

## TONGAN FIGURES: FROM GODDESSES TO MISSIONARY TROPHIES TO MASTERPIECES

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Six wooden so-called “goddess” figures from Tonga have survived in public museum collections around the world. Three are in Auckland and there are single examples in Aberdeen, Chicago and Paris. As highly refined sculptures they have featured in many prestigious books on Pacific and Polynesian art, usually with repeats of the same fairly minimal historical and contextual information (Barrow 1972; Brake, McNeish and Simmons 1979; Dodd 1967; Kaeppler, Kaufmann and Newton 1993; Meyer 1995; Oldman 2004a, 2004b; St Cartmail 1997; Wardwell 1967). Much previous discussion of these wooden figures has been combined with interpretation of Fijian/Tongan whale ivory “goddess” figures (for example, Larsson 1960), but the focus of the present paper is principally on the wooden examples.

These wooden figures have also been highlighted in major exhibitions of Pacific art, and in their associated published catalogues. One of the first of these was the 1969 New Zealand exhibition entitled *No Sort of Iron* curated by Roger Duff, who also wrote the catalogue (Duff 1969). Duff’s entry on the three Tongan figures in Auckland set the pattern for much later comment on them. This was followed in 1979 by an international exhibition entitled *The Art of the Pacific Islands* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., for which catalogue entries on two of the Auckland figures were written by Adrienne Kaeppler (Gathercole, Kaeppler and Newton 1979:92). The Paris figure was included in an exhibition entitled *Rao Polynésies* in 1992-93 at the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, Paris, with a catalogue written by Sylviane Jacquemin (1992:54-55). Most recently, four of these figures were included in the exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860* held at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich in 2006, for which catalogue entries were written by exhibition curator Steven Hooper (2006:242-44).

So far, the most comprehensive study of their provenance, collection history and cultural context is the section on Tongan figure sculptures in the wider study of human images in Fiji by Karl Erik Larsson (1960). Numerous other books and articles have mentioned the figures but without progressing our understanding of them much further. A recent summary description of these figures, concentrating on their ascribed connection to the goddess Hikule’o, has been published by Burley (1996). In the booklet for a 1999

exhibition at the Tonga National Museum, which did not actually include any of these figures, Kaeppler (1999:21-23) summarised current thinking on the goddesses, both wood and ivory.

My intent in this essay is to present the full corpus of information about the six surviving wooden figures: all the available information on their origin, their cultural context and meaning; their role and significance in the conversion of Tonga to Christianity; and their subsequent biographies through private collections into museums and the global art world. This study provides a case history, a step-by-step account, of a Polynesian society surrendering its gods and their symbols to a new religion. The study also affords an opportunity to reflect on the identities of the goddess figures, their relationships to other Tongan religious symbols, and their role in Tongan religion and social organisation. In presenting detailed and critical consideration of the existing documentation on these figures, the study inevitably raises some questions about the version of events usually presented in the literature on them.

#### THE SURVIVING FIGURES

*Figure 1: Auckland War Memorial Museum: Registration Number 32651. Ex-Collection William Oldman, No. 530. Purchased from T. Barnard 20/9/1919 (Fig. 1).*

In Oldman's (n.d.) own manuscript catalogue of his collection, he described this as: "Goddess of Lefuga sinnet cord around neck, 14¾ x 5 [inches]. Illust. Williams p. 274. Tonga. T. Barnard 20/9/19." He noted other numbers of now unknown relevance as 45, 3½, 45, 39262. In this same catalogue, Oldman noted that he also obtained the following artefacts from Barnard: Tongan fishhook, Tongan headrest, Tongan club, Fijian turtle carapace, Austral or Hervey sacred stave with six dancing figures on the turret top, Ra'ivavae drum, necklet with ivory emblems[Austral Islands?], bowl on circular stand [Fijian?]. Barnard, about whom we know nothing further, clearly owned some important early items from Tonga and the Austral Islands.

The published description of this figure in Oldman's (2004a:29) catalogue to his Polynesian collection reads:

530 Goddess. Close-grained dark-brown wood. The face is flat and almost triangular, both sides are sharp angled, merging into a pointed chin, eyes and mouth are indicated by small grooves; nose is long and clearly cut; chevron-shaped projecting ears, the right one pierced. Short neck; angular shoulders with straight acutely-tapering arms, fingers not indicated. Large breasts. Short legs with exaggeratedly large calves. Feet have projecting heels, toes not indicated. The outline of one foot and the base are decayed badly, the latter has been bodied up with wax. Around neck is a length of twisted sinnet cord.



Figure 1. Wooden Figure 1, Tonga. Auckland Museum, No. 32651.  
(Photos: Auckland Museum.)

The front surface including the head appears to have been once coated with a dark-red substance. Label on back: "Goddess of Lefuga hung by Taufaaahu on embracing Christianity, Hapai, July, 1830." This is probably the figure described and illustrated by Williams in *Missionary Enterprises*, page 274. Height 14¾ in.; width across shoulders, 5in. Tonga.

Hiroa [Buck] (1937:75) has also described this figure in great detail, adding: "Abdomen not protruding, no navel, and horizontal edge defining upper line of a raised pubic triangle, base upward, which may represent female sex-organ." And furthermore, "Feet rotted in front; heels project backward. The feet and base were originally in the same block of wood but when acquired by Mr. Oldman both feet and base were so worm-eaten that a new base had to be made."

First-hand examination of this figure in 2005 confirms that a new circular wooden base has been added and that the original decayed feet and base have been inserted into this addition. Almost all of the original left foot at heel and toes has been lost, while the original right foot has lost all of the toes. The actual original base is now obscured by the wax build-up but it appears

to have been left considerably irregular by decay. A wooden insert into the underside of the base makes it impossible to determine if the base had been sawn off a post or whether this represents its original height. The paper label is still present, glued tightly down the back of the figure. The total height of the figure and its present base is 37.4cm, but the figure itself from the top of its original base is 33.5cm high.

*Figure 2: Auckland War Memorial Museum: Registration Number 32652. Ex-Collection William Oldman, No. 531. Purchased from Mrs Webster [widow of the English dealer W. D. Webster?] 25/11/1930 (Fig. 2).*

In Oldman's (n.d.) own manuscript catalogue of his collection, he described this as: "Goddess of Lefuga. 13 x 6¼ [inches]. Tonga. Mrs Webster 25/11/30." He noted other numbers of unknown relevance as 46, 2¾, 50. In this same catalogue Oldman noted that he also obtained many other Polynesian artefacts from W.D. Webster, almost certainly confirming that Mrs Webster was the widow of the famous English artefact dealer W.D. Webster. However, there is no mention of a Tongan goddess in any of Webster's published catalogues or his business or private ledgers (Hermione Waterfield, pers. comm. 17 December 2005, Waterfield and King 2006:54-63).



Figure 2. Wooden Figure 2, Tonga. Auckland Museum, No. 32652.  
(Photos: Auckland Museum.)

Oldman's manuscript description of this figure as "Goddess of Lefuga" seems to be simply an attribution based on its close similarity to Figure 1. The published description of this figure in Oldman's (2004a:29) Polynesian collection catalogue makes no comment on any specific Lifuka provenance and simply reads:

531 Goddess, very similar but much wider across the shoulders. Fingers and toes are indicated by notched incisions. The figure and base are cut from one piece. Surface of body and thighs stained with a red-brown substance. The forehead and sides of head marked with many indentations as if it had been beaten. Height, 13in.; width across shoulders, 6¼ in. Tonga.

Hiroa (1937:76) has also described this figure in greater detail, noting that this stockier figure has no raised pubic triangle and the figure and pedestal are cut out of one piece of wood. First-hand examination in 2005 confirmed that the figure and its base had been carved from one solid piece of wood. The original feet are still intact, as is most of the circular base, except for some worm damage or decay at the rear. However, at some stage in its private collection history, a new flat circular base of a different wood has been added below the original base. This makes it impossible to determine the original treatment of the base or whether it has been cut or sawn off a post. The total height of the figure with its present base is 32.7cm, but the figure itself from the top of its original base is 29.8cm high.

*Figure 3: Auckland War Memorial Museum: Registration Number 32650. Ex-Collection William Oldman, No. 532; Collection of Mr O. Belsham, 1846. Purchased from Birket 10/8/1935 (Fig. 3).*

In Oldman's (n.d.) own manuscript catalogue of his collection, he described this as: "Goddess seated. Old label: Ex O. Belsham 1846 ?Taufaahau?. Birket 10/8/35." He noted other numbers of unknown relevance as 47, 3½, 20. In this same catalogue, Oldman noted that he obtained only one other item from Birket: "411A 42. Club used in game 36¼ [inches]. Heavy dark wood. Australs/Rurutu. No date." This item can now be identified as Number 411a in the Oldman Collection, now in Auckland Museum, registration number AM 31893 (Oldman 2004a:27, Plate 43).

The published entry for this goddess in Oldman's Polynesian catalogue (2004a:29) describes this figure as:

532 Goddess, heavy dark-brown close-grained wood, carved in a seated position, the typical graceful attitude adopted by Tongan women, with knees flexed and left thigh higher than right, the right leg underneath; feet and arms broken. Rounded breasts. Head and face with pointed chin, more rounded



Figure 3. Wooden Figure 3, Tonga. Auckland Museum, No. 32650.  
(Photos: Auckland Museum.)

than in the two previous figures, also the ears more life-like. Eyes and mouth are indicated by slits, a slight ridge above eyes is shown; nose damaged. The features show deliberate mutilation by beating with a knife or axe. A large deep cavity near one eye, apparently a natural knot-hole in the wood. In spite of the damage the modelling of the figure is good, especially the thighs and legs. The seated position of this figure is the first instance I have heard of from Polynesia. With the specimen came a portion of a colour-decorated *tapa malo* and an old label: “Household Goddess of the Emperor of Tonga and part of the Dress worn by him when he worshipped the Devil.” Height, 7½ in. From the collection of Mr O. Belsham, gathered about 1846. This may also be another of Taufaaahu’s Gods. Tonga.

The attached label, now lost, makes the connection to Tāufa‘āhau definite. But this entry is unfortunately ambiguous in not making it clear whether Belsham himself collected this figure in Tonga in 1846 or whether he added it in that year to his collection in England. However, Oldman (2004a:11, Plate 35, No.171) also noted that Belsham had a carved Māori tinderbox in his collection which was “formed about 1846”. Oldman’s use of “formed” and “gathered” certainly implies that Belsham obtained his Tongan figure in

London in about 1846, probably never having been to Tonga himself. The old label associated with the figure makes it almost certain that this was one of the figures originating from Tāufa‘āhau, “the Emperor of Tonga”, in 1830.

Hiroa (1937:77) has also described this figure in great detail, noting the deliberate mutilation that included the cutting off of the arms but suggesting that they were probably pendent as in the other figures. He agreed with Oldman that the angled seating posture was unique among known Polynesian images. Kaepler (Gathercole, Kaepler and Newton 1979:92) has noted this seated position, called in Tongan *faite*, as the correct posture for a woman in Tonga by keeping the legs parallel and not spread widely, as in the cross-legged position adopted by men. Such a posture also indicates respect to others by not allowing one’s feet to be pointed towards them. This figure is also distinguished by its strongly projecting chin, naturalistic ears, minimal breasts and lack of pubic demarcation. The breasts are intact but there are large cuts of intentional damage on both outer sides of them. The total height of the figure is 19cm.

*Figure 4: Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, Scotland: Registration Number ABDUA 63365 (originally I.22) (Fig. 4).*

No detailed description of this figure has been published previously. An original old label glued to its back reads: “Sakaunu a great Tonga goddefs”. The original Marischal Museum catalogue, Wardwell’s (1967:20) description of the old label glued to its back, and most subsequent literature also give the name as Sakaunu. Barrow (1972:67) mistranscribed the name as “Sakunu”. Barrow also believed that “the wear and patination of the fractured surfaces indicate that the arms were lost long ago, possibly well before the figure was carried away from Tonga”. Hooper (2006:244) noted that the right shoulder showed traces of four holes, possibly showing where the right arm was previously reattached, presumably in Tonga before its collection. Both arms are now completely missing, broken away at the shoulders. From my own examination of this figure, the most prominent features are the large naturalistic ears, the proportionally large head and the reduced size of breasts. The figure’s left breast is broken off at the extremity and has some impact marks. Slightly raised eyebrows are represented above the narrow eye slits and meet over the nose. The facial features are softened and smoothed, probably by prolonged handling, and the chin shows old impact marks. A raised pubic area is demarcated by a transverse groove. Both feet are broken away at the front but still joined, suggesting that it may originally have had a larger “base”. Its total height is 36.8cm. In addition to the missing arms, some evidence of deliberate mutilation may be seen in the damage to the lower part of the nose, the broken breast and the impact marks. The material is fine-grained brown wood with a homogenous dull polish.



Figure 4. Wooden Figure 4, Tonga. Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, No. ABDUA 63365 (I.22). (Photos: University of Aberdeen.)

There is no record of the date when this figure was received by the museum, nor is there any record of who might have collected it. The earliest catalogue entry simply reads “Sakaunu, a great Tonga goddess”. This name has puzzled commentators ever since. On the authority of Pacific languages expert George Milner, Larsson (1960:61) has pointed out that it cannot be a Tongan word and that it is also unlikely to be a Fijian word, although a Fijian connection seems more likely. Paul Geraghty, a current expert on Fijian linguistics, has commented (pers. comm. 5 March 2007) that the name Sakaunu looks like it is from Fijian and was most probably borrowed from Fijian by the Tongans. He suggested that it may have come from a Fijian name that could be any of Sakaunu, Sakaudru, Saqaunu or Saqaudru although he could not recognise any of these as the name of a Fijian deity.

However, Kaeppler (1999:21) has reported that the name “Sakaunu” is preserved in written form in the Palace Office Papers at Nuku‘alofa as “a goddess of the underworld”. This apparently undated document,<sup>1</sup> in Tongan, describes Sakaunu as another “tevolo” [devil, that is, a pre-Christian god] living at Fakan[?]faki in Tonga who was the ruler or chief (*pule*) of the road to



Pulotu. The gate of the road to Pulotu was blocked by a *kaho* tree which would only open when spoken to by Sakaunu. Therefore when a person wanted to go to Pulotu, they must ask Sakaunu to speak to the *kaho* tree, which would then obey Sakaunu by moving aside and thereby opening the gate to Pulotu. This close association between Sakaunu as the guardian of the gateway to Pulotu and Hikule‘o as the goddess of Pulotu is highly significant, as will be discussed below. Despite the questions concerning this name, it is extremely important as it is the only one of the six figures with a documented name of a deity attached to it.

