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The Bird-Contending-with-Snake as an Art Motive in Oceania

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EXCEPT for man himself, the bird is the most visually conspicuous animal in Oceania, and so is expectedly common in Oceanic myth, material culture, and decorative art.¹ In contrast, the land snake is absent from the whole of Polynesia including New Zealand. It is therefore expectedly rare in myth, material culture, and decorative art of the area. The sole known New Zealand literary reference to the snake is Captain Cook's (Cook, 1785, I, 142): 'We had another piece of intelligence from (Taweiharoa), more correctly given, though not confirmed by our own observations, that there are snakes and lizards there of enormous size . . . we could not be mistaken as to the animal; for with his own hand, he drew a very good representation of a lizard on a piece of paper; as also of a snake in order to show what he meant.' It has been shown elsewhere (Skinner, 1964) that in spite of its absence in fact, the crocodile survived vigorously in New Zealand folk-memory as expressed in myth and material culture. The snake was also present there in myth but supporting evidence exists on a much smaller scale than in the case of the crocodile. In northern Melanesia and in New Guinea the bird-contending-with-snake motive is present in myth and material culture, being evident most conspicuously in New Ireland. A survey of the distribution of the motive therefore begins in that group.

¹ This paper had been completed in draft and the illustrations had been selected before the writer became acquainted with the paper 'Eagle and Serpent' by Dr Rudolf Wittkower (1939). 'Since the migration of our symbol can be traced in Europe and the Mediterranean world of antiquity' says Wittkower, 'it is reasonable to suspect that when the same symbol appears outside that area . . . it is not invented again independently, even if the connecting links are still missing.' He goes on to deal very fully with the symbol in the Middle East and in Europe, and less fully but still convincingly in Asia and India. He demonstrates its presence in Indonesia and New Ireland, and suggests that it is present also in Polynesia and New Zealand. The present paper supplies much fuller western Pacific and New Zealand data than were available to Dr Wittkower.

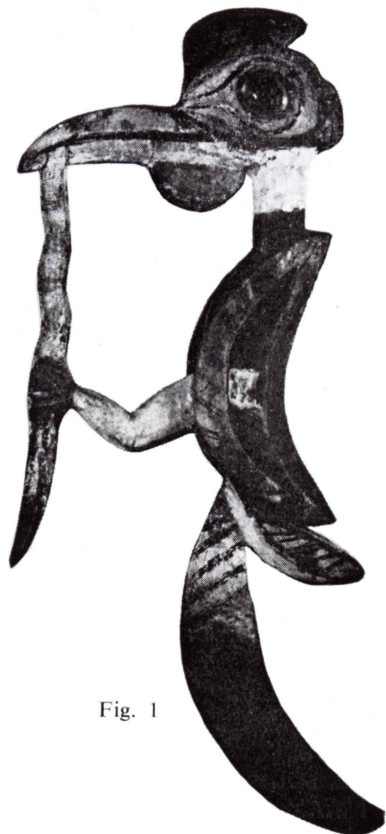


Fig. 1

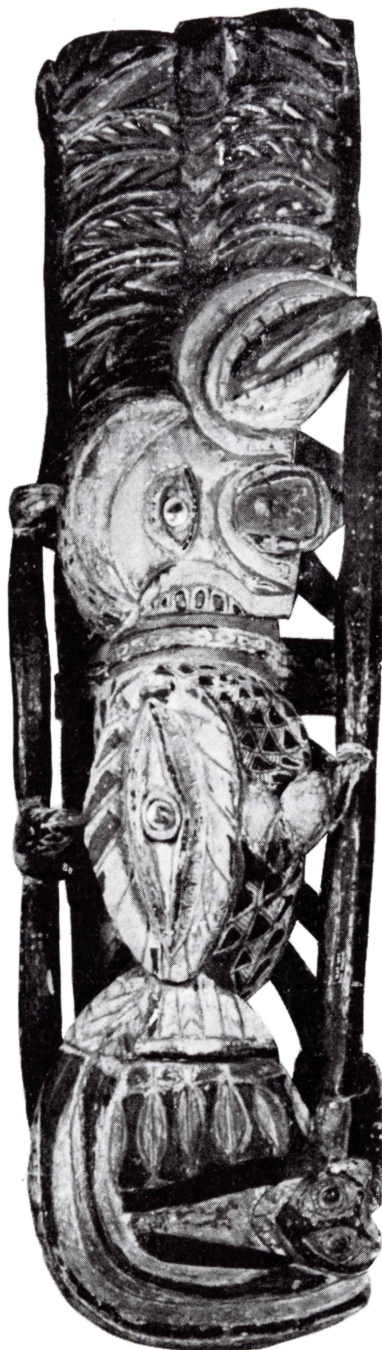


Fig. 2

Fig. 1. Carving, 27 cm. New Ireland.
Otago Museum. Fels Fund. D.35.274.

