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## **Idol speculations: Aneityum *Nelcau* and Dr Turner's missionary archaeology**

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The Hunterian Museum (the Hunterian) at the University of Glasgow houses an artefact (GLAHM:E.406, Figure 7.1) described in the museum's 1945 Ethnography catalogue as a 'canoe model' from Aneityum, the southernmost inhabited island of Vanuatu (previously the New Hebrides).<sup>1</sup> It was brought to Scotland in 1860 by Reverend Dr George Turner, Superintendent Missionary of the congregationalist London Missionary Society (LMS), and deposited in Glasgow with more than 200 items from Oceania. Despite its catalogue entry this artefact bears little resemblance to the usual style of nineteenth-century canoe models from the Pacific Islands widely found in museum collections. These models, replicating full-size canoes, were made locally across the Pacific. Whether created recreationally, as training for later making full-size canoes, or specifically for trade, they appear to have been popular with collectors partly for their portability. While such models offer a detailed ethnohistorical record of style and manufacture, this concave lenticular object has no specific technical details, being carved from one solid piece of wood with no paddles, outrigger or other features. It also differs greatly from the hull of a comparable Aneityum canoe model

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1 We use Vanuatu when the modern nation is implied, and New Hebrides when explicitly referring to historical contexts prior to independence in 1980.

found at National Museums Scotland (NMS) in Edinburgh, collected in the late 1880s by the Presbyterian missionary Reverend James Hay Lawrie of the Free Church of Scotland mission (NMS A.1895.413.3). In short, this object is a wooden bowl and not a plausible canoe model at all. Turner believed it represented an important story relating to Aneityum's prehistory. When contextualised within Turner's broader observations on Pacific culture and history it highlights a distinctive 'missionary archaeology' characterised by a Judeo-Christian approach, as well as a broader discursive strand in the development of Pacific archaeology, namely the use of oral traditions to interpret the deep past. Our paper explores the historical status of this bowl, on Aneityum and in Glasgow, questioning how a locally important cultural artefact came to be misidentified for so many years, and elucidating nineteenth-century approaches to interpreting Pacific archaeology.



**Figure 7.1. Nelcau-Añoñ or kava bowl from Aneityum, Vanuatu.**

Collected by George Turner as 'model canoe' c. 1859.

Source: © The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (GLAHM:E.406).

## Identifying and interpreting *Nelcau*

Aneityum, located in the TAFEA province of Vanuatu (the name taken from the initials of the five islands that make up the province), shares exchange relationships with neighbouring Tanna, Futuna, Aniwa and Erromango islands, as well as long-term trade and kinship connections to the Loyalty Islands of New Caledonia to the south (e.g. Bonnemaison 1996:fig. 208; Dubois 1996; Flexner 2016). Reverend John Williams of the LMS was the first Anglophone Christian missionary to the region in 1839, accompanied by 10 Samoan missionaries (Steel 1880:34–35). Much of the nineteenth-century material culture from Aneityum found in museums outside Vanuatu was acquired through Lawrie, who lived there from 1879 to 1896, and is in NMS, Glasgow Museums and the Australian Museum. This bowl acquired by Turner is therefore one of the earliest identifiable items of Aneityum material culture outside Vanuatu.