A previous curator of the Marischal Museum, Charles Hunt (1981:4), has made the valuable suggestion that this figure was possibly donated to Kings College at the University of Aberdeen by David Cargill, a graduate of the University who served as a Methodist missionary in Tonga from 24 January 1834 to 7 October 1835, and in Fiji from 12 October 1835 to 27 July 1840 (Schütz 1977). While on leave in Britain, Cargill visited relatives in Aberdeen in December 1841 (Schütz 1977:205) and presented a collection of Tongan and Fijian artefacts to the University. Although a Tongan goddess was not listed among his presentations, he nonetheless remains the most likely source of its presence in the collection from such an early date. If Cargill himself collected the figure in Tonga, it probably means that this goddess is one of those surrendered to the Wesleyans in the early 1830s by the first Tongan converts. The name “Sakaunu” may reflect Cargill’s special interest in the Fijian language or may mean that he actually obtained the goddess in Fiji, perhaps from the Tongans of Lakeba where he was first stationed. While working and preaching mainly among the Tongans of Lakeba, Cargill noted on 20 March 1836: “Some of them embraced the profession of Christianity 5 or 6 years ago in the Tonga Islands: the rest have abandoned idolatry since our arrival in Feejee” (Schütz 1977:74). Again, on 8 May 1836, Cargill wrote: “One old Tonguese chief acknowledged the truth of my remarks and the vanity of their idols...” (Schütz 1977:76). Then, on 19 May 1836, Cargill reported: “I addressed myself particularly to the heathens. Most of them listened attentively to what was said of their idols and of the true God” (Schütz 1977:77). These notes would seem to suggest that Tongan “idols” had been brought to Fiji by Tongan adventurers coming to Fiji to build canoes and to participate in local warfare. As a further supposition, Tongan goddess figures may even have been carved in Lakeba or elsewhere in Lau by Tongan *tufunga fou vaka* ‘canoe builders’, with their specialised woodworking skills. Burley (1996:23) has suggested that continued marriage of the Tu‘i Tonga’s eldest sister into the Fale Fisi, leading to intense interaction between Tonga and Lau, may have provided the avenue for an extension of Hikule‘o worship into Fiji.

*Figure 5: Field Museum, Chicago: Registration Number 274478. Ex-Collection Captain A.W. F. Fuller (until 1958) (Fig. 5).*

Hiroa (1935:89) has provided the most detailed description of this figure, which he studied in London in 1933 when it was still in Fuller's possession. Fuller obtained this figure on 20 July 1906. No further information is available on how he obtained it and whether the Tongan identification was preserved with it or was just an attribution by him or someone else. Hiroa did not record how this figure was determined to be from Tonga. However, Hiroa (1935:90) hints that this Tongan attribution was arrived at by comparison with the Oldman figures (Nos 1 and 2) in personal consultation with Fuller and Oldman in London in 1933, concluding unanimously that "the images in their collections must have come from the same locality as the Williams image". By this, they probably meant Lifuka rather than just simply Tonga.



Figure 5. Wooden Figure 5, Tonga. Field Museum, Chicago, No. 274478. (Photos: Field Museum, Chicago.)

The figure is clearly female with smallish protuberant rather than pendulous breasts and a raised pubic area demarcated by a horizontal groove across the upper edge. The pupils of the eyes are marked by holes with raised eyelids and prominent raised eyebrows. Force and Force (1971:150) actually suggested that the eyes originally had shell inlays but this seems unlikely. The pendent arms end with clearly cut fingers although two fingers on the right hand and three from the left are missing. The feet have toes deeply carved, but the front of the left foot has been cut or broken off. Two small wooden inlays have been let into the right shoulder, presumably by a native craftsman. There is now no evidence of a circular “base”. The surface is highly polished in a dark stain. Body and limb volumes, and especially that of the buttocks, are bulbous without the angularity of the other figures. The height of the figure is 37.2cm.

*Figure 6: Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (formerly in Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, Paris): Registration Number 56.127. Originally in the collection of Baron Vivant-Denon, former Director of the Royal Museums of France, before 1825 (Fig. 6).*

The earliest record of this figure is a listing in the catalogue of the 1826 sale of the Denon Collection in Paris. Denon had been collecting in the years up to 1825 and the image was illustrated on the first plate of the 1829 catalogue of his collection, *Monuments des Arts du dessin...recueillis par le Baron Vivant Denon*, which shows that it previously wore a small loincloth, probably of barkcloth. At some time in its history in France the figure was labelled as a fetish from New Guinea (Jacquemin 1992:54). The figure’s identification as Tongan is a recent attribution, which was arrived at by Marie-Claire Bataille and Adrienne Kaeppler. I certainly concur with this attribution. Jacquemin reports the hypothesis that this figure might have been collected during Cook’s voyages of 1772-75 or 1776-80, or the voyage of Bruny d’Entrecasteaux in 1791-94, but these can only be educated guesses based on the early date of its first appearance in France. Certainly, there is a small human image illustrated with other artefacts from Tonga in the account of d’Entrecasteaux’s voyage (Labillardière 1800[II]: Plate 32, No. 22), but this is reported to be carved from bone. An obvious comparison is with the two figures illustrated by Dumont d’Urville (1833: Plate 101) that he saw at Mu‘a in 1827 during his 1826-29 voyage in *L’Astrolabe*, but the Vivant Denon figure must have been in France before he left.

This figure is clearly intended to be female, with small, slightly protuberant breasts, a rounded projecting stomach above clear indications of female genitalia with a prominent vulva represented by a groove. The head is round with prominent protruding naturalistic ears. The eyes are represented by



Figure 6. Wooden Figure 6, Tonga. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.  
(Photos: Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.)

long horizontal slits under deep brows. A straight nose in relief ends with a horizontal cut some space above the small slit for a mouth. Both arms are pendent with no fingers. The gluteal region and legs are well-shaped with only a very slight flexing of the knees. No feet are indicated as the legs continue into a slightly domed base showing signs of damage around its edges. The surface shows signs of weathering or ageing from burial in the soil. Cut out of one solid piece of light brown wood, the total height is 37cm.

## THE COLLECTORS

Apart from the possibility of Cargill being the source of Figure 4, none of the other named collectors have any known direct Tongan connections. W.D. Webster can be discounted as he never travelled to the Pacific, spending his professional life as a general artefact dealer based in England. At the time of his retirement in November 1904, his collection, or rather dealer's stock, was sold at auction in London. The sale was described thus: "In 1904, Mr Webster's collection made a representative sale of all the trophies mentioned in this chapter—with Benin bronzes, New Zealand *hanis* [*taiaha*], Congo idols, bull-roarers, paddles, food dishes, clubs, and jade axes selling for good prices" (Allingham 1924:219; see also Waterfield and King 2006:54-60). At this sale Oldman purchased a "Tahitian idol" for £1 but there is no mention of Tongan figure sculptures. Webster died in 1913, which accords with Oldman's private purchase of the Tongan goddess from Webster's widow in 1930. Similarly, Captain A.W.F. Fuller was a private English artefact collector who never travelled to the Pacific. Therefore, both Webster and Fuller must have obtained their Tongan figures from now unknown intermediaries.

Birket, Barnard and Belsham are not listed as London Missionary Society missionaries (Annotated Register 1769-1923, Lovett 1899). Neither are they listed as Methodist missionaries to Tonga and Fiji by Lawry (1850:134-35). Therefore, it seems fairly certain that the date of 1846 associated with Belsham's figure refers to the date when Belsham acquired the figure in England. Nevertheless, judging from Belsham's recorded date of 1846, and the apparently early and rare types of Polynesian artefacts owned by the three men, they certainly had some close connections with these areas of the Pacific, but whether by residence, travel or personal relationships is not now known. Whatever may have been the actual processes of transport to England and the changes of ownership there, these investigations reveal a long temporal gap between those figures actually seen and collected in Tonga in the 1830s and the Tongan goddesses in collections in Scotland and England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

## EARLY ACCOUNTS OF WOODEN FIGURE SCULPTURES SEEN IN TONGA

The earliest and in many ways the most comprehensive descriptions of Tongan wooden figure sculptures in their physical contexts are those provided by Cook and his companions. Astronomer William Wales at Tongatapu in October 1773 was very clear:

At several of these intersections [of the roads] there are square areas of perhaps 50 to 100 yards left unenclosed, and planted round with large spreading Trees.

Towards the upper end there is raised a small mount, whose top is enclosed with a sort of low parapet of square flat hewn Stones, set on edge in the ground, and the mount is ascended in the front by a flight of steps of the same stone. All the Top of the Mount within the Parapet is covered with gravel, or very small pebbles, and in the midst is a Building, which I took the liberty to enter, and found in one of them two, and in another one small wooden Image, and in both they were placed on the left hand as I went in. On the Middle of the floor lay a heap of black small pebbles (those which covered the floor of the building & top of the mount were of the common brown Gravel) disposed into an Oval form, which took up about 2/3 of the breadth & length of the whole Building. The building might be about 4 yards long & near 3 yards wide. The Gravel both within and without was kept very neat & clear from weeds, and the Area before the Mount was a level patch of short green Grass. (Wales in Beaglehole 1961:812-13)

Similarly, Cook himself gave a complementary description of the same occasion:

... the chief shewed us the way, conducting us along a lane which led us to an open green on the one side of which was a house of Worship built on a mount which had been raised by the hand of Man about 16 or 18 feet above the common level, it had an oblong figure and was supported by a Wall of Stone about three feet high, from the top of this Wall the mount rose with a gentle slope and was covered with a green turf, on the top of the mount stood the house which was of the same figure as the mount about 20 feet long and 14 or 16 broad... the floor of the house was laid with gravel, except in the middle where it was raised with fine blew pebbles to the height of about Six Inches and had the same form of the house that is oblong. At one corner of the house stood a rude image and on one side laid a nother, each about two feet in length, I who had no intention to offend either them or their gods, did not so much as touch them, but asked the chief as well as I could if they were Eatua's [Gods]: whether he understood me or no I cannot say, but he immediatly [*sic*] turned them over in the doing of which he handled them as roughly as he would have done any other log of wood; which raised a doubt in me that they were representations of the Divinity. I was curious to know if their dead were enterr'd in these Mounts and asked my friend several questions relating thereto but I was not certain that he understood any of them, at least I did not understand the answers he made. (Cook in Beaglehole 1961:250-51)

George Forster joined Cook at the same place and provided his own description:

At the upper end of it [the lawn], there was a rising two or three feet high, set out with coral-stone cut square. The area above was covered with a green sod, like the rest of the lawn. Two steps, likewise of coral rock, led up to this part,

in the midst of which a house was situated.... We entered into this building with only one of the natives, the rest keeping at some distance. We found the floor covered with broken pieces of white coral rock, and in one corner a heap of blackish pebbles, about eight feet long, which was elevated a foot above the white stones. The native told us that a man lay buried there, and pointing to the place where his little finger had formerly been cut away, he plainly signified that when his *maduas* or parents died they mutilated their hands. We found two pieces of wood a foot long, carved into some resemblance of the human figure, like those which are called *e-tee* at Taheitee, but they were treated in the same manner, that is without the least degree of respect or veneration, being frequently trod upon and kicked about. These burying places, which are called *a-Fayetooca* [*fa'itoka*] in the language of the country, are always delightfully situated on green lawns, and surrounded with the finest groves. (Forster 2000:246)

Johann Forster, in describing the burial places that he had visited, added that; "In several I saw a wooden figure carved, which they called *Tee*, as in Otahaitee" (Hoare 1982:384).

Four years later in June 1777, Cook was back at Mu'a on Tongatapu, and while visiting with the Tu'i Tonga Paulaho, he noted:

The only thing we met with worth mentioning was a large Affi-a-too-ca or burying ground belonging to the King, a Wall of stone enclosed three separate Mounts and on each of these Mounts stood a house, under which as we were told, the dead are buried, but there was nothing of this sort to be seen; the floors of these houses were covered with loose fine pebbles and like wise the tops of the Mounts round the houses, there were a few rude Images of the human figure, of different ages. We were told they were there as monuments to the Memory of the dead and not the representation of any Deity. Such monuments they seldom raise for these seemed to be very old. (Cook in Beaglehole 1967:138-39)

Beaglehole added the notes:

Within them [*the langi*] were the stone vaults or burial chambers. The houses, *faletoia*, were set up to protect the central part of the covering of fine black volcanic pebbles, called *kilikili*, which marked a vault. The information about the "rude Images being 'monuments' or commemorative figures was probably correctly gathered.... The Tongans did not carve representations of their gods.

Anderson also described the burial place at Mu'a in June 1777:

Almost close by it we found a Fya'tocka or burying place much more extensive and seemingly of more consequence than any we had seen at the other islands. It consisted of three pretty large houses situated on a rising ground

or rather just by the brink of it, with a small one at some distance, all rangd longitudinally. The middle house of the three first was by much the largest, and plac'd in a square 24 paces by twenty eight raisd about three feet high, with surface covered with shingle stones and the whole bounded by large flat stones of hard coral rock, properly hewn, placd on their edges, one of which measur'd twelve feet in length, two in breadth and above one in thickness. The others were placed on little mounts rais'd artificially to the same height and covered with gravel, one of the huts, contrary to what we had seen before, being open on one side which we enterd & found coverd with shingle, with two rude wooden busts of men, one at the entrance the other farther in, the last of which from its appearance had been there perhaps several ages. On calling to some of the natives who had followd us to the ground but durst not enter here, to enquire what they were intended for, they made us as sensible as we could wish that they were merely memorials of some chiefs who had been buried there. (Anderson in Beaglehole 1967:904)

Twenty years later, in 1797, Captain James Wilson of the London Missionary Society ship *Duff* visited the grave mound of Finau 'Ulukālala and wrote:

... it is on a fine plain shaded with toa and other trees. Several people sat round the grave, which was covered with black cloth, and remarkably clean and neat; we sat down to converse with them, and improve the opportunity for their instruction. They shewed us two logs of wood rudely carved in a human shape, which they said were odoos [*atua*] brought from Feejee. We told them these could not be spirits, but mere pieces of wood fit only for the fire. Nor did they seem, by the manner in which they tossed them about, to have any idea of their sanctity. (Wilson 1799:252)

The next European visitor to Tonga who reported wooden figure sculptures was Dumont d'Urville in 1827. During his time on Tongatapu, Dumont d'Urville and his comrades inspected many *fa'itoka* (Fig.7) and *langi*, describing them in terms very similar to those of Cook and his colleagues (Dumont d'Urville 1832:82-84, 106-07). A *fa'itoka* is a large mound of earth with sloping sides marking the burial site of a high-ranking chief, while a *langi* is a rectangular stone-faced platform marking the burial place of a member of the Tu'i Tonga family. After visiting the “*fa'itoka ou tombeau de Mou-Moui [Mumui]*”, which consisted of the usual small hut on an artificial mound surrounded with casuarinas and other trees, Dumont d'Urville makes a distinction between these burial places and another type of religious site (Fig. 8) which he called chapels (“*chapelles*”):



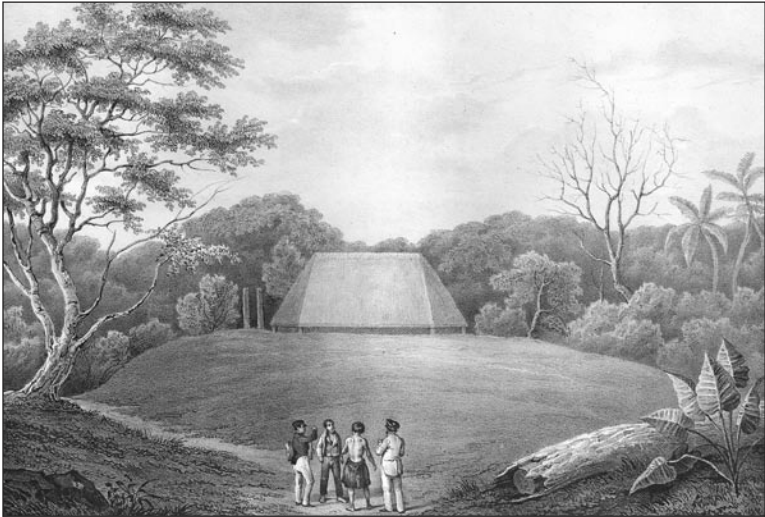


Figure 7. “Tombeau du Chef Tongamana (Tonga-Tabou)”. This engraving shows the house over the grave of a chief, set in open view on a raised earthen “rise” or “mount”. (After Dumont d’Urville 1833: Plate 80.)



