

THE "FISH" FOR THE GODS

Paul Wallin and Helene Martinsson-Wallin
The Kon-Tiki Museum

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to provide an alternative interpretation for the large Rapa Nui stone fishhooks, *mangai maea* (Figure 1). These nicely carved hooks have been interpreted as clan or status symbols, as well as ordinary fishhooks (Chauvet 1935:32-34, Martinsson-Wallin 1994:125-126, Métraux 1940:363, Heyerdahl 1961:415-426, Lee 1992). We here examine this specific type of fishhook in the light of large fishhooks found on other islands in Polynesia. There is clear evidence that oversized fishhooks were used symbolically by leading chiefs for a very specific kind of "fishing" that was dedicated to the war god at certain ceremonial structures. In this case, the "fish" consisted of human sacrifices, suspended from a tree by a large fishhook inserted in the victim's mouth. These types of human sacrifices were called "fish". The relationship between large fishhooks and human sacrifice is discussed in this article.

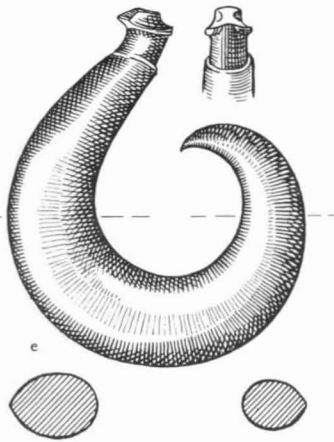


Figure 1. Easter Island stone fishhook. The total length of this example is 9.8 cm. (after Heyerdahl 1961:420).

THE "LONG-LEGGED FISH"

In Eastern Polynesia the name "fish", or "long-legged fish", is used as a symbolic periphrasis of human sacrifices (Handy 1927:193, Best 1995:234). The origin of this symbolism may be found in a Society Island legend about two fishermen who were to offer their premium catch to the god but they consumed the fish instead. However, they brought the remains of the fish skeleton to the priest at the *marae*. The priest knew the god would not be pleased with this fish skeleton. His indignation was even greater when he discovered the two men had eaten the fish. Therefore, the priest decided to offer the two men as a sacrifice, instead of the offering of a dishonored fish. The two men were hung up in a tree at the *marae* and presented to the god as *i'a avae roroa* (fish with long legs) (Henry 1928:242).

THE HUMAN FISH

The idea that the humans were related to fish or porpoises probably extends far back in time and can be illustrated with several examples. The myth about *Vatea*, the father of gods and men, as it was told on Mangaia (Southern Cook Islands), shows this divinity as being half human and half fish (or possibly porpoise). W. W. Gill mentions: "One eye of *Vatea* was human, the other a fish-eye. His right side was furnished with an arm, the left with a fin. He had one proper foot, and half a fish-tail" (Gill 1876:3) (Figure 2). The myths explain the relationships between humans and surrounding nature.

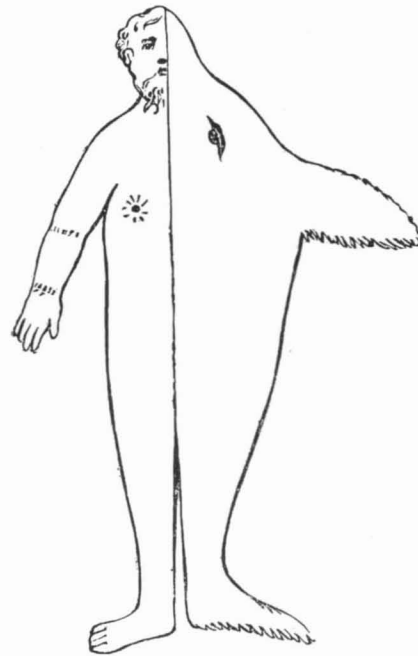


Figure 2. Imaginary representation of *Vatea* (after W.W. Gill, 1876:4)

A relationship between the leading chiefs and sharks has also been mentioned (Métraux 1940:58, Martinsson-Wallin 1994:132). Sharks were related to the god *Tangaroa* in Marquesan legends, for example (Lee 2000:50). The Milky Way was, in some parts of Polynesia, seen as "the great shark of the sky" or "the long, blue, cloud-eating shark" (Williamson 1933:126, Lee 2000:50). In this association, sharks were often perceived as incarnations of persons, who could be both dangerous and helpful. In the Society Islands, sharks that appeared close to the shore were viewed as bad omens. These visiting sharks were seen as sacred ancestors who came to presage a death within the chiefly family (Handy 1927:84). In Hawaiian mythology, the shark god was believed to be an incarnation of ancestral spirits that helped fishermen at sea in

fishing, or in times of trouble. These shark spirits could reveal themselves in either human or shark form (ibid.:128).

