.

Patu is the generic term for this form of hand weapon. Other types of *patu*, each distinctively shaped and named, were made from different stone, wood or bone, especially whalebone. In his discussion of the form, Skinner stressed that

'in the literature *patu* have often been described as clubs, a misnomer since a club is used with a downward stroke and is normally wielded by both hands. The correct *patupatu* stroke is a one-handed upward jab aimed at the opponent's temple, or at the lower margin of his lower jaw, or at the lower margin of his ribs.'³

Patu, therefore, were perfected in shape, finish and weight for skilled close-quarter fighting. In addition, true to the conventions of Maori society, the weapons

usually possessed the status of their owners, often incorporating that of their ancestors, and were imbued with *tapu* (ceremonial restriction; sanctity). They were as much statements of authority and power as functional weapons. Numerous specimens surviving in New Zealand today, especially those in Maori ownership, retain these symbolic qualities.

Patu are well recorded in the ethnographic literature⁴. Joseph Banks, following his circumnavigation of New Zealand with Captain Cook on H.M.S. *Endeavour* in 1769-70, described them in his *Journal*:

'Patoo patoos" as they [i.e. the Maoris] call'd them, a kind of small hand bludgeon of stone, bone or hard wood most admirably calculated for the cracking of skulls; ... in these they seem'd to put their chief dependance, fastning them by a strong strap to their wrists least they should be wrench'd from them. The principal people seldom stirr'd out without one of them sticking in his girdle ... insomuch that we were almost led to conclude that in peace as well as war they wore them as a warlike ornament in the same manner as we Europaeans wear swords.'⁵

Examples made from stone are known from a few late North Island archaeological sites⁶, but the generic form, at least in bone and wood, is likely to be as old as Polynesian settlement in New Zealand, i.e. from at most between A.D. 600 and 1000⁷. This is because *patu*-shaped artefacts in wood and whalebone dated to A.D. 850-870 have been found on the island of Huahine, Society Islands⁸, which is within the eastern Polynesian area ancestral to New Zealand settlement. In this area, *patu* forms are also known ethnographically on the Chatham Islands and Easter Island.

The intriguing question, of course, is why this *onewa* should have been found in a 19th century domestic deposit in Southwark. There is no need to assume that it belonged to a retired sea captain. *Patu* have been popular collectors' items in Europe since specimens

1. M. G. Dennis (forthcoming) 'Excavations at Hendre Road, SE1' in *Excavations in Southwark 1976-79*, London and Middlesex Archaeol Soc and Surrey Archaeol Soc joint publication. See also B. Richardson 'Excavation Round-up 1978' *London Archaeol* 3 no. 10 (1979) 264.
2. *Pers. comm.* Dr S. O. Agrell, Department of Earth Sciences, University of Cambridge, via Dr C. Forbes.
3. H. D. Skinner 'Patu in the Pacific' in *Comparatively Speaking: Studies in Pacific Material Culture 1921-1972* (1974) 147.
4. See the summary in Sir Peter Buck *The Coming of the Maori* (2nd edn., 1950) 277-80.

5. J. C. Beaglehole (ed.) *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771*, vol. II (2nd edn., 1963) 27.
6. J. Davidson 'Maori prehistory: the state of the art' *Journ Polynesian Soc* 92 299.
7. *Ibid.*, 292-3.
8. Y. H. Sinoto 'A 'patu' from Huahine, Society Islands' *Journ Polynesian Soc* 83 366-7.
9. A. L. Kaeppeler 'Artificial Curiosities', being an exposition of native manufactures collected on the three Pacific voyages of Captain James Cook, R.N. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Special Publication 65 (1978) 185-91.
10. *Ibid.*, 6 and Fig. 12.

were brought back by Captain Cook and others in the 1770s⁹. They are small, handy and beautifully made, and easily transportable. Collectors regard them as vivid evidence of that noble savagery often attributed to Polynesians prior to colonisation. Indeed Joseph Banks was so delighted by *patu onewa* that he had copies cast in bronze to give to Maori and other island chiefs, had he returned on Cook's second voyage¹⁰. Cook vetoed Banks' participation, however, and gave specimens away himself during his second and third voyages (1772-5, 1776-80). Gift-exchange, and subsequently straightforward trade, meant that Pacific objects were widely dispersed after European contact. They were, and remain, material reflections of European fascination with a past Pacific world.