Despite its identifying name in the Hunterian catalogue, we believe this wooden artefact is a ceremonial kava bowl, conceptually and symbolically related to canoes, rather than an actual canoe model. The confusion in its classification likely originates in the fact that the noun *nelcau*, meaning canoe, signifies other things in Aneityum language (Inglis 1882:99). It is also a term for a storage box and, in 1887, Presbyterian missionary Reverend John Inglis gave *Nelcau* as the local name for the constellation Orion, with the three stars of Orion's Belt named *Nehev*, 'paddle' (Inglis 1887:173). In the 1840s, *nelcau* was recorded as the generic term for one of the seven 'dominions' on Aneityum, each one under the jurisdiction of a *natamarid*, or high chief (Spriggs 1985:23). A recently compiled dictionary additionally gives *nelcau* as a term for the breastbone of a fowl – presumably indexing its carination and containment (Lynch and Tepahae 2001:206). Most importantly, as applicable to the object in question here, *nelcau* denotes a canoe-shaped bowl used for mixing kava (Spriggs 1997:191 plate 32), more accurately in the forms *nelcau-añoñ* (Lynch and Tepahae 2001: 206) or *nelcau-tan* (Lynch 1996:32). This usage is significant as it has strong conceptual affinities with the contemporary Fijian and Tongan terminology for god vessels (i.e. ritual manifestation vehicles) as 'canoes' (Fijian *waqa*, Tongan *vaka*). In Fiji, the ritual ingestion of kava was one of the central means by which an ancestral deity entered the body of a *bete* possession priest. The conceptual premise that kava

bowls were vehicles by which ancestral gods came to manifestation in this world has broader application in the region, and relevance to the narrative Turner collected with the *Nelcau-Añon*.

## George Turner's visits to Tanna and Aneityum, 1842–59

George Turner (1818–91) was born in Irvine, Scotland. In 1837, he enrolled at the University of Glasgow where he met lifelong friend and future LMS colleague Henry Nisbet (1818–76) of Laurieston, Glasgow. Both studied divinity at the Relief Divinity Hall in nearby Paisley and went to the noted nonconformist Cheshunt College in Hertfordshire together, before returning for a dual ordination on 23 July 1840 at the Presbyterian Hutchesontown Relief Chapel, Laurieston. By 10 August that year, Turner had married Mary Anne Dunn, and all three were bound for the New Hebrides. On their way, Nisbet married Sarah Crook in Sydney. They attempted to establish a mission at Port Resolution on Tanna, an island northwest of Aneityum, between 30 June 1842 and February 1843 (Turner 1861:17–68). Ultimately, local indifference and conflict on Tanna led them to abandon their work and relocate to the island of 'Upolu, Samoa, where they principally concentrated their missionary efforts for the next 30 years.

Turner first visited Aneityum in 1845 (Turner 1884:325). He landed there on three separate missionary voyages from the LMS's central Malua Mission Station on 'Upolu, travelling through the New Hebrides, Loyalty Islands, parts of northern Polynesia and eastern Micronesia. He documented these voyages in the later chapters of his monograph *Nineteen Years in Polynesia* (1861:363–535). During Turner's 1845 visit, the missionary ship *Camden* anchored at Anelcauat village on the south coast of Aneityum from 16 to 22 April. He met with 'Nohuat' (Nohoat), the *natamarid* of the Anelcauat area (Turner 1861:363–373). Turner placed Simeone and Pita, two Samoan 'native teachers' (the LMS term for non-European missionaries), in Nohoat's care (1861:363–364). Turner returned in 1848, calling at Aneityum from 13 to 16 July and from 28 July to 5 August. He was anxious to assess the wellbeing of Simeone and Pita and resupply their mission with provisions and trade goods. A man named Umra was also returned to his home at Aname on the island's north coast following a year studying with the LMS in Samoa, and two Cook

Islander ‘native teachers’, Opetia and Palepo, were placed under the care of Umra’s chief. Additionally, Turner settled Canadian missionaries John and Charlotte Geddie of the United Secession Church of Nova Scotia on Aneityum, accompanied temporarily by Thomas Powell (LMS).