As a result, shark fishing was carried out only as a sacred sport for chiefs. When fishing for sharks, large hooks were used. These hooks usually measured c. 20-40 cm in length and were about 10-20 cm at their widest point. This kind of fishhook has been found on New Zealand, the Marquesas Islands, Rarotonga, the Society Islands (Figure 3a) and Hawai'i (Figure 3b). They were made of whalebone, pearl shell or wood. During this sporting event, the hook was reportedly baited with human flesh (Gudger 1927:238, Beasley 1928:50, Anell 1955:219-228).

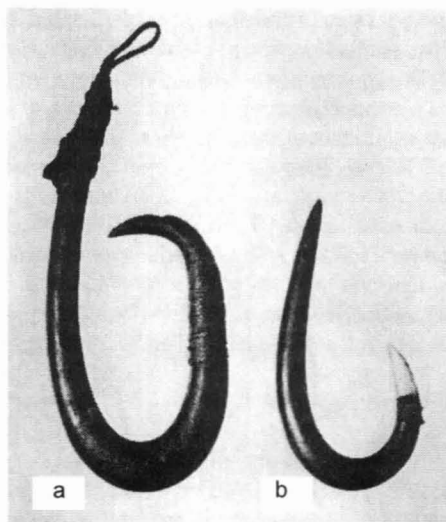


Figure 3. Tahitian shark fishhook (a) of wood. Total length about 25 cm. Hawaiian shark fishhook of wood with bone point (b). Total length about 15 cm (after Anell 1955, Pl. VIII).

Another example of a close connection between humans and fish is documented on Rapa Nui. In a legend about the origin of bone fishhooks (the cycle of *Ure-a-vaira nuhe*, reported by Métraux), it is said that stone hooks, which were used first, no longer were effective: the fish did not bite. Then a man called Ure took a human bone, preferably from a man known as a good fisherman (Anell 1955:104), and carved a nice fishhook. With this hook he went out fishing and returned with a canoe full of fish (Métraux 1940:363, Routledge 1919:218). In many parts of Polynesia human bones had a high value, because they were supposed to contain *mana*, making them powerful materials from which to fashion tools (Beasley 1928:50).

The event depicting the unsuccessful nature of stone hooks in the fishing process indicates the stone fishhooks most likely had a symbolic function, at least during the late Rapa Nui pre-history. Based on an analogy with other Polynesian islands, it is possible to suggest that the Rapa Nui stone fishhooks may have been used for the "long-legged fish", and eventually they became *tapu* for ordinary fishing.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF LARGE FISHHOOKS

Huge fishhooks played a central role in most Polynesian creation myths. One describes how the god Maui used a fish-

hook and line to drag up the islands from the bottom of the sea (Williamson 1933:32-41). Such mythological associations on the use of fishhooks may of course be of importance to how people valued this artifact. Geiseler noticed that, next to weapons, fishing implements were most highly valued on Rapa Nui (Métraux 1940:172).

Several observations about the use of large fishhooks are found in the ethnohistoric literature of the Marquesas, Mangaia and Hawai'i. In the Marquesas Islands, Handy mentions that during the chant performed by the ceremonial priest over human sacrifices, the priest stepped up on a small stone platform holding a fishing line in his hands. On the end of the line was a large pearl shell fishhook, named *tava* (Figure 4). The hook was placed in the mouth of the victim, who was referred to as a "fish". The victims were then suspended from hooks in the trees at the sacred precincts (Handy 1923:242, 1927:193-194).