Fig. 2. Carving, 176 cm. New Ireland.
Otago Museum. Fels Fund. D.39.1602.



Fig. 3

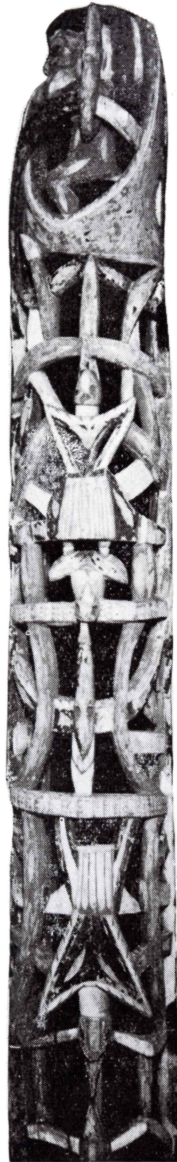


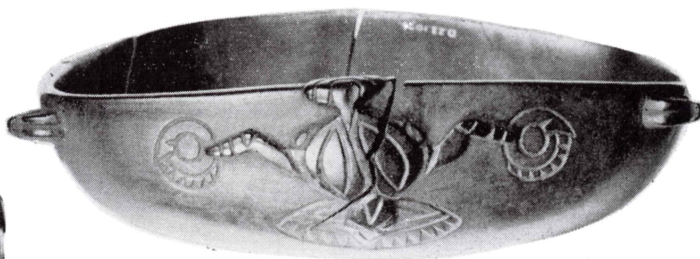
Fig. 4

Fig. 3. Carving. 130 cm. New Ireland. Otago Museum. Fels Fund. D.23.1061.

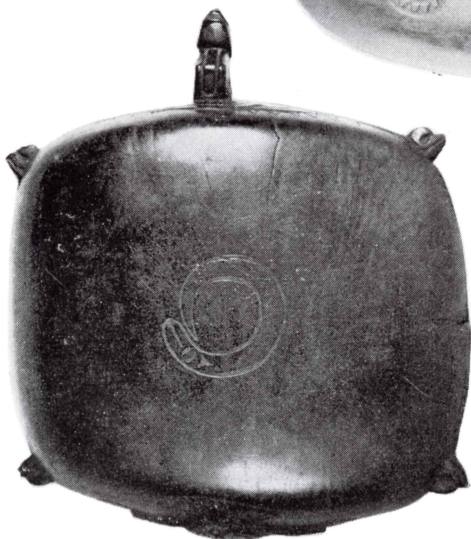
Fig. 4. Carving. 364 cm. New Ireland. Otago Museum. Fels Fund. D.39.1602.



Fig. 5



a.



b.

Fig. 6



c.

Fig. 5. Carving. New Ireland. Australian Museum, Sydney.

Fig. 6. Bowl. 45 x 35 cm. Tami. Otago Museum, Fels Fund. D.23.1076.

New Ireland

Wood more easily cut than any other wood in Oceania gave the New Ireland sculptor an opportunity which he exploited with imagination and vigour.

Fig. 1. 27 cm. A bird, whose characteristics are strongly influenced by those of *Gallus bankiva*, transfixes, with glittering eye, a snake, grasping it by the tail.

Fig. 2. 176 cm. A bird influenced by but more heavily built than *Gallus bankiva* grasps the snake's tail. The snake strikes at its opponent's tail feathers.

Fig. 3. 140 cm. The snake issues from left in four loops, its neck firmly gripped by the bird. The snake strikes at the bird's eye. The first loop of the snake is grasped by a subsidiary bird. A second subsidiary bird recalls the birds present in New Zealand myth at the death of Maui.

