



# Image of a god ('godstick')

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Image of a god ('godstick')

**Born:** 1750 - 1850

**Measurements:** h. 381 x w. 58 x d. 63 mm

**Accession Number:** 179

**Historic Period:** 18th Century - Late, 19th century - Early

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Maori images of this rare form (*whakapakoko atua*) are generally known as 'godsticks', since there is reliable evidence (discussed by Barrow, 1959a, 1961 and Simmons, 1983a) that they represent particular named gods. The Reverend Richard Taylor, who collected a number of these images in the South Taranaki/Wanganui area towards the middle of the nineteenth century, provides some detailed information concerning them, including an illustration, in his book *Te Ika a Maui* (1855: 82). In the second, fuller, edition of this work he writes (albeit in awkward prose) that these images ' . . . were little more than wooden pegs with a distorted figure of the human head carved on the top . . . [They] were only thought to possess virtue or peculiar sanctity from the presence of the god they represented when dressed up for worship . . . This dressing consisted in the first place of the *pahau*, or beard, which was made by a fringe of the bright red feathers of the *kaka*, parrot, — next of the peculiar cincture of sacred cord with which it was bound; this mystic bandage was not only tied on in a peculiar way by the priest, who uttered his most powerful spells all the time he was doing it, but also while he was twisting the cord itself, and lastly, [the dressing consisted in] painting the entire figure with the sacred *kura* [red pigment]; this completed the preparation for the reception of the god who was by these means constrained to come and take up his abode in it when invoked' (Taylor, 1870: 21 1-12).

Various names are recorded for these gods, but this example most probably represents Maru, one of the gods closely associated with the great mythical Aotea migration and an important deity in the South Taranaki/Wanganui area. Simmons (*ibid.*) discusses the ritual use of these godsticks in sets of three, conducted according to the purpose for which divine favour was to be invoked. The elaborate binding, lost here, was clearly an important part of the ritual invocation and corresponds to related practices and images in other regions of Polynesia, notably in the Cook Islands, the Society Islands and Hawaii.

Comparison with other examples places this image, in sculptural terms, among the finest of all godsticks. The bold arching brow crests complement the curving beak-like mouth, and the carving is well smoothed yet also well preserved. The appearance of the worked surfaces suggests stone tool work, though certainty is not possible since this technical aspect of carving is difficult to assess. The back of the head has a distinctive raised medial ridge which divides to extend to the sides of the

head just behind the eyes, a feature also present on examples in Auckland (Z1894.3, Mead, 1984: 221) and Salem (EI9,I66, Barrow, 1961: 216). The *Haliotis* shell eyes are probably old replacements for ancient originals.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 8-9.

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