Figure 8. “Consultation à l’esprit pour un enfant malade (Tonga-Tabou).” This engraving shows a small “chapel” or temple set within its “sacred enclosure” surrounded by a closely-woven reed fence. (After Dumont d’Urville 1833: Plate 77.)

Then we visited several other small huts of a form practically similar. Each of these is situated in the middle of a small very pleasant grove and enclosed by neat palisades. All are dedicated to different spirits, *hotouas*, which have between them certain degrees of subordination.... All these chapels which correspond perfectly to the *sacella* of the ancients, are quite bare on the exterior and do not present any sort of decoration, except for certain objects that have been deposited there by way of *ex voto*. I visited several and in one of these only, I found a large piece of wood in the form of a human head, which appeared moreover not to be the object of any special veneration. All these places are essentially *tabou*; excepting certain persons commissioned for their care and maintenance; only Europeans have the privilege to approach. M. Thomas repeated to me that the people do not worship any material effigies of wood or stone. (Dumont d'Urville 1832:83; translated by RN)

These same small “chapels” at Mu‘a were seen by de Sainson (Appendix in Dumont d'Urville 1832:360), who reported: “We examined two *fale paléogo* (house of spirits), where the remains of canoes, worm-eaten *ex votos*, were the only remarkable pieces of furniture.” As a summary of his observations, Dumont d'Urville (1832:279-80, translated by RN) noted: “The houses of the chiefs, and likewise the houses of the gods, are rarely ornamented with sculpture as in New Zealand. One finds however, sometimes in the latter, some images most crudely carved, to which the natives appear to attach little interest.” The chapel at Mu‘a illustrated by Dumont d'Urville (Fig. 8) may be the best contemporary representation of the sort of “house of the gods” where the wooden goddess figures may have been kept.

Later, at Mu‘a, Dumont d'Urville and de Sainson inspected some of the *langi* and eventually came to the *langi* of Tafoa. All of the *langi* were neglected and had become hidden by the rapid growth of trees and brush. Here:

On the tomb of Tafoa, we observed several small human effigies in wood and roughly sculptured, two feet and three inches long. The natives who were accompanying us all kept at a respectable distance from the *fa'itokas* which are eminently *tabou*, seemed not to have any veneration for these figures, and did not make any effort to prevent us from handling them and even taking away one or two. (Dumont d'Urville 1832:101; translated by RN)

De Sainson (Appendix in Dumont d'Urville 1832:362; translated by RN) made similar observations on this occasion but added an explanation about the presence of the figures: “At the same time that the corpse is buried, there is interred at some inches of depth some figures in wood representing individuals of both sexes. I have had the occasion to dig up some of these little statues and I then noticed an astonishing sentiment of design....”

Two were drawn (Fig. 9), apparently on the spot, by de Sainson (Dumont D'Urville 1833: Plate 101), who described them as "Figures of wood found at Mu'a under the earth of the tomb of Tafoa". The height of these figures was about 70cm, about twice the height of the surviving goddess figures. Dumont d'Urville is unclear whether these figures were actually taken away from Tonga and no trace of them has been found in any French museum.

Therefore, despite the reporting of several wooden figure sculptures associated with *fa'itoka* and *langi*, apparently none were collected by these early European visitors to Tonga, or if any were, their whereabouts are now unknown. Only the figure now at the Musée du Quai Branly (Figure 6 here) may represent a figure from a *fa'itoka* or *langi*, having been in France since at least 1826. Larsson (1960:68) reports on three now lost Tongan "idols" displayed at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, but these belonged to the Wesleyans and must have been collected by Wesleyan missionaries during or after 1830.

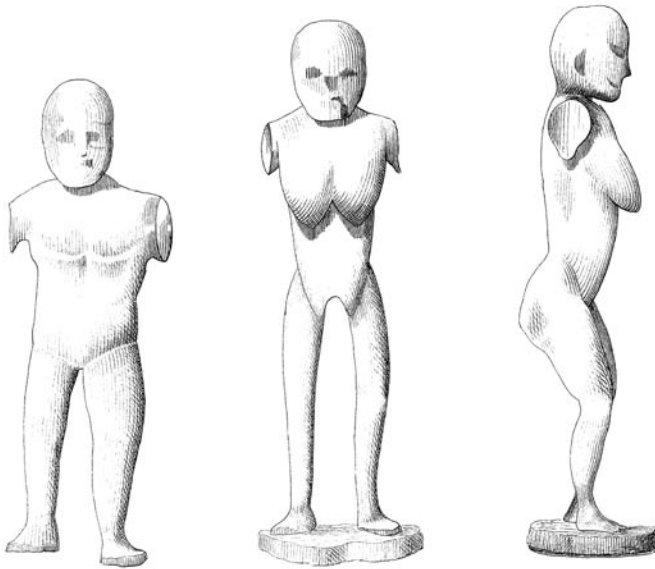


Figure 9. "Plan des tombeaux des chefs de Tonga-tabou" (detail). This engraving shows the two carved wooden figures, one male, one female, seen on the *langi* of Tafoa at Mu'a in 1827. (After Dumont d'Urville 1833: Plate 101.)

## TONGAN GODDESSES IN MISSIONARY ACCOUNTS

During the first half of 1830, critical changes in Tongan culture and religion were happening at a greatly accelerated pace, as some factions decided to embrace the new messages of Christianity and other factions decided to oppose its spread. Tāufa‘āhau and his followers, influenced by the Rev. John Thomas who was then based at Lifuka, rejected their traditional religious figurines and often gave them to the missionaries. Tongan goddess figures were reported frequently by the resident missionaries and their visitors between February and July 1830. It is very likely that most of the surviving Tongan goddess figures were obtained by the missionaries in this short period of six months, but there are difficulties in matching these missionary accounts with specific figures. Therefore, a critical reading of all these accounts, arranged chronologically, is necessary for any attempt to specify how, where and by whom each figure was collected in Tonga.<sup>2</sup>

*Friday 12 February 1830*

The Rev. John Thomas had arrived at Lifuka at the end of January 1830, travelling from Tongatapu on a large *kalia* canoe named Tausala sent for him by Tāufa‘āhau who had already been burning the houses of the gods and casting away the images therein. This iconoclasm had been reported by the Tongan convert Peter Vi who had preceded Thomas to Lifuka (Lātūkefu 1974:64-65, Luckcock 1990:75, Turner 1872:115). Therefore, the events of this day happened only about two weeks after Thomas himself had arrived at Lifuka. Thomas wrote at least three versions of these events, first in his journal, later in a letter and also in his “Tongatabu or the Friendly Islands” (n.d.:565). Larsson (1960:59, note 70) has quoted the following longer version from a letter written by Thomas from Lifuka, Ha‘apai, on 6 August 1830, wherein Thomas inserted an altered extract from his journal entry for 12 February 1830:

The King brought me four Tonga gods to day, these he told me were worshipped by the people, but a little while ago; they are pieces of wood made somewhat in the likeness of human beings and chiefly of the female sex. They have a very oldfashioned appearance. I suppose they were made when Iron tools were scarce at these Islands. If I had an opportunity I would send of them to England. They are venerable for age, but the worms have made such inroads upon them that I question whether or not they would hang together until they arrive in England; however It will gladden the hearts of the friends of Mission to learn that these Idols which were once adored as gods are now cast away as a useless thing. The Houses which were once dedicated to these Idols are now inhabited by those that worshiped them, and they are now sanctified by the word of the living God and by prayer.

In his original journal version, Thomas noted that the idols “have lost all respect among the people” and, “[t]hey now cast them away as a thing of nought, if not to the moles and to the bats yet to the worms and the fire. The houses they once possessed some are now inhabited by the people others are quite destroyed. Thus the Lord is accomplishing his purpose and famishing [vanquishing?] the Gods of the Heathen” (Thomas n.d.3: 12/2/1830). Another slightly different and longer version of these events was reproduced from Thomas’s journal in *Missionary Notices* (187, July 1831), adding that the Lord “is sweeping away the refuge of lies”.

In his later account synthesising all his observations on Tonga, Thomas (n.d.1:565) repeats some of his original diary entry but adds some interesting afterthoughts:

The king brought me four rude wooden images today, called Tammabua’s, they are rudely cut into human shape, chiefly of the female sex (I expect they were saved from some of the gods houses the king and his zealous friends set fire to just before I arrived here). The king says they were worshipped by some of the people a short time since. They are venerable for age, and not being made of iron wood, the worms have made sad inroads in them, or I might forward them to England—I fear there are many persons who still grieve about the desecration of these sacred things, but it seems if we use their crying after them, they have fallen into the firm grasp of this powerful and determined king, who treats all such things with contempt.

Here, Thomas makes the distinction between ironwood (*toa*) and other softer woods from which the figures may have been made. He guesses that they had been rescued from among those recently destined for the fire and is aware that many Tongans were still deeply attached to such images and anxious about their desecration. Most importantly, this extract is apparently the only record of the general term applied to these figures by Tongans of the time: *Tammabua*, or in modern spelling *tamapua*. For modern Tongans, this means a doll, but in the days before the idea of European dolls had been introduced, a *tamapua* was an idol or an anthropomorphic image (Rabone 1845).

#### *Friday 11 June 1830*

Four months later, the Rev. John Thomas, still in Lifuka, visited Tāufa‘āhau in the king’s own dwelling house or “apartment” and described the situation, for which at least two somewhat complementary versions are available.

The King being called upon today was found busy writing, this is a new employment for his Majesty, but he wishes to be able to copy scriptures and

other things for his own use. In looking to the side of the house five wooden images were seen suspended by their necks, side by side, on the King being asked if he had been hanging the gods he replied Yes he had hung them up that his friends may see that they were dead. He had some thought he said of taking them to the large house where divine service is performed. He was informed it may be well to do so and pile them on a heap there as vanquished false gods. (Thomas n.d.2:609)

The other version from Thomas's journal has been quoted by Larsson (1960:59) and Rowe (1976[1885]:60):

I called upon the Chief, found him busy writing. In looking round I perceived 5 wooden Images, or Tongan Gods suspend(ed) by their neck to the side of his apartment. I smiled when I saw them and asked him if he had been hanging the Gods. He said yes, he had hung them up that his friends may see that they were dead, he said he would take them to the house we worship in. I told him it would be well, and heap them together that the people may see them, and learn that they yielded to the worship of God. The Chief laughed heartily at these Idols who are now fallen into disgrace. (Larsson 1960:59-60)

Both of these versions are very clear that there were five wooden images hanging in Tāufa'āhau's house. Luckcock (1990:84) quotes part of this account giving the number of images as six, but this must be a mistake.

This remarkable scene of the king writing in his own house is indicative of the rapid and deeper changes that were happening in Tongan society at this time, just as powerful as the actual surrender of the god figures. The scene is even more evocative of these changes when it is noted that Tāufa'āhau had only just started to learn to write in November 1829, when Peter Vi reported on his learning to read (Luckcock 1990:75). Then, as soon as Thomas arrived in Lifuka in January 1830, Tāufa'āhau attended reading classes sitting humbly with young children and ordinary Tongans in Thomas's mission school. By June 1830, Tāufa'āhau was writing to the missionaries in his own handwriting (Turner 1872:117; see below).

### *Saturday 12 June 1830*

On the very next day, the Rev. Nathaniel Turner at Tongatapu received a gift with a note from Tāufa'āhau in his own handwriting:

A canoe has just arrived from the Haabais [Ha'apai] bringing pleasing intelligence from Mr Thomas. The chief Taufaaahau has been much stirred up of late and quickened towards the Lord and his cause. He, the chief, has sent me a short note, in the King's own hand, and also a small present, including

one of their former Goddesses – a rude wooden image about 20 inches high, representing a most ugly looking decrepit old woman with a cord round her neck, by which she with many others, had been tied up to the rafters of one of the desecrated Fale Otua “Gods Houses”—as a culprit or ... thing. Brother Cross has also received a similar present from the same Noble Minded Chief. Glory to God for these tangible trophies of the Gospel of his Son. (N. Turner MS. 1836-1846: 292/209-210/293)

A slightly different account of this event from Turner’s journal was reproduced in *Missionary Notices* (187, July 1831), giving the height of the female figure as about 18 or 20 inches, concluding that these figures “were formerly objects of adoration and worship. Glory to our God for these trophies of his word and grace”.

As noted by Turner in his journal quoted above, the Rev. William Cross also received a goddess figure from Tāufa‘āhau on the same day. This was reported by Cross with an extract from his journal in a letter dated 1 July 1830 (quoted in Larsson 1960:60-61):

He [Tāufa‘āhau] sent for my acceptance a basket of citrons and an wooden Idol, one of their former Godes’s. This speaks much.... These Idols I understood were numerous at the Haabai Islands. That formerly they made them on the death of any God or Godes. That they make them to represent their Gods, and suppose that the Spirit of the Gods come into these Idols, hence they become the objects of worship & are considered most sacred.

A similar shorter account from Cross’s journal was reproduced in *Missionary Notices* (187, July 1831). In his account of Cross’s life, Hunt (1846:31) described this event, giving credit to the work of John Thomas: “In June, Mr Cross received from the King of Haabai two substantial proofs of the usefulness of Mr Thomas’s labours; namely a letter written by the King’s own hand and an idol which he and his people had formerly worshipped.”

