

## The Repatriation of Maori Remains

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On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> October Birmingham Egyptology was invited to attend a repatriation ceremony, whereby some human remains were returned to their Maori ancestors by the University of Birmingham's Medical School. The remains had been brought to the University for scientific research during the colonial period in New Zealand and had remained here since. When the remains were re-discovered earlier this year the University's Medical School offered to return the remains to the Maori Repatriation Project whose aims are to return their ancestors to the tribal lands they originated from. The remains will shortly be transported back to the Maori National Museum (Te Papa) in Wellington, New Zealand where researchers will determine where they should eventually be located. As the Maori explained at Thursday's event, they see that 'the past is in front of us', and to truly move forward we must understand that which has occurred before – for this reason the remains must be returned, and on their arrival in Wellington they will be mourned for and grieved as though they had died yesterday.



The Maori elders opened the ceremony with a traditional chant and *waiata* (song) before the researchers of the Maori Repatriation Project spoke about the importance of returning Maori ancestral remains. What follows here is a brief summary of these discussions.

The Maori have been indigenous to the islands of New Zealand for over 1000 years, since they originally settled the area from Eastern Polynesia. Today 4.5 million Maori reside in New Zealand; a country populated by a variety of demographics including the ancestors of colonial European settlers. The Maori were first encountered by Europeans when Captain James Cook arrived on the shores of New Zealand in 1769. Cook and his crew were intrigued by the Maori culture they encountered and it was during this first trip that the first human remains (a mummified head) was taken back to England in 1770. The Maori traditionally mummified the heads of revered tribal elders to retain their memory within the communities. This involved a process of steaming the heads within a sealed earth oven resulting in the preservation of facial features and hair. They would also preserve the heads of significant tribal enemies as trophies of war, which often became symbols of compensation and reconciliation to the enemy tribes. It was these heads, those of enemies, which were traded by the Maori. These preserved heads became a trade commodity as demand for them in European and American scientific institutes grew. Known to the Maori as *toi moko* these remains are often decorated with traditional facial tattoos that now act as a sort of 'signature' aiding with their eventual repatriation to their rightful ancestors, alongside museum and trade records. The first head (taken by Cook's crew) was taken to the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons but was unfortunately lost when a bomb hit the collection in 1941. The trade of *toi moko* continued right up to the 1970s. The return of these remains symbolises the spiritual reconciliation of the Maori with their ancestors.

The Repatriation Project engenders the rediscovery of lost cultural practises, including the tradition of facial tattoos. The return of ancestral remains is aiding in educating the modern Maori of New Zealand about their cultural past and allowing them to take pride in their heritage with the welcoming home of their *tupuna* (ancestors). As the Maori stated, 'it is just a matter of time before all ancestors are welcomed home'. Since the conception of the Repatriation Project in 2003, already 230 *toi moko* have been repatriated to Te Papa and of these 100 have already been reunited with their ancestral homes in a process of domestic repatriation.

By tradition the event was closed with another chant and *waiata* led by the Maori elders.

Following the discussions the Maori entertained those attending with a display of Maori *waiata* using some traditional instruments. Alongside the older songs they also performed some more familiar entertainment on the piano, and a very engaging display of the *haka*!



The event was well attended and led very well into discussions of the Birmingham Egyptology Forum the night after about 'Who owns history?'. While the Maori culture remains distant from that of Ancient Egypt in both time and space, we would all do well to remember that when we research ancient cultural remains they all have a human and spiritual dimension that exists above those of material importance.