Fig. 4. 364 cm. Intricate carving, each end representing a man being swallowed by a crocodile. On right hand end a snake with black body and white head, strikes upward across crocodile's lower jaw through the hook of the man's arm at the crocodile's upper jaw. The crocodile's body is replaced by an arabesque of birds and snakes.

Fig. 5. New Ireland carving in the collection of the Australian Museum, Sydney. The central human figure is flanked by two birds each of which drags a snake from the ear region of the human figure. There is a pair of outer, smaller, figures, each holding a horizontal paddle. In its neck each of these smaller figures has a socket designed to hold a head secured by a peg. The heads and their pegs are missing. If the missing head were human (i.e. were similar to that of the central figure) they would have been carved solid with the body, as was done with the central figure. I suggest that the missing heads were bird heads set on pegs because of the liability of such heads to be caught on stage fittings or to be knocked off accidentally in other ways. The realism characteristic of this Australian Museum piece, as of New Ireland sculpture in general, is emphasised here by the insertion of actual bird tail feathers.

Tami Islands, Huon Gulf

The decorative art of the Tami Islands has been discussed by Gladys Reichardt, who deals in particular with elongated wooden bowls. Some phases of her treatment are handled with conspicuous ability, but she is less happy in others. When dealing with decorative motives she designates them by numbers solely, rigidly refraining from using descriptive terms. There is a citation of an allied motive in Marquesan decoration but there are no references to closely allied motives in the art of such near neighbours as the Trobriands or New Ireland.

Fig. 6, a, b, c. 45 x 35 cm. Rectangular bowl representing bird, head projecting. Formalized snakes project at each corner. Fig. 6, a. Bowl from forward. The wings contact two of the snakes. Fig. 6, b. Bowl from below. Fig. 6, c. Bowl from behind. Each leg of bird grasps a snake.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 7. Weapon. 82 cm. Trobriands. Otago Museum. Oldman Collection

Fig. 8. Weapon. 62 cm. Trobriands. Otago Museum. Thomas Chalmers gift. D.20.470

Fig. 9. Lime spatula. 34 cm. Massim. Otago Museum. Fels gift. D.24.2219.

Trobriland Islands and Massim Area

A careful localisation of museum material from this region has still to be carried out. Its decorative art is touched upon in numerous books on Oceanic Art. Haddon has made familiar the rendering of the frigate bird often associated with the snake, and with the crocodile.

Fig. 7. 82 cm. Ceremonial weapon of patu type. At the proximal end a crocodile head. At distal end, crocodile swallows a man. On blade, frigate-bird-head pattern forms background to four snakes.

Fig. 8. 62 cm. Ceremonial weapon of patu type. Near proximal end, four bird's eyes are grouped. Two birds' heads pursue snake which dives into crocodile mouth. Along blade is an elaborate pattern of frigate bird heads. Distal end of weapon is a crocodile tongue.

Fig. 9. 34 cm. Lime spatula. Two birds' heads chase snake along blade.

Fig. 10. 70 cm. Dance wand. Each blade elaborately decorated with frigate bird heads among which are formalized snakes.



Fig. 10. Dance wand. 70 cm. Trobriands. Otago Museum. Fels Fund. D.23.1009.

Cook Islands

The motive bird-contending-with-snake is present in the mythology of the Cook Islands. (Smith, 1919, p. 139.) There the *ruru* (white heron) is stated to have fought with the *aa* (sea snake). Bird ultimately vanquishes snake. The motive has not been recorded in the material culture of the Cook Islands.

Solomon Islands

Birds and snakes rendered separately are frequent in the decorative art of these islands. But the grouping of bird and snake in combat is much less common than in New Ireland and the Trobriands.

Fig. 11. 35 cm. Small wooden bowl. Frigate bird grasps snake. In the Solomons the motive much more commonly favoured is bird-grasping-bonito.

Fig. 12. Two spears. In the longer example the hollowed circles held shell discs, the eyes of an attacking bird. Snake carved on spear blade. Shorter example shows snake carved on blade, in contact with formalized bird heads.