#### *Thursday 8 July 1830*

Travelling on their London Missionary Society ship, later named the *Messenger of Peace*, the Reverends John Williams and Charles Barff visited their Methodist missionary brethren in Tonga in July 1830. After calling at Tongatapu, the two LMS missionaries took Mr and Mrs Cross with them to Ha‘apai, departing on 6 July. They met with the Rev. Thomas and Tāufa‘āhau at Lifuka on Thursday 8 July, as described by Williams in his “A Journal of a Voyage undertaken chiefly for the purpose of introducing Christianity among the Fijians and Samoans by Messrs Williams and Barff 1830” (quoted in Moyle 1984:61-62):

Went after dinner with our friends to look at the establishment of the Chief Taufaahau and we were astonished both at its extent and neatness. The chief had not less than six good houses, in as many enclosures all remarkably neat with even grass plots around the houses and very neat reed-fences surrounding each separate enclosure. We were much surprised at the superior manner in which some of the houses were executed the neatness and number of the rafters being not more than three inches apart, the very neat manner in which the whole building was tied together with sinnet. The lapping [lashing] resembles different figures all very handsome but no two posts alike in the ornamental lapping. We were conducted by Mr Thomas and the chief [Tāufa'āhau] into the sacred residence of the gods but strange to tell instead of being laid up as formerly with the utmost care they were all hanged up by the neck around the wall plate of the house out of contempt.

The Chief having been urged by some of the Principal Chiefs of the Island around him to return to Idolatry had taken such a decided step to prevent their importuning him any more. The little idols were made somewhat in the shape of a human being but not more than 14 or 18 inches long. They were all goddesses that we saw. One of those hanging by the neck was requested and immediately given to us.

Williams's later 1837 published account of this experience, with its illustration of the goddess still with the string around its neck (Williams 1837:318-20), is now the most frequently quoted account of the repudiation of Tongan goddess figures, but there are some inconsistencies, both within his own accounts and between those of others:

Taufaahau, resolving to anticipate and neutralize this movement [to revive their pre-Christian religious ceremonies to honour their gods] drove a large herd of pigs into the sacred inclosure, converted a most beautiful little temple, which stood in the middle of it, into a sleeping apartment for his female servants, and suspended the gods by the neck to the rafters of the house in which they had been adored! The idolaters, ignorant of his proceedings, came, with great ceremony, attended by their priests, to present their offerings, and found, to their astonishment, a number of voracious pigs, ready to devour any thing they had to offer, and the gods, disrobed of their apparel, hanging in degradation, like so many condemned criminals. They retired from the spectacle with great indignation; but as they were comparatively few, and knew the character of the man with whom they had to contend, their rage spent itself like the foaming billow when it dashes upon the shore. The chief conducted us into this once sacred spot, the area of which did not exceed half an acre, and was adorned by several beautiful cordia, Barringtonia, and other trees; it also contained three houses, which were converted into dwellings for his female attendants. Of these the middle house was the smallest, but it was the most complete and beautiful that could have been erected with their



means and materials, and surpassed any structure I had seen in the Pacific. I expressed my surprise to the chief, that they should bestow such immense labour in preparing so beautiful a residence for such worthless objects. "It is true," he replied, "they are worthless, they are pieces of wood, they are devils; but we were formerly in the dark: it is only lately that our hearts have been made light in the knowledge of the true God." On observing five goddesses hanging by the neck, I requested this intrepid chief to give me one of them, which he immediately cut down and presented to me. I have brought it to England, with the very string around its neck by which it was hung; and I prize it the more highly, because it was one of the trophies of the moral conquests of the Gospel, achieved by Christians of another denomination.

Williams's subsequent narrative goes on to locate this episode of hanging the goddesses to the period between the arrival of Peter Vi at Lifuka, that is August 1829, and the arrival of Thomas at Lifuka in late January 1830. If Williams's synthetic account is accurate, this would mean that the goddesses had been hanging in the now disused temple for at least five and possibly even up to ten months before he saw them. There are also inconsistencies in the number of goddesses hanging in the temple reported by Williams. His journal account does not specify a definite number, but in *The Watchman* of 6 May 1835 he claimed there were three gods, while his 1837 published book account (quoted above) increases the number to five. However, this discrepancy of numbers may simply mean that Williams had been told that Tāufa'āhau had originally hung five, but by the time Williams visited the temple only three were left in place. It is possible that the two "missing" figures were those sent by Tāufa'āhau to Turner and Cross. There are also doubts about Williams's identification of the houses that he saw (Moyle 1984:61, note 89), later claiming that the "sacred residence of the gods" had been turned into a cooking house, then later still "a sleeping apartment for his female servants". Thomas disputed both these claims, saying that "the God house was not turned into a cook house, but into a royal palace and it was in this palace that the wooden gods were hanging when Mr Williams saw them" (Thomas MS. 1837). Therefore, as seen in Thomas's journal entry quoted below, the goddess given to Williams came from Tāufa'āhau's own house or "royal palace" although this building had originally been a temple. Sadly, some of Williams's account was apparently embroidered for dramatic effect and cannot be trusted for exact details.

In his journal account for 8 July 1830, reproduced in *Missionary Notices* (187, July 1831), Cross, who was also present, described this occasion:

We arrived at Lifuka. Brother Thomas met us on the beach. The Chief Tāufaahau appeared pleased to see us and showed us his different houses. He had some good houses erected in a most masterly manner. They are much

superior to any I have seen in Tonga [Tongatapu]. His largest house is used as a chapel: I suppose it will contain more than four thousand persons. In one of his houses, which had formerly been devoted to the gods, he had hung five wooden idols by the neck. He observed it was to show all the people that they were dead.

Therefore, Cross's account does seem to validate Williams's claim that there were five idols hanging in a building that originally had been a temple, but he does not make any mention of one being cut down and given to Williams.

*Friday 9 July 1830*

In his journal for the next day, the Rev. John Thomas (Larsson 1960:60) recorded: "I gave our brethren [Williams and Barff] one of the Tonga Gods, and our King [Tāufa'āhau] gave one at the request of Mr. Williams. It was one out of the 5 who the King tied up by their necks a few weeks ago in his own house."

Thomas (n.d.1:621-22) later expanded on this event in his synthesised account:

The Brethren, Williams and Barff, concluded their very friendly visit to us, which we have much enjoyed. They likewise were much delighted to witness the progress of the Gospel, over idolatry and evil. I was happy to be able to present Mr Williams, with one of the Tonga idols, I had received some time since from the King, and his Majesty at Mr Williams request, gave him another from five gods hanging by the neck in his house; these are trophies won by the blessed Gospel, without loss of life or blood, and many more such we hope to witness, as well as to hear of through the blessing of God upon the labour of his servants, in the islands of these seas.

This makes it clear that the goddess given to Williams by Thomas was most likely one of the four that Tāufa'āhau had given to Thomas on 12 February 1830. The goddess that Williams reported obtaining from Tāufa'āhau on the 8 July 1830 was one that had been hanging in Tāufa'āhau's own house, formerly used as a "temple" (see Record 2, Table 1).

*Thursday 15 July 1830*

The Rev. William Cross had travelled to Lifuka with Williams and Barff on 6 July 1830. A few days later, Cross noted in his journal for 16 July: "Yesterday an Image that had been the object of religious worship at an adjacent [*sic*] Isle was offered for sale which I procured with a few beads" (Larsson 1960:61, note 71).

This is the first recorded instance of a Tongan god figure being offered for sale, introducing a new development which signals the first known transformation of Tongan god figures from missionary trophies into commodities. By this date, many of the islands in the Ha'apai group which were under the control or owed allegiance to Tāufa'āhau had followed him in repudiating their traditional gods. Williams (Moyle 1984:64) reported in 1830 that Tāufa'āhau had 22 islands under his government from Lifuka, 17 of which were inhabited.

#### MATCHING THE RECORDS WITH THE SURVIVING FIGURES

From the records summarised above, the following numbers of goddesses actually seen in Tonga by missionary observers can be substantiated. Record 1 enumerates four given to Thomas by Tāufa'āhau. Thomas gave one, presumably out of this group of four, to Williams and Barff (Record 8), leaving

Table 1. Summary of Tongan wooden goddess records

<i>Record</i>	<i>Collection date</i>	<i>Collector</i>	<i>Occasion</i>
1	12 February 1830	Rev. John Thomas	Tāufa'āhau brought me "four Tonga gods, chiefly of the female sex"
2	11 June 1830	Tāufa'āhau	Five Tonga gods hanging by neck in apartment of Tāufa'āhau
3	12 June 1830	Rev. Nathaniel Turner	"One of their former gods – a wooden image of a female figure, about 18 or 20 inches high" sent to Turner by Tāufa'āhau
4	12 June 1830	Rev. William Cross	"An wooden idol, one of their former Godes's" sent to Cross by Tāufa'āhau
5	8 July 1830	Rev. John Williams	Given to Williams by Tāufa'āhau in 'temple' at Lifuka
6	8 July 1830	Rev. John Williams	Unspecified number, 3 or 5, seen by Williams hanging in "temple" of Tāufa'āhau
7	8 July 1830	Rev. William Cross	"In one of his houses, which had formerly been devoted to the gods, he had hung five wooden idols by the neck"
8	9 July 1830	Rev. John Thomas	"I gave our brethren [Williams and Barff] one of the Tonga gods and our King [Tāufa'āhau] gave one at the request of Mr Williams. It was one out of the five who the King tied up by their necks a few weeks ago in his own house."
9	15 July 1830	Rev. William Cross	Cross purchased an image at Lifuka (from "an ajacent isle") for a few beads

three in his possession. Record 2 enumerates five hanging in Tāufa‘āhau’s own dwelling house. From these five, Tāufa‘āhau definitely gave one of this five to Williams (Record 8). Tāufa‘āhau also gave one goddess to Turner (Record 3) and one to Cross (Record 4). Unfortunately, it is not recorded whether these last two were from Tāufa‘āhau’s original five or from another source, but for the sake of this exercise the conservative position would be that all three given away by Tāufa‘āhau came from his original five. This leaves two in Tāufa‘āhau’s possession. Independently of all these, Record 9 enumerates another image (of unknown sex) which Cross obtained from another source. As noted above, the number of goddess figures that Williams said he saw in the “temple” (Record 6) cannot be relied on, ranging between an unspecified number (Moyle 1984:62), then three (*The Watchman*, 6 May 1835), then five (Williams 1837:320). Furthermore, the source of the two goddesses given to Williams (Records 5 and 8) have already been accounted for, one coming from Thomas’s original four (Record 1) and the other from Tāufa‘āhau’s original five (Record 2). Therefore, Williams can be discounted as the source of any other goddess figure, although if given the benefit of doubt, he may have seen another separate three to five hanging in the temple. Nevertheless, in view of his proven narrative embroidery, this number must remain suspect. Consequently at a conservative count, these records enumerate a total of ten wooden images, at least nine of which were apparently female “goddesses”, in circulation in Tonga between 12 February and 15 July 1830. Using a more generous count, up to 13 could be covered by these records alone.

A tantalising record of three Tongan “idols” exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867 by the Wesleyan Mission has been reported by Larsson (1960:68). From the exhibition catalogue (with author’s translation in brackets), they are described as:

210. Idole de Tonga: Tui-hadjakafonna. Adorée autrefois par la famille du *Haw*, chef civil des îles des Amis.

[210. Idol of Tonga: Tu‘i Ha‘a Fakafanua. Worshipped previously by the family of the *Hau*, civil chief of the Friendly Islands.]

211. Faabi Fonga. Idole adorée autrefois par le chef sacré, appelé Tui-Tonga.

[211. Fa‘ahi Tonga. Idol worshipped previously by the sacred chief, called Tu‘i Tonga.]

212. Erki Tubu, adorée par le chef sacré. La Taminaha et sa famille.

[212. ‘Eiki Tupu. Worshipped by the sacred chief. The Tamahā and her family.]

The specificity of the information supplied with them (allowing for mis-transcriptions into type and into French) corresponds closely with information about gods contained in a manuscript by the Rev. John Thomas entitled “The Mythology of Tongans” (Larsson 1960:66-68). With the proviso that we do not know if the images exhibited in Paris were of wood or ivory, it is distinctly possible that these were the three wooden images which, after July 1830, remained in Thomas’s possession (four having been given to him by Tāufa‘āhau in February, one of which was passed on to Williams in July). At some later stage, Thomas may have transferred them to the Wesleyan Mission with associated information about their identities that he had obtained later. Where they are now remains a matter of conjecture—they may actually be among those now in museum collections. However, the quality of the Paris information, although fragmentary and confused, does provide a sample of the detailed naming that no doubt once was applied to all the actual goddess figures.

Reprising my opening remark: six Tongan wooden figure sculptures of goddesses are presently held in various museum collections worldwide. The task now becomes to ascertain whether it is possible to match any of these missionary accounts with actual specific figures existing today. Most of the brief descriptions recorded in the missionary accounts are very generic, mentioning: (i) “likeness of human beings and chiefly of the female sex” (Thomas), (ii) “oldfashioned appearance” (Thomas), (iii) “venerable for age but the worms have made such inroads upon them” (Thomas), (iv) “rude wooden image about 20 inches high” (Turner), (v) “representing a most ugly looking decrepit old woman” (Turner), (vi) “[t]he little idols were made somewhat in the shape of a human being but not more than 14 or 18 inches long” (Williams), and (vii) “[t]hey were all goddesses that we saw” (Williams).

There is clearly common agreement that the images were female, possibly considered to be a mature or old woman, ranging from 14 to 20 inches high, and some were damaged by worms and other weathering. There is no mention of any intentional damage or mutilation such as might have been inflicted by zealous converts, a feature often deduced from the marks on several of the existing figures. With regard to any distinguishing features, the most striking and unique feature is the seated stance of the goddess catalogued here as Figure 3, but there is no mention of such a stance in the missionary accounts. Similarly, the missing arms of catalogued images Figures 3 and 4, and the missing fingers and toes of Figure 5, are not mentioned.

Thomas makes mention of the inroads into “them” of “worms” when referring to the four figures given him by Tāufa‘āhau on 12 February 1830, which implies that at least two were in such a condition. “Worm” damage is especially evident

on the feet and base of Figure 1, the figure with John Williams's label still on the back. This may help to confirm that Figure 1 is the figure given by Tāufa'āhau on 12 February 1830 to Thomas, who then passed it on to Williams on 8 or 9 July 1830. The base of Figure 2 is also in a fragile condition, and it may be this poor state of the bases of Figures 1 and 2 which prompted Thomas to question "whether or not they would hang together until they arrive in England". If so, this would make Figure 2 one of those retained by Thomas and, possibly stretching circumstantial evidence, one of those exhibited in Paris.