The Geddies were joined by John and Jessie Inglis of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1852. While the LMS itself was notionally a non-denominational Protestant organisation, the Anglophone New Hebridean missions became strongly Scots Presbyterian and Scots diasporic. This can be viewed as a continuation within the LMS of a policy of Protestant denominational non-competition in central Oceania – something instituted by John Williams and Charles Barff in June 1830 during negotiations with representatives of the Methodist Missionary Society in Tonga. They determined Samoa, the New Hebrides, Loyalty Islands and Niue would become congregationalist, while Tonga and Fiji became Wesleyan (Mills 2015:40). Turner’s third and final visit to Aneityum occurred between 5 and 10 October 1859, en route to distribute more British, Samoan and Rarotongan missionaries and their families to mission stations throughout the New Hebrides and Loyalty Islands. Regarding our observation of a characteristically Scottish missionary presence in the New Hebrides, Turner’s journal for 6 October read: ‘met with Messrs. Geddie, Inglis, Matheson and Copeland, missionaries from Glasgow and Nova Scotia, labouring in this group. Messrs Baker and Macfarlane were also present’ (Turner 1861:474–475).

In the pages of *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, Turner was generally circumspect about his collecting practices and criticised ‘trader-missionaries’ from other unnamed organisations, but when the 1859 voyage continued to Uea in the Loyalty Islands on 2 November, he broke that trend:

Here, and also at Lifu, Maré, and Aneityum, I had presented to me as many as eighty-six of the castaway idol-gods of heathen times: gods of the sea, gods of the plantation, war-gods, disease-making gods, storm and rain gods, etc. I have also received twenty-six more, to be taken to some of my brother missionaries, making in all 112 of these unmistakeable trophies of the power of the gospel of Jesus to overturn idolatry of every name, and triumph in every place. (1861:512–513)

Steven Hooper has described the use of artefacts construed as idols by missionaries as ‘performance indicators’ of the mission’s success (2006:65), and Turner’s words clearly exhibit his desire to share the ‘success’ of

Christian conversion with his readers. Nonetheless, a multitude of intersecting motives characterised missionary collecting transactions; not only those of the European missionaries, but also the local owners who passed their artefacts into missionary hands for a diverse range of reasons (see Jacobs et al. 2015). For example, what remains obscured in Turner's account is precisely what he, the LMS, or perhaps even Jehovah himself, reciprocated or were anticipated to reciprocate for such ancestral relics. In his analysis of the LMS Museum in London, Chris Wingfield has similarly emphasised a range of discursive functions in the display of 'idols' to the mission-funding British public, observing that it was a particular preoccupation of LMS collecting in Oceania when compared with Africa or Asia (Wingfield 2017). This raises a concomitant possibility of an approach within the LMS in Oceania, observable in the activities of earlier missionaries such as John Williams and William Ellis, and continued by Turner, that predisposed them to both speculatively identify and vigorously pursue the collection of 'idols', regardless of how accurately such a Judeo-Christian construct reflected the religious beliefs and practices of the makers and users of those objects.

Given the minimal progress in converting people on Aneityum by the date of his second visit in 1848, and considering the suggestive passage concerning 'idols' above, it is likely that Turner was presented the *Nelcau-Añõñ* on Aneityum in October 1859, when he recorded collecting several sacred stones and 'other relics of heathenism' (Turner 1884:326). One such 'relic' was a long staff of wood, 'kept for ages in the family of one of the disease-making craft', which was a god representation used to cure sickness (Turner 1884:326). Turner made no mention of the *Nelcau-Añõñ*, but it likely fell within his concept of departmental 'gods of the sea'. Inglis and Geddie, who advocated abstinence, frowned upon items associated with kava consumption, so the owner may have been encouraged to part with it on this basis alone. Equally, such kava bowls exclusively belonged to men of high status, and the giving of prestigious gifts was an important dimension of local diplomatic relationship-building. It is therefore also conceivable that this *Nelcau-Añõñ* was not given as a sign of the abandonment of kava-drinking or 'idolatry', but as a speculative means of developing relationships of economic reciprocity with influential, wealthy mission leaders.

