

The Great Adze in the Smithsonian Institution: History and Provenance

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The assignment of provenance to museum objects that are considered to be archaeological—even though they were not found in archaeological contexts—such as adzes, has long been left to archaeologists, or to museum curators or technicians who, because they have handled similar objects before, are expected to deduce by comparative analysis where an object came from. Visitors and scientists give solicited and unsolicited views about attributions, uses, and meanings to objects that they have never seen before, while curators evaluate this information depending on the known background, status, and trust of the person giving the information. Most museum curators and technicians record these opinions into what I have termed “museum gessalogs” which masquerade as catalogues.

The paper trail of these gessalogs is sometimes extraordinary and constitutes a kind of “who’s who” of the important people who have owned and looked at a specific object. These paper trails often lead nowhere, but occasionally they lead the researcher into the lives of collectors, artists, and literary figures who have created the Pacific mystique and who remain ever fascinating in the modern world of Pacific studies. One such object is the great stone adze in the Smithsonian Institution, about which guesses and opinions have been recorded for nearly a century. The generally accepted opinion, that this object is from Easter Island, based on the views of respected Polynesian specialists, was further encouraged by a Smithsonian curator in the 1950s who placed it on exhibit in a case devoted solely to Easter Island.

This short paper recounts the history of this extraordinary object, the various guesses about it, and my own views on the subject. Unlike my guessing predecessors, who have based their guesses primarily on technology, typology, and taxonomy, my guesses are based on ideas about art, design motifs, and—aesthetically speaking—which Polynesians were most likely to have made this beautiful piece and why. Although I would stop short of giving it a “new provenance” in its continuing gessalog, I will state that I have little doubt that it is not from Easter Island. In short, the thrust of my paper is a cautionary tale with two prongs—1) do not believe museum gessalogs without doing your own research into the history and provenance of each object, and 2) aesthetic/artistic analysis may be an equally accurate indicator of provenance as the more archaeologically favored technology, typology, and taxonomy. Both artistic and technological analyses depend on comparison and museum curators use

such analyses in their work every day. Perhaps the doyen of the comparative method in Polynesia (and beyond) was H.D. Skinner, whose views on the subject are recorded in a number of papers that were reprinted in a book appropriately called *Comparatively Speaking*. It was H.D. Skinner himself who, not surprisingly, gave the adze in question its present Easter Island provenance.

History and Documentation

The nineteen-inch long adze (178579, Plate 1) was deposited in the Smithsonian Institution on November 17, 1897, as part of a 100 piece collection of Polynesian objects from W. Hallett Phillips. The Tahitian part of the collection, to which the adze was attributed, was said to have been given by the Queen of Tahiti to a Mr. Adams, who in turn gave it to Mr. Phillips. The collection was on loan to the Smithsonian until Mr. Adams verified its donation to the museum (accession 32872). The adze is mentioned in the Phillips papers in a legend

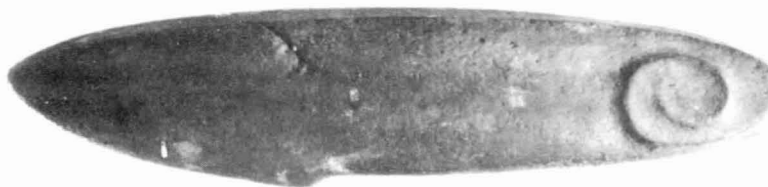


Plate 1. Polynesian adze. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. (178579).

where it is referred to as a Tahitian stone fetish. Apparently, it was on exhibit at the U.S. National Museum where it was described as a “Fish God, Tahiti” (Skinner 1974:25). In 1928 it was seen by Skinner who ridiculed the legend—saying it was “cooked up” (Smithsonian card catalogue). Then in a published article Skinner noted (incorrectly, however), “It was stated to have recently been presented to the museum by an American tourist who, when purchasing it at a Papeete store, had been given the information recorded” (Skinner 1974:25).