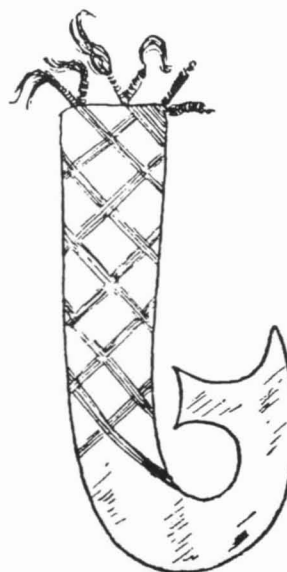


Figure 4. Marquesan fishhook of pearl shell used at human sacrifices. Size not indicated. (after Handy 1923:237).

Another example of large fishhook use was noted for Hawai'i. When erecting a war temple, the human sacrificial victim was dragged to the temple with a large fishhook in his mouth, just like a fish (Handy 1927:194, 280; Valeri 1985). In a similar vein, a Marquesan legend tells us that the tribal war god lowered a hook from heaven to catch a human victim on it (similar to Māui fishing up islands). It is a possibility that when the Marquesan priests actually suspended human victims on fishhooks in trees they were just "following" or acting out the legend. The concept of the legend and the "real" world was thereby the same (see Sahlins 1981).

In other parts of Polynesia, men (for ceremonial sacrifices) were treated like "fish". On the island of Mangaia, the human victim was at times placed in a fishing scoop-net made of coconut fiber, and in this way presented to the great god Rongo (Gill 1876:296-297). In addition, when human offerings were transported in a double canoe to the great *marae* Taputa-puatea at Opoa on the island of Ra'iatea, the slain victims were

placed: "...alternatively a man and a cavalli fish, a man and a shark, a man and a turtle and finally a man closed in the line" (Henry 1928:124). Henry mentions that "human victims were suspended with sennit strings strung through the ears, as 'Oro fish'" (ibid.:188). Henry also mentions that the heads of children were pierced through from ear to ear, and strung together on a cord as a "tui ia" (string of fish) (ibid.:313).

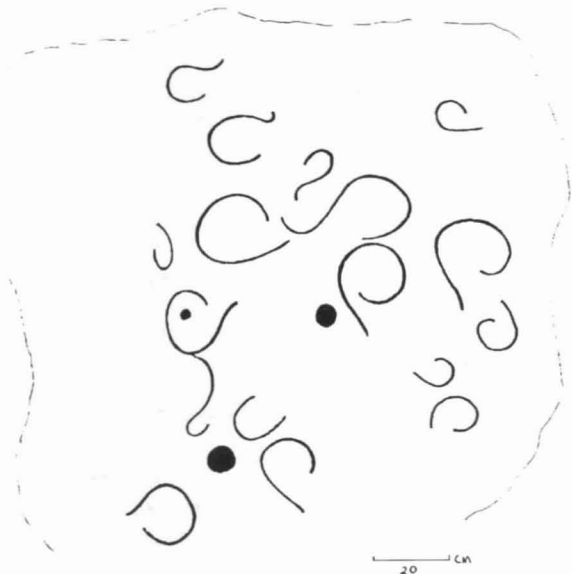


Figure 5. Drawing of Easter Island fishhook petroglyphs (after Lee 1992:114).

DISCUSSION OF THE LARGE STONE FISHHOOKS OF RAPA NUI

A unfinished stone fishhook found during excavations at the settlement site of Ahu Nau Nau East at 'Anakena, is the earliest artifact of this type, dating back to c. AD 1200 (Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994:142). However, the largest hooks can probably be related to a much later time period, associated with the powerful Miru clan, the leading clan of the island. This is indicated by the concentration of fishhook petro-

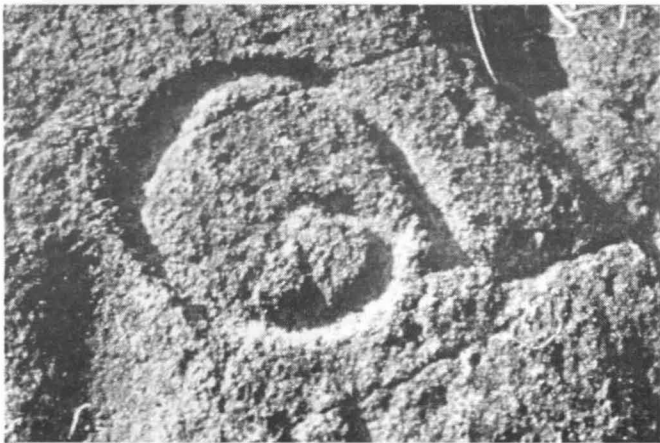


Figure 6. Deeply carved fishhook from the La Pérouse area of Easter Island (photo: G. Lee).