Two of the goddesses were reported as still having the string around their necks by which they were hung (Williams 1837:32, Turner 1793-1846:292/209–210/293). As reported by Oldman, Figure 1 did have "a length of twisted sinnet cord" around its neck when he obtained it in 1919, although this cord has since disappeared. Because of the similarity between this image with a cord around its neck and the illustration in Williams's *Missionary Enterprises*, Oldman and other writers following him have assumed or argued that this is the image cut down and given to Williams in the temple by Tāufa'āhau. This may well be so, and the similarity is convincing, but it must be remembered that at least two images, if not all, had strings around their necks and Williams received two images on 8 or 9 July (Records 5 and 7). So, Figure 1 is either the ex-Thomas one given to Williams (which may have incidentally had a string on it) or the one cut down by Tāufa'āhau for Williams. One came from Thomas's original four that had been in his possession since 12 February 1830 and the other from Tāufa'āhau's group of five that he had suspended in his home before 11 June 1830. However, the similarity of the content of the early labels attached to Figures 1 and 3 strongly suggest that these two are the figures given to Williams during his July 1830 Tongan visit, even though they came into Oldman's hands from different sources. If so, Figure 1 is the only candidate to match Williams's illustration, since the seated posture of Figure 3 rules it out. Even accepting that Figures 1 and 3 are the Williams ex-Thomas and ex-Tāufa'āhau figures, it is not possible to discriminate definitely which was given to him from Thomas and which from Tāufa'āhau. Nevertheless, the evidence of worm damage on Figure 1 tends to indicate that this figure is the one from Thomas.

Figure 4, with its identification as the goddess Sakaunu, would seem to have come from a different source than the others mentioned in the quoted missionary reports, none of which attribute a personal name to any of the goddesses. The possibility that the Sakaunu image was collected by David Cargill in Tonga in 1834-35 or Fiji in 1835-40 is very strong.

## NUMBERS AND SOURCE AREAS OF GODDESSES

Complicating this entire attempt at correlation is the fact that there is no logical necessity that all of the existing figures must have come from those figures reported in Tonga in 1830. Certainly, the circumstantial evidence supports this link to the missionary reports, and in the case of Figures 1 and 3, makes it likely. For the other existing figures, they could just as likely have originated from other unreported sources.

With regard to the possible total number of figures existing in Tonga in that period, it is certain that there were many more than the six surviving examples. As an indication of how many were destroyed in the early years of conversion to Christianity, at Vava'u in May 1831 when Finau forsook his gods at the urging of Tāufa'āhau, Finau stood seven of the principal idols in a row and told them he was going to burn them if they did not "run away", implying perhaps that they had legs to do so. When they made no attempt to escape, he burned them along with 18 temples, the smoke from the burning idols and temples darkening the sky for three days (Farmer 1855:211, Hunt 1846:41, West 1865:160). Describing what he was told about this event, Peter Turner (MS. 27 May 1831) listed "idols rudely carved" among the whales' teeth, fine mats and clubs that were burned as gods among the 15 (not 18) godhouses that were destroyed by fire. This confirms that the "idols" were almost certainly human figure sculptures and not other objects frequently labelled "idols" by the Wesleyans.

Most of the accounts of wooden figure sculptures in Tonga situate them in the Ha'apai Islands and more specifically to Lifuka. The Rev. Cross obtained one from an island "ajacent to" Lifuka, suggesting a source very close to Lifuka. However, Captain Cook and astronomer Wales in 1773, the Rev. Thomas in 1826 (Cummins 1977:71) and Dumont d'Urville in 1827 (Dumont d'Urville 1832), all saw wooden human images at Tongatapu. Along with Finau's destruction of the idols at Vava'u, these accounts confirm that carved wooden sculptures of lineage ancestors and/or deities were present at Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u. This widespread occurrence also provides another impression of the probable total numbers of such images. But this total number would include all reported human images, not just the goddess figures. If just the goddess figures are considered, their concentration at Ha'apai is obvious. Likely explanations for this concentration might include the possibility that goddesses really were rare elsewhere in Tonga, that goddesses were associated with particular lineages that were centred on Ha'apai, or that goddesses were present but not seen by foreign observers in other areas of Tonga.

## THE SEX OF THE FIGURES

All of the surviving six Tongan figures are clearly intended to represent females embodying the accepted Tongan female aesthetic qualities of prominent breasts, generous shoulders, exaggerated gluteal region, large calves, smooth curved body surfaces, some with a demarcated pubic area and in one case (Figure 3) depicting the posture appropriate for a seated female. Of the two figures excavated from a tomb at Mu'a during Dumont d'Urville's visit in May 1827, one is clearly female with the same features noted above for standing females. The other Dumont d'Urville image is apparently male, lacking the female marker feature of prominent breasts (Fig. 9).

As has been shown above, most of the early written records of explorers who saw wooden figurines in Tonga before their surrender to the missionaries are non-committal as to the indicated sex of the figures. Only Anderson makes the observation that there were "two rude wooden busts of men". It is probably reasonable to expect that if the figures seen by Wales, Forster, Anderson and Cook had displayed the obvious female markers of prominent breasts, their sex would have been noted, especially in view of the attention paid to the appearance of such gender markers on the living Polynesian women they met. Therefore, these explorers' accounts do imply that the figures seen by them were probably male, or with no clear sex, except for the one definite female unearthed by Dumont d'Urville. The figure in Paris (Figure 6), because it was most probably collected by an early explorer and appears to have been recovered from the soil, may belong in this category, but is unusual by virtue of its female sex. In contrast, it has been shown above that most of the figures seen and collected by the missionaries in 1830 were described by them as female, as are those surviving images presumed to be from this short period. Some confirmation of this female image grouping may be found in the fact that all of the sperm whale ivory figurines from Tonga are also clearly female.

Perhaps these two sets of descriptions and the known figures might imply that there were two categories of figures: mostly male figures from the period of 1773 to 1827, and apparently all female from the very short 1830 period. Of course, these time periods only reflect the date of their reports. Obviously, both the wooden male and female figures and the ivory female figures must have been made over a considerable span of time. Indeed, some of the explorers' and missionaries' accounts explicitly comment on the great range of ages displayed by the wooden figures, judging by their state of decay and the amount of "worm" damage. This appearance of greater age, weathering and decay is most obvious on the Paris figure (Figure 6) and the Dumont d'Urville figures, that is, the group from the earlier collecting period. Any temporal difference in the two categories may be related to the situations and arrangements where these figures were located, what category of beings they represented, and the differing access to them available to Europeans in the periods before and after Christian conversion.



There also seems to be a significant size differential between these two categories of figures. The six available heights for the earlier period figures consist of the two estimates of about 60cm made by Cook, the two estimates of about 30cm made by George Forster, and the two measurements of 70cm made by Dumont d'Urville. These give an average height of about 53cm. The five heights for the later period goddess figures, excluding the aberrant seated female at 19cm, all range between 29.8cm to 37.4cm, giving an average height of 35.6cm. These size differentials, while obviously not mutually exclusive, suggest that there may be a significant difference between the larger earlier reported mostly male figures and the smaller later exclusively female figures.

Many of the pre-conversion accounts comment on the lack of respect shown by their Tongan guides towards the figures encountered literally lying about loose in the burial places or *fa'itoka*. Cook and his colleagues came to the general conclusion that these (most probably) male figures were "monuments to the memory of the dead and not the representation of any deity" (Beaglehole 1967:138). This interpretation would accord with the prominence of males among the "chiefs" and "lineage heads" so commemorated. Johann Forster came to the same conclusion:

However, as far as we could see into their religious notions, it did not appear that they practised any kind of idolatry; neither did they seem to have any particular veneration for birds like the Tahitians, but to worship a supreme invisible Being. What may have induced them, as well as the people of Tahitee and the Society Isles, to unite their repositories of the dead and their places of worship in one, remains in obscurity. (Forster 1996:248)

Did they reach this conclusion because they were denied access to the "temples" where the goddesses reposed? It appears that only Dumont d'Urville, in the later period of 1827 when the missionaries had already gained some trust, was allowed to enter actual godhouses or chapels as he called them. Therefore, was there a distinction between tomb memorials to dead chiefs and lineage heads, who would be expected to be mostly male, and representations of deities, who in fact were apparently mostly goddesses? Some confirmation of this association between high-ranking male memorial figures and burial places may be found in the story of the wooden "doll" of Talaiha'apepe, which substituted as the Tu'i Tonga until Talaiha'apepe grew up and became Tu'i Tonga himself, whereupon the wooden figure was buried with customary ceremony in the two-terraced stone tomb called Langi Tama Tou (Gifford 1924:55). However, in other versions the "doll" was simply a "billet of *tou* wood" (Rutherford 1977:33). It also must be noted that there seems to be no mention of wooden images in descriptions of elaborate funeral rituals by Dumont d'Urville and others.

## BURIAL PLACES AND/OR TEMPLES

Some understanding of the distinction drawn above may emerge from a consideration of the question raised by astronomer William Wales in 1773:

Another thing about which much dispute has arisen is the design & use of those neat little buildings which I have mentioned to be situate at the intersections of the Roads; some asserting that they are Temples & the Images Idols, and others that they are Burying Places & the Images merely Ornamentall. If the former opinion be true they pay little regard to their Gods for one of the Natives set one of them up for us to shoot at: For my part I believe they are appropriated to both, here as well as in Europe & that the Images, are put there in memory of ye persons interred. (Wales in Beaglehole 1961:814-15).

Were Tongan temples (*fale 'otua*) distinct from burial places (*fa'itoka*), or did the same sort of constructions serve one or other function at various times, depending on their importance and the status of the personages associated with them? The burial places with their wooden images lying about loose are usually described by early European visitors as being set on an artificial “mount” or “rise”, and in the case of the highest status ones, as at Mu‘a, set on stone-fronted stepped and terraced *langi*. This raised place was surrounded by lawns and large ornamental trees. The houses on these mounds or terraced structures were clearly visible from a distance, with no enclosures or fences around them. Contemporary illustrations make these features very clear (Fig. 7).

In contrast, descriptions of the places where goddesses might have been located do not mention any special elevation and most simply refer to a “sacred enclosure”. Gifford (1929:318) noted that when the gods feature in the *talatupu 'a* ‘traditional stories’, the enclosure in which the priest’s or god’s house stood was often referred to as *loto 'ālahi* or ‘inside the great fence’. According to Cummins’ (1977:73) summary descriptive account, drawn largely from Williams’s report, the sacred houses resembled normal dwellings except that they were more carefully constructed and better decorated. Cummins (1977:74) has also suggested that in 1777 Cook may have been taken unwittingly into a temple, probably the sacred house of the Tu‘i Tonga attended by the priest Kautai, when Tu‘i Tonga Paulaho took him to a mourning ceremony. Cook (Beaglehole 1967:140) described the place as “a small inclosure, in which was a small neat house and one man seting before it”. This seems to be the same sort of “chapelle” situated in a small grove and enclosed by neat palisades that Dumont d’Urville encountered on Tongatapu, noting that many of them contained objects placed therein as offerings made in fulfilment of a vow or as thanks (Dumont d’Urville 1832:83). At Bea [Pea] on 1 July 1830, Williams recorded:

We noticed a sacred enclosure where their Idols are kept. We requested admittance but the people were not willing to allow us to go in. A New Zealand Ti or idol guarded the door of the sacred enclosure, having the face tattooed like the New Zealand chiefs. It was made in the shape of a man but not more than three feet high. We could not learn whether it was made at Tonga, or was brought from New Zealand. (Moyle 1984:51-52)

At Lifuka on 8 July 1830, Williams did gain entry into Tāufa‘āhau’s “establishment”, which had “six good houses in as many enclosures all remarkably neat with even grass plots around the houses and very neat reed fences surrounding each separate enclosure”. Williams makes special mention of the “even grass plots” virtually ruling out any possibility of raised “mounts” or “rises”. Williams’s description of the supposed sacred house occupied by the gods as the smallest and neatest of the houses in these enclosures distinguishes it from the houses seen on the burial mounts, which were likened to large common dwelling houses by Cook and Anderson.

By the time later foreign observers reached Lifuka, Tāufa‘āhau and his followers had already destroyed all of the temples, as West (1865:366) and others reported. This destruction had already commenced as soon as Tāufa‘āhau returned to Lifuka with Peter Vi in August 1829, and was carried out by Tāufa‘āhau to prove to Thomas his commitment to the new religion.

#### DEPLOYMENT OF THE FIGURES IN THE TEMPLES

With this paucity of descriptions about Tongan temples *per se*, scarcely any information is available on how goddess figures were deployed within the temple. Accounts of the deployment of other god symbols such as whales’ teeth and polished ivory pieces, perhaps also ivory goddess figures, usually describe their careful wrapping in barkcloth to keep them hidden in the god houses. However, none of these accounts seem to apply specifically to the wooden goddess figures. Those hints that have been recorded suggest that the images were hanging in the temples, unlike the male figures left lying about loose in the *fa’itoka* houses. Missionary John Thomas reported that he saw god figures hanging from the rafters of the godhouse (Thomas n.d.1:609, also quoted in Kaeppler 1999:21). On the basis of this reference, Kaeppler has commented that the usual home of the figures was in the rafters or hanging from the ridgepole in the godhouse, where Tāufa‘āhau regularly took offerings to them, until 1829.

Earlier, Kaeppler (1990:65) had suggested that the wooden figures “were probably part of hooks or were hung from the ridge pole in god houses dedicated to them”. But this identification of the goddess figures as hooks

cannot be supported, given the absence of any means of hanging them and the lack of any evidence that a hook form had been cut from their lower parts. The usual Tongan hook form is well-known from hooks and disc baffles collected on Cook's voyages, and the goddess figures have no formal resemblance to those. Several of the surviving Tongan female figures made of ivory have suspension holes in the top or back of their heads, others are arranged to be worn suspended as a necklace, and yet others are represented as back-to-back figures above a suspension hook, probably designed to be hung in a shrine or temple. If the wooden goddess figures were intended to be hung in the same way, then the carpenters were perfectly capable of carving suspension holes or lugs in their heads.

The accounts of both Williams and Thomas agree that the goddesses were "hanged up" by Tāufa'āhau to demonstrate his commitment to Christianity and his opposition to those chiefs wishing him "to return to idolatry". This "hanging" has been interpreted as an intentional desecration of the goddess figures and a sign of contempt towards the traditional religion (Duff 1969:49). Thomas credits Tāufa'āhau with saying that he had hung them up so his "friends [pagans]" could "see they were dead".

Williams, who may have been making assumptions about Tongan practice based on his experiences in the Cook Islands and the Society Islands, noted in Lifuka that the images were no longer "laid up as formerly with the utmost care", and were "disrobed of their apparel" (Williams 1837:274). The exposure of the naked goddesses to all eyes can also be interpreted as an aspect of this desecration. This comment by Williams and the usual widespread treatment in Fiji and elsewhere of small valuable items being wrapped and stored in baskets leads to the valid suggestion that the wooden goddess figures were probably wrapped in barkcloth bundles and/or kept in beautiful baskets, perhaps up in the rafters, and then brought out periodically for ritual purposes. The surfaces of several of the figures show signs of oiling or anointing with colour such as the traces of red on Figures 1 and 2, which would be expected from their treatment during rituals.