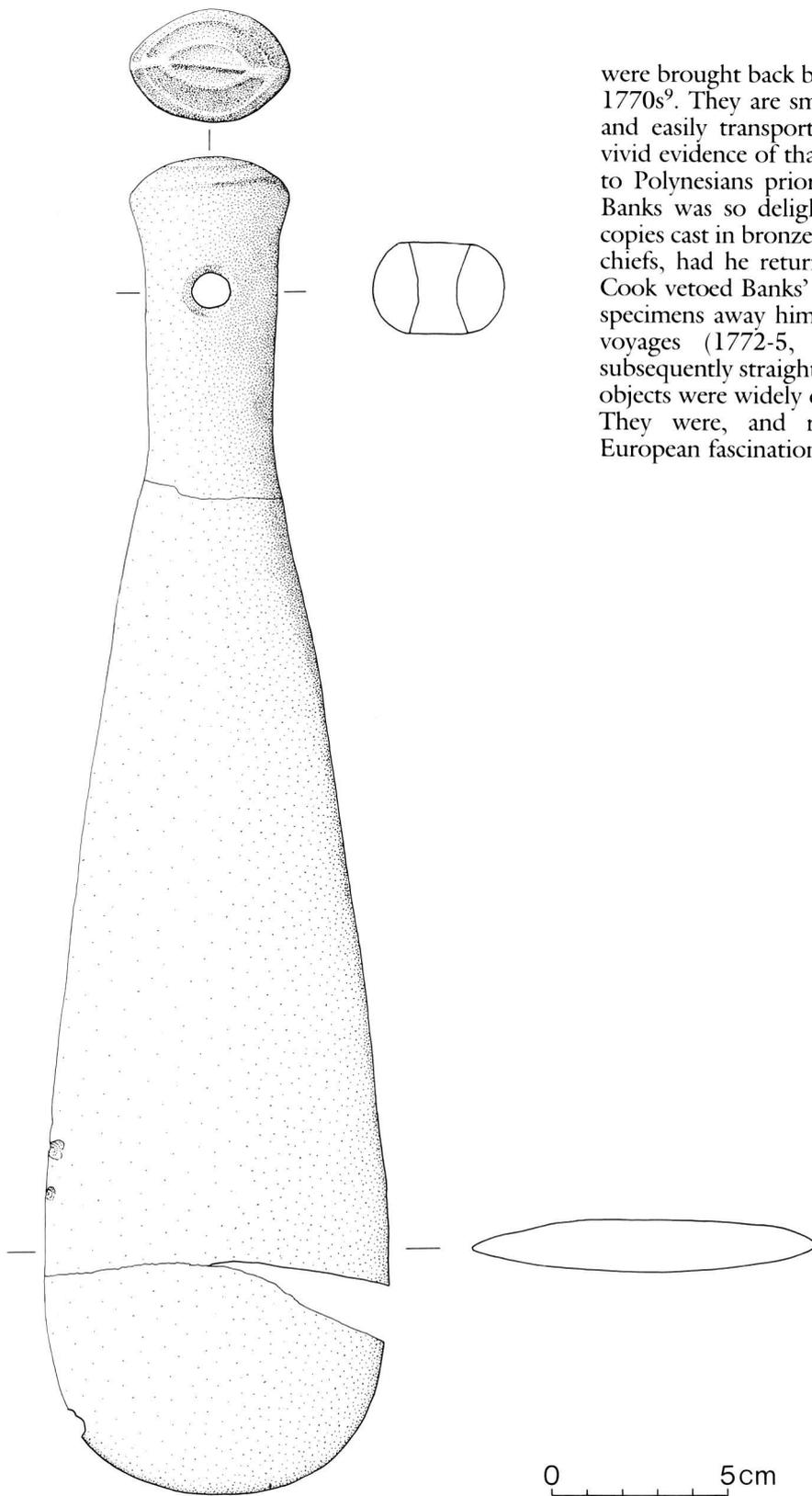


Fig. 1