But, where was this information recorded? I have been unable to find this information in Smithsonian documents. What was recorded in the Smithsonian papers is that it was given by the Queen of Tahiti to Mr. Adams, who gave it to Mr. Phillips—no reference to a tourist who purchased it in a Papeete store can be found. Skinner then goes on to state, unequivocally, that it is from Easter Island. Noted on the museum catalog card is “Skinner is certain that it is from Easter Island and that it had been used in making the large stone statues there.” But then, perhaps with a note of sarcasm, the person who typed the note on the catalog card added, “Big objects require big tools in the making!”

This note was probably written by Robert Elder, a museum technician whose job included adding specialist’s comments to catalog cards and who signed a later note on the same specimen. Elder was a student of Ralph Linton, who apparently believed the Tahitian stone fetish story and pub-

lished the adze as such in his 1946 *Arts of the South Seas*, that he co-authored with Paul Wingert (1946:24). Apparently Elder went through some trouble to show that his professor was correct and asked Dr. Gilbert Corwin of the U.S. Geological Survey to look at the basalt and the following note was added to the card on September 10, 1953, "fine-grained heavy basalt of a type which occurs on all of the islands in question, Tahiti, New Zealand, and Easter, and therefore, from this aspect, could not be localized, if at all, without thin-sectioning for an analysis of the included minerals. It cannot be tested otherwise."

In the meantime Kenneth Emory visited the Smithsonian Institution and Elder notes, "Apparently Emory did not discuss it while at the Museum, but Skinner claims that he thinks that it is from Easter Island. ????" Evidently Elder did not believe that Skinner had actually discussed it with Emory, in whom he did have confidence. Finally, Elder adds "The possibility that it came from either of the islands suggested [i.e. New Zealand or Easter Island], other than Tahiti, seems highly unlikely without very strong reasons for it having been transported" and signs his name.

Then on May 19, 1959, there is a final typed note signed by the then curator, Saul Riesenber, "Letter of May 7, 1959, from Universidad de Chile, Centro de Estudios Antropologicos, Calle Ejercito 233, Santiago, Chile (signed Gonzalo Figueroa and Eduardo Sanchez R.): 'We have been informed by Dr. Roger Duff of the Canterbury Museum (New Zealand) . . . that this specimen is of undoubtedly Easter Island origin.' With this I agree." Then a final hand written note, probably by Riesenber, says "Emory (1946) says Easter Island," but on what this note is based is unknown.

I became curator of Oceanic Ethnology at the Smithsonian in 1980, following Riesenber's retirement. At that time the adze was on exhibition in an Easter Island case and thought to be unique. "Unique" is one of those problem terms. If it is unique, how can one render an opinion when there is nothing to compare it with? In another context, Kenneth Emory (whom I worked with at Bishop Museum) once cautioned me about uniqueness by saying, "only believe the validity of a unique object when you find a second one." In any case, the adze never struck me one way or another until browsing through a catalogue of a private collection in Paris where, indeed, I found a second one that I believe is comparable—but it was attributed to New Zealand.

This second adze (Plate 2) had a very specific provenance, "Lac de Waikareiti, Waikalemoana, Northhaws Bay, Nouvelle-Zelande" (Meyer, 1988). In questioning the owner, Anthony J.P. Meyer, he told me that the information was taken from an inscription on the blade. No guesswork here.

My research then went in three directions. First of all, I wanted to know on what grounds Skinner and Duff were so

sure that the adze was from Easter Island. Secondly, now that the adze was obviously not unique, I wanted to search for others. Thirdly, I wanted to find out more about Mr. Phillips, Mr. Adams, and the Queen of Tahiti.