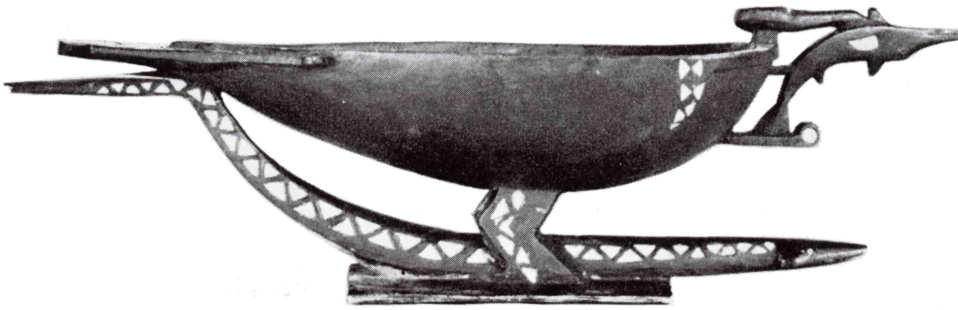


Fig. 11

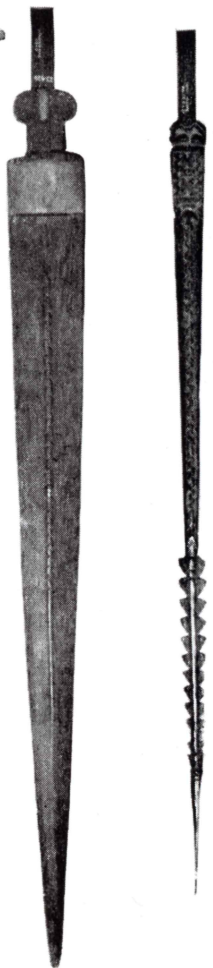


Fig. 12

Fig. 11. Carved bowl. 35 cm. San Cristoval. Otago Museum. Gift of D. C. Fox.

Fig. 12. War spears. Arosi. San Cristoval. Otago Museum. Gift of D. C. Fox. D.33.1609.

New Zealand

Fig. 13. The large Hauraki doorway lintel. Patetonga. Length 240 cm. Auckland Museum. In the centre of the geometrical spirals constituting the overall background is a large full-faced grimacing web-footed female human figure. On each upper outer margin is an outward-facing figure which I interpret as a bird-headed man. For purposes of discussion, attention may be centred on the left-hand marginal bird-headed man, Fig. 14. Its jaws, elongated into a beak, grasp the tail of the snake, whose conspicuous jaws attack the outer end of the base of the lintel. The snake's tail has itself been unobtrusively elaborated into a subsidiary head which snaps back at its opponent's mouth. The three-toed webbed feet both grasp the tubular body of the snake.

Fig. 14. Detail of the left-hand marginal figures.



Fig. 13

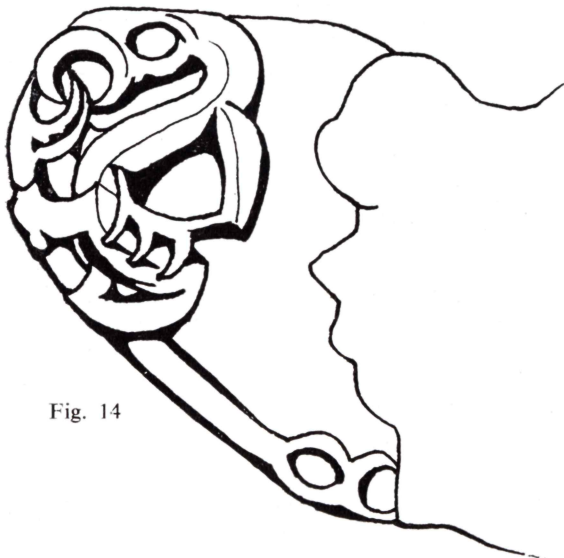


Fig. 14

Fig. 13. Hauraki lintel (Patetonga). New Zealand. Length 240 cm. Auckland Museum.

Fig. 14. Hauraki lintel. Detail.

Fig. 15. Doorway lintel, Wanganui Museum. Length 52 cm. Ex Newman Collection purchased from E. Craig, Auckland. Central female figure in parturition. Two subsidiary female full-faced figures. The bird-headed female flanking figure snaps at the tail of a snake. The snake's head snaps at the base of the lintel.

Fig. 16. Detail of the left-hand figures.