One prominent feature of four of the female figures (Figures 1, 2, 6 and Dumont d'Urville's female figure) is a round flat base which allows them to stand free on a flat surface. The seated goddess (Figure 3) is also able to stand free on a flat surface. The base on Figure 1 has been restored, presumably to recreate what was considered the original form, but unfortunately obscuring its actual condition. Figure 2 is still on its original base but the new section fitted underneath obscures the underside of the original. Consequently, it is impossible to determine whether these two figures had been sawn or cut off a post. The bases on Figure 6 and Dumont d'Urville's female figure are seen in their original damaged state. Duff (1969: 49) interpreted these "bases" as the

top of an original post support, presumably sawn off by a collector. However, the Dumont d'Urville female figure has been drawn as it was found, making it most unlikely that the French had sawn it off the post before the artist on the spot, de Sainson, had begun to sketch it. There would have been no flat-topped furniture in the temple for these figures to stand upon, suggesting that they were probably placed on the ground when in ritual use.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF THE GODDESSES

Only one of the surviving goddess figures has a name of a deity recorded with it. This is the figure in the Marischal Museum (Figure 4), which is identified in the original museum register as "Sakaunu, a great Tonga goddess". The original source of this name is unknown and no other definite original information has been preserved with this figure. As discussed above, the name "Sakaunu" has proved problematic, although a Fijian or at least Lauan connection seems most likely.

The 1867 Paris exhibition information reported above suggests that the Tu'i Tonga, the Tamahā and the Tu'i Ha'a Fakafonua each had specific named god figures. That named "Tui-hadjakafonna" may be identified as the god Tu'i Ha'a Fakafonua, patron of a famous sanctuary at Maufanga (or Ma'ofanga), Tongatapu (Gifford 1929:324). Following information recorded by the Rev. Thomas that a goddess among the Fa'ahi Tonga group of gods associated with the Tu'i Tonga family was called Nau'aa or Ngau'aa, Larsson (1960:68) suggested that the Paris figure No. 211 probably represented this Nau'aa. However, this suggestion is premised on an assumption that Thomas thought all the other Fa'ahi Tonga gods, including Hikule'o, were male and a conjecture that the Paris figure No. 211 was female. Larsson (1960:66, 68) also observed that Thomas recorded the name Eiki Tubu ['Eiki Tupu or 'Eiki Tupu'a] as a god worshipped by the Tu'i Tonga and the Tamahā, thereby confirming that the Paris god figure No. 212 had this name. However, these identifications are purely academic since the actual figures have not been located and it is not even known whether they were made of wood or ivory.

These references to the gods Sakaunu, Tu'i Ha'a Fakafonua and E'iki Tupu are the only early references that specifically allocate names to carved god figures. Writing in 1960 and drawing on information supplied by Thomas, Larsson (1960:68) also suggested that one of the Paris figures might be named as the goddess Nau'aa. Several other named gods have been recorded as having temples dedicated to them (Larsson 1960:66), but no wooden figures are mentioned; reference usually is made to ivory figures and other whale ivory items, clubs, certain mats and cloth, even natural pieces of wood and stone, as the material representatives of the gods. In 1850, Lawry (1851:34-37)

described some of the “gods which have not been viewed by any mortal eye for several generations” that were presented to him by Tongan converts. They included “an ivory necklace wrapped up in native cloth, stuck full of small red feathers”, a whale’s tooth god named Feaki, a god named Finau-tau-iku consisting of a piece of cloth interwoven with small red feathers, and a large necklace of whales’ teeth representing the god Fakatoumafi. Lawry went on to explain that Tangaloa and Maui were “never represented or approached by a shrine or idol of any kind”.

The deity now usually identified with the goddess figures is Hikule‘o. But it does seem strange that out of all the missionary accounts about these gods when they were being surrendered to the missionaries, none mentioned the name Hikule‘o or made any suggestion that Hikule‘o might be involved. Many of the early European visitors to Tonga heard about Hikule‘o but none of them reported any carved figures representing this god/goddess. The association of goddess sculptures with Hikule‘o, as reported by the anthropologists Kaeppler, Herda, Burley and others, seems to date from the later 1950s at the earliest. This late association may just simply be the result of a lack of Tongan memory about these figures, which were all removed from Tonga over 100 years previously, until prompted by anthropologists bringing photographs of them back to Tonga.

There are suggestions that Queen Sālote identified these figures with Hikule‘o during her conversations with Elizabeth Bott in 1958-59 (Herda 2005:21, note 7). However, the person most credited with making this connection is the Honourable Ve‘ehala Leilua, who served as Governor of Ha‘apai, Keeper of the Palace Records and the first secretary of the Tongan Traditions Committee set up by Queen Sālote. Kaeppler (1990:65) was the first anthropologist to publish this connection and she has confirmed (pers. comm. 6 December 2005) that when she showed Ve‘ehala photographs of the figures in the 1960s he immediately said, “Hikule‘o”, apparently independently of any influence from other anthropologists. As explained by Herda (pers. comm. 8 December 2005), “When I spoke to Ve‘ehala in 1985, he was very clear that it was Hikule‘o. In fact, most (knowledgeable and interested) Tongans that I spoke to in the 1980s just ‘knew’ or assumed the female figures were Hikule‘o.” The identification of the Aberdeen goddess (Figure 4) as Sakaunu may be regarded as evidence supporting this identification with Hikule‘o, given the reported role of Sakaunu as the guardian of the gateway to Pulotu, the domain of Hikule‘o. Another possible tenuous link to Hikule‘o for these figures may be the suggested identification of one of the figures as the goddess Nau‘aa (or Ngau‘aa), described by Thomas (Larsson 1960:66) as “an intercessor for Hikule‘o”.

However, militating against this identification of the goddesses as Hikule‘o is the aforementioned observation that none of the early missionaries’ accounts make this identification, despite their strong interest in Tongan gods. Further, despite his careful reading of missionary sources, Larsson (1960) did not make this specific connection either, and none of the early European visitors to Tonga, even Mariner who was there for four years, make any mention of carved figures representing Hikule‘o. Most early accounts mentioning Hikule‘o emphasise the power and status of this god as the main god of Tonga, the guardian of Pulotu and the kin of Maui and Tangaloa. Most assert that Maui and Tangaloa did not have any temples dedicated to them and were not explicitly worshipped. These sources are often more ambiguous about the possibility of temples dedicated to Hikule‘o and the sex of this deity, usually assuming a male. Thus, Anderson in 1777, reporting on his informants’ beliefs, wrote:

...immediately on death that [the soul] of their chiefs separates [*sic*] from the body and goes to a place called ‘Booolootoo [Pulotu], the chief or god of which is Gooleho [Hikule‘o]. This Gooleho seems synonymous with our Death, for all (even you & the men of Feejee speaking to us) say they are subject to the power and dominion of Gooleho. (Anderson in Beaglehole 1967:949)

Wilson of the *Duff* noted:

They believe the immortality of the soul, which at death, they say, is immediately conveyed in a very large fast-sailing canoe to a distant country, called Doobludha [Pulotu], which they describe as resembling the Mahometan paradise. They call the god of this region of pleasure Higgolayo [Hikule‘o], and esteem him as the greatest and most powerful of all, the rest being no better than servants to him. This doctrine, however is wholly confined to the chiefs. (Wilson 1799:273-74)

From his experience in Tonga between 1806 and 1810, Mariner (1817[I]:302) described Hikule‘o as: “HIGOOLEO; a very high god, regarded principally by Tooitonga’s family. He has no priest, nor any house, and is supposed never to come to Tonga. The natives are uncertain about his attributes.”

Similarly, Dumont d’Urville made the same points as Anderson but added the important association with the Tu‘i Tonga, although his wording is suspiciously close to that of Mariner, whose book he may have read: “Higouleo is a powerful god, venerated principally by the family of the Tu‘i Tonga. He has no priests or chapels and his attributes are little known. However Cook, who called him Gouleho, says that he lives at Bolotou, and tends to believe that he represents the power of death” (Dumont D’Urville 1832:291, translated by RN).

Of these voyagers, only Wilkes of the United States Exploring Expedition mentioned a temple of Hikule‘o, but by 1840 his information was coming from the missionaries: “This god has his spirit-temple where all their valuable presents to the gods are deposited. I was shown by the missionaries some large whale’s teeth that were prettily carved, which had been found in the temple lately destroyed by the Christian party” (Wilkes 1845[III]:24).

Also relaying information supplied by Thomas, Farmer (1855:126) wrote, “The people never presented offerings to the Mauis, or the Tangaloas, and rarely to Hikuleo.” Collocott (1921:153, 162) presented a summary of the Wesleyan missionaries’ understanding of Hikule‘o, voting in favour of a female gender, and recognising her as the ruler of Pulo-tu. He described how “Hikuleo was bound by a great cord, one end being held by the Tangaloa in the sky, and the other by the Maui in the Underworld. The earth would have been destroyed by a visit from her, hence the precautions to keep her at home”.

Later commentators (Burley 1996; Gunson 1990:16, 18; Herda 2005; James 1991:302-3, 1995; Māhina 1990) have made careful use of Tongan traditions about Hikule‘o, emphasising her position and role as senior in rank to her younger brothers Maui and Tangaloa. As explained by Herda (2005), her situation parallels that of the Tu‘i Tonga Fefine, the eldest sister of the Tu‘i Tonga, validating her role as the principal deity of the Tu‘i Tonga. The ‘*inasi*’ annual offering of yams to the Tu‘i Tonga on behalf of Hikule‘o acknowledges the kinship link between the Tu‘i Tonga and Hikule‘o through ‘Aho‘eitu, the nephew of Hikule‘o and the first to hold the Tu‘i Tonga title. In the most recent and most comprehensive of these commentaries, Herda (2005:33) has argued convincingly that those Tongan myths which portray Hikule‘o as a phallic symbol in the form of an eel, sea snake or having a tail (cf. Gunson 1990) can be regarded as borrowings from Samoan stories of Savea Si‘uleo where he is always male. In Tongan mythology according to recent scholarship, Hikule‘o structurally occupies the place of eldest sister and is consistently female.

#### DESCRIPTIONS OF HIKULE‘O

Wilkes in 1840 described Hikule‘o as male and noted “Bulotu [printed in error for Hikule‘o] is most remarkable for a long tail, which prevents him from going farther from the cave in which he resides than its length will admit of” (Wilkes 1845[III]:23). Farmer, following Thomas, described Hikule‘o as:

The god Hikuleo was in the habit of carrying off the first-born sons of chiefs and other great men in order to people Bulotu. He went such lengths in this system of abduction that the men on earth grew very uneasy. Their ranks became thinner and thinner. How was all this to end? At last the other gods were moved to compassion. Tangaloa and Maui seized hold of Hikuleo. They passed a strong



chain round his waist and between his legs, and then taking the two ends of the chain they fastened one end to the sky and the other to the earth. Even this confinement did not hinder Hikuleo from making many attempts to seize upon first-born sons; but whenever he approached within a short distance of his prey he was pulled in one or the other of two contrary directions.

Hikuleo has a very long and intelligent tail. In all the journeys made by the body of the god, the long tail remains in Bulotu watching. He is thus aware of what goes on in more places than one. (Farmer 1855:132-33)

Even if the presence of the masculine tail is discounted as a borrowing from Samoan traditions about Savea Si'uleo, as argued by Herda (2005:33), these descriptions of Hikule'o do not suggest any obvious reason why she should be represented as a woman beautiful by Tongan feminine aesthetic ideals. On the one hand, by taking into account the powerful feminine role of Hikule'o as *mehekitanga* 'father's sister' to the Tu'i Tonga, it does make good sense in Tongan logic that such a powerful female should be portrayed as a beautiful woman. On the other hand, power could just as equally have been conveyed by making Hikule'o an ugly and dangerous being, perhaps as suggested by the Rev. Nathaniel Turner's doubtless prejudiced description of the goddess figure presented to him as "a most ugly decrepit old woman". Obviously, "beauty" is in the eye of the beholder, in the same way that the representation of "power" is culturally determined.

A related question might be posed about the significance of the goddesses being represented naked. Tongan women were required to uncover their upper bodies in the presence of chiefs and gods as a sign of respect, as seen in the engraving from Dumont d'Urville of supplicants in a temple enclosure (Fig. 8). Missionary Thomas was well aware that to do this was insulting, but this custom caused him problems when he tried to convince Tongan women that they should cover their upper bodies in a Christian church. Whatever the exact implication of the nudity of the goddesses, such explicit nudity as depicted by the goddess figures obviously had a very powerful symbolic value. The fact that they are naked now, as are most other surviving Polynesian sculptures, is because of historical circumstances and their new status in Western culture as art objects. From other Polynesian circumstantial evidence, it seems highly likely that the figures originally had coverings of barkcloth and fine mats, from which they might periodically have been exposed under strict ritually controlled circumstances. Also in Polynesia, unwrapping was an act of desecration and disempowerment, whether done periodically in the course of rituals of renewal or to deconsecrate sacred objects before handing them over to Europeans. This scenario suggests that Tāufa'āhau obtained these gods and disempowered them by taking off their wrappings and then hanging them up to public exposure, to demonstrate that "they were dead"

as he apparently put it. Hanging by the neck may not have been the critical issue, but public exposure in their nakedness would have been.

One aspect of Hikule‘o that all Tongan traditions agree on is the binding by a great cord (transformed into “chains” in Farmer’s account) held by Tangaloa in the sky and Maui in the underworld, so that Hikule‘o cannot visit Tonga and destroy it. Some Eurocentric speculations have been made about the goddess images standing on flat surfaces or surmounting a vertical post, or being placed lying down on beds. There is no evidence for any of these conjectures. Being suspended hanging on a sennit cord attached around the neck is still the best documented deployment of these goddess figures. Nevertheless, it is probably too far-fetched to suggest that the sennit cord around the neck of the goddesses represented the great cord held by Tangaloa the sky god present in the rafters of the god house and the round “base” represented the underworld inhabited by Maui.

#### TEMPLES OF HIKULE‘O

According to the Rev. John Thomas as quoted by Burley (1994:63, 1996:21), the principal temple of Hikule‘o in Tonga was Olotele in the Tu‘i Tonga compound at Mu‘a. McKern (1929:93) described Olotele as a rectangular area within the southwestern gateway of Lapaha at Mu‘a that contained the dwelling house of the Tu‘i Tonga and the house of Kautai, the priest who administered to the family god of the Tu‘i Tonga. Cummins (1977:74) noted that a sanctuary of Hikule‘o, called Fanakava, was situated at Mu‘a, presumably in the same place as the Olotele temple to Hikule‘o. Gifford (1929:324) described this rectangular area in Lapaha, Mu‘a, belonging to the Tu‘i Tonga, as a sanctuary named Fanakava which was unique in that there apparently was no god or priest associated with it. But he did suspect that this Fanakava in Lapaha might be associated with Hikule‘o, given the close relationship between Hikule‘o and the Tu‘i Tonga. There was an original Fanakava sanctuary in Puluotu and this name seems to have been applied to actual sanctuaries on earth that were associated with Hikule‘o.