## From Maui to Noah and beyond

On completion of his 1859 voyage, Turner and his family sailed for Britain from the central mission station at Malua, 'Upolu, arriving in London on 30 June 1860. They settled in Glasgow for three years, where Turner published *Nineteen Years in Polynesia* and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Glasgow. He donated 110 ethnological and natural history specimens to the Hunterian in 1860, and a donation of comparable but unknown size in 1861 to the Andersonian Museum at Anderson's University, which later became the University of Strathclyde (Markus 1985; Scouler 1831, 1866). The bowl from Aneityum does not appear on Turner's original manuscript donation list to the Hunterian, indicating that he almost certainly gave it originally to the Andersonian (Hunterian Museum 1860). A parallel donation list would unquestionably have been compiled, but is believed to no longer exist in Glasgow. When the Andersonian Museum closed in 1888, its ethnographic collections were gifted to the Hunterian accompanied by display labels, but seemingly no other paper documentation. The bowl retains an original label '9' in Turner's hand, which would have corresponded to its position on his donation list. Based on a comparison of the Andersonian label text for duplicate artefacts also listed on Turner's Hunterian list, we can infer that the Andersonian's curator, Professor John Scouler, transcribed text from the lost list onto exhibition labels *verbatim*. The label reads, '[T]he canoe in which the gods Aicharia and Nefatimepeke sat when they pulled up Aneitum [sic], one of the New Hebrides. Long an object of veneration there'. An ink inscription in Turner's hand on the underside of the bowl, now partially illegible, mirrors the Andersonian's 1860s exhibition label, although Turner recorded the gods as 'Aichariai' and 'Nefatimitipeke'. It is this label text, along with the bowl's contextualisation as a *kastom* object of Aneityum, that connects it to broader interests in migration stories in nineteenth-century Pacific archaeology.

Reverend William Gunn, who represented the United Free Church of Scotland on Futuna and Aneityum from 1883 to 1917, wrote of comparable stories of ancestral island-fishing on those islands. He described Inhucheraing or Moitikitiki as the principal god of Aneityum, adding that the latter name was 'known with slight variations throughout the Pacific – Amoshishiki in Futuna, Moitikitiki in Weasisi [Tanna], Mauitikitiki and Moiti'iti', etc., in Polynesia' (Gunn 1914:217). Gunn explained that on multiple islands he was said 'to have fished up

the land, raising one headland after another' (Gunn 1914:217). Gunn's Inhucheraing and Turner's Aichariai are likely parallel transcriptions of the same god. 'Nefatimitipeke' does not resonate with any of the names Gunn recorded, although 'nefatimi' indicates 'a very old man' or 'big-man', which is relevant in the context of Turner's brief narrative for the bowl (Inglis 1882:98; Lynch and Tepahae 2001:201).

Linguist Arthur Capell's paper 'The Maui Myths in the New Hebrides' (1960) specifically addressed the similarity between myths such as the one that Turner associated with the *Nelcau-Añon*, and those of the pan-Polynesian divinity Maui. Capell suggested that Maui-Tikitiki's name became disassociated from the island-fishing narrative at the time the myth was transmitted to Aneityum from one or other of its so-called Polynesian outlier neighbours in the southern New Hebrides (1960:29–30). According to Capell:

The raising of Aneityum [...] is connected with the local flood myth, and the name of the person who achieved this raising was not remembered by the informant. The story states that there were two orphan boys who were being brought up by their grandparents. These lived in the interior of the island on a hill. In those days there was terraced agriculture and the old people had a deep well which supplied the water for their gardens. This water was presumably salt, for its ultimate source was the ocean. The grandfather kept the well-top covered with a lid to prevent the egress of water at the wrong time. The two boys were curious to know where the water came from and decided to lift the lid from the well or spring, in spite of being warned by their grandfather never to touch it. One day however they approached the spot stealthily in the grandfather's absence and took off the lid. The grandfather uttered a spell when he removed the lid, saying *arero, arero* 'cover up, cover up'; the boys did not know this, consequently the sea poured in until the entire land was flooded and living people and animals were drowned. The grandfather saw what was happening and managed to rescue himself and them. After three days they were floating in their canoe; there was no land and no people. The grandfather lowered a line and pulled and pulled, till at last there emerged from the sea Saddle Peak, the highest point of Aneityum. (Capell 1960:29–30)