Fig. 17. Doorway lintel, Peabody Museum, Salem. Length 100 cm. Presented Captain William Richardson, 1807. There is a principal central female human figure. The two outward-facing composite figures have each become dismembered. The principal arm of each outward-facing figure has become the body of the bird. For details see Figure 18. The transformation of arm of composite figure into body of a bird is present in numerous pieces of ancient Maori carving. The three digits of the bird grasp the neck of the snake, the tail of which has developed into a small secondary head. The principal snake's head and the bird's head are interlocked. The bird's second limb is thrown upward and back to grasp with three-fingered hand a second snake which it pulls out of the ear of the central human figure. The parallel supplied by the New Ireland carving, Fig. 5, is notable.

Fig. 18. Detail of the central head and left-hand composite figure of the Peabody lintel.



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Fig. 15. Hauraki lintel. Length 52 cm. Wanganui Museum. Wall Collection ex Newman Collection.

Fig. 16. Detail of Fig. 15.



Fig. 17

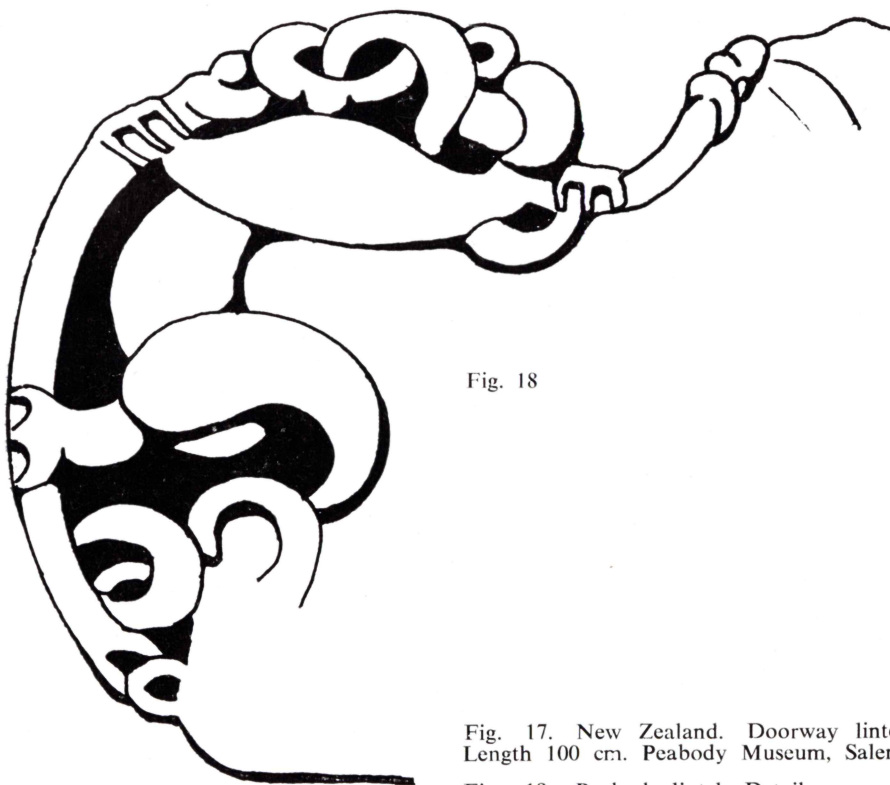


Fig. 18

Fig. 17. New Zealand. Doorway lintel.
Length 100 cm. Peabody Museum, Salem.

Fig. 18. Peabody lintel. Detail.



Fig. 19

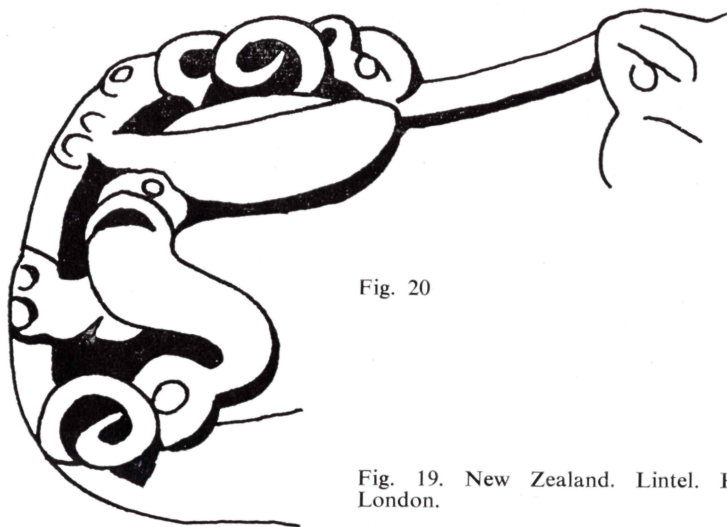


Fig. 20

Fig. 19. New Zealand. Lintel. Horniman Museum, London.