glyphs on the North coast (Figures 5 and 6), an area that belonged to the Miru and Tupahotu clan areas (Lee 1992:114-115). These hook motifs are described by Lee as being the same circular type as the ancient stone and bone fishhooks used for deep sea fishing (Lee 2000:48). Fishhooks were also a common motif as a tattoo design (Figure 7), which strengthens their symbolic importance (Routledge 1919:219-220). Therefore, it is easy to interpret this well-made artifact as a clan icon and symbol of power and authority (Chauvet 1935:32-34, Martinsson-Wallin 1994:126, Martinsson-Wallin and Wallin 1994:142).

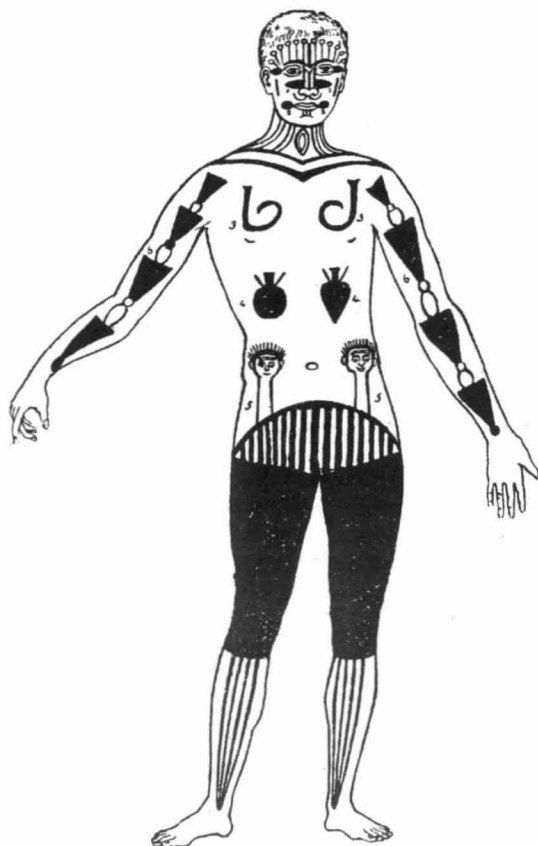


Figure 7. Easter Island fishhook tattoo design (after Routledge 1919:219).

This interpretation does not contradict a ceremonial use of the hook and its connection with human sacrifice. If the hooks were used in the context of sacrifice, it may explain why they were so extremely well-made and polished. Furthermore, it is not surprising that the Miru clan (or the most powerful clans) developed such an artifact, if they desired to conduct a large amount of human sacrifices in order to maintain their power and authority. Rapa Nui crematories, often situated close to the rear wall of an *ahu* (Martinsson-Wallin 1994:102) may, in fact, indicate human sacrifices.

It has been mentioned in the Marquesas as well as in Rarotonga that *tapu* breakers were offered for sacrifice and the bodies burned (Handy 1927:193, Gill 1856:16-17). This might be

taken into consideration as a possible indication of human sacrifices on Rapa Nui (Wallin 1998:33, Ayres and Saleeby 2000:127). Human sacrifices, in connection to ritualistic cannibalism are, however, mentioned by Geiseler (1883:31) and Zumbohm (1879-80). Moreover, it is mentioned in a legend about a war between the two main units Kotuu and Hotu Iti that a man called Kainga killed another man called Vaha and took the corpse of Vaha to the *ahu* "as fish-man for food, brought it to Marotiri, and gave pieces to all the people on the island" (Routledge 1919:287). It is told in the same story that "We have killed the men in the net" (ibid.), which clearly indicates the association that sacrificed men were looked upon as "fish".

Unfortunately there are no descriptions in Rapanui traditions that point to the suggested use of stone fishhooks but, as stated above, the custom of using great fishhooks for catching the "long-legged fish" to the gods is widely spread throughout the rest of Eastern Polynesia. It is likely that the same practices existed on Rapa Nui.

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