Capell's account frames the boys' grandfather as the unnamed Maui figure, and whether he and his wife or perhaps the brothers were Turner's Aichariai and Nefatimitipeke is unclear. Capell's approach sits within



a culture-historic interpretive framework primarily directed towards ethno-archaeologically supporting a construct of ‘Polynesian outlier’ societies scattered through the heart of the ‘Melanesian’ New Hebrides. What strikes us 60 years later is the wealth of Judeo-Christian elements in the narrative. By Capell’s time, the story seems to have incorporated key narrative motifs from the book of Genesis, primarily the Deluge; Aneityum was a new Ararat, admixed with elements of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Fall. After a century of missionary enterprise on the island, this is hardly surprising, but this becomes more pertinent when we recognise that Turner was equally assimilating Oceanic cultural motifs, and ethnic variability, to his own Judeo-Christian models of world prehistory.

## Oral tradition and Turner’s ethnology as missionary archaeology

Like other European missionaries, Turner was deeply interested in the culture and history of people he met. European missionaries in the Pacific commonly pursued research interests in natural history and ethnology, encompassing both archaeology and ethnography at that time (e.g. Barker 1992; Gardner 2006; Gunson 1978, 1994; Haddow 2016, 2019; Samson 2001; Sivasundaram 2005). Turner consciously aimed his published monographs at an audience beyond the supporters and potential donors to the mission. In the preface to *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, he wrote:

a number of things [will be] brought to light respecting the manners, customs, and mythology of the native tribes of Polynesia, which, it is hoped, will prove interesting to the friends of the missions, and at the same time contribute to the data, after which many, at the present day, are in search, in studying the comparative history of the human race. (1861:preface)

This aim is echoed in the opening pages of *Samoa One Hundred Years Ago & Long Before* (1884:vii). Turner’s ‘archaeological researches’ largely manifested in the ethnological collection and comparison of linguistic data, oral traditions, material culture and the observation of perceived human physical traits.

The term 'Melanesia' is absent from Turner's discussions of Oceanic ethnology, using 'Polynesia' to cover all of the Pacific Islands, as was the tendency for British scholars until the turn of the twentieth century (Douglas 2011:17). Turner differentiated Eastern and Western Polynesia and wrote that the New Hebrides was home to 'dark brown Papuans or Western Pacific Negroes' (1861:97). Conversely, when he encountered a gang of Macao Chinese sandalwood cutters, he observed they were 'not unlike some of our Eastern Polynesians' (Turner 1861:368). However, he more specifically described people on Tanna as having 'less of a negro cast of countenance than other Papuan tribes we have met', explaining 'their colour is exactly that of an old copper coin' (1861:76). Some observations suggest Turner followed an underlying system of biblically framed classification into Semitic, Hamitic and Japhetic races, which was shared by contemporaneous missionary colleagues (e.g. Gunson 1959:157–159; Inglis 1890:7–11). This system derived from the book of Genesis and attributed the repopulation of the world following the Deluge to Noah's three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth. Turner's observation of the Aneityumese *natamarid* Nohoat as having a 'dark Jewish countenance' is suggestive of these biblically framed perceptions (Turner 1861:368).

In another example, calling at Fakaafu, Tokelau on his way back to Malua in 1859, Turner recorded the following story:

The natives there say that men had their origin in a small stone on Fakaafu. The stone became changed into a man. After a time he thought of making a woman. This he did by collecting a quantity of earth, and forming an earth model on the ground. He made the head, body, arms and legs, all of earth, then took out a rib from his left side and thrust it inside of the earth model, when suddenly the earth became alive and up started a woman on her feet. He called her Ivi (Eevee), or rib, he took her to be his wife, and from them sprang the race of men. (1861:526)