The best documented temple of Hikule‘o was called Fale Me‘e in Ha‘ano village on the island of Ha‘ano in Ha‘apai. Its history was originally recorded by Thomas (n.d.1:95), later described by Gifford (1929:291, 323) and Burley (1994), and mentioned as a famous sanctuary or place of refuge by Cummins (1977:74). Despite its status as a sanctuary, a massacre of several chiefs and people assembled there at the house of Hikule‘o occurred during the civil disturbances about 1781 or 1782 (Cummins 1977:77, Gifford 1929:292, Thomas n.d.1:797-98). Gifford (1929:292) was given the name Fanakava for the sanctuary associated with Fale Me‘e. Burley (1994:64) makes a strong

case for the early association of the local Ha‘a Ngana lineage with the Tu‘i Tonga lineage, explaining the presence of a Hikule‘o temple in Ha‘ano. Unlike any of the other godhouses or temples described by the early visitors, Fale Me‘e had stone structural elements instead of or in addition to the usually reported wooden frames.

Burley’s (1994:58) informant, Vake of Ha‘ano, mentioned another godhouse similar to Fale Me‘e situated on the island of Tungua, in the Kotu Island group of Ha‘apai, “close to the langi for the Tamaha”. Noting that Tungua is recognised as the island of the Tamahā, the eldest daughter of the Tu‘i Tonga Fefine, and that her god is believed to have been Hikule‘o, Burley (1994:64) makes the logical argument that this temple on Tungua was also dedicated to Hikule‘o.

Another temple of Hikule‘o situated in Ha‘apai was on the island of ‘Uiha where Hikule‘o was the patron goddess of the chief Malupō (Gifford 1929:292). Here, the assistance of Hikule‘o was sought by the practice of finger sacrifice in cases of sickness, and those planning voyages had to inform the goddess of their plans in order to avoid bad weather. The people had to observe various prohibitions on activities that annoyed the goddess.

For all these four temples to Hikule‘o, there is no mention of anthropomorphic sculptures among the temple paraphernalia. But Hikule‘o could be symbolised by other representations. According to Gunson (1990:18, note 23):

In Vava‘u, Hikule‘o was said to be a pale-skinned god represented by a shark. Hikule‘o of the Tu‘i Tonga was a female manifestation and may have originally “possessed” the Tu‘i Tonga Fefine just as Nafanua, the Samoan war goddess, possessed the sacred taupo of a high chiefly family in Samoa.

Gunson (1990:16, note 21) also claimed that:

The shamans of Hikule‘o were probably the most powerful. These constituted a priestly caste because of their superior knowledge and mana and appeared in the known world as Lo‘au or even as priests of the Tu‘i Tonga. Through the talking tree [Akaulea or Pukolea] the shamans of Hikule‘o had superior means of communication as the tree was supposed to be able to summon whatever Hikule‘o required from the earth plane. The power of Hikule‘o was so great that the ‘otua had to be tied by the tail in order to save the world from destruction.

In her refutation of a proposed psychoanalytic interpretation of Tongan kingship based on an “oedipal” theme, James (1991:301-3) has suggested that the Tu‘i Tonga’s kava bowl represents the body of Hikule‘o. In more detail, James posits that the *taunga*, the side of the bowl by which it is hung when

not in use, is a representation of Hikule‘o’s face, the actual bowl is her body or womb, the legs of the kava bowl are described as “breasts” and the attached sinnet cord with the female genitalia-like white *Ovula* shell at its end is her tail. In this interpretation, during a chiefly installation ceremony marked by the taking of kava, the new title-holder is “born” out of the kava bowl.

#### CULT FIGURES OR *EX VOTO* OFFERINGS

For the missionaries in Tonga of the 1830s, all the gods and their representations or vehicles were “idols”. But very little is known about how the material items in Tongan temples were used in worship or supplication. In fact, Dumont d’Urville described pieces of canoes and other items seen in the temples as *ex voto* items, assuming, perhaps under the influence of his Roman Catholic background, that they were put there as thanks or as contracts with the gods for their help. However, we do not know how these were presented to the temple and what was done with them.

From the missionary accounts, there are some descriptions of how the symbols (“idols”) of the gods were kept wrapped up in cloth and brought out for special ritual occasions. But none of these descriptions apply specifically to anthropomorphic figures. Were anthropomorphic figures deployed differently from the other material representatives of the gods? And if not, can we then apply these descriptions to the figures? This is assuming that these figures were material representatives of the gods, that is, cult statues that were worshipped in some now unknown way. And from missionary records we do have the names of three actual figurines that identified them with gods. But what if the figures were themselves *ex voto* objects? Might they have been *ex voto* offered to various gods or to Hikule‘o herself? Might they have been *ex voto* for the supplication of Hikule‘o at particular ‘*inasi* festivals?

#### CLUBS AS VEHICLES FOR THE GODS

There is also a possibility that Hikule‘o might have been represented by a carved wooden club. As Thomas noted for Saturday 18 November 1843: “Today the King called and gave me a beautiful, carved club, called Hikuleo, this he said was the god worshipped at Uiha, one of the principal of the Haabai Islands from which place he said it had been sent to him. Hikuleo is the devil name” (Thomas n.d.3).

Apart from this single reference to a club actually representing Hikule‘o, the role of certain clubs serving as vehicles for the gods is well documented by Thomas from his earliest years in Tonga. As he wrote: “Besides this many of the gods had what was called the hala, or way, which was a carved club—most sacred, by which the god was supposed to enter the priest” (Thomas, quoted in Larsson 1960:67).

On the 25 December 1830, Thomas accompanied Tāufa‘āhau to ‘Ahau village at Lifuka where they visited Uataili (or Uataele), the old priest who served the god Fakailoatonga. After partaking of kava with the priest:

The *hala* or gods shrine was laid at the feet of the king who passed them to me, thanking the old chief who had thus renounced his idol god and as proof had thus given up the insignia of his office... I carried away with pleasure the *hala* or god from this interesting village... the King himself with his friends had been worshippers of this god who was called Fakailoatonga. (Thomas n.d.2)

Thomas was well aware of the aesthetic quality of these *hala* clubs and started to make a practice of collecting them. Thus, in September 1831, he made the following note:

The god Havea worshipped by the family of Fakaaulolo was represented by a beautifully carved iron wood club, which was known to be in the keeping of the Chief who had now become a worshipper of Jehovah, through means of the teaching of the missionary. Lazarus Vea a Chief of this place and a member of my class, being a relative of the above chief and formerly a devoted worshipper of Havea the god while at Vavau and before he took his leave of his friend, begged of him the god they had formerly worshipped, saying he wished to give it to the missionary who had brought them the knowledge of the true God. It was readily given up and brought and presented to me; which was thankfully received, to be kept as a trophy of the blessed Gospel, fairly won from the hands of the enemy. (Thomas n.d.1:772)

A month later, Thomas pursued another *hala* while stopping over at the island of Taunga, Vava‘u, where he called upon Kaho, the old priestess of the god who was represented by the club:

I asked about the god of that island, it being rather a famous place, for voyagers to call at, both in going to and from the southern groups. The old lady told me the god was taken to Tonga, but in this she lied also for the god was still in the house, which stood not far away and I found she was the priestess, and was evidently afraid I was going to take some liberties with their poor god, especially as the King had now turned from all such things, and also that such havoc had been made of gods and goddesses in these parts. I had taken a walk to see the god's house and saw that the god was in it, a beautifully carved ironwood club, which she was afraid I should have carried away with me,—hence she did all she could without insulting me, to prevent my seeing the inside of the building, but I professed to be her real friend, and no one ever knew me lay hands on what was not my own—but the Lord had executed judgement upon the Vavau gods—and there is now no place for them. (Thomas n.d.1:792).

Although he did not obtain the *hala* at this time, Thomas made arrangements to purchase the club as soon as it became available. In 1850 at Mu‘a, Rev. Walter Lawry was given a *hala* club:

There is also in my possession, among the Heathen relics from Mua, a club belonging to a long line of Priests; and its name is hallah, or “path.” When the Chiefs came to enquire of the Priest, this sacred club was taken down; the Priest was inspired, and delivered his message, which might be in anger, or otherwise, as the case might be; then the club smote the beam, and away went the fahe gehe, mounting aloft, or plunging into deep, as they saw fit. This club, then, is a sacred fahe gehe, or “god” of Tonga. Several others are safely lodged with me, which need no description; for all their qualities are the same as those already mentioned, with mere circumstantial variations. (Lawry 1851:38)

Unfortunately, it seems that none of the accounts of *hala* clubs describe their appearance—whether they had a specific form or any other distinguishing features—apart from being “beautiful” and carved out of ironwood (*toa*). Many collections include Tongan clubs with incised stylised figures of humans, birds, dogs, turtles, crescents, fish, and European sailing vessels, sometimes combined into scenes of activity (Barrow 1972:73-75, Kaeppler 1999:24-30, St Cartmail 1997:127-35).<sup>3</sup> One of the frequent human figure motifs appears to represent the Tu‘i Tonga with his feathered *pala tavake* headdress (Fig. 10). Another prominent and frequent anthropomorphic figure motif is a full frontal human figure of indeterminate sex but highly suggestive of a two-dimensional rendering of the wooden goddess figures with a plain round head, pendent arms lacking hands or fingers and splayed feet (Kaeppler 1990:65; Kaeppler, Kaufmann and Newton 1993:524). Some clubs and headrests have similar figures inlaid with ivory. Perhaps most significant among these ivory inlays is the full-frontal human figure on the handle of the fly whisk given to Captain Cook in 1777 by Tu‘i Tonga Paulaho and now in Vienna (Gathercole, Kaeppler and Newton 1979:175; Kaeppler, Kaufmann and Newton 1997:524). Given the close association between the Tu‘i Tonga and Hikule‘o, this particular ivory inlay figure could support the speculation that such incised and inlaid full frontal anthropomorphic figures with round head and pendent arms actually represent Hikule‘o. Clubs with incised and ivory figures are probably too numerous to be categorised as *hala* simply by virtue of the presence of these figures. Yet perhaps the presence of the “goddess” on the club was a means of conveying the approval, power and protection of the goddess on to the field of battle.



Figure 10. Tongan Club, Auckland Museum No. 14696, with incised figures on the end. (Photo: Auckland Museum.)

Much less common than the clubs with incised or inlaid figures are certain clubs (Fig. 11) with raised bosses around the distal end (Oldman 2004a:32-33, Plate 51; St Cartmail 1997:132). Some of these clubs with bosses are long clubs; others are short throwing clubs or *kolo* (Kaepler 1999:27). Hiroa (1937:78), agreeing with a suggestion from Oldman, was probably the first to comment on the similarity of the simplified faces on these bosses to the faces of the wooden goddess figures. Both sets of faces share a flat face, pointed chin and projecting nose. On this basis, Buck suggested that the two such clubs in the Oldman collection were probably from Lifuka. Larsson (1960:68) also pointed out that the Paris exhibition of 1867 included a Fijian or more likely Tongan club described as an “*Idole en forme de massue avec trois têtes ou demi-dieux de chaque côté*” [Idol in the form of a club with three heads or demi-gods on each side]. Consequently, a further speculation can be made, based on this facial similarity, that the faces on the clubs indicate a connection between these specific clubs and Hikule‘o, suggesting that these rare clubs might have been *hala* from a temple dedicated to Hikule‘o or at least *hala* owned by a priest of Hikule‘o.



Figure 11. Tongan clubs with bosses in the form of faces resembling the faces of the goddess sculptures. (Photos: Auckland Museum.)

#### SURRENDERING THE GODS OF HIS ENEMIES

If these wooden goddess figures are associated with Hikule‘o, they represent the main god of Tāufa‘āhau’s opponents, the Tu‘i Tonga party. Therefore, the question arises: was Tāufa‘āhau surrendering the gods of his enemies to the missionaries?

Several writers (e.g., Cummins 1977:77-78) have commented on a declining belief in the power of the traditional Tongan gods and growing scepticism about their worship, evident for many years before the arrival of foreigners in the islands. Cummins noted that this scepticism was evident later in the scant respect that Tāufa‘āhau showed the Tu‘i Tonga as the representative of the great god Hikule‘o during the conflict in Ha‘apai, which culminated in Tāufa‘āhau’s victory at Velata in 1826. Gunson (2005:323-25) also related these changes of religious ascendancy in the early 19th century to earlier events:

This came about in relation to the decline of the power of the Tu‘i Tonga and the cult of Hikule‘o. Even before the death of the Tu‘i Tonga Pau in 1784, the Tongan Islands had been divided politically, and after 1784, there were two Tu‘i Tonga claimants [one at Mu‘a and one at Neiafu in Vava‘u].... Despite the proliferation of *taula ‘otua* and the reputation of “god-men”, the high chiefs were more inclined to replace Hikule‘o by another god. The god most amenable to the incumbents of the office of *hau* was Pulotu Kātoa, who replaced Hikule‘o as the principal god of Tonga until the second religious revolution, the advent of Christianity.



Collocott (1921:162) described Pulotu Katoa as a great deity with his principal shrine in the eastern part of Tongatapu, from where he was associated at various times with the Tu‘i Ha‘atakalāua, the Tu‘i Kanokupolu and other great chiefs, but not with the Tu‘i Tonga. Collocott understood that the importance of Pulotu Katoa was related more to whichever chiefly power was in the ascendancy, rather than to a general displacement of Hikule‘o.

Urbanowicz (1977:253-54) has noted that the Wesleyans had managed to convert an earlier Tu‘i Kanokupolu, Jiosaia Tupou, in 1830, but he was an ineffective leader. The Wesleyans also tried to convert the last Tu‘i Tonga, Laufilitonga, but he later became a Catholic convert and continued in that faith until his death in 1865. Once the Wesleyans had gained the conversion of Tāufa‘āhau in 1830 and were able to share in his rise to power, “there came a concomitant decline in the power of the Tu‘i Tonga and related titles” (Urbanowicz 1977:254). Tāufa‘āhau was installed as Tu‘i Kanokupolu in 1845 and when the last Tu‘i Tonga died in 1865, Tāufa‘āhau absorbed his title.