Fig. 20. Horniman lintel. Detail.

Fig. 19. Doorway lintel, Horniman Museum, London. Stylistically stands close to the preceding lintel. There is a central female human figure. Arm of flanking outward-facing composite figure is transmuted into the body of a bird, whose foot grasps the snake's neck. Bird's beak and snake's mouth interlock. The head of the snake emerging from the central figure's ear can barely be detected, and the bird uses no limb to grasp it.

Fig. 20. Detail of the central head and the right-hand composite figure of the Horniman lintel.

Fig. 21. Doorway lintel, British Museum. Length 70 cm. Central three-fingered female human figure. Two outward-facing bird-headed figures, one arm grasping snake the jaws of which interlock with jaws of bird-headed figure. The other arm is thrown up and back to grasp a second snake which emerges from ear region of central female figure.

Fig. 22. Detail of central head and flanking figure.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22

Fig. 21. New Zealand. Doorway lintel. Length 70 cm. British Museum.

Fig. 22. British Museum lintel. Detail.



Fig. 23

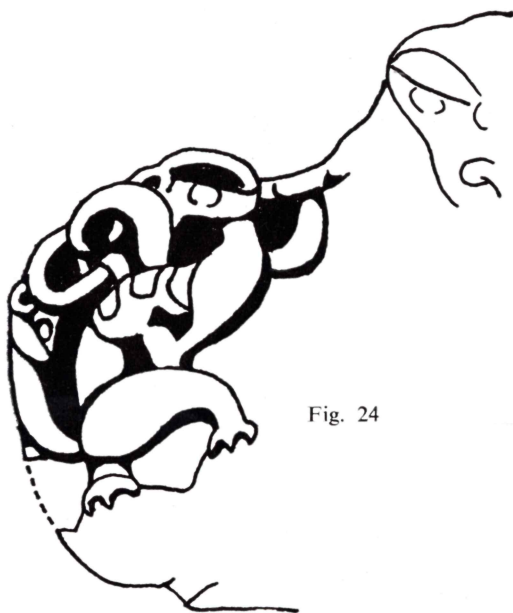


Fig. 24

Fig. 23. New Zealand. Doorway lintel. Length 50 cm. British Museum.

Fig. 24. Detail of British Museum lintel.

Fig. 23. Doorway lintel, British Museum. Gift of Sir George Grey, 1854. Length 50 cm. Central three-fingered female human figure in parturition. Two outward-facing bird-headed figures. Each of these grasps a snake the jaws of which interlock with jaws of bird-headed figure. The other arm is thrown up and back to grasp a snake emerging from ear region of central female figure.

Fig. 24. Detail of central head and flanking figure.

Fig. 25. Doorway lintel, Auckland Museum. Neighbourhood of East Cape. Length 80 cm. Central three-fingered human figure. Two outward-facing bird-headed figures. Each of these lays a three-fingered hand on abdomen and throws other up and back to grasp a snake. The outer margin of lintel consists of two snakes the upper interlocking its jaws with its opponent's jaws. The lower snake turns downward and nips the base of lintel and is nipped by a large bird-head. This lintel is figured by Hamilton: *Maori Art*, Plate XXVI, Fig. I. At page 261, Hamilton figures an allied but much later lintel at Berlin.

Fig. 26. Detail of central head and flanking figure and snakes.



