



Press release

Māori ancestor goes home

Captain James Cook removed the ancestral portrait 250 years ago; University of Tübingen returns 'Pou of Hinematioro' to New Zealand – Māori community and University want to continue to cultivate relationship

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The University of Tübingen is returning an elaborately carved ancestral panel to the Māori community of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti in New Zealand. The 'Pou of Hinematioro' embodies the living presence of the ruler Hinematioro. She lived 250 years ago at the time of Captain James Cook's first landing in New Zealand, and was regarded as a charismatic leader. The British seafarer and his crew brought the 'Pou of Hinematioro' to London in 1771. From there it took a circuitous route to the ethnology collection of the University of Tübingen.

The Pou is one meter high and 33 centimeters wide, and was carved from Canarywood using stone tools. It shows a standing figure, with ornamentation and elaborately fluted patterns adorning the tongue, face and body. A pou is traditionally kept in the religious meeting house of the Māori, the *whareniui*, and enables a spiritual connection to their ancestors. The good condition of the Pou of Hinematioro and the community's ties to the portrait over continents and centuries make the piece unique. The Pou is expected to return to New Zealand by air in March.

The Baden-Württemberg science minister Petra Olschowski said: „There are still numerous cultural belongings from colonial contexts to be found in our museums as well as in our university collections which were appropriated in ways no longer ethically justifiable. I am glad that the committees of the University are aware of their historical responsibility and decided to return the sculpture. At the same time, this decision provides the conditions for a dialogue based on partnership with the community and partners in New Zealand.“

“The Pou and its history has led to a long-standing relationship between the Maori community of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti and the University of Tübingen. We want to cultivate this relationship and make a positive contribution to the return of museum pieces to countries with a colonial

past,” said Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. (Dōshisha) Karla Pollmann, president of the University of Tübingen.

“The Pou represents our paramount leader Hinematiaro and her ancestral line back to the birth of our tribe. The Pou transmits the life force, or *mauri*. When we touch it or are close to it, we can sense the breath and the presence of our ancestors and feel alive,” says Victor Walker, speaker of the Māori community of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti. The community is based in Ūawa on the east coast of the North Island, and like every Maori community has several pou in its meeting house.

Convolved path

The British seafarer Captain James Cook landed in New Zealand on October 8, 1769. In the two days after his arrival his crew shot several Māori and then sailed 60 kilometers further north to Ūawa (Tolaga Bay). There, they received a peaceful welcome from the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti people and their then leader, Hinematiaro. How the Pou came to leave on Captain James Cook’s ship, the Endeavour, is unrecorded and unknown.

Captain James Cook sailed back to London bearing the Pou in 1771. The ancestral panel later passed to a private collector in Vienna and from there to the ethnology collection of the University of Tübingen in 1937, after which it was forgotten for decades. In the 1990s, the curator of the collection, Dr. Volker Harms, rediscovered the piece, researched its origin and made contact with New Zealand. “We could barely believe that after all these years and travel the Pou had survived,” recalled Victor Walker. In 2008 the first delegation of the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, including Victor Walker, traveled to Tübingen, and paid their respects to the Pou.

Researching provenance

By this time a debate had arisen worldwide concerning the origin of exhibition pieces in European museums. Many items had come into the hands of European collectors and museums through violence during the colonial era, and their local communities and the governments of their countries were demanding their return.

Delegations from Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti regularly visit the Pou in Tübingen – emphasizing the importance of the piece to the community. In 2019 both sides decided on a temporary loan. And so, for a couple of months from October 2019, the Pou of Hinematiaro could once again be seen in the meeting house of the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti in Uawa.

The return of the Maori ruler

In 2024 the New Zealand government applied formally to the German Foreign Ministry for repatriation. Once again, Victor Walker traveled to Tübingen to see the pou with a delegation in October 2025. He was also accompanied by a school group. The Māori delegation performed a *haka*, their traditional dance, in the Museum at Hohentübingen Castle, where the Pou currently forms the heart of the jointly planned exhibition “Te Pou o Hinematiaro. Celebrating Maori Heritage, Culture and Connection”, to conclude its time in Tübingen.

“We’re delighted that the Pou will soon be returning to New Zealand,” says Professor Ernst Seidl, head of the Museum of the University of Tübingen MUT. “For the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, the Pou has a far greater significance than it does for us. This is an issue relating to many items, and we are researching it intensively and will initiate the return of other pieces as soon as their origin is clarified.”



The Pou of
Hinematioro in the
University of
Tübingen Museum

Photo: Valentin
Marquardt / MUT



The delegation from Uawa Bay at the exhibition at Hohentübingen Castle. Victor Walker in black to the right of Pou.

Foto: Valentin Marquardt / University of Tübingen

The exhibition 'Te Pou o Hinematiaro. Celebrating Maori Heritage, Culture and Connection' at the Museum Ancient Cultures at Hohentübingen Castle continues until March 29. See [here](#) for more information.

A video of the Māori delegation's last visit in October 2025 can be seen [here](#).

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