So, if these goddesses were consecrated to the worship of Hikule‘o, this may help to explain the readiness of Tāufa‘āhau to surrender the main god of his opponents to the missionaries, while at the same time gaining credit with these representatives of the new Christian god and access to their material advantages. However, this suspicion of tactical manipulation of the gods of his enemies by Tāufa‘āhau for his own political advantage may be doing him an injustice. Other evidence shows Tāufa‘āhau to be well aware of the implications of his actions while he tried to make fair and reasoned responses to the demands of the missionaries and his own people. He emerges as a very moderate and careful thinker on these questions, certainly not the rabid iconoclast he is sometimes depicted. For example, when chiefs from Tongatapu and Nomuka came to Lifuka to remonstrate with Tāufa‘āhau for destroying the native gods at Lifuka, he prepared to discuss their demands very rationally and moderately, as described by Thomas:

The Chief is now free again, and sent up today to borrow an English Bible, he being about to meet the old Maafu, a blind chief from Tonga and his own relative, having just arrived, and having been deputed by heathen chiefs at Tonga to remonstrate with the king for his rude conduct in destroying the gods known at Lifuka. The king it seems wants the Bible that he may show them where he has obtained his knowledge from, and that he intends to abide by its teachings.

I sent a Bible at once, when the king and several of his people came at once to me when said Maafu the Tonga chief was not coming to him, he was staying at Nomuka, but had deputed Tāufa chief of Nomuka to wait upon him, to require him to give up his new religion or lotu, and to pray to the gods, but that if

he refuses to do so, he is requested to rebuild the god houses which he has destroyed. His own mind he said was to take hold with both his hands with the book of God, and swear by that book to hold fast his lotu—the king wished to know if that would be improper, and being informed it was not. He then asked whether it would be proper for him to replace the houses of the gods he had destroyed? He was told it was thought it had done quite right by destroying both the gods and their houses, and it would be wrong for him as king of this group to rebuild them, that if they are to be rebuilt, those had better do it who believed in them, and worshipped them. To this the king at once agreed and left the mission house to meet his heathen friends. (Thomas n.d.1:584)

#### COMMODITIES AND TROPHIES

As the Tongans came to accept Wesleyan Christianity and its teachings about the dangers of figures and “idols”, so the meanings of their displaced goddess figures changed rapidly, for both Tongans and missionaries. The contemporary official Wesleyan doctrine on “idols” was phrased for a missionary and lay readership in 1827 in “Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions and to the State of Heathen Countries” (*Missionary Notices*, 144, December 1827):

The overthrow of idolatry in any land, is an event of the most cheering nature, whether we regard the miseries and degradation from which it rescues our fellow-men, or the fact, so gladdening to all who love their Saviour, that his throne is there erected on the ruins of those of false Divinities, and that praise and prayer ascend to him from lips, which formerly uttered the hopeless appeal to gods who could neither help nor deliver.

From the beginning of their ministry, the missionaries had demanded the surrender of their idols as a sign of Tongan sincerity and determination to accept Christianity. All of the Tongan goddess figures obtained by the missionaries in the first six months of 1830, whether as representatives of the deities lately worshipped by Tāufa‘āhau and his followers, or the readily disposable gods of his recent enemies, were handed over as signs of conversion. As Nathaniel Turner phrased it, the surrender of his gods was “a significant token of his sincerity in turning Christian” (Turner 1872:117).

While functioning as signs of conversion, these figures also became like a currency of conversion. Tāufa‘āhau obviously used them as carefully directed messages to selected missionaries whom he wished to convince of his sincerity. If a commodity can be defined as something that is exchanged for another value, then these goddess figures became commodities that Tāufa‘āhau could judiciously present to certain missionaries in exchange for

their confidence in his conversion. Within six months, this commodification was carried even further when the Rev. Cross purchased a goddess figure at Lifuka in exchange for a few beads. By this transaction, the goddess had become a commodity exchangeable for other desired consumer goods, the introduced colourful glass beads that had been in demand ever since Schouten in 1616 and Tasman in 1643 had bartered some blue beads with Tongans (Moyle 1984:78, note 133).

By 1831 Thomas was commenting on the increasing commodification of their gods by the Tongans, eager to use them as signs of their conversion but also aware of their growing value as goods to be exchanged for more utilitarian objects: “Now that the Lord has opened their eyes to see, the people have renounced these idols, and readily give them up to be either hung, burnt or banished the islands and several have brought their gods and offered them for sale to us; one was purchased for a pocket knife—his name was Ata. It was a Vavau god” (Thomas n.d.1:773).

Thomas was not above taking advantage of this commodification of the gods to satisfy his desire to obtain more of the aesthetically valued *hala* clubs. Notwithstanding his earlier profession of not coveting the “beautifully carved ironwood club” or *hala* in the care of Kaho, the old priestess at Taunga, Thomas left the following instructions before he left the island: “It was fully believed that the god of this place would soon be a saleable article, and Mafi was authorised to purchase the idol as soon as Kaho was disposed to part with it and send or bring over to me” (Thomas n.d.1:793). He did not say what the currency of the purchase would be, but probably some introduced utilitarian goods were intended, like the pocket knife of his earlier “purchase”.

For the missionaries, the goddess figures and the *hala*, once they had been surrendered, were primarily seen as trophies. Thus, on receiving a goddess figure from Tāufa‘āhau on 12 June 1830, Nathaniel Turner wrote in his journal, “Glory to God for these tangible trophies of the Gospel of his Son” (Turner 1836-1846:292/209-210/293). Similarly, just a month later Williams obtained his goddess figure from Tāufa‘āhau, later writing (Williams 1837:322), “I prize it the more highly, because it was one of the trophies of the moral conquests of the Gospel.” While writing this and glossing over the details of how he had obtained the figure, Williams was displaying this figure to Protestant mission supporters in England, using his trophy as mission propaganda in his campaign to raise more funds. Thomas also referred to this figure and the other that he gave to Williams as “trophies won by the blessed Gospel”, a version of the stock phraseology used by all of these writers.

Since their arrival in European private collections and later in public museum collections, the Tongan goddess figures have been transformed from

signs of conversion and missionary trophies into highly-valued examples of traditional Tongan and wider Polynesian art. But for many modern-day Tongan people, these goddess figures have lost any relevance as religious symbols, except perhaps as signs of a dark and dangerous pagan past, to be ignored or avoided as much as possible. Only those young Tongans educated in Western art-historical values have come to regard these figures as “art” regardless of their religious connotations.

#### ARTISTIC QUALITIES OF THESE FIGURES

Careful reading of the early accounts of human figure sculpture in Tonga has suggested that there may have been at least two traditions of figure sculpture in pre-contact and early contact Tonga. One was the tradition of larger, mostly male figures, perhaps representing lineage ancestors, encountered on burial structures mainly on Tongatapu in the period of 1773 to 1827. The other was the tradition of smaller, exclusively female figures encountered in “temples” mainly in Ha‘apai in 1830, perhaps representing the goddess Hikule‘o. Many observers noted the varying ages and state of decay of the figures that they saw. The different time periods when these figure traditions were encountered can be attributed to external factors of changing access granted to outsiders rather than to any temporal succession between these two traditions.

A consideration of the artistic sculptural form of the six surviving images on the basis of such features as face form, treatment of facial features, ears, shape of breasts, demarcation of pubic area and general body form indicates that they can reasonably be categorised into three stylistic groups. Figures 1 and 2 form one group on the criteria of flattened faces with demarcated edges, stylised ears, lack of eyebrows, protruding almost pendulous breasts, lack of fingers, strongly angular gluteal region and calves. They are so similar that they could be considered as the work of one artist. Figures 4 and 5 form another group on the criteria of rounded projecting faces with no demarcated edges, naturalistic ears, definite raised eyebrows, smaller non-pendulous breasts, definite pubic demarcation by a transverse groove, presence of fingers, more rounded enlarged gluteal region and calves. While very similar, the two figures of this second group are likely to be the work of different artists, though possibly from the same workshop. Figure 6 is clearly the work of another carver whose work can be likened to the artist of the Dumont d’Urville figures.

Figure 3 has a style of its own by virtue of its unique pose. Some features also differ from the others, including the much reduced breasts and rounded non-projecting gluteal region and calves. However, it shares the rounded

projecting face form, naturalistic ears, reduced non-pendulous breasts and rounded non-angular calves of the second group. This figure is probably the work of yet another artist. These detailed stylistic comparisons could usefully be extended to the corpus of Tongan ivory figure carvings, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

The angled oblique seated *faita* form of Figure 3 appears to be unique within Polynesia, as noted by Oldman, Buck and later writers. However, it must be noted that from the waist up Figure 3 is entirely frontal, only the legs being tucked under and to the side. The Tongan artist who created this seated goddess was apparently a special individual who made a break from a culturally approved “conceptual” stylised rendering of the human figure to a “perceptual” rendering based on actual observation of the natural world. Whether he made this break as a result of acculturative experience of other introduced art forms or as an innovation based on his own observation will never be known, but his special daring deserves to be acknowledged. The impact on early Polynesian sculptors of European ship figureheads, ship furnishings and of European illustrated books has not yet been adequately reviewed. Contrary to some popular views, Polynesian artists were not fixed in some static traditional style—the sheer variety of pre-European Polynesian sculptural forms is testament to the innovative abilities and adaptable nature of these carvers. Neither should the ability of an artist to draw inspiration from new forms and images be disparaged as “copying” European style. It may well be that the carver of the seated figure and indeed the carvers of the neat circular stands were stimulated by objects or illustrations which they had seen. It should be remembered that in Tahiti in 1792 George Tobin came across a treasured possession of a Tahitian priest—an illustrated book on European statuary (Newell 2005:79).

With so many of the records of carved goddess figures concentrated at Lifuka and the Ha‘apai Group, it is understandable that many commentators on Polynesian art have assumed that the existing figures constitute examples of a Ha‘apai figure carving style. Barrow (1956, 1972:67) has even described a “Ha‘apai image school of craftsmen”. In fact, only two of the goddess figures, Figures 1 and 3, have definite documentation localising them to Lifuka. Oldman apparently attributed Figure 2 to Lifuka on the basis of its similarity to Figure 1. The earliest catalogue entry for Figure 4 simply records “a great Tonga goddess”. Figure 5 has no original documentation to Tonga, let alone Ha‘apai. The crediting of this Fuller figure to Ha‘apai by Force and Force (1971:150) is apparently an attribution based on similarity to the Oldman figure, first noted by Oldman, Fuller and Te Rangi Hiroa. Furthermore, the fate of the Tongan god figures described in the historical accounts gathered above indicate that the surviving figures are only a small restricted sample

of the range of anthropomorphic figure sculptures existing in pre-missionary Tonga. Therefore, this impression of a consistent Ha'apai figure style may simply be the result of the historical circumstances that determined where most of them were seen and collected by Europeans, augmented by some circular reasoning based on stylistic attributions.

The female figure unearthed by Dumont d'Urville and de Sainson at Mu'a on Tongatapu differs in several respects from the stylistic range of the goddesses from Lifuka, in particular the definition of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the lack of a prominent gluteal region, the minimal flexure of the knees, the absence of pronounced calves, and the general slimness of the body and legs. These comments can also be applied to the Paris figure (Figure 6). These features could conceivably represent another area style of female human figures. The male figure from Mu'a sketched by de Sainson supports the impression gained from the historical accounts that there might have been a tradition of larger human images from the Tongatapu area, perhaps predominantly representing males.

Therefore, on the available evidence and without a wider knowledge of any contrasting styles from other areas of Tonga, this Ha'apai style may have been just one Tongan figure style among several, perhaps indicated now only by the female and male figures from Mu'a recorded by de Sainson.

With the proviso that they may represent just one among several Tongan figure styles, the surviving goddess figures can justifiably be used to define a Tongan style of wooden figurative sculpture. This Tongan style can then be contrasted to a Fijian style of figure sculpture, as outlined by Larsson (1960). Nevertheless, despite the contrasts, there were also connections and similarities. The possibility has been raised that Tongans might have taken their goddess figures with them to Lau and may even have been carving wooden figure sculptures in Lau, as suggested by the figure representing the goddess Sakaunu (Figure 4). Further support for this suggestion of Tongan wooden figure carvings reaching far into Fiji may be found in certain "Tongan" stylistic traits of a supposed Fijian figure in Berlin (Larsson 1960:99) and a wooden head from Matailobau in interior Viti Levu (Larsson 1960:49, Roth and Hooper 1990: Plate 53).

Within Western Polynesia, this Tongan wooden figurative carving tradition of fairly naturalistic anthropomorphic images is virtually unique. Only from Samoa are two wooden human figures known, both male (Davidson 1975, Scott 1982) and both with possible connections to canoe carvings and both probably from a restricted area in the Aleipata district of the eastern end of 'Upolu (Neich 1984). These two do not bear any strong stylistic similarity to the Tongan goddesses. Only much further west, among the Polynesian

outliers, perhaps owing to Melanesian influences, do other wooden carved human figures occur. In marked contrast, throughout all of Eastern Polynesia including New Zealand and Hawai‘i, wooden human figure sculptures are widespread and frequent.

Overall, the surviving Tongan goddess figures are clearly examples of a highly refined and resolved art tradition that must have been practised for some considerable time in order to have achieved such a consistent and high quality resolution of the artistic project among several individual artists. It is obviously not a recently invented tradition. Quite justifiably on the basis of their pendent arms, bent knees stance, and their clean abstracted lines and volumes, these Tongan figures have been hailed as classic representatives of the best of Polynesian figurative art, on a par with the human figures from Nukuoro and Mangareva.

\* \* \*

As a result of detailed reading and comparison of all available sources relating to the Tongan goddess figures, this study has been able to expand on the account that has been widely accepted and repeated by non-specialists ever since Williams’s 1837 *Missionary Enterprises* book. Notably missing from this popular story were the key role of John Thomas and the other Wesleyan missionaries, and the presence of other Tongan figurative sculptures. This study has now revealed the key role of John Thomas, the unreliability of some of John Williams’s reporting, the surrendering of his enemy’s gods by Tāufa‘āhau possibly to support his political designs, and the wider perspective of other traditions of figure sculpture in early contact Tonga. As expected, the story of conversion to Christianity in Tonga in the 1830s was much more than a simple case of religious change. It also involved powerful social and political forces at work. These religious, social and political processes in Tonga of the 1830s have been extensively described elsewhere; now the Tongan goddess figures and other Tongan figurative sculptures can be better understood within these wider processes of change.

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NOTES

1. Palace Office Archives, Tonga. Folder POA 103/2B. I am grateful to Adrienne Kaepler for this reference.
2. The writings of the Rev. John Thomas and copies of them are held in several different repositories and are difficult to reference and compare. He often wrote several variant versions about the same event in his journal, his letters, his reports to the mission offices and his reminiscences. Some of these were published in the missionary publications of the time, often with alterations. In this study, I have endeavoured to use his original accounts wherever possible but incorporating additional information from his other versions. No definitive collection of Thomas's writings has yet been published. Many of his papers are held in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.
3. Andrew Mills of the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, is currently writing a Ph.D. thesis on Tongan club carvers and their art, in which he discusses the role, form and decoration of Tongan clubs in great detail.



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