Typology, Taxonomy, and Similarities

Most useful for understanding the works of Skinner and Duff was the article by Stuart Park, "The Pacific Stone Adze Studies of H. D. Skinner and Roger Duff: An Historical Survey". Park notes that Skinner and Duff did typology, "a short and convenient method of describing artefacts" (1989:59). Taxonomists, on the other hand, "endeavour to demonstrate relationships between cultural groups by describing the similarities and differences between certain

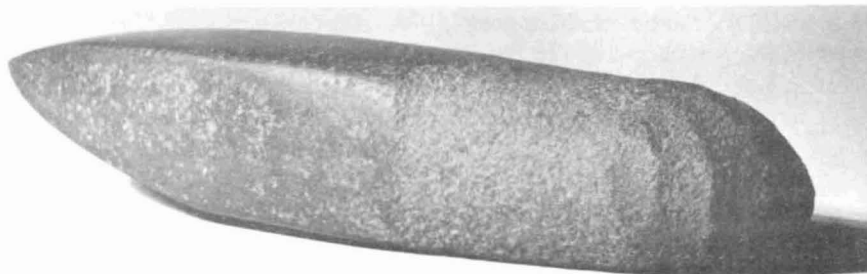


Plate 2. New Zealand adze. Anthony J.P. Meyer Collection, Paris, France.

groups of artefacts. These are no longer descriptive symbols — they are objective realities, which existed in certain proportions at known places and at fixed points in time" (p. 59). Park cautions, however that "there is no conceivable way

of demonstrating . . . the relationships claimed for them" and although typology was useful for describing the adzes, it did not help in understanding what guided the Polynesian adze maker in making his tool-kit (p. 59).

Skinner, and apparently Duff, were interested in technology, typology, and taxonomy. They measured adzes, drew them, and compared them. Skinner, in his definition of adze Type IV to which he assigned the Smithsonian adze, notes that this is the "most highly specialized of all Polynesian adzes . . . The type occurs in every important island group in Polynesia but is usually rare . . . Its primary function appears to have been the felling of trees" (Skinner 1974:108).

If, as Skinner says, the type occurs widely in Polynesia, why did he assign it the provenance of Easter Island? According to Skinner's article, "Study of the Easter Island adze collection in the Bishop Museum, Honolulu, indicated that [the Smithsonian adze] was no fish god but a hammer-dressed adze, its blunted edge due, perhaps, to its use in sculpturing the statues characteristic of the island." Here the cautious researcher should note the change from "the felling of trees" to "the sculpturing of statues." Skinner continues, "Most large Easter Island adzes are similarly blunt-edged. Many of them are of Type 4 in my classification. Three of the Easter Island adzes in the Bishop Museum collections had the front slightly grooved by hammer-dressing, a feature otherwise unique. [The Smithsonian adze] has this groove. The two lines delimiting the groove are prolonged backward to form a pair of spirals on the lateral surfaces of the butt. In its spirals it is, to my knowledge, unique among Easter Island adzes" (Skinner 1974:25-26). Skinner then goes on to ponder, "The problem arises whether the pair of hammer-dressed spirals on the Easter Island adze are genetically connected with the pairs of hammer-dressed spirals on the butts of adzes

from Area 6 represented in the figures above [from Poukawa near Hastings; Mohaka, Hawkes Bay; and Taranaki]. But while the Easter Island adze falls into my Type 4, the New Zealand adzes fall into Type 1" (p. 26).

Apparently, to Skinner, the adze type is more important than the spirals, even though he notes that type 4 is also found in New Zealand and is common in Murihiku (p. 108). I am afraid that the logic and reasoning here escapes me. But in addition, Skinner apparently did not check the documentation on the so-called Easter Island adzes in the Bishop Museum collection on which he based his attribution. I did this in July, 1993, and found that most of the "Easter Island adzes" have question marks after their entries, have no real documentation, and came primarily from J. L. Young, a private collector based in Tahiti and New Zealand. Indeed, Skinner fell into the problem of many museum researchers, comparing questionable provenances with questionable provenances, and making attributions based on them.

As stated above, in my view aesthetic/artistic analysis is an equally accurate indicator of provenance as technology, typology, and taxonomy. As I read the literature about adzes, as useful as these latter may be for description, demonstrating relationships, and perhaps even hinting at migration patterns, they cannot be thought to be definitive of provenance or use.