Fig. 25

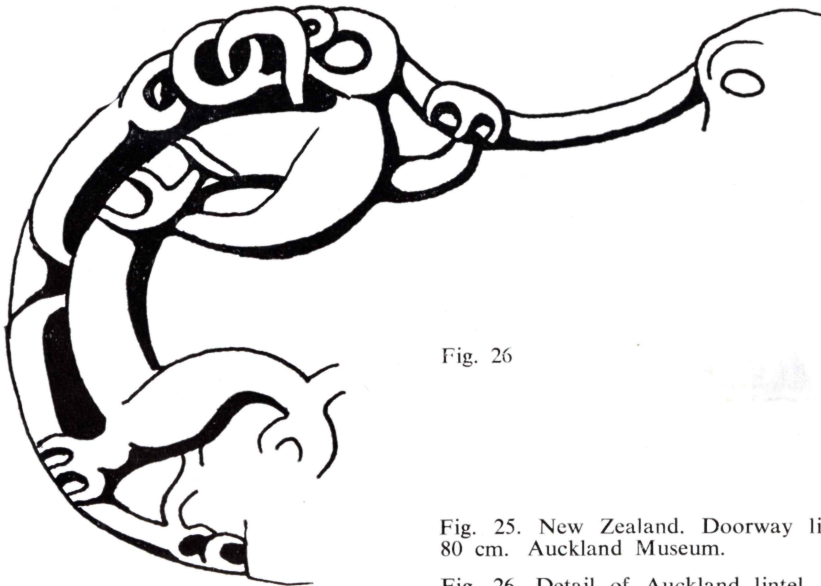


Fig. 26

Fig. 25. New Zealand. Doorway lintel. Length 80 cm. Auckland Museum.

Fig. 26. Detail of Auckland lintel.

Fig. 27. Doorway lintel, Otago Museum. Length 50 cm. Gift of Thomas Morland Hocken who purchased it from the Auckland dealer Eric Craig. Central full-faced human figure. Two outward-facing bird-headed figures. The background has split and is tied by two flax braids. The lower margin of the base has been split off and lost. The lower outer margin of the lintel appears to have been pared off. In my opinion this lintel is the oldest of those figured in this article, and was carved with stone tools. One hand of each flanking figure rests on abdomen, the other being thrown up and back to grasp the snake, in this case headless.

Fig. 28. Doorway lintel, Otago Museum. Length 92 cm. Gift of Adolf Moritzson. The whole surface has been lightly charred and then rubbed, so that the more prominent areas have been cleared of charcoal. Central full-faced human figure. Background includes three pairs of small human figures and some limbs. Along outer margins are a pair of outward-facing, bird-headed figures. One hand of each flanking figure grasps a snake, while the other arm is thrown up to grasp the upper margin in which the customary snake's head is present.

Erratum

Records of Otago Museum
Anthropology No. 2.

Page 4, Fig. 6, for a substitute c.
" c " a.

Page 18, in second line from bottom for
"attached" read "attacked".



Fig. 27

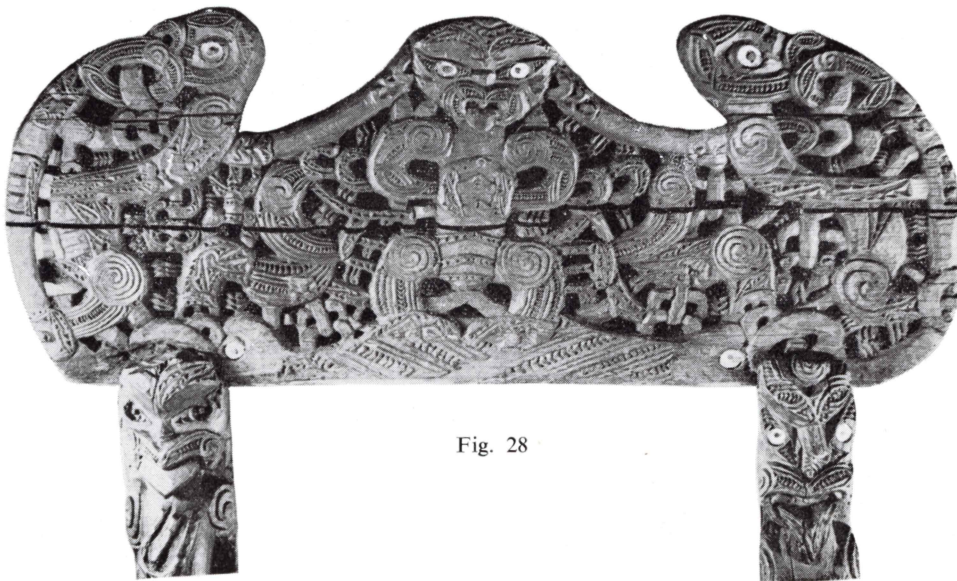


Fig. 28

Fig. 27. New Zealand. Doorway lintel. Length 50 cm. Otago Museum.

Fig. 28. New Zealand. Doorway lintel. Length 92 cm. Otago Museum.