In a footnote, Turner remarked that this story 'reminds us of Prometheus and his clay models [...] but it is more interesting still as a manifest fragment of the Divine doings as recorded in the Mosaic cosmology' (1861:526). What appears to a modern reader the syncretic product of recent Christian influence on Tokelau shortly before 1859 was interpreted by Turner as an ancient remnant of scriptural events diffused into Oceania with the islanders themselves. Where Turner's missionary archaeology diverged from the broadly secular models of English archaeologist Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers's typological diffusionism, for example, or

Danish antiquarian Christian Jürgensen Thomsen's three-age system, is that the comparative-historical diffusionism informing it complemented, rather than revised, what Turner considered irrefutable facts of biblical scripture. This complementary relationship is also observable in Turner's later 1884 publication, which took on more of a Tylorian flavour, with the preface written by English cultural evolutionary anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor himself (Haddow 2020:55). Turner's discourse embedded oral traditions of more recent historical events into a substrate of the diffused echoes of scripturally documented realities. It is noteworthy that this was almost precisely the opposite relationship to that which contemporaneous archaeologists of the Levant had with scriptural texts, which they perceived as distorted partial representations of historical events. Within this interpretive context, Turner's 1859 collection of the *Nelcau-Añon* and related story of Aichariai and Nefatimitipeke was both broadly typical of comparative-historical methods in ethnology at that time, and fundamentally informed by a Judeo-Christian cosmology.

In a matter of decades, such diffusionist comparative-historical approaches within ethnology were challenged by cultural evolutionist paradigms (Stocking 1987). Prior to the application of stratigraphic excavation and relative dating techniques in the Pacific, however, both the recording of oral traditions and the collection of related material culture remained important ethnological methods for Europeans interested in reconstructing Oceanic prehistory. They played an important role, for example, in the early British School of ethnography through the works of Grafton Elliot Smith and W.H.R. Rivers, and it was only the dominance of Malinowskian functionalism in early twentieth-century British anthropology, and concurrent shifts in archaeological research, that truly suppressed their significance (Malinowski 1922; see also Lowie 1915; Nunn 2003). The collection of oral traditions waned in popularity for Pacific archaeologists from the 1940s onwards as they sought to establish a more 'scientific', empirical approach in keeping with archaeological discourse elsewhere in the world. In the last 40 years, however, the 'cultural turn' of post-processualism<sup>2</sup> has seen renewed interest in such

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2 Post-processual archaeology developed in the 1980s as a response to processual archaeology, in particular the failure of processual archaeology to engage with contemporary social theory and critiques of positivism. Processual archaeology developed as part of the 'New Archaeology' of the 1960s and 1970s and emphasised the idea of 'culture process'. It took a problem-oriented, generalising rather than particularising approach toward archaeological data, aiming to advance knowledge about social, cultural and political processes characterising past human societies (Hodder 2018; Johnson 2010:41–48, 80–97, 109–116; LeBlanc and Watson 2014).

traditions as direct historic ethnographic analogies to complement excavational fieldwork. Tom Dye identified a similar shift in Hawaiian archaeology away from engagement with oral traditions between the late nineteenth century and the 1980s, which he related to the emergence of first relative, and then absolute, dating techniques within the discipline (Dye 1989). Dye's argument that traditional local histories have an important part to play in archaeological narration is, of course, as valid for the entire Pacific region as it is in the Hawaiian Islands (e.g. Kirch 2012; Nero 2011; Sheppard et al. 2004; see also Spriggs and Howes, **Chapter 26**, this volume). We believe that resources such as this *Nelcau-Añoñ* from Aneityum, gifted to the Hunterian by George Turner, have an important role to play in the emergence of such synthetic and polyvocal archaeologies. An interrogation of early ethnological museum collections and their related archival material has huge potential to both reengage us with the historical narratives of local communities and situate the broader historiography of archaeological research in Oceania. Examining this *Nelcau-Añoñ* simultaneously elicits the specificities of *missionary archaeology* – a short-lived and particular, but nevertheless influential, research paradigm in the history of Pacific archaeology – and brings to light a significant *kastom* object of early nineteenth-century Aneityum.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow from September to November 2020.

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