Searching throughout Polynesia for similarities of artistic motifs and aesthetic renderings in wood and stone, the conclusion that I find inescapable is that the Smithsonian adze has decided similarities in design—especially the spirals—structure, style and form only with the adzes of the New Zealand Maori. Indeed, there are several similar adzes in museum collections in New Zealand. In addition, the spiral design and its placement is consistent with the Maori aesthetic system. That is, discrete placement of spirals and circles/ovals in an otherwise empty field is found on *patu* of various kinds and wood carvings.

Other comparable pieces are the stone fish god "fetishes" from the Society Islands and the Marquesas Islands (von den Steinen 1928).

Mr. Adams and the Queen of Tahiti

Finally, we must look for Mr. Phillips, Mr. Adams, and the Queen of Tahiti and try to decipher their relationship and examine if or how the adze may or may not be part of it.

Let us go back to the Smithsonian accession papers of the Polynesian collection that included the adze. According to these records, the adze was part of the Tahitian section of the collection which was originally received by a Mr. Adams from the Queen of Tahiti and then presented to W. Hallett Phillips. The collection was deposited by Mrs. Eugenia Phillips and Mr. P.L. Phillips on loan until Mr. Adams verified its donation to the museum. The adze appears in a legend in the Phillips papers that accompanied the donation.

The Mr. Adams of the catalogue entry turns out to be none other than Henry Adams, historian, novelist, and descendant of the U.S. political dynasty. Adams traveled to Tahiti (as well as Fiji and Samoa) with the American artist John La Farge in 1890-1891. Both Americans were adopted by the so-called Queen of Tahiti—Ariitaimai, the ranking

female chief of the Teva family—an important dynasty of Tahitian chiefs before the Pomares exerted their influence on the French. Legends and genealogies were recounted and Adams helped the Teva family write its history which was essentially a genealogical discourse interwoven with legends and songs (O'Toole 1990:248; Samuels 1989:259). With this material Adams compiled a memoir about the rise and fall of the Teva dynasty as a personal account of the last queen of Tahiti, which was printed in ten copies and in December 1893 sent off to Tahiti for corrections and additions (O'Toole 1990:269; Samuels 1989:285). An expanded version was completed in 1901 and published anonymously in France as *Memoirs of Arii Taimai*.

William Hallett Phillips, a Washington, D. C. lawyer, was a friend, financial advisor, and co-adventurer of Henry Adams, especially in a political intrigue in support of Cuban independence of 1895. Phillips was drowned in a sailing accident in May 1897 (Samuels 1989:319), that is, six months before the so-called "Phillips Collection" was deposited in the Smithsonian by Mrs. Eugenia Phillips and P.L. Phillips—his mother and brother. The Pacific collections, however, undoubtedly belonged to Henry Adams—who according to the Smithsonian records verified its donation. This is typical of Henry Adams, he published the Tahitian *Memoir* anonymously and gave the collection anonymously—correctly attributing both to the Queen of Tahiti.

Who Made and Used the Smithsonian Adze?

We have three probable provenances for our beautiful adze:

- 1) The specialists in adze technology, typology and taxonomy—H.D. Skinner and Roger Duff—have ascertained that it is from Easter Island.
- 2) On the basis of art and aesthetics, I find that its closest associations are with the New Zealand Maori.
- 3) On the basis of good collection documentation, it is certainly from Tahiti.

Who do you want to believe?

My view is that it was made and used by the New Zealand Maori. Later it was traded and transported to Tahiti, perhaps via an early European voyage. It was acquired and used as a "fish god" by a Tahitian and finally given to Henry Adams. An adopted object given to an adopted son. In any case, it can no longer be considered an Easter Island piece, and its temporary adoption as such can only be attributed to the guesswork of our anthropological ancestors.

I conclude that although we may still praise famous men, do not be led up the garden path by the questionable research based on the impressionistic guesswork and dubious comparisons of our illustrious forefathers.

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