Fig. 29. Doorway lintel. Length 57 cm. Otago Museum. Ex Webster Collection. Central full-faced female figure; a lower human head is emergent, presumably in parturition. Two flanking, outward-facing, bird-headed human figures. Three-fingered left hand of the left flanking figure (Fig. 30) grasps own body; its right arm and hand are not visible. Snake's upper jaw and bird's beak interlock. The subsidiary head sometimes added to snake's tail is not present here.

Fig. 30. Detail of Webster lintel.

With the exception of Fig. 29, the doorway lintels here discussed belong to a single closely related group. Such evidence as is at present available supports the view that they are from the Bay of Plenty area. Within that area there exists a second quite distinct group of doorway lintels; there are other groups elsewhere, notably in the Ati Awa area of Taranaki. I agree with the suggestion of David Simmons that Fig. 29 is probably from Northland. In these lintels sex, when indicated, is always female.

Carved lintels were also provided for windows and occasionally for store-pits; whether any of these are pre-European may be doubted.



Fig. 31

Fig. 31. Canoe stern-piece, probably of a large model canoe. Oldman Collection, Hawkes Bay Museum. Length 50 cm. All other New Zealand carved stern-pieces examined have a conspicuous pair of upward curving features which may be called ribs. The outer margin of Fig. 31 is unique in developing into a third rib, a snake-like body provided with a head. The second rib in Fig. 31 becomes a snake with an aggressive head which engages a bird-like head. The third rib ends without a head. In all except one of the New Zealand stern-pieces examined, the feature here called a third rib ends in a blank. In a solitary Otago Museum example the snake-like body has a poorly defined head. In complete stern-pieces the upper tips of the two snake-like ribs are attached by an entity which may be avian or may be human.



Fig. 29

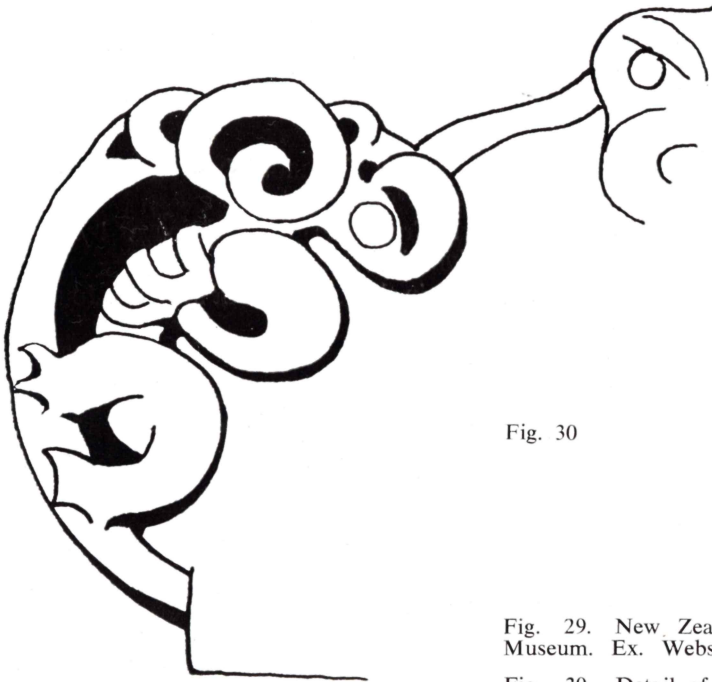


Fig. 30

Fig. 29. New Zealand doorway lintel. Otago Museum. Ex. Webster Collection.

Fig. 30. Detail of Webster lintel.

A corpus of Maori carvings earlier than the year 1900 is greatly to be desired. In no part of the field is this more desirable than in the case of lintels. It is surprising that the only lintel recorded in Cook's voyages should be one occurring in a *pa* in Queen Charlotte Sound, South Island. It is probable that Webber's original drawing of this scene would give more accurate detail than the engraving. Maori lintels have been figured and discussed by various writers including Gilbert Archey, Augustus Hamilton, William Phillipps and the present writer. Details are given in the bibliography.

Thanks are due to the authorities of the British Museum, the Horniman Museum, the Peabody Museum, the Australian Museum, the Auckland Museum, and the Otago Museum for providing photographs and answering what must have seemed unending correspondence; to Dr Ray Forster who took numerous photographs and undertook numerous editorial duties; to Linden Cowell who made the line drawings; and to David Simmons for discussions.

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