

# The Cultural Significance of Māori Pounamu

Presented By Brandon Borba

## Pounam~who?

The beautiful greenstone found only on the southern island of New Zealand has extreme cultural significance beyond that of its striking appearance. This special mineral known as “Pounamu” to the native Māori people of New Zealand contains immense cultural, practical, and aesthetic properties not found anywhere else in the world. This special hardstone not only is used as an ornamental decoration; but as a weapon of war, a symbol of peace, a tool of creation, and a spiritual connection to past and future ancestors. By researching historical data and ethnographic accounts, the cultural significance of pounamu can be more closely examined and further understood by those unfamiliar with the topic.

## Why so important?

Pounamu, a form of nephrite or bowenite, contains a long and storied history within Māori culture closely linked to not only its beauty, but its strength as well. This durable stone was heavily used by the indigenous people of New Zealand to carve out their own unique perspective onto the landscape. Much like any valuable resource, pounamu has suffered from commercialization and exploitation through colonization. Such as gold was valued by Europeans, pounamu was the most precious mineral in Māori culture and therefore was exploited as well. Beyond the commercialization stemming from the lapidary industry, all value placed on pounamu can be more accurately associated with its sacred or “tapu” connection to the Māori people themselves. This spiritual connection to the stone could be assumed to be the most important aspect of pounamu, making it worth more than gold to the Māori.



Vasiil. End of a fishing hook, nephrite, Maori culture, 1800-1900. In the exhibition "Maori, their treasures have got a soul", in the Musée des Arts Premiers in Paris.



Hiart. Ear pendant (*peka peka*), Maori people, New Zealand, 19<sup>th</sup> century, carved greenstone and red sealing wax, Honolulu Museum of Art.



Szilas. Pounamu objects. Self-photographed photo taken from the Canterbury Museum, New Zealand. 27 January 2016.

## Mighty Mana

In Māori culture, pounamu is not just a piece of jewelry or a tool, it is a spiritual being. Every piece of pounamu contains “mana” or “status” that comes from the history behind the piece. Pounamu with great mana are often kept as tribal heirlooms, given their own names, and are used as peace offerings between tribes.

## How can we know?

The symbolism and cultural significance of pounamu can be more accurately determined not from artifact analysis, but instead from Māori ethnographic descriptions. Ethnoarchaeology would seem to be the best way to fully understand the cultural significance that pounamu has on the Māori people themselves. These qualities themselves are not something that can be innately measured by scientific methods or means. They are derived from the experiences and storied histories of the items themselves and can only be learned from firsthand accounts of those familiar with the item. Since these artifacts are often passed down from generation to generation, the oral history of pounamu can be discovered by anyone who would like to listen.

## Hands on Learning

In order to gain a greater appreciation for the lapidary process that is involved in the creation of pounamu there is only one answer. Experimental Archaeology. For that reason, I purchased some rough-cut greenstone to create my own pounamu ornament. Abrasion is the chief principle to create this Taonga (treasure). By using an abrasive quartz rich schist, the Māori would rasp grooves into the pounamu to break it down into smaller workable pieces. The craftsman would then smooth the surface of the pounamu against a piece of sandstone. Stick and sand hand drills would then be used to create fastening holes